Animals Like Us Belong In the Black

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Summary

Simon managed to break River out of the Academy but she won't leave without her partner. Riddick tends to make everything more complicated but he's also handy to have around. From the Academy to the Hunter Gratzner to the Firefly transport Serenity, River & Riddick are partners.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Riddick paused in his pull-ups, the scientists hated his improvised exercise bar but so far, they hadn’t figured out a way to stop him from working out without completely altering the structural integrity of his cell. The window next to the door was a source of constant irritation to him so he enjoyed returning the favor by exercising when the watchers were there. In retaliation, they’d taken the pallet and blanket that had come with the cell. They really didn’t seem to understand that unless they piped in rats and roaches that this was still an improvement over his last prison. The tests were annoying and at times uncomfortable but so far they hadn’t tried to ‘improve’ him any. Attempts like that had been made on others though; he’d seen and smelled the human wreckage of the spectacular failures.

So far, he’d seen at least three boys, all in their late teens, marched past his cell, all of them a combination of confident and fearful. Each time he’d seen a new boy he had heard screams during the next week, smelt blood, the scent of torture, and eventually death. He’d come to hate the sound of footsteps down the long hall, the echo of unfamiliar feet treading down metal stairs with anticipation and reluctance. He was so tired of deaths he hadn’t caused and couldn’t prevent.

Now though, there was someone else in the hallway, someone female and very afraid. Someone who was being marched down the cold white metal hall and about to pass his cell. He dropped down from his bar and positioned himself at a slightly different angle to continue his exercises. Now it looked as if he’d simply wanted to adjust his position and not as if he’d heard something past his four walls. Now he’d be able to see who else was being shoved into this hole along with him.

Definitely female, a tiny girl, another teenager from the looks of her. Slender and graceful even as she was pulled along, looking at everything. For a moment as she passed the window her eyes met his, dark eyes, black to his vision though they were probably brown to everyone else. He could smell her fear; see it on her face, even half hidden as she was behind long dark hair. Riddick kept doing pull-ups as she passed and wondered what they were doing with a little girl.

Every other subject he’d seen had been male. Some, like him, were obviously convicts taken for the same reasons he’d been. Their brains were different; more than a few were psychotic. That was something the scientists thought he had in common with the others. He knew differently even if they didn’t. For a bunch of people who thought they knew everything they sure were idiots about human nature. One of them though, Mathias...he was almost as smart as he thought he was. He was one of the few who didn't mind Riddick’s exercising.

Most of the other convicts were gone now; Riddick could only hear one other, a man whose appetite for blood rivaled his own. That one was someone Riddick was hoping he’d get to kill. The wǒ kǎo that man talked about made him sick. There weren’t a lot of things Riddick wouldn't do, and killing kids or raping anybody were definitely among the ‘do not’ category.

In the last six months it looked like they’d finally gotten done working on convicts and they were moving along to the kids they had in the upstairs. The scientists never had figured out just how acute his senses were, the paranoia born of years on the street and foundling homes had kept him from being honest in his reactions to their stimuli. At night when it was quiet, he could hear all the way up to the ground levels, to the place where children studied and slept with hell right under their feet.

Riddick dropped down from his exercise bar and rearranged himself so he could do some hanging sit-ups. He’d been in this place for more than two years, ever since it had smelled new. The kids had always been upstairs. He hoped most of them never made it down here.
River shuddered and wrapped the blanket more tightly around her body. Elevation was not what she'd been told it would be. Higher learning was more like indoctrination, drugs and other things pumped into her body to prepare her for the programming. Training. More training. She could do things with ballet that she would never have associated with the beauty of dance. And they'd put her to sleep and when she woke up she could hear things... odd things that made no sense. Her head had ached for days afterwards.

At first, the Academy had been amazing. She could plan her own programs for study, science, higher mathematics, theoretical physics, applied astrophysics... it had been wonderful. She'd been able to constantly challenge herself. And she'd still had time to read literature and history, to dance and draw. It had been a wonderful year. And then...everything had changed.

She'd drawn attention, attention of the wrong kind. So she'd been...elevated like a few others had been. Some of the older boys, they'd gone on to advanced study. They'd never been seen again. Now she knew why.

River shivered again and fixed her mind on escape. She'd sent letters to Simon, letters that hopefully her brother wouldn't find too complex to decode. She'd sent the same letters to her parents, but she'd heard nothing. Simon was her last hope for outside help to escape. She didn't have access to a cortex or a databook even, apparently, Mathias didn't want to underestimate her intelligence and give her something she could actually use.

She'd never mentioned her interest in programming. It hadn't been something her parents wanted known and she'd agreed her youthful (relatively speaking) interest in hacking or husking as some called it might damage her chances of getting into the Academy. It wasn't even something that she'd been known for at her last school. Everything she'd learned to do with a sourcebox and a databook she'd taught herself. The courses in programming at her school had been so simplistic she'd learned everything they had to teach in less than a day. If she could get a databook she could use the port to hack her way into the cortex servers of the Academy and effect an escape. Therefore, Mathias' precautions were doubly annoying.

Her door slid open and Mathias entered along with two orderlies. If she was lucky, it was only more testing. But her luck hadn't been good lately.

Riddick rolled his head back and forth stretching a bit. They'd taken to throwing him into a bigger room where he'd have to fight whoever was thrown in with him. They must be shipping in new men for him to fight because none of them smelled familiar. The fun part was they never gave him a shiv, or any sort of weapon, it was always hand to hand combat.

This time they'd added two other doors to the room, not just one, and both opened at the same time. One had the little girl he'd seen, the other had the maniac that liked to rape and kill children. Riddick didn't even have to think it over, he charged straight at the psycho.

River blinked; her instructions had been clear, kill the more dangerous of the two men. One of them wore goggles, no shirt, and fatigues. He was the man she'd seen exercising when she'd first been 'elevated'. The other was hard to see as the first had launched himself at the second a curse about rapists on his lips. River tilted her head and stepped into the room, her choice of opponent made.

Riddick was surprised when the girl jumped into the fight, her fists and feet striking lethally helpful
blows to the baby-raping killer he'd been itching to gut. She had a look of dark glee on her face as she kicked the hún dàn in the small of his back. The blow she took to her face threw her backwards a foot but only served to give momentum to her next blow, this one to the man's ribs.

Riddick cursed as the man turned his attention from him to the girl, a very disturbing gleam in the pale eyes. Soon he was the one attacking from behind as the girl took the brunt of the hún dàn's fists. "Sonovabitch!" He cursed again as she fell backwards with the maniac on top of her, "Not this time."

River was struggling for leverage and had dug her thumb into the man's throat but couldn't get enough force to truly cut off his breathing or circulation. Most disturbing wasn't the man's hand on her own throat but that his other hand was working at his trousers, trying to open them even as she struggled. Then the man's weight was jerked off her body with a roared curse.

Getting up and crouching warily was instinct as the man with goggles wrapped one arm around the other man's jaw and his other around his shoulders, jerking violently in different directions until there was a loud ugly crack. Just as abruptly, the man with goggles let the body fall to the ground. "Ain't gonna hurt you Qīng Xiāng," He stood with the man's body at his feet and waited.

River blinked and then frowned, her instructions were unclear, she was to attack the most dangerous man in the room, in her opinion that man was dead. Then the overhead com blared and she took a deep breath. "Have to fight, prove I can win," She shook her head. "Don't want to hurt you."

"Then don't," Riddick shook his head and folded his arms. "They can't make us fight.

"They'll trigger me," River shook her head, "And then..."

"Subliminals?" Riddick cursed vilely and nodded, "All right. Come at me. Do your best...or your worst little girl."

River's eyes narrowed, "Not a nǐ zi." She sprang at him, a whirlwind of feet and fists, landing several solid blows before he caught her ankle and tugged.

Riddick smirked as he pulled her off balance for a moment and used the half second she need to right herself as a way to wrap his arm around her throat. "Fight little girl," He taunted her before he spun her slender body away from his. "I won't hurt you."

"Have to," River told him as she aimed what would have been a paralyzing kick at his groin if he hadn't blocked it. "You like to win. I can tell." She could feel it, hear it in his mind, the second surgery had made the voices she heard more clear, while giving her awful mood swings until she'd started meditating.

"Yeah," Riddick let his smirk widen to a grin. "And you hate to lose, can smell it on ya." He aimed a punch at her stomach and had the satisfaction of a glancing blow as she danced away. He was strong enough that even a glancing blow had an effect on her; she was much smaller than he was. He might like to win but not at the expense of beating on a girl half his size.

"No choice," River shook her head as she aimed a kick at his jaw. His head snapped back and she spun and tried to repeat the performance only to be grabbed by the ankle and yanked forward, then tackled. Her breath left her lungs in a dizzying rush as she hit the ground, her opponents much larger body pinning her.

"Why no choice?" Riddick nearly growled in her face and ignored the body beneath his. This close to her she wasn't as young as he'd first believed and even with her fear, she smelled incredible.
"What's that mean?"

She shuddered under him, hearing his thoughts, feeling his desire and his unwillingness to do anything about his sudden need. "Both anecdotal and objective evidence indicates that all other students to be elevated have died. Failing to win seems a sure path towards death."

"Yeah," Riddick caught the sound of someone coming towards the room, "All right, so I'll teach you how to win against a bigger opponent." He backed off and let her up. "You need to build up some muscle, more than you got."

"No experience or knowledge of weight training," River pointed out as he pulled her to her feet.

"Regular weight resistance exercises," Riddick explained and began to show her what he meant. Looking up as the orderlies and the scientist, he knew wanted more genetic tissue came to the door he ignored them and went back to instructing the girl. "You ain't ever gonna outweigh me, but you'll have more than grace behind those kicks a yours. Iffen you'd had a bit more power, coulda knocked me out with that last kick."

She nodded seriously, "Do you think we could practice?" She wondered, "I...haven't ever really fought anyone bigger than me. Not like you."

Riddick put the girl behind him when the orderlies came closer, "Ya'll just hold yer horses." He shook his head, "Girl wants ta learn. An' everyone keeps sayin' how this's a school or somethin'."

"She'll learn from our instructors, not you Riddick," He was told in a flat voice. The scientist, Doctor Cho smirked at the man who could break him in half; smug in the knowledge that Riddick would be taken down before the convict could hurt him. "River, come here."

"Would like to stay with Riddick," River slid out from behind the big man and stood beside him. "Need to learn more than just proper forms. Need down and dirty fighting. My knowledge of martial arts is superior but he still beat me." She brushed her hand over the big man's, her knuckles touching his briefly. "Could learn from him, seems willing to teach me."

"You're a female, he's a male, fraternization isn't recommended or allowed," Doctor Cho shook his head.

"Ain't sayin' we should bunk together," Riddick shook his head. "Though I hope ya'll understand that I like women, not little girls, least by this time. Ya did enough psych profilin' on me ta figure that much out."

"A test then," Doctor Cho suggested a dark gleam in his eyes that Riddick didn't care for.

"What sorta test," Riddick narrowed his eyes behind his goggles.

"If you can spend a day in quarters together, a full twenty four hours, without killing each other or doing anything else inappropriate, then I'll consider making the arrangement permanent. You may teach the girl," Cho said with a smirk.

River looked at Riddick, "I am willing to try if you are." She tilted her head, "Will not hold it against you if you do not wish to share quarters with the girl."

"Hell, ain't like I'm a prize 女之, Riddick shrugged. "You sure you wanna end up roomin' with me? Ain't 'xactly mannerly."

"To keep learning? I will abide," River nodded slowly, her fear hadn't gone away but it had faded
"All right then," Riddick nodded. "We'll give it a try." He held out his hand, "Richard B. Riddick, escaped convict; murderer."

"River Diaochan Tam," River bowed slightly. "Genius; dancer."

"Huh," Riddick tilted his head thoughtfully. He'd have to see how this went. One thing was for sure, he was in for an interesting time. He looked at Cho and smirked, "Only reason he's suggestin' this is he thinks one a us is gonna screw it up."

"Then we will prove him wrong," River's smirk was a touch wicked, and nearly identical to his.

It was later on that day, after they’d worked out a few ground rules between them for needful moments of privacy that River thought to ask him why Doctor Cho would even allow them this experiment. Riddick had smirked again, smug in his manipulation of the supposedly more intelligent male. “He hates me, hates he can’t figure me,” He told her quietly. ‘Thinks I’m an animal, which ain’t untrue I guess, an’ he’s hopin’ I lose control an’ fall on ya, do somethin’ that’ll get me punished. He likes hurtin’ folk.”

“Then why agree to the experiment?” River asked softly her eyes glued to his silver orbs in the dim room. “Why take the risk?”

“First I ain’t ever hurt a kid deliberate like,” Riddick told her as gently as he could. “Second, I like provin’ him wrong an’ I know I ain’t gonna hurt you.” He tilted his head, “Third is you got guts, an’ I like that. An’ you didn’t look at me like I was dirt. So I can teach you.”

“But Cho said that if we made it through twenty four hours he might make this permanent,” River persisted. “You realize that means you’ll be stuck with me if Doctor Mathias agrees to it.”

“Cho don’t got the clout to make that decision,” Riddick shook his head. “An’ if Mathias ‘grees to this it’s for reasons a his own. Either way, ain’t somethin’ I think is all bad.” He met her eyes and was intrigued to see a faint gleam of silver starting in the depths. “I guess you ain’t seein’ it the same way?”

“I…” River twisted her hands together and dropped her gaze for a moment remembering the things they had done to her when she failed. “I’m nervous about this; I’ve never lived in close quarters with anyone, let alone a large, dangerous unrelated male.”

“Guess you grew up with money then,” Riddick chuckled. “Way you talk, that ain’t ‘xactly a surprise.”

“I don’t imagine it is,” River’s expressive face twisted sardonically. “But even being nervous, I’d rather try, and try to learn from you, than fail outright again.” She shook her head, “Failure isn’t… isn’t given positive reinforcement here.”

“No, it ain’t,” Riddick remembered hearing her screams about a month after he’d first seen her. He’d had to exercise until he’d been drenched in his own sweat with exhaustion so he didn’t beat at the walls. His agitation had been twice that of when he’d heard the boys screaming out their pain and he wasn’t going to delve too deeply into the why of that.

“So I… I’d rather be a little nervous… and maybe learn to trust you at least, and learn,” River told him.
softly. “I apologize in advance if anything I say or do is insulting…I…” She shuddered.

“Ain’t gotta worry ‘bout me touchin’ you in a wrong fashion,” Riddick tried to reassure her smelling her fear like burnt cinnamon. “I ain’t a rapist. An’ any urges I get I know how to control.”

“I know, I could tell, when you pinned me,” River blushed slightly in the dim room. “If this… experiment succeeds I’ll explain that more completely. But that’s why I agreed…to let you teach me, because of that control.”

River was seventeen, Riddick still had a hard time believing he'd known her for more than a year and a half, longer if he counted seeing her when she was first brought down to the lower levels. He'd had a very difficult time stifling the animal since they'd begun bunking together. What made it worse was that River felt the same way. They'd done another surgery on her brain after they'd bunked together and afterwards it had been impossible for River to not know of his desire for her. At first she'd reacted to his lust, the scent of need rising off her skin like honey but it hadn't been real. He'd throttled back his need, restraining the animal until he'd felt as if he was suffocating but it had worked. She'd relaxed and breathlessly explained exactly what had been done to her.

He'd never wanted to kill someone so badly in his life as he had Mathias at that moment. He'd punched the wall he'd been so angry. River had shuddered, started to weep and he'd gotten himself under control. She was just a little girl, but she'd gasped and grabbed his hand, and pulled him down beside her. In a whisper of a voice, no one but he could ever have heard she began to tell him of what they wanted her to do, to be. They'd succeeded as far as he was concerned, they'd created a Reader. River felt so much, all his emotions, even the ones he tried to bury, the ones he'd rather she didn't see. According to her, his mind wasn't like anyone else's she'd heard, she called it elegant, layered and intricate, beautiful.

That didn't change the animal or anything else about him but River didn't seem to mind and she was the one stuck in a room with him. Then she'd really shocked him. She'd told him she believed that it was the animal in her that heard thoughts, felt the emotions of others, that was why it was so hard for her to deal with. She wasn't born like him, wasn't used to having the animal so close to her skin. She needed him to teach her how to live with it, how to embrace it because the Academy was determined to use it, to use her. If they were ever going to escape, she needed to be able to match him, to keep her sanity no matter what was done to her. He could smell truth on her, truth like blood smelling sweet to his nose. She'd smiled and leaned against him and whispered that she wished she were old enough for him.

That had been six months ago. Six months of teaching her more than fighting moves. Six months of watching her struggle to resolve the genius of her brain with the instincts of the animal the Academy had awakened. Six months of wanting her, of needing her and knowing the animal considered her his already. And then they'd taken her out of the training room for some reason. He'd had a devil of a time acting as if he wasn't worried. It was bad enough he'd wake up wrapped around the girl, hiding her from the door and window. That could be explained away by the fact that he was warm and she was always cold. But if he was worried when she was taken away for one of her tests... Cho would jump on that as a prime example of unsuitable attachment. Not that they cared what their test subjects thought one way or another.

Riddick channeled his energy into working out, trying to burn out his rage with sweat. He'd just dropped down to his feet when River stumbled in, her dark eyes wild. "Richard B. Riddick," She said his name as if she were reading it off a cortex. "Exemplary male specimen. Resistant to drugs and torture. Highly evolved instincts. Excellent night vision." She turned and looked at the window
as the orderlies left her with him, the door sliding shut. "Richard does not speak of his life. But she hears."

He moved over to grab her shoulders and helped her to sit on the pallet they'd been given for good behavior. "Yeah I know alla that nī zī." He'd maintained the fiction that he still saw her as a child for the past year, ever since she'd turned sixteen. He couldn't fool himself but he could fool their watchers. "What happened today?"

"Read the cards for visitors," River muttered, "Old men drowning in blood but it never touches them. Dress me up like a doll and ask me what I see." She looked up at him, "Don't want to see anymore."

"All right," Riddick was actually worried. "You remember what we talked about?"

"What I see isn't mine, I'm not responsible for it," River whispered. "Richard is right, but it hurts, it hurts, hurts!" She nearly shrieked the words.

Riddick nearly shuddered with the effort of holding back the animal and took a deep breath, "All right," He kept his voice low. "You don't have to talk about it or think about it tonight. We'll figure out how to keep it from hurting." He wrapped her up in his arms and pulled the blanket around her. "Get some rest."

River didn't like the chair. The metal was cold and the straps were hard and bit into her skin. Mathias always put needles where they shouldn't go and Riddick hated how she smelled after these procedures. She shuddered as the drugs began to flow into her veins and hoped she wouldn't remember what she saw when she'd read the cards.

Riddick had soothed her, thought things at her that he'd read or seen. Let her read him until she'd seeped herself in his animal and let it calm her. She'd worked hard since then to embrace her animal. Her combat skills had never been better and she read other people easier than she ever had before. But the nightmares of what she'd seen wouldn't leave her and these procedures just made her see them while she was awake. And then she wasn't awake but she was. Simon was here. But he wasn't because Simon wasn't an inspector.

But he was, because everyone was unconscious and he was talking to her and taking the needles out of her forehead and getting her out of the chair. She stumbled and he nearly went with her, and that was wrong. When she stumbled, Riddick always caught her and made sure she was all right. Simon saw one of the orderlies coming and grabbed a chart; River scrambled up the wall and braced herself between the walls and the ceiling of the hallway. Dropping down she grabbed her brother's hand and began tugging him towards Riddick.

"No, River this way," Simon shook his head and gestured in the other direction.

"No, cannot leave without him," River folded her arms and stared at her big brother.

"Without who?" Simon didn't receive an answer as River darted off down the hall. She tore the cover off the door controls and hot-wired it to open and stick.

Riddick looked up as River burst into their room and grabbed his hand. "Come, quickly," She tugged on him as if to tow him in her wake.

"Where we goin' nī zī?" He'd found it was best to not argue when River got like this. The worst that would happen was they'd end up sparring at an unscheduled time.
"Time to go," River told him as she raced down the hall, Riddick easily keeping pace.

That sounded promising, though the new doctor in the hallway looked appalled. For a half second Riddick wondered if he'd have to break the man's neck but River shook her head. "Simon came to get her. She won't leave without you," She explained.

"Appreciate that nǐ zǐ," Riddick nodded as they came to a halt beside the man.

"We'll talk about how unexpected this is later," Simon nodded at him. "Right now we're running behind," He pointed towards the open door at the end of the hall. "And we have company," His eyes were on something behind Riddick.

Riddick cursed and shook his head, "Run." He told Simon, "River an' me got this, just make sure that door don't close."

Simon nodded and raced for the door, holding it open as Riddick and River turned and dealt with the three guards in a manner that had his eyes widening. His sister had leapt and kicked out with her dancer's legs, striking two men simultaneously, the man she insisted on taking with them had thrown one punch at the third guard and the man had fallen to the ground unmovong. River's tiny fists struck unerringly, her aim lethal; her guard had a crushed windpipe and a ruptured spleen. Her big partner had simply grabbed the guard reeling from River's kick and expertly broken his neck. Before Simon could call for them to hurry, the two were racing towards him more guards behind them.

Riddick grabbed onto River's waist and leapt with her through the door. The lift began to move upwards as Simon slid the door closed behind them. Simon looked at his sister, crouched on the floor of the lift, her hand around a cable. The big man stood behind her, his hand on her shoulder almost protectively.

Riddick sighed as he sat down in the shuttle and looked at River. "Tell me again nǐ zǐ how old you are?"

"She's sixteen," Simon said wearily taking a seat.

"Simon is erroneous in his calculations," River slid in between the two men. "The girl was in the Academy for more than three years. She is seventeen."

"Good," Riddick wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "That's good."

"Why is that good?" Simon blinked at the bigger man, "Who are you?"

"Partner, best friend," River relaxed into Riddick's side. "Have not spoken of more than that. Unsafe."

"Because part a me weren't seein' her as a child no matter what I call her an' I weren't happy 'bout that thinkin' she's only a little girl," Riddick played up his accent with a smirk.

"Richard has skin privileges, same as Simon," River pronounced the words with an air of finality.

"Skin privileges?" Riddick glanced at her curiously, he'd never heard her use the term before.

"The right to touch and be touched," River nodded seriously looking up at him, "Your animal needs skin privileges to truly feel safe, part of a pack. Mine needs this also."
"She is a little girl," Simon argued, disregarding the skin privileges issue altogether in favor of something he considered more important.

"She is sitting right between the two of you," River said sharply. "And she is not a little girl. Seventeen year old woman who would like to know where we're going."

"Good point Qīng Xiāng," Riddick agreed. "Where're we going?"

"The people who helped me get into the Academy also have a plan to get River and I out," Simon explained quietly. "You're...a bit of a hiccup."

"You're sayin' I weren't part a the plan," Riddick concluded. "So gettin' all three of us out is gonna be a problem."

"Yes," Simon shook his head. "Who are you again?"

"Richard B. Riddick," Riddick offered River's brother his hand.

"Doctor Simon Tam," River's brother introduced himself.

"Thanks by the way, for the rescue," Riddick tilted his head. The boy looked like his nerves were stretched thin as piano wires.

"Thank my sister," Simon half-smiled, worry pouring off of him in waves. "I wouldn't have even known about you if she hadn't insisted on it."
Riddick found it ironic that the people who'd helped Simon free River from the Academy had sent them to a slave ship to buy passage. To be fair, the Hunter Gratzner probably hadn't always been a slave ship. When these things changed they changed quickly. No, what he couldn't believe was the bloody rotten luck he'd had since for the last six years.

Not only had he gotten stuck in the Academy and before that a maximum security prison and before that...well that wasn't something he cared to recall. But when he finally got out of the Academy and was lucky enough to still be around the girl that had been a torment for more than a year and a half... He paused trying to determine exactly how that was fortunate and then shook his head. The animal considered River his and to be fair so did he. It was River's agreement that was the sticking point.

But once he was out, and free, or potentially free, who should Simon run into but Johns, the very merc who'd stuck him in prison in the first place. And Johns had been as quick as he'd ever been, pulling that big gauge off his shoulder and sticking it in Riddick's face. That had been a problem. Luckily for Johns the Hunter Gratzner had been right there, Simon had been booking passage. And Johns just struck a deal with the slavers.

Now he was in cryo of all things, something that had never had much effect on him. River was awake too, he could hear her breathing and her heartbeat, too fast to be asleep. Cryo was supposed to put your brain to sleep except for the animal side, the primitive side, the side that was far too strong in him and very strong in River since her time in the Academy. 'No wonder we're still awake,' He thought to himself. 'But who knows where we're headed. Me, Johns is gonna turn me into some slam. But River an' Simon... slaves are wanted on barely terraformed worlds, worlds that need a lot of labor, out past the rim, past the Blue Sun system even.'

He shook his head cataloging all he'd heard and smelt as other people had moved through the cabin. Johns hadn't taken any chances with him, he was bit-gagged and bound within the cryo tube so even though River was awake he couldn't talk to her. Too bad; he knew she was close, along with some holy man, Johns, and a prospector couple. Simon was nearby which would comfort River, as well as Johns more's the pity.

"Riddick?" River's voice sounded hesitant. That wasn't surprising, they hadn't ever really been able to talk much, always watched. She couldn't know how he'd welcome talking to her. But her voice held a smile when she spoke again, "Benefits of being friends with a Reader, she can hear your thoughts, would like very much to speak with you."

He would have grinned around the gag if he could, 'All right gorgeous, what did you want to talk about?' Part of him hoped she wouldn't take too much offense at the rest of his mind. He knew to think clearly at her but the undercurrents, the animal and all the emotions wrapped up in thoughts of her, she might not care for that too much.

"Richard B. Riddick erroneously thinks she only finds him physically attractive due to his attraction to her," River's voice was prompt. "She wishes to correct this mistake," He heard her pause as she took a deep breath and could smell her nerves, tiny tendrils of sugar roiling off her skin and drifting towards him in the air. "She finds her friend to be very physically attractive. She wishes she were old enough for him to not feel guilty about his desire for her."
'River you weren't even sixteen when I first started to want you,' Riddick really felt a little disturbed about that still. 'That's not right.'

"It doesn't mean you're perverted Richard," River's voice soothed him immediately. "It just means that your animal liked mine. You didn't ever do anything about it, not even when I started wanting you to."

'You're still a... a virgin gorammit,' Riddick thought violently. 'Girls deserve...I don't know...love their first time, not a big old hún dàn who's never had an affectionate thought in his life.'

"Setting aside your belief that you don't love me," River's voice had chilled in a way that meant she was going to talk about something she really didn't like and she knew he'd hate. She always smelled like steel when she got that tone; discipline controlling her reactions. "What makes you think I'm a virgin? Do you really believe the Academy wouldn't torture me that way as well as others once they'd elevated me? The first time I failed I was raped with metal."

The wordless roar of rage that escaped Riddick's lips through the gag vibrated his cryo tube and filled the air of the cabin. He could smell steel on River still, leavened with silk and blood and...honey and sugar. Steel for discipline, silk for strength, blood for truth, sugar for embarrassment, honey for...desire. He wanted to kill the men who'd hurt her and she felt desire for... him? 'River?'

"It was before I met you Richard," River explained. "I resisted the training at first. That was my punishment. It was why I didn't respond to your own desire for so long. But you helped me. I could feel your need, your lust for me, but you never even touched me in a way that reflected that lust. You held me, but only to keep me warm and never for your own needs." Her voice softened, "You made me realize that my first instincts, the animal's instincts were correct, I could trust you. I...I..." She stopped, sugar flooding her scent and he knew she was beyond embarrassed over what she'd wanted to say.

'River you... all right you're just killing me here,' Riddick rattled his chain's for emphasis. 'You're mine. All right? Even if I never get to touch you. Even if you aren't ever ready for me to be inside you. You're still mine. You're...the animal...it wants you like nothing else in the 'Verse. It wants you for its mate. I want you. So no matter what Qing Xiāng, you belong to me. And...' He hesitated and then barreled onwards, if she didn't like this she'd tell him pretty definitely. 'And I belong to you. All right? We're partners.'

The scent that flooded the air when he thought that at her was redolent with honey and silk, blood and steel and the combination was intoxicating. "I...Richard, I want that, more than anything," Her voice was trembling and he could hear her heart pounding. "I think...I think we might actually have time," She paused a moment. "I've always had feelings... flashes of insight but since the Academy they've become more powerful. Something's going to happen. We aren't going to reach our intended destination. We'll have a chance for freedom."

'You mean I'll get a chance to actually talk to you?' Riddick liked the sound of that, especially if he could get his hands on her a little bit. Not a lot, but just enough to ensure she wasn't spooked by him touching.

"Impending death situation will make in depth conversation difficult," River didn't quite laugh but he could hear in her voice that she was smiling. "Though I do look forward to your hands on me. I... Riddick...whatever happens...I promise...I am yours."

Sugar and honey were in her scent and he would have smiled if he could. She wanted him, but she was embarrassed about wanting him. That was something he'd have to teach her, honest desire wasn't anything she should feel embarrassed about. She was a woman, her animal nature was
something she should enjoy; he knew he was going to enjoy it when the time came. ‘Good. Because you aren’t getting away from me.’ He paused and changed the subject before they both began to second guess themselves. ‘Johns is going to be a problem. We had a run in years ago and now he’s always hyped up on drops, painkillers.’

"Bigger problems than Johns," River was frowning, worry like toasted cinnamon was threading through her scent. "Stars are falling." She took a deep breath, "Survival is not a guarantee. Please be careful."

'No way am I dying before I've gotten my hands on you River," Riddick would have growled if the bit permitted it. 'And I won't let you die either.'

"Richard does not have control over my life or death," River reminded him pertly. "But the thought is appreciated. Looking forward to getting my hands on you too." She sighed, "A further change of subject is perhaps needful. Perhaps we can discuss weapons? Or literature? Know that you like to read."

'Yeah,' Riddick agreed. 'Let's go over a few things about guns and shivs, that'll be fun. Then we can lighten the mood a bit.'

Riddick fumed silently. Not that he had a choice about the silence. In the madness of the crash he'd been able to escape his cryo tube. River's tube had already been empty. He'd found a way to hide and when Johns had come to find him, he'd attacked. But he hadn't been able to get out of his restraints and now he was chained up again, with his only hope of escape a break in the pillar to which he was strapped. It would be uncomfortable as hell but he could use it to escape.

The rest of the passenger were milling around outside, some on the ground a few on the top of the broken ship. River and Simon were among them, Simon checking everyone for injuries. He'd even stood up to Johns, insisting he be allowed to examine Riddick but Johns had decided no one got near his prisoner. Now the prospectors were working on a way to supplement oxygen and the holy man was praying along with his boys, three young pilgrims, all of them unaware they would have been slaves if they hadn't crashed.

The woman who'd landed the ship, the one that had jettisoned more than half of the containers, some of them with people inside, was acting as if she were really the captain. Riddick felt his stomach turn as she looked at him and lust floated off her skin with the scent of too ripe mint leaves. Part of him wondered if he just didn't like her or if River had really spoiled him for other women, all without laying more than a friendly hand on his. The animal didn't care, this woman wanted to collar and chain him and that wasn't something he could tolerate. But she was talking about him and that meant paying attention.

"And him?" Fry was talking to Johns. "We just keep him locked up forever?"

"Well that would be my choice," Johns sounded both smug and superior. Riddick wished he could smack that expression off the merc's face.

"Is he really that dangerous?" Fry wanted to know.

"Only around humans," Johns had a shrug in his voice and the two of them left the cabin, Fry lingering half a moment to watch a bit longer before she was gone.

Riddick uttered a mental curse and began to refine exactly what he'd have to do to get his hands on
the welding torch. Before he could begin to implement his plan someone else came into the cabin, walking quietly and determinedly right up to him. "Here," A pair of goggles were put on his head and tugged down, the blindfold removed only after his eyes were safely covered. Suddenly he could see clearly, the doctor, River's brother Simon standing in front of him with a set of tools very foreign to a doctor in his hands. In the doorway River was keeping watch, her dark hair blowing in the desert wind.

Before he could clear his thoughts to ask River what they were doing Simon was moving around behind him. Who'd have thought a doctor would carry around lock picks? Or know how to use them. Then he was free, his arms loose and his feet unchained. Savagely he reached up and tore the bit gag out of his mouth. "Thanks Doc," He managed the words around a dry tongue.

"You'll have to hide," Simon said quietly. "But that's nothing you don't know. Imam, the holy man, is going to look for water soon. River thinks Fry and Johns will go with him."

"She's usually right 'bout these things," Riddick agreed. "Why'd you do this anyway? Can't think you really care 'bout my freedom or not."

"River was adamant," Simon shrugged. "Everyone else is investigating the cargo container. I volunteered to stay out here and keep an eye on you. River wouldn't go with them so she stayed as well. They think she's younger than she is."

"Richard will have to hit Simon over the head to affect his escape," River said softly. "She will hide the lock picks."

"Doc, you okay with that?" Riddick wouldn't normally ask but this was River's brother.

"We talked about it, just don't hit me hard enough to do permanent damage please," Simon sounded resigned. "You'd better do it soon; River can fill you in on anything else you need to know."

"You got it," Riddick tilted his head evaluating and then struck out, knocking Simon's head into a beam and catching the doctor before he could crumple to the ground. "All right," The convict took a deep breath and arranged Simon so it looked as if he'd been dragged out of sight.

River deliberately stepped into the sand and marked it up so it would appear Simon had been attacked from behind and then dragged inside before she slipped back inside the broken ship. Riddick looked up at her and then rose from his crouched position. "You all right?" He wanted to be sure she wasn't feeling too overwhelmed by all the chaos and minds of the others. That was something they'd been working on but in high stress situations it wasn't easy.

"Will be fine," River offered him a smile, a little shy and hopeful. "Just wanted you to be free. Be careful...this place...it has murmuring underground and a place filled with death in the direction of the Blue Sun."

Riddick nodded and stepped closer to her, raising one hand to caress her cheek and hair. "Stay away from Johns, he's...not right inside." Her skin was so soft, felt so good under his hands, the animal wanted to purr.

River covered his hand with hers and leaned into his palm, "I will." She closed her eyes a moment and looked up into his meeting his gaze unerringly despite the goggles. "Remember..."

He nodded and pulled her closer, his hand firm on her neck and skull, pressing a kiss to her forehead and breathing in her scent. "I remember River," He promised her, mentally adding. 'You're mine and I'm yours.'
"Then go, they'll come back soon and I'll have to act hysterical," River turned her lips to his palm and kissed it.

"All right," Riddick forced himself to pull his hand away from her skin. "You better not get hurt or I'll be pretty damn pissed River."

"Go," River commanded, "Not much time."

Riddick cursed and began to run, taking care to leave tracks and taking the restraints with him. When he was a good distance away he heard River begin to scream and cry as if she were terrified.

River watched as the others cataloged the possible weapons in the crates of the cargo container. They'd already found booze and now there was a hunting boomerang and older weapons probably stolen to be sold on the antiquities black market. Simon was holding his head and with admirable core poise arguing with Johns who was insistently organizing the weapons scrounging. "What's the point? If he's gone, he's gone. Why should he bother us?"

Johns shrugged as he loaded up his big gauge shotgun. "Maybe to take what you got. Maybe to work your nerves," He pumped the gun and slid it onto his back and then began to check his pistol. "Or maybe to just come back and skull-fuck you in your sleep." He looked from Simon to River, "Pretty little thing like your sis, if he hadn't been pressed for time he mighta decided to take her along with him."

River shuddered and knew the others would read it as revulsion. Just Riddick's lips on her forehead had sent her body into a frenzy. The idea of being alone with him for hours or days to talk and touch and feel his animal reaching out for hers felt like embodying a thunderstorm. She took a deep shaking breath and shivered again. She knew exactly where Riddick was, a grave of giant bones, carving out a shiv so he could do what he did best.

Shazza, the pioneer woman, sent an irritated look at Johns, "Why don't you keep that kind of wǒ kào to yourself?"

"Because much as she might love her brother we were stupid to leave her with him, and stupid to leave only him standin' guard," Johns retorted. "We're lucky he wanted to get away more than he wanted some trim or she might have ended up dead and worse than that beforehand."

"He sounds like a charmer," Shazza shook her head.

River shook her head and shrugged picking up the boomerang and walking towards the door. "Keep eyes open," She suggested, "When you go to look for water."

Simon sat down on the top of the main cabin and watched carefully as Zeke, Shazza's husband, loaded up a sled with bodies and tools to dig with. River was watching the horizon, giving everyone the impression that she was watching for Riddick.

"Just keep your bloody eyes open. I don't want that dog sneaking up on my bloody ass," Zeke called up to Simon.

"My eyes were open when he hit me over the head," Simon retorted. "But I'll do my best."
"Yeah, that's a comfort," Zeke shook his head and began hauling.

"He's making a mistake," River's voice sounded quietly next to her brother making him jump.

"River don't do that!" Simon shook his head. "What do you mean a mistake?"

"Monsters underground. Shouldn't dig," River whispered, her voice almost lost against the wind.

"What kind of monsters?" Simon murmured still watching Zeke worriedly.

"Afraid of light, only come out at night," River explained. "But very deadly."

"Well with three suns here night shouldn't--"

"Eclipse is upon us," River shook her head as she interrupted her brother. "We have maybe a day and a half."

"Then how will we—" Simon was cut off again as River shrugged.

"Fry and Johns have found an emergency shuttle. Imam has found water," She told him softly. "In the town of ghosts." She looked around. "Get down, someone is coming."

"Who?" Simon did as she said, leaving the parasol and bottle of whiskey behind.

"Survivor," River shook her head. "Poor man." She tugged Simon into the cargo container and towards Shazza. "Stay here."

Shazza looked up in confusion as Simon was shoved towards her, "What's going on?"

Simon shrugged, "No idea," He said weakly. "River just gets awfully insistent sometimes." He turned to watch his sister as she stood in the doorway and caught his breath as the shadow of someone began moving outside. "River!"

His sister just turned and smiled at him, hunting boomerang in one hand, a cool controlled expression that was nothing like the smile he remembered. A shadow loomed over her and she tilted her head. Before anyone could say anything she had grabbed someone and yanked him forward just as a gun shot sounded. The stranger went down as River ducked out of the way, and shoved something upwards blocking a second shot. There was a grunt in a familiar voice and Shazza rushed forward. "Zeke?"

River let go of Zeke's hand and gave him a scolding look that was entirely too familiar to Simon, "Foolish to shoot when your target is not the enemy." She looked at the man she'd pulled out of the way. "Simon, he will need medical attention."

"Right," Simon nodded and moved forward to help the man turn over. "River can you..." He looked around and his sister was gone. "My bag is near the storage containers, will one of you grab it?"

River had slipped past Zeke when she'd heard Riddick's mind, his thoughts consumed with worry for her. Darting across the sand she'd found him slipping down from Simon's old perch, whiskey on his breath to grab her up and wrap her in his arms in a brief breathless hug. "Heard gunshots," He said gruffly. "You all right Qīng Xiāng?"

"Fine," River nodded. "Here," She handed him a bottle. "Wine is better for you than the whiskey. Our animals don't overly care for intoxication in battleground scenarios."

"Yeah, something eerily wrong about the ground hereabouts," Riddick agreed. "I'm gonna hang
around here, keep an eye on you an' Simon." He looked back towards the direction of Zeke's dig site, "Try to convince that fella not to dig any deeper iffen you can."

"Thinks I'm a little chī xiàn," River shrugged and leaned against him. "Won't listen."

"Yeah, ain't none of 'em too bright, 'ceptin' your brother," Riddick said grimly. "Gimme a quick kiss an' I'll take off again. But you look out for you an' Simon, the rest of 'em..." He shook his head, "Lower priority."

"Understood," River nodded and rose on her tiptoes to press a soft kiss to his cheek. "You be careful." Riddick nodded and let himself wrap her up in his arms for a moment before setting her on her feet and taking off, disappearing behind a dune of sand in the direction of the graves.

River returned to the cargo container and watched as Simon examined the new survivor. "He will need liquids," She observed. "Found wine, less alcohol than whiskey, better for imbibing." She handed the man a bottle and watched as he opened it with shaking fingers. "I'm River, that's Simon," She nodded at her brother. "Those are Zeke and Shazza."

"I'm Logan," The man nodded his thanks for the wine, "Thought I was the only one left."

River shook her head and examined the man critically. He was sunburnt and covered in dust, and had obviously spent a great deal of time in the heat. "How's your breathing?"

"Not great," The man shrugged and began pushing himself to his feet. "But I figure that's 'cause a there bein' three suns." He wiped some dust off his face with the sleeve of his shirt. "Why was someone shooting at me?"

"There's an escaped convict out there, likes to carve on people," Zeke spoke up. "We thought you were him."

"You thought Logan was Riddick," River corrected coldly. "You didn't bother to confirm that before you began shooting. It was not a well planned course of action."

"Well I don't see you standing guard or diggin' out there in the sun where that dog could sneak up on you." Zeke berated her. "When the man escaped it was when you an' your pansy brother here were standing watch."

"Yes," River said coolly. "My brother was injured and I was terrified. And in spite of that Riddick did nothing but push past me and leave. If he is as dangerous as Johns claims why did he leave both Simon and I alive? Why has he not returned to kill us all while his jailer is gone?"

"Because we have a gun?" Shazza suggested dryly as she picked up a pick axe and rested it on her shoulder.

"We have a pistol with eight shots, two of which are now gone," River pointed out, "In the hands of a man who is inexperienced with such firearms."

"River," Simon said gently. "Maybe you could take Mr. Logan out and show him the main cabin? Or perhaps give him a little history as to where we are? Who is here with us?"

River nodded slowly, "I will show him the main cabin and find him a breather," She said quietly. "Come Mr. Logan, we are clearly not wanted here."
Simon looked at the man and woman standing side by side and shook his head, "I need to explain something to you while River isn't here." He said thinking quickly, "She's extremely intelligent. She's graceful and she's trained in martial arts. She's also enormously afraid right now. She thinks this is a slave ship and that we were all being taken out past the rim to be put to work on some new planet that needed labor. She's a voracious reader and followed the news on the cortex feeds so she knew exactly who Riddick was when Johns mentioned the man's name. She told me everything she knew about him, which was quite a bit given her tendency to research her interests."

"And what was that?" Zeke relaxed slightly as Simon appeared to be treating he and Shazza as equals.

"Riddick is a murderer, but he's also one with a peculiar code of his own," Simon shrugged. "She told me that he has no compunction about killing anyone who opposes him. He's extremely skilled and dangerous and has almost animal instincts for what will keep him alive."

"So far not seeing the upside here Doc," Shazza shook her head.

"He doesn't harm children, by all accounts he despises people who hurt children. Adults are fair game, they've made their choices, but to hurt a child..." Simon shook his head. "And if we've done nothing to him, the chances of him returning to harm us are very slight. He'll want a way off this world just as we will. I think if we try to deny him that, that's when he would turn dangerous to us all. As it is, the only person he is a danger to now is Johns."

"That ain't totally comforting," Zeke said slowly. "But since we ain't done anythin' to him, you're sayin' he'll most likely leave us alone."

"According to what River learned yes," Simon nodded. Outside the container Riddick smirked and shook his head. Who'd have known the Doc could bullshit with the best of 'em. That he was mostly spoutin' facts didn't hurt. Knowing something was true certainly could make repeating it sound assured.

Riddick eased away from the cargo section and began to make his way over to the main cabin keeping an eye out for the returning party of explorers. River was explaining to Logan what had happened to the ship leaving out the part about it being a slave ship. "So...what? The lawman and the captain went off to look for water and left a little girl, a barely old enough doctor and a married couple more concerned about themselves than other folks behind?" Logan didn't sound impressed.

"Fry wished to escape the memories of her crewmates dying," River shrugged. "She hopes by the time she returns that they will be buried though burial is inadvisable on this planet." She moved about the cabin, trailing her fingers over things, letting Riddick hear where she was. "Johns went to try and find Riddick; that was the direction he took when he escaped. The Chrislams went to find water; their quest is the likeliest to succeed."

"But they left a pretty girl alone with only her brother and two other people while a murderer roams around this place?" Logan seemed a bit disturbed by that idea.

"Not alone," River shook her head and listened to Riddick's thoughts. He seemed to think the newcomer was flirting with her. His thoughts were near growls of insistence; the animal felt its claim on her was threatened. "I am in no danger from Riddick. He didn't harm me when he was quite capable of doing so."

"Still, iffen the man's been locked up ain't like he's got much chance to meet girls," Logan argued. "An' you're a pretty little thing. Ain't like he'd have a lotta other options. He don't sound like he's been in a position to be choosy."
"That is an accurate statement," River replied thoughtfully. "He would certainly not have any other opportunities to meet women while incarcerated." She glanced at Logan curiously. "You are positing the theory that any attraction he might have to me comes from proximity and lack of other potential mates?"

"Well it ain't like you aren't a cute little thing, but a man a that stamp ain't known for findin' refined little ladies like you to be to his taste." Logan pointed out taking a drink of his wine.

"That is true," River nodded. "Riddick is likely older than I am, and accustomed to women who look more like..." She gazed morosely down at herself, "Women." Resolutely she began to block out Riddick's mental shouting though with the volume he could project it wasn't easy.

Zeke stopped near the opening in the side of the cabin, "I'm headed back out to bury the dead." He told them, "Logan you wanna come with, keep a lookout? Simon's gonna help Shazza in the cargo container and then keep watch from up top."

"Yeah man, sure," Logan nodded and picked up the bottle of wine before grabbing the pick axe Zeke held.

River sat down and began to think. Riddick claimed to want her and his emotions supported that claim. He'd had, however, very little opportunity to meet and form an attachment to any other woman since he'd been locked up with her since she was just past fifteen. It was true that they talked regularly and had much in common besides several years in an experimental government institution. He had been remarkably forbearing for a man of his background and proved himself capable of controlling or sublimating his physical needs. None of that meant he had formed an attachment to her that was lasting and real. It only meant she was the sole female of his acquaintance. Logic dictated that she keep him at a distance and encourage him to find other women with whom he could explore his physical urges. If he still wished to claim her after he had spent time and had coitus with other women then perhaps he would be satisfied with her as his mate or woman or whatever it was called when the two people in question were fugitives and unable to marry legally.

Riddick paced and stifled the urge to murder the ǒu niáng yǎng de who'd told River that she was 'cute' but not the type of woman a man like Riddick would want. He'd known to the minute when she'd actually begun giving credence to Logan's theories. Her scent had filled with steel and citrus and silk as she'd begun to think. He could see the two men in the distance, the ground where they worked a bit lower than the rest of the area. Zeke had erected a tarp and it had fallen while he'd been gone.

Suddenly River burst out of the cabin and began running for the grave, her scent redolent with burnt cinnamon. Riddick scowled and began to run after her. Several shots rang out and there was a scream of agony. River reached the grave before he did and jumped down before he could stop her. Logan was there, hanging onto Zeke with all his might, the man was screaming, his legs in a hole in the side of the grave.

River picked up the gun and shot blindly into the hole ignoring Logan. Riddick jumped down after her and began pulling Zeke away from the hole, "Cào dàn!" He tore off his shirt and hastily began to wrap it tightly around Zeke's severed leg. River leaned down to peer into the hole and shrieked throwing herself backwards and nearly into Riddick.

The shots and screams had drawn Simon and Shazza and the doctor jumped into the hole. "What happened?" He demanded as he began working to stabilize the injured man.
"We was comin' back, to finish diggin' the graves," Logan began not looking at Riddick. "An' there's a hole in the side of the grave. The bodies is gone so Zeke he crouched down by the hole, kinda looked in like. Something...speared him through the leg... pulled him in. I kep' hold of 'im but it was..." He shook his head. "Your lil sis comes along grabs the gun an' shoots in the hole. This 'un he gets hold a Zeke an' we pulled 'im back. His leg..."

"Don't go into the dark," River whispered still trying to back away from the hole. "Hunger in the dark."

Logan looked at her and then at the hole in the ground, "Yeah, ain't really able to argue that."

Riddick looked at the unconscious pioneer and then at River. She was white as a ghost, staring into the hole and shaking her head, the scent of fear coming off of her overwhelmed every other scent until he felt as if he were drowning in burnt cinnamon. Slowly but surely she began to calm down, her animal reading his and taking comfort from his own composure.

Before he could say anything he heard the sound of feet running towards them and leapt up. It was time to go.

River shuddered and took deep calming breaths trying to find a serene place inside her, her mind instinctively finding Riddick's as he ran. She could feel Johns coming towards them, and then his mind and Riddick's collided. Fighting, and then blinding light and she whimpered. Logan moved slightly, turning towards her, his foot sliding just a hair too close to the hole.

Like lightning something wrapped around his ankle and jerked, pulling him off his feet. Shouting with fear he reached out as he was drawn down, grabbing onto anything near by, his hand wrapping around River's wrist and yanking her forward as he slid backwards. River screamed as she was dragged forward closer to the hole, Logan's fingers like a manacle around her wrist.

Scrambling for purchase in the loose dirt River's fingers closed around the gun even as she was pulled closer to the hole. Someone grabbed her around the waist and pulled backwards but whatever held Logan was strong and the man's grasp on her wrist was desperate enough that he could not be pried away. Logan was screaming now, his other hand grabbing onto her and pulling her into the hole with him, almost face to face as he was dragged downwards.

River shuddered as the arm Logan gripped dislocated and brought up the gun. Closing her eyes she shot point blank into Logan's screaming mouth and was abruptly pulled backwards as Logan's hand grew lax around her wrist. River looked around as she was pulled out of the hole and tried to control her breathing. "Only two bullets left," She whispered.

Shazza looked up as Fry came to the edge of the grave and looked back down at her husband closing his sightless eyes. "Burials...they aren't such a good idea here," She said quietly.

"What happened?" Fry looked at Simon whose arm was still around his sister's waist, tears streaming down his face.

"Where's Riddick?" Shazza wanted to know.

"Johns is takin' him back to the cabin, lock him back up," Fry shrugged. "Why?"

"Because he tried to save Zeke," Simon said dully. "Logan told us..."
"Who's Logan?" Fry looked at the three traumatized people and shook her head. "C'mon outa there and get in some shade and tell me what happened."

"Teeth in the dark," River whispered and cried out as Simon touched her shoulder in an effort to help her up.

"Shǐ niào," Simon shook his head as he took in the way River's arm was hanging. "We've got to get back to the ship."

"Gǒu niáng yǎng de," Shazza shook her head in pained awe. "Can't you do anything about it here?"

"I'm going to need someone with more strength in the upper body than I have," Simon shook his head. "It's got to be popped back in, and River can't have pain meds. She's severely allergic."

"Let's go then," Shazza took one last mournful look at Zeke and got to her feet. Fry looked at the three of them but said nothing.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

hún dàn - bastard
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
wǒ kào - crap
chī xiàn - crazy/insane
Cào dàn! - damn it!
Shǐ niào - shit and piss
Gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch
River wouldn't let go of the gun, not even when she was struggling to climb out of the grave. The walk back to the ship was a journey of step by painful step. And then they heard what was happening inside the ship. The meaty sound of a fist meeting flesh. River moaned as the sick satisfaction Johns felt reached her mind. Riddick's stoic resolve in the face of torture was no help, it didn't mean he didn't feel pain. He was just very good at channeling it.

Simon intended to ask Johns to help him pop her shoulder into place and River shuddered at the thought of Johns putting hands on her. "No," She whispered as Simon considered how to ask. "No." She pulled away from him and walked into the main cabin ignoring Johns and Simon as he hurried after her.

Riddick had to keep his eyes closed but he could smell River close by, she smelt of pain and fear. Burnt cinnamon and citrus and he slitted his eyes to see why. The problem was instantly apparent and he muttered a curse. Johns had stopped hitting him when River wandered in and now he turned to look at the diminutive girl.

"What are you doin' in here?" Johns was very irritated.

"Require the use of your prisoner," River told him flatly. "Need his muscles."

"If you need muscle I'll help you," Johns told her in a clear and final voice.

"You are inadequate to her needs," The girl shook her head. "Step aside please."

"No; go get your doc brother to fix you. That's his job," The merc scowled and backhanded Riddick across the face again. Riddick growled at him, his eyes still slitted and fixed on River. The look on her face promised murder for the merc but she turned away and studied the column to which he'd originally been chained.

"Inadequate upper body musculature," River said absently. "If Riddick's strength cannot be lent to her she will do this herself." She looked at Johns, "You won't like it."

Johns looked as if he was going to shout in frustration but looked at her, "I don't care. Get out." His voice rose to a near shout.

River shook her head studying the column still and nodded once. Muttering to herself she angled her body and twisted her waist. As quickly as possible she slammed her shoulder into the column and moaned deep in her throat as the shoulder popped into place. Sliding to the ground she giggled weakly until tears slid down her cheeks. Minutes ticked past until Fry poked her head into the cabin and demanded to speak with Johns. Grumbling the merc left.

Riddick looked at River, his eyes slitted against the harsh light streaming in. She wasn't in as much pain but the short sleeved tunic she wore didn't hide the bruises that circled her wrist like a cuff. "I don't care what Logan convinced you of," Riddick said finally. "It don't change a thing."

River looked at him and shook her head, "From a logical perspective he was correct." She rose and moved towards him, angling her body so it blocked the sunlight from his eyes. "Riddick has only been close to her. Further exposure to other variables is needed to determine if his desire to keep her
is genuine."

"There’s Shazza an’ Fry an’ you, an’ am I sniffin’ ’round either a them?" Riddick growled the words out, "You’re the one I want."

"Want that very much," River told him, her voice still melancholy. "But it is not fair to Richard for her to cling to him. He must have freedom first. Then the decision can be made."

"Tā mā de dì yù," Riddick cursed. "I hate that gorram stubborn look you get when you think you're right an' you ain’t."

"She cannot keep him until he has a choice and still wants her," River told him gravely. She looked at the door, “Must go.”

"Yeah, go on before Johns comes back," Riddick snarled and watched her go. Johns had been marching him back to the broken ship at gunpoint when he’d heard River scream. He’d been blinded by the suns and still had turned in her direction, her terror driving the animal mad. Johns had beat him about the head until he was dizzy to make him turn back towards the ship. Then River’s screaming had stopped with a gunshot and only the continued waves of her scent had kept him moving.

Johns didn't come back though, Fry did. Riddick would almost have rather had another beating. "So according to Simon and Shazza another survivor was found," The docking pilot said quietly. "A man named Logan."

"Never got his name, just helped the man pull Zeke outa a hole in the ground," Riddick drawled. "What's your point?"

"So he's gone. Zeke's dead with more than half a leg gone and the little girl nearly disappeared down the same hole," Fry retorted. "Do you want to tell me about the sounds?"

"Same thing everyone else heard," Riddick shrugged, "Screams."

"Look you told Johns you heard something," Fry shook her head when he didn't answer her. "That's fine. You don't want to talk to me, that's your choice. But, just so you know...there's a debate right now as to whether we should just leave you here to die."

"What? You mean the whispers?" Riddick asked with a smirk. This bitch deserved a good scare and he was just the person to give it to her.

"What whispers?" Fry stared at him.

"The ones telling me to go for the sweet spot just to the left of the spine," Riddick drawled keeping his smirk firmly in place. He knew they were debating just letting him die of thirst and starvation. No matter what he’d done, when people went missing or dead he was always the one blamed. Of course he was a murderer and he did tend to kill people but he hadn’t this time. But this time he could scare this bitch good, put the fear of the animal into her before they left him for dead. "Fourth lumbar down, the abdominal aorta," He paused as if remembering and nearly smiled as he caught the tequila scent of River listening to him in amusement. "It's a metallic taste, human blood. Copperish. If you cut it with peppermint schnapps, that goes—"

“Do you want to shock me with the truth now?" Fry broke in, irritation in every line of her body.

Riddick could smell her fear, twisted with lust and anger the scent of overripe mint, twined into coffee and pepper overlaid with the scotch she’d drank with Johns. She was unappealing on so many
levels, not the least of which being that she was talking to him instead of River. He knew his voice was going to sound dark and bitter when he spoke, just thinking that River might be giving up on him was making him want to kill everything in sight except her and maybe her brother. “Alla you people’re so scared of me,” He let his voice drip out slowly wanting to inflict pain in the only way he could. “Most days, I take that as a compliment. But it ain't me you gotta worry ‘bout now.”

Her reaction was one he could have predicted had he cared to do so, but her motivations didn’t interest him. She’d been prepared to sacrifice him, River and everyone who’d survived the crash along with all the other slaves she’d just dumped, purely to save her own skin. Her own needs and wants blinded her to anything else. So her demand wasn’t exactly a surprise. “Show me your eyes.”

River was listening, he could smell her, close by, anger on her skin, a hot spicy cinnamon mixed with something he rarely caught on her skin, something like chocolate…mixed with her anger it was a heady combination knowing she was jealous. The blonde got to talk to him and River couldn’t because of their charade. Teasing River now his voice changed, and Riddick nearly smiled slanting the words on his tongue seductively. “You'd have to come a lot closer for that.”

The goggles around his neck were no deterrent as she moved a bit closer, “Show me.” Fry demanded.

Riddick held back his grin loving the scent roiling off River’s skin. Oh she was mad at him, furious with Fry, angry with herself for not claiming him when she could, she smelled better than anything in the world right now. Honey mixed with chocolate and cinnamon and a slight tendril of citrus as if the entire idea of him showing off to Fry pained her. “Closer,” He drawled the words out again. When she finally came close enough he screwed his eyes shut and braced himself for the pain. Fry took another half step and he lunged forward, his teeth barely a half centimeter from her face as he opened his eyes to the light.

“Where can the girl get eyes like yours?” River’s voice was amazed and he remembered this was the first time she’d seen his eyes in the light. Suddenly Riddick fiercely wished Fry gone so he could talk to River convince her that she was the one he wanted, the only one he’d ever want. The animal had never felt like this before, never wanted a woman to keep for the rest of his life. He’d known women, known too many, and none of them stirred him like this slip of a dancer.

“Gotta kill a few people,” He looked at River who drifted closer to him, sidling up so his left hand was close to her hair, his fingers strained to touch a few silky strands. He knew she could feel his amusement over the story he was about to tell, the story she knew was a lie.

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“She is capable of filling that requirement,” River nodded seriously her hands reaching for his goggles even as Fry hissed out a warning.

“Then you gotta get sent to a slam where they say you'll never see daylight again,” Riddick reveled in the feel of those slender little fingers touching his skin, fixing the dislodged lens and sliding the goggles up over his eyes. “You dig up a doctor and you pay him in cigarettes...” He looked from River to Fry and tilted his head, “To do a surgical shine job on your eyeballs.”

“Enhanced night vision to show all dangers in the darkness? To guard against those who would encroach upon you?” River whispered softly, her breath against his skin.

“Exactly,” Riddick drawled, hiding his need for her beneath his amusement. Fry was getting pissed that he wasn’t paying attention to her anymore, his entire being concentrated on the little girl staring up at him in wonder.

“Leave!” Fry snapped the word out, her annoyance like a blast of onion in his nose. River looked up
at the pilot, injured feelings in her expression and produced the cutest pout Riddick had ever seen. If she used that look on him he was done for and he was smart enough to know it. The tendrils of amusement that floated off River as she read that thought teased his nose with a tequila scent and he shook his head at her. “Leave,” Fry repeated more gently.

River looked up at him one last time and wrinkled her nose at Fry before sweeping away more grandly than anyone should be able to manage in a loose tunic and leggings. Riddick smirked at Fry, “Cute kid.” He shook his head continuing the conversation that had begun before River’s entrance, before her jealousy had given him hope again. “Did I kill a few people? Sure.” He shook his head, “Did I kill Zeke? The new guy Logan?” He knew his voice hardened on the name just thinking of the damage the man could have done to his future with River, “No. You got the wrong killer.”

“Logan’s not in the hole, we looked,” Fry repeated more gently. “Shazza and the doctor had said was impossible, it didn’t make sense. And Johns was convinced that Riddick had somehow killed the two men and scared the other three bad enough that they’d lie for him. That didn’t make sense either, but it would take more than sense to convince Johns that Riddick wasn’t the ultimate bad on this planet. Riddick chuckled, “Look deeper.” He watched through the smoked glass lenses as Fry stomped out of the cabin and shook his head. That woman was going to get herself killed if she wasn’t careful.

“Truer words,” River shook her head in imitation of him as she entered. “Shazza is going with Johns and Fry and the Chrislams to investigate the hole. Zeke’s body will be gone. That will spook Johns. Simon is looking through the cargo hold; I am supposed to be with him.”

“C’mere,” Riddick demanded, he knew he sounded autocratic and didn’t want to give. He wanted River’s hands on him again.

“She still believes Riddick must have further exposure to females besides the girl,” River cautioned him as she moved closer.

Riddick growled deep in his throat at the thought of waiting even a minute longer to claim her, “Think I haven’t been with other women?” He nearly snarled the words despising this weakness that made him need her even as she was turning away from him. There was a part of him that was furious with her for denying him, the only woman he’d ever really wanted and she didn’t believe it was real. The animal inside was snarling that this was his mate, the only weakness was letting her go, doing anything to make her listen, to make her understand what she was to him, that was strength. The animal was a lot more pragmatic than the man. The man had pride, bruised now, but pride nonetheless. He stared at her, “Think I dunno the difference ‘tween them an’ you? Ain’t a woman in the ‘Verse I felt about the way I feel for you River. Never wanted to protect them, never wanted them for any longer’n took me to have ‘em. You’re different. Don’ need me to shield you an’ I wanna anyway.”

“Just a girl, killer like him, skinny and not quite right,” River retorted moving closer as in spite of her argument. “What if Riddick deserves better?”

“Have you lost what’s left of your chí xìn mind?” Riddick snarled, “There ain’t anyone better’n you River. An’ if there was I wouldn’ care. I want you. The animal is goin’ nuts wantin’ to claim you as its mate.”

“Riddick is being loyal and honorable,” River murmured reluctantly. “Cannot hold you to words said in captivity.”

“Little girl, you get your cute pì gu over here an’ I’ll show you just how not honorable I am,” Riddick snarled rattling his restraints. “Want your hands on me again River, goin’ crazy with
“He is certain,” River eyed him curiously and he knew she was reading him, finding the truth of everything he’d told her even as he read her scent and caught threads of honey weaving into apples and cinnamon and chocolate. “Riddick was pleased she was jealous of Fry being able to see his eyes, likes cinnamon and chocolate on her skin.”

“Yeah,” He nodded loving that she couldn’t hide the effect his voice had on her, not from him. “Yeah I was damn pleased you were pissed ‘bout her talkin’ to me. Want your animal to override your reason same as mine has.” That was the wrong thing to say, he could tell the minute the words came out of his mouth. Her scent, rising with honey and apples twisted with the cinnamon scent that meant she was pissed.

“Then the man does not truly want the girl,” River said quietly, steel in her words and scent twining with blood and cinnamon. “It is only the animal that desires her touch.”

“That ain’t what I meant and you gorram well know it,” Riddick snarled. “C’mere,” He lunged forward and was forced to stop just short of her position. “If the man hadn’t given in to the animal, hadn’t agreed with it, I wouldn’t a ever said a thing. Wouldn’t a told ya I wanted ya. Way I figure it your animal’s the only thing that likes me. Your brain works too well to want me otherwise.”

River moved closer to him forcing him to back up until the chains were slack again, staring up into his eyes, “I am a fool for you Richard B. Riddick,” She whispered, her breath like a sweet breeze on his skin. He nearly groaned at the feel of her, not quite pressing against him, her body brushing lightly over his. “Your voice feels like a caress on my skin, your body is beautiful and promises safety and affection and I want your heart for my own. I can no longer tell the difference between the animal and the girl. All I know is I wish to stay by your side for the rest of my life and if you tire of me I will be more broken by you than the Academy could have ever done.”

Her palm rested carefully on his chest over a frantically beating heart and he nearly groaned at the fire that shot through him. “River,” He kept his voice low, just for her ears. “I swear baby girl, if you don’t do somethin’, anythin’, I’m gonna go crazy.” Riddick knew there wasn’t much she could do with him since he was tied up and she was so tiny. But he was so hungry for her touch, needed what she’d called skin privileges with her, the right to touch and be touched, it felt like he could howl out the agony of being denied those slender fingers on his skin. Even if she just petted his skin, it would soothe the animal and reassure the man.

She was reading him, a near constant thing between the two of them. He knew her scents so well he might as well have been a reader concerning her. She knew his mind, almost two years of familiarity between the two of them made them closer than most married folk, but he still didn’t know what her skin tasted like or how her mouth would feel under his. “What satisfaction can thou have tonight?” She murmured the ancient question and he groaned knowing the response.

It was accurate, painfully accurate as far as he was concerned. He might say he couldn’t know what love was to someone like Simon, but Simon wasn't River. He couldn’t lie to her, and he was acutely aware that this hunger and need and hope for her alone most likely qualified. Taking a deep breath he inhaled her scent and gave her the truth, “The exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine.”

Her smile was blinding, the joy that burst off her skin a perfect blend of caramel, apples, honey, silk and blood along with something else, something almost indefinable that was hers alone. “I gave thee mine before thou didst request it,” She told him softly, moving closer so that her body pressed to his, her cheek against his neck, breathing in his scent the way he’d taught her.

“River,” Riddick never wanted her to leave, but he was tied up, couldn’t defend her, couldn’t even
defend himself, and someone was coming towards the cabin. Her lips pressed to his skin, trailing over his neck up to his cheek and just brushing over his mouth before she backed away to sit on a broken bulkhead across from him.

Simon poked his head in the door and nodded in satisfaction, “Ah good; just wanted to make sure this was where you were River.” He tilted his head at Riddick, “I’m sorry but I think if we broke you out twice they’d get suspicious. Best to wait until we’re sure we can make a run for it.”

“S’all right Doc,” Riddick was absurdly touched by the man’s apology, he hadn’t expected aid the first time let alone a second attempt. “You’re right. Johns an’ Fry, they’re figurin’ out River’s been tellin’ the truth. We’s just talkin’ ‘bout how they might want to use me ‘stead a keepin’ me in shade an’ comfort.”

Simon cracked a smile, “I did find a shirt along with some other things in the cargo hold,” He held up a piece of fabric in a pale color. “If they let you go at least you’ll have some protection from the sun.”

“Thanks Doc,” Riddick nodded.

River tilted her head at Simon and smiled, “Need not worry gē ge I’ll hear the others long before they come back. Then I’ll come find you if I think I should. Enjoying time with my partner, haven’t had much chance to talk. Missed it.”

“All right, I guess you’d know when the others were too close for comfort,” Simon looked a bit discomfited by her decision to remain but took himself back off to the cargo containers.

“C’mere,” Riddick growled teasingly at River. “Wanna feel those sweet lips a yours again.”

Her hushed laugh was like a breeze through the hot air as she moved towards him, her slightly swaying walk more seductive than a Companion’s strut ever could be to his eyes. “Richard is greedy,” She teased as she wrapped her arms carefully around his neck and pressed her body to his. “He makes her hungry.”

“Good,” Riddick tilted his head and reminded himself that she wasn’t a whore or companion, she deserved better from him than greed. “Just a taste Qing Xiang.” He murmured against her cheek. “Don’t wanna scare you.”

“It was never Richard who made her afraid,” River murmured turning her face so her lips brushed over his. “He will not start now. Take. Take her mouth as you want to.”

“Cain’t do that,” Riddick groaned at the fire of need that swept through him with such an innocent caress. “I’ll bust my wrists to get loose iffen I kiss you the way I want.”

“Then she will kiss him,” River pressed her lips to his and gasped against his mouth in shock at the heat that went through her. His lips moved under hers, nibbling at her, teasing and caressing until she was imitating him, tasting his mouth under hers. Her body pressed closer to his of its own volition and she felt him groan deep in his chest, vibrating against her.

Riddick groaned and opened his mouth under her lips, letting his tongue flicker and tease her tender flesh until she shuddered against him and gasped, letting him inside. Now the kiss was his, devouring her, his tongue seeking hers to rub against, his lips sucking on her tongue gently until she moaned into his mouth. He could hear her heart pounding, feel it against his chest, her hands had begun loose at his back, now they were clinging to his shoulders, a tight desperate embrace he wished he could return. All too soon he heard a commotion, screams, shouts and shots and drew back.
River followed him, desperate to continue the kiss and he groaned and chuckled lifting his head away. “Listen Qīng Xiāng, they’re gonna come back soon.” He nuzzled her neck and kissed the pulse pounding at her jugular. “Go on an’ sit down or find Simon,” He told her, “Gotta stop while we can.” He inhaled deeply loving how she smelled, honey bursting over her skin, apples and silk and blood, “Gorram you smell good.”

“Riddick is not going to suddenly decide he will not kiss her anymore?” River asked as she retreated to calm her racing heart. “She will be very displeased if he should change his mind at this juncture.”

“Hell no,” Riddick nearly growled the words out. “You’re mine now,” He took a deep breath and willed the blood away from his groin and back to his brain. “Don’t mean I’m takin’ you right to bed, but you’re still mine.”

“He wishes courtship from her?” River was tilting her head and he could tell she was a little confused. It was a rarity for her so he hardly ever caught the scent of roses on her skin.

“No tiān shǐ,” Riddick shook his head, “Wanna court you.”

“Don’t know if I want to be courted if it means Richard won’t hold me at night,” River told him with that pout he found so unreasonably adorable.

“Ain’t ever said that was gonna stop,” Riddick found himself irrationally pleased that she was being stubborn about that particular thing. The animal wouldn’t know what to do with itself at night if its mate was out of reach. From the pleased smile on her face she’d heard that particular thought.

“Good,” River pulled her knees up to her chin and sat with her arms wrapped around her legs as the sound of the rest of the group returning reached her ears. She looked about twelve when she did that and impossibly cute.

Johns stalked into the cabin and glared at River who was sitting and simply staring at Riddick biting her lips thoughtfully. “Go on girly, get outa here,” He commanded, pulling the goggles off Riddick’s head and tossing them to the ground.

“Don’t have to do as he says,” River stuck her tongue out and wrinkled her nose at him.

“Yeah you do,” Johns grabbed her by the arm, unfortunately the one that had been dislocated, and hauled her up, startling a cry of pain out of her before she bit her lip until it bled to keep from speaking. “Go on, get.”

River left the cabin muttering to herself about what her wolf would do to the merc when he had the chance. Riddick watched her for a minute and promised himself that Johns would get a shiv to the stomach for every time he hurt River before he turned his attention to the merc. “Finally found something worse than me?”

“So here's the deal,” Johns began, “You work without chains, without bit and without shivs. You do what I say when I say it.”

"For what?” Riddick sneered, "The honor of going back to some asshole of a cell? Fuck you."

Johns shook his head and sighed, "The truth is...I'm tired of chasing you." He looked at Riddick with a weary shrug.

"Are you saying you'd cut me loose?" Riddick really couldn't believe that. Johns thought he needed muscle so he was working a con.
“I'm thinking you could have died in the crash,” Johns suggested eyeing the convict with a tilt of his head. Blue eyes sparkled coldly in the desert heat and Riddick nearly snarled. The man was practically sweating deceit and he thought Riddick couldn’t tell? Johns really did think he was stupid.

“My recommendation: Do me,” Riddick did snarl the words then, smirking as Johns’ half smug expression faded. “Don't take the chance that I'll get shiv-happy on your wanna-be-ass,” He leaned forward almost daring the merc to kill him. River was outside, reading the both of them, her scent a mass of cinnamon and steel, that stubborn will she had holding herself back from shrieking at the two of them to stop playing games. There was a particular fragrance about her when she was impatient with him, whenever he’d begun baiting the orderlies and scientists as he was baiting Johns. “Ghost me, motherfucker, that's what I would do to you,” He sneered at the merc knowing the man wouldn’t kill him. Johns’ greed and desire to live were too strong to simply kill Riddick. Johns needed him alive, so the merc would try to play him as long as possible.

The shotgun lifted towards Riddick’s face and for a moment the convict wondered if he’d miscalculated until it kept angling upwards and blasted, unbearably close and loud, Riddick’s chains falling from the ceiling to dangle around his wrists. “I want you to remember this moment,” Johns told him through the ringing in his ears, “The way it could have gone and didn't.” He reached down and grabbed the goggles he’d torn off of Riddick, “Here.” Johns held them out to the convict who snatched them out of his hand with barely repressed fury. “Take it easy.”

“Fuck you!” Riddick snarled at the blue eyed merc, wanting nothing more than to put a good scare into the hype.

“Do we have a deal?” Johns simply waited as if he had all the time in the world, holding out his hand as if to seal the bargain.

Riddick paused and reached out for the hand, and grabbed the shotgun with his other hand. With one quick twist Johns was looking down the barrel of his own gun, "I want you to remember this moment.” Riddick told him softly, wanting nothing more than to kill the merc right then. The man had kept him from going to help River, beaten him while he was chained up, again kept him from helping River, and then had hurt River on top of it. The man was going to die; it was only a matter of when.

“Just one?” Johns smirked at him, his face impassive even though Riddick could smell the nerves on him.

“For now,” Riddick pumped the shotgun, spitting blue shells over Johns and dropped the empty gun at the merc’s feet. He grabbed the shirt Johns’ hadn’t even noticed and walked away, pulling it over his head as he entered the desert.

River took a deep breath and then supplemented it with a puff on her breather. She and Riddick would acclimate more quickly than the others to the lack of oxygen but it wasn’t a pleasant sensation until they did. Mentally she began to plan for the ghost town, easily reading the memories from the minds of the boys and holy man. Fry’s thoughts were on the lifeboat, the emergency shuttle, and Johns was thinking about his next fix. She wrinkled her nose, no wonder he was hard to read so often. Riddick would have more reliable intel on Johns’ than any she could gather. She stole a look at her partner and potential mate as he hauled a power cell onto the sled.

“Should bring more than one,” River suggested to Fry, sidling up to the pilot quietly and startling the blonde with her voice. “Best to be prepared for the worst.”
“If the cells don’t work in the skiff there’s no point in hauling them,” Fry told her after she’d recovered from her scare.

“I can convert the power cells to make them work with anything, it’s a matter of processing the energy in the right sequence and flow,” River shook her head. “The girl is a genius, can make it work. But must have cells, more than one, three if possible. Go, come back, go again,” She looked out into the desert. “We will need to run or night will come.”

“We have three suns,” Fry shook her head, “Don’t think night’s coming anytime soon.”

“You’re wrong,” River shook her head and went to speak to Shazza and Imam to try and convince them.

Riddick watched River and shook his head as she tried futilely to convince the others that they should prepare to make only one trip to the town. Imam was condescending but kind about it, and he admitted it would be wise to stock the skiff with extra oxygen in case they didn’t find the ship lanes right away. Shazza was nodding her agreement and appeared inclined to agree with River, casting a wary look at the spires nearby.

When the two women went to make their case to Johns the merc shrugged them off. In frustration River started towards Riddick, obviously intending to go over both Johns’ and Fry’s heads to the man who would be doing the hauling. Shazza grabbed her, thankfully by the uninjured arm, and shook her head. River rolled her eyes and made an ‘enough’ gesture with her good hand and began to drag Shazza along with her.

“Then stay with me if you are so worried about what he will do with his newfound freedom,” He heard River saying as she drew closer.

“This is a bad idea little girl,” Shazza was muttering in a voice that wasn’t quite quiet enough.

“Mr. Riddick,” River stopped in front of him, Shazza at her side and slightly behind her, “I postulate that it is better to make two equal trips in weight and distance than to make one easy trip and one very difficult.”

Riddick stopped what he was doing and tilted his head at the girl as if he was confused. River knew he wasn’t, but everyone else thought he was pretty dumb, and he’d better play to that. “Uh, nǐ zì,” He began, “Be happy ta ‘gree or dis’gree iffen I could un’erstand one word in ten a what you’re talkin’ on.”

Shazza huffed in frustration and translated, “She wants to bring three powercells now, and then run back quickly and bring three more. She keeps goin’ on ‘bout the darkness coming and being prepared for quick flight.”

“Don’t see why not,” Riddick shrugged easily even with the weight on his back. “I can haul three, maybe more, an’ it’ll make an easier second trip.” He looked at River, “What’s this about darkness?”

“The suns will not live forever,” River said seriously. “They die and will be reborn like Imam’s Christ but it will be longer than three days before they are resurrected and we must escape or we will die under the teeth and claws that hunger in the darkness.”

Shazza shuddered obviously remembering how quickly Logan had disappeared and how Zeke had died. For a moment she considered and then she looked at Riddick, adult to adult over the head of a child, “Do you think she’s right?”

“Tell ya when I hit her brother over the head and walked towards her?” Riddick began slowly as if
trying to speak clearly, “Girl was scared, but didn’t seem so scared a me. Heard her brother sayin’
she was a genius, liked researchin’ stuff. She kept goin’ on ‘bout hunger in the ground, teeth in the
dark and claws in the night, like she knew something I didn’t.” He looked at River with the
dimwitted expression of an idiot trying to be thoughtful and caught the whiff of tequila that meant
River was trying not to laugh, “Maybe she knows more ‘bout this planet than the rest a us. We all
know there’s somethin’ underground. Saw what it did.”

Shazza nodded, but before she could reply Johns came stormin’ up to them. “You two get away
from him. This ain’t no Sunday social picnic.” He shoved River away, pushing her into Shazza so
her sore shoulder collided with Shazza’s arm and side.

Riddick growled and grabbed the mere, “Johns, you got me on a leash fine,” He snarled into the
man’s face. “But you oughta know I don’t tolerate anybody beatin’ on kids, an’ that’s how many
times in my sight you pushed or hurt this little girl?”

Johns struggled and tore himself out of Riddick’s grasp, “Maybe I don’t want her to end up dead like
your other victims.”

“I don’t got the taste for women’s blood Johns,” Riddick growled softly. “That’d be you. Everybody
I killed, I killed clean, an’ they knew why. I don’t kill kids. An’ I don’t care much to kill women
lessen they try to kill me.”

He turned away from Johns and looked at River who was holding her injured arm and taking deep
breaths designed to hold back tears. “Here nǐ zi,” He pulled off his shirt and handed it to Shazza,
“Make her a sling for her arm. It ain’t gonna heal if she keeps tryin’ to use it. An’ iffen she’s right?
She’s gonna need to heal up. Got a bad feelin’.”

Simon called for River, an appalled tone in his voice as he saw where she was, “River, get away
from him!”

Shazza shrugged and slid an arm around the smaller girl's waist guiding her towards her brother.
River turned her head to look at Riddick over her shoulder, holding his shirt with her good arm.
Riddick turned and looked at Johns, “The girls are right ya know, better to haul a few more cells
now than have a lot of ‘em later.”

“Riddick you wouldn’t know right if it bit you in the ass,” Johns stomped off, no doubt to get his
next fix and Riddick took a firmer hold on what he was hauling and began moving again.

Riddick kept a smirk on his face as he hauled not three but two powercells along with a lot of
oxygen and as much as they could salvage from the wreck. He was last in the little parade, Shazza
up ahead behind Fry, with Imam and his boys leading the way. Johns was walking in front of him,
Simon giving a good imitation of a pansy core doctor beside him. “So, you click your fingers and
he’s one of us now,” The doctor asked Johns in what had to be one of his snootiest accents.

Johns shook his head, amused by the question, “I didn't say that.” He took a slug of the whiskey he’d
appropriated from the cargo hold. “At least this way I don't have to worry about you all falling asleep
and not waking up.”

River was dancing lightly back and forth between Shazza, her brother and Riddick, never going so
close to the murderer as to upset Johns, but coming close enough to make Simon appear nervous.
“May she converse with the chained man now?” She applied to her brother hopefully.
As if it had been planned Johns and Simon replied in unison, “No.”

Riddick chuckled as River made a face at her brother and skipped ahead of him. She wasn’t as relaxed as she appeared, burnt cinnamon drifting off her skin as she looked at the spires they traveled beneath. She could hear the mental murmurings of the creatures hiding underground just as he could hear their claws inside the spires. She turned and gave him a sharp look and he nodded slightly. She’d heard right, they were definitely prey out here, no matter that the predator was handicapped by light. The burnt cinnamon smell increased as she shivered and began walking more slowly until she was walking between he and Johns. He didn’t say anything and neither did she but he felt better having her close where he could try to protect her if something did happen.

Simon dropped his bottle of wine with a muttered curse and turned to follow it right to Riddick’s feet. Riddick picked it up and looked at the smaller man curiously. Simon visibly drew himself up to his full height, to the open amusement of Johns watching them. “Simon Tam, medical doctor, surgeon,” He held out his hand politely.

Riddick grinned openly and took the doctor’s hand. “Richard B. Riddick, escaped convict, murderer.” He drained the wine from the bottle and handed it back to Simon.

River’s giggle from her position a few feet away drew the attention of both men and Simon cast one look at Riddick before taking River’s good arm. “Let’s walk a little bit further up mèi mei.” He suggested firmly.

“No,” River shook her head and made a shooing motion with her hand. “Rivers go where they will, paths through stone and sand carved by fate and force,” She looked around at the spires and shook her head. “Must think and cannot do that with you chattering at me, need the quiet of the chained man’s mind.”

Simon sighed and trudged back up beside Johns who’d overheard the whole thing and laughed, “Hear that Riddick, you gotta quiet mind, must be ‘cause there ain’t much in it.”

River glared at the merc’s back for a moment her expression precisely matched the maligned convict’s. “We wear the mask that grins and lies,” She muttered in annoyance.

‘It hides our teeth and shades our eyes, this debt we pay to human guile,’ Riddick found the words in his memory and thought the next line. ‘With torn and bleeding hearts we smile, and mouth with myriad subtleties.’

“Now this is the Law of the Jungle -- as old and as true as the sky;” River started a new poem, seemingly for no reason and Riddick nearly grinned.

‘And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die.’ He thought the lines at her, smothering his smile at the game they were playing without anyone knowing a thing. ‘As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk the Law runneth forward and back --For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.’

River smiled to herself and tilted her head thoughtfully, “Is he a tiger or a wolf? She cannot decide. Do Furyans mate for life? Are they lobsters or hawks?”

“I’m a wolf,” Riddick muttered the words wanting her to hear them with her ears so there would be no mistaking his meaning. “You had better believe that.”

“She has no reason to doubt,” River smiled slightly and skipped slightly ahead of him as Johns turned suspiciously at the sound of Riddick’s voice.
Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:
Tā mā de dì yù - fucking hell
chī xiàn - crazy/insane
pì gu - butt
gē ge - big brother
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
tiān shǐ - angel
nī zi - little girl
mèi mei - little sister

Quote Sources:
We wear the mask that grins and lies – Paul Laurence Dunbar

It hides our teeth and shades our eyes, this debt we pay to human guile, With torn and bleeding hearts we smile, and mouth with myriad subtleties. – Paul Laurence Dunbar

Now this is the Law of the Jungle -- as old and as true as the sky – The Jungle Book – Rudyard Kipling

And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die. As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk the Law runneth forward and back --For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack. – The Jungle Book – Rudyard Kipling
Riddick took a deep breath and shook his head. Imam and his boys were working on the water unit. Simon was doing a surprisingly practical systematic search of the buildings for only he and River knew what. Fry was working with River and Shazza on the skiff, converting the electrical system to work with the power cells. Johns was busy watching to be sure Riddick didn’t try to enter the skiff.

“We’ll need three more,” River said finally when the two were hooked up. “Should have brought more,” She shook her head at Fry and Johns.

Shazza sighed and patted River’s good shoulder. “We tried nī zi,” She reminded her. “Least we won’t be haulin’ four more.”

“This is the bright side,” River shook her head.

“That’s at what thirty five kilos each? Still a hell of a load,” Johns pointed out.

“Might be able to get that old sand cat out there runnin’,” Shazza suggested. “River seems to have some know how, and I’m not bad at mechanics either.”

“Do it,” Johns nodded, “And if you need help...” He paused looking out the window, “Where’s Riddick?”

Shazza shrugged and walked out of the skiff into the sun and sighed, “I hope Imam gets that water pump goin’ soon. I drink anymore a that wine I’m going to pass out.”

River nodded, “Don’t like it much either.” She agreed, “Makes me feel odd.”

“Little thing like you I’m not surprised,” Shazza smiled. “Gimme a hand to get me started here and then go sit in the shade, find your brother maybe.”

“Shazza is kind,” River gave the newly widowed woman a smile, “Will endeavor to save her and the shepherd.”

“Thanks...” Shazza clearly didn’t know what to make of that. Riddick grinned and walked calmly away from the girls exploring the ghost town and noticing everything left as if people had just put things down and walked away.

River tilted her head as she walked through the settlement in search of her brother. He’d been a little worried about leaving her alone with the others but she’d managed to convince him that with Shazza around she’d be all right. Now she was narrowing her thoughts to concentrate on Simon, tracking his mind through the empty streets. Riddick was nearby; she could feel him like a sun, his mind a gorgeous elegant crystal of graceful thoughts and labyrinth paths. He was doing something Johns would find irritating. Sure enough, Johns began to holler at the convict, prompting the dangerous man to move away from the merc.
River smiled and kept moving, if Riddick wanted to find her he would. There wasn’t anywhere he couldn’t track her eventually. He’d told her once her scent was unforgettable.

As if the thought had conjured him the big man stepped out from a doorway after she’d wandered a bit more and beckoned to her to come inside. River nodded slowly and unhurriedly made her way over to the doorway, stepping into the shade to look up at her best friend, her partner, and potential mate standing in the gloom of the shuttered house. “Been missin’ you Qing Xiang,” He murmured sliding a hand around her waist and drawing her deeper into the house, out of view of the doorway. “How’s your arm?”

“Better now that it is immobilized,” River returned gravely. “It aches but that will subside in another few hours. Whatever else they did, they made certain I heal quickly, almost as quickly as you.”

“Good,” Riddick slid his other hand around her waist. “You tell me if I hurt you now,” He instructed as he lifted her up, holding her easily against his body so her face was level with his. Carefully she draped her bad arm over his shoulder and nodded that she was positioned comfortably before brushing her lips over his in a delicate kiss. Riddick groaned at her touch and tightened his embrace, one hand slipping down to cup her pì gu, pressing her hips against his.

River moaned into his mouth, she could feel his body, instantly hard and ready for hers, his mouth stoking the fires burning inside her. His lips nipped and stroked hers and when she tentatively slid her tongue over his lips she felt his moan of pleasure vibrate through his chest. His hand on her bottom squeezed and kneaded her flesh until she wanted to part her legs and wrap them around his waist. “Richard,” She moaned his name into his mouth, “I want…”

“I know,” Riddick groaned. He hadn’t planned to get this hot this quickly but it was something about her that made him forget all control. River was like a match to tinder burning through his control over the animal. “Me too Qing Xiang,” He pressed a hot kiss to her neck and felt her breathy moan on his skin. “Gorram River,” He shuddered. “We gotta stop.”

“No,” River shook her head and frantically kissed him again, “No, not until she belongs to the wolf.” Her good hand snaked down between them and slid into his pants, seeking his jī ba and finding it hot and ready.

Riddick shuddered as her fingers closed around him and felt his eyes nearly cross as her hand began to move. “Gorram,” He kissed her almost desperately and grabbed her wrist. “Wǒ de mā zhī ‘ài, ya gotta stop ‘fore I lose my mind.” He nearly groaned as her hand released him and slid out of his pants. With almost clumsy steps he found a chair and nearly collapsed into it, holding her so she was cradled in his lap.

“Zhi ‘ài?” River whispered looking at him, “Truly?”

Riddick stroked one hand down the long fall of dark hair and looked at her face, “Yeah River, wha’d you think you were to me? My yǎng nǚ?” He nuzzled her neck and was glad he’d managed to shave before Johns stopped him. “Told ya, you’re mine.” He traced a hand down her neck and over the curves of her breasts. “Didn’ mean to get you this worked up,” He murmured feeling her shiver with need. “Gonna have to do somethin’ bout that I think.”

“Richard won’t let her touch him, but he’ll touch her?” River looked at him and he smelled roses to go along with her confused expression. “How is a double standard appropriate in a relationship of equals?”

“I’m easy,” Riddick murmured. “All it’ll take is a touch from you to make me fall. Hell you nearly sent me over a minute ago.” Her scent deepened with honey and caramel, joy and desire mixing
along with roses until he wanted to gobble her up. “It ain’t as easy for girls,” He let his hand cup her breast; careful until he was sure he wasn’t frightening her. “But I gotta make you mine zhì ài, least in some little way.”

“She wants to be yours Richard,” River kissed him again, lingering on his mouth and he groaned.

“You trust me?” He drew back and looked at her, “I can make you fall River, but you’ll have to trust me.”

“Trust you with everything,” River nodded solemnly. “But your touch makes me moan, makes me want…don’t know if I can be quiet with you touching me.”

“Yeah,” Riddick nodded. “You sayin’ maybe wait on that for a bit, ‘til we got some privacy?”

“Privacy will be in short supply for a week or more,” River tilted her head, her voice eerily absent as she saw things that weren’t there. “If Richard wants the taste of honey it will have to be now, or wait for more than two weeks before we have time together again.”

Riddick groaned and let his head fall onto her good shoulder, “That’s painful baby,” He declared.

“Hmm…” River squirmed in his lap and he shuddered as her body inadvertently provoked his. This close to him she could feel exactly what he wanted, knew exactly what he’d intended to do with her. Her breath caught at the images Riddick had in his mind. Her hands on his shoulders, his mouth between her thighs, or his mouth on her breasts while she rode his hand. “Richard, more, think of more,” She breathed, waves of pleasure rolling through her body at the thought of what he wanted to do.

Riddick’s head jerked up at the erotic tone of her voice and he groaned as he saw the flush on her cheeks and her breasts swollen, her back arched pressing them to his chest. “Oh hell no, not without my hands on you River,” He declared, throwing caution and sense out the window with the need to claim his girl.

“Richard, please,” River shuddered as heat swept over her body. “Need you.”

Riddick knew he was being rough but he couldn’t stop himself, one hand delved into her leggings, finding her sheath and yīn dì as he cupped her mound in his hand. She was so tiny and delicate but her skin and curls were slick with honey. He felt his cock throb in response to the feel of her. His other hand pushed up her shirt, exposed her breasts, nipples dark with blood, and budded tight for his mouth. “Don’t cry out Qīng Xiāng or we’ll be so screwed and not in a good way.” He warned her before he fastened his mouth to her breast and began to suck gently and then more firmly. She shuddered and he could tell she was biting back moans. His palm flooded with her honey and he groaned against her skin. Her hips were moving, squirming against his hand, seeking her pleasure.

“Richard, please,” River whispered, praying her voice wouldn’t give them away. “I need…” She bit her lip trying to keep from moaning in her need as Riddick’s big hand teased her, cupping and rubbing but never giving her exactly what she needed.

“All right,” Riddick lifted his mouth from her breasts and palmed one of them, kneading and stroking it before he kissed her. “Gonna give you a little something inside zhì ài,” He murmured. “Wanna feel you fall around my fingers.” He adjusted his hand and slid his thick index finger inside her, his thumb finding her yīn dì and rubbing it gently. Her body clutched and squeezed around his finger and River fastened her mouth hard to his to muffle her shriek of surprise and pleasure. Riddick groaned as she shuddered against him and undulated her hips over his hand. “That’s right bāo bèi, you ride my hand now,” He murmured into her mouth. “God you’re gorgeous,” He opened his eyes
to look down at her, eyes closed in ecstasy, her lashes like a fringe over her cheeks, mouth open in a
breathless greedy pant for air as she strove for her pleasure.

River had never felt so good in her life; self-exploration was nothing like Riddick’s hands on her
body. He felt so good, his finger inside her, stroking deep within, teasing and torturing her with
pleasure. “Richard, please, more,” She begged against his mouth, “Give me more.”

“Hmm… love how greedy you sound baby,” He was hard as a rock and felt like he’d fall any second
just from her hips moving against his groin. “I’ll give you more bǎo bèi,” Riddick promised, part of
him listening for anyone else who might come looking for them. So far nobody, but that could
change. He set that aside and concentrated on River, sliding another finger into her body along with
the first and felt her freeze, a tremor starting deep within her body and exploding outward over her
skin with a flood of honey over his fingers and palm. Quickly he pressed his mouth down over hers,
drinking in her cries as she fell, igniting in pleasure over his hand. Her hips bucked and snapped
against him and he groaned at the sensation of her body pushing against his cock. Before he could
stop her, River’s hand slid down inside his fatigues and gripped him. Soft fingers were firm and
ruthless as she pumped his jī ba and forcing him to follow her and fall moments later. Gasping for
breath he groaned into her mouth and gentled his kiss. “Gorram River,” He breathed, “You’re the
most wicked little woman.”

“Not ever going to fall without her partner,” River told him in a prim voice withdrawing her hand
from his trousers and licking her palm like a little cat, tasting his seed. “Richard tastes salty,” She
giggled.

He carefully slid his fingers out of her body and his hand from her leggings before licking his fingers
greedily. “River tastes like honey and apples,” Riddick teased her, licking every bit of her off of his
hand. “You feel a little better?”

“Hmm… relaxed, safe, needed her mate to claim her in some fashion. The animal is satisfied for
now,” River nodded, leaning against him. Riddick absentedly nodded in agreement, he felt similarly.
The animal wouldn’t tolerate Johns touching River, but her brother or the shepherd would be safe
enough.

“Yeah, feel a little better myself,” He said finally. “But we’d better go find the others, or someone’ll
come looking for us.”

“We have only been sequestered for a quarter of an hour,” River told him with a smile as she
removed herself from his lap. “Richard should look for clothing. She will do the same.”

“Yeah, something other than Academy clothes’d be good,” Riddick let one hand play with her hair
as he stood and began moving into what was probably the bedroom. He turned and looked at her,
“Not gonna look with me?”

“Have to find Simon, must begin making explosives,” River explained. “Simon is one street away,
two houses down.”

“I’ll come find you when I find something for us to wear,” Riddick nodded his understanding.
“River,” He called before she left and she turned back to look at him curiously. “I didn’t….” He took
a deep breath, “Didn’t scare you or anythin’ did I? Last thing in the world I wanna do.”

“No,” River smiled, a warm sweet smile that felt better on his skin than a thousand suns. “No, her
mate didn’t frighten her. Knew it was theoretically possible to find pleasure with a man. Glad he
proved it to her. His fingers feel much better than her own.”
“Tā mā de dì yù,” Riddick groaned and shuddered as the thought sent blood straight to his groin. “Go find your gē ge before I go crazy and throw you on the bed.”

River’s laugh was like a cool breeze as she left the room.

River entered the room Simon was in humming a funny little tune he recognized as the chorus of an operetta. “How’s the skiff?” He asked as she drifted up to him.

“It requires more powercells as I said,” River shrugged. “Saw Richard, he is looking for additional clothing for us. These clothes are… not very practical.” She tugged at her leggings and shook her head.

“There’s a couple of rooms back there, you might find something,” Simon jerked his head towards the rear of the house. “And I found quite a few things that I think will work if I remember chemistry class correctly.” He indicated a crate he’d set on the table. “I also found a couple things I think you and Rick will like,” He pulled a slender case out from under his shirt and handed it to her. “I thought you and he could have one each, and hide them until you need them,” He explained as she opened the case to reveal two beautiful and deadly sai.

“Simon is very wise,” River kissed her brother’s cheek. “She will go find more versatile clothing.” She danced away with the case clutched in her bad arm, her hand gripping it while it rested against her chest.

Simon grinned and went back to looking in cupboards for potential explosive materials. Riddick leaned in the doorway and watched him; the kid was very methodical not closing a door until he’d looked at everything in the cabinet. He was also really unobservant since Riddick had been watching him for five minutes. Finally he sighed and rapped his knuckles on the door. “Hey Doc, anybody home?”

Simon jumped about a foot before he turned around, “Cào dàn!” He cursed, “I ought to put bells on your neck.”

“Found a few things for your sister,” Riddick held up his handful of fabric. “Find anythin’ useful?”

“I think so,” Simon nodded. “River has something for you as well. I…appropriated it from one of the other houses.” He uttered an objection as Riddick moved purposefully towards the room where River was exploring. “Riddick, what’s goin’ on with you and my mèi mei?”

Riddick stopped midstride and looked at the doctor. The kid was maybe half his size but he was still standing there, chin out, like he had no clue he could get pounded into the ground. “What’s goin’ on ‘tween River an’ me is ‘tween River an’ me.” Riddick said finally, “I figure when she wants you to know she’ll tell you. Ain’t for me to say.”

“But there is something,” Simon seized that that idea.

“Simon, your sister an’ me, we been together for nigh two years now, since she’s half past fifteen,” Riddick shrugged. “I seen her naked, I see her black an’ blue, an’ I seen her terrified outs of her mind. Seen her sick, bleedin’, takin’ a piss even. An’ she’s seen the same with me. Ain’t a thing she an’ I gotta hide from each other. She’s…she’s my partner, my best friend.” He shrugged, “This ain’t the time or place to talk on it though, too much chance a someone hearin’. If Johns got the idea that River’s…” He shook his head. “Stop askin’ me ‘bout these things ‘til we’re alone. For real alone. Ain’t takin’ a chance with River, not with Johns around.”
Simon nodded and watched as Riddick continued his stride towards the room with his sister in it. River’s voice was quiet but affectionate when she spoke with the big man and Riddick’s dark rumble of a voice was warm in a way Simon hadn’t heard when Riddick spoke with anyone else. There was a low chuckle from the big man and he came out pulling a dark grey exercise shirt over his head. “Doc, thanks for the shiv,” Riddick grinned. “River says that Johns is lookin’ for me, I’m gonna go out and lead him ‘way from here. Make sure she don’t move that arm too much all right? I got her started with a stretchy bra and teeshirt but she’s gonna need another layer. I got another shirt to go over this. An’ you oughta find yourself somethin’ too. Think River’s got a shirt might work for ya.”

Without another word he was out the door leaving Simon to stare after him, “River?” He managed to get her name out in spite of his shock at the man’s words.

“Hmm…” River came to the door holding a couple of shirts in her hand. “Richard is mine Simon. Don’t get all spiky and streaky about this.”

“He helped you put on a bra?” Simon knew his eyes were huge.

“Not the first time,” River shrugged. “They had the girl fight often. Sometimes against Riddick, sometimes against others. Richard was always careful to not damage me, might have been why they made me fight other men, made him wait. But afterwards…he’d help me with my clothes. Very restrained, very controlled, never frightened me.” She smiled affectionately, happily, “Treated me like a nī zi, called me one too.”

“So nothing’s going on then,” Simon nearly sighed in relief.

“Simon is asking the wrong questions at the wrong time,” River told him with a frown that erased his relaxed look. “Very inappropriate conversation for this planet and this company,” She tilted her head at him. “Put this on and then we will begin to make bombs.” She began struggling into a long sleeved shirt that was far too big for her.

He’d been wandering around exploring the settlement for nearly an hour when Shazza nearly jolted out of her skin after she bumped into Riddick. He tilted his head to look at her, knowing the effect was made eerie by the goggles. “If you’re lookin’ for River an’ her brother, they’re in the house back there,” He shook his head, “Stuck my head in an’ it looked like a science experiment.”

Shazza backed up a step but nodded, “Imam got the water reclamation unit going. We’ll need to fill containers and suchlike to put on the skiff.”

“Yeah, along with oxygen,” Riddick agreed. “You tell River an’ Simon, I’ll get on the heavy lifting.”

He jogged along looking around the settlement and grabbed a couple of jugs he’d seen in the abandoned house he and River had spent time in, breathing in the lingering scent of River that hung in the air. Though part of him hated to do it he opened the shutters and let the sun start the fans and circulate the air before he left.

Setting the jugs by the door he stepped into the room where Imam and the others were waiting and leaned against the wall. It wasn’t long before Shazza came in with River and her brother. Both of them smelled like chemicals and River carried a satchel over her good shoulder that clinked when it moved. The late comers were handed cut glass goblets of water, Riddick’s noticeably cloudier than the rest.
The convict moved away from the door and into the shadows, taking off his goggles and letting them dangle from his hand as he sipped the water and listened to the shepherd toast. "All praises be to Allah, for his many blessings to us."

Shazza was talking to Simon while River sat quietly with her satchel and sipped from her glass. "Who were these people, anyway? Miners?" The doctor asked curiously.

"Looks like geologists," Shazza held up an instrument with a rock inside it. "An advance team, moves from rock to rock."

Fry had been prowling around the room looking at everything, she seemed to finally be realizing the same thing he had when he'd found the minutia of an entire settlement strewn broken in the sand as he walked through the empty streets. "Nice of them to leave so much stuff here," She looked at the rest of them. "Why did they leave their ship?"

Johns, ever the know it all shook his head and poured himself some more water, "It's not a ship. It's a skiff and it's disposable." He set the pitcher down with an air of finality.

Simon seemed disbelieving but he seized upon the hopeful thought, "It's more like an emergency life raft, right?"

Shazza nodded, obviously trying to shore up his theory, "They probably had a big drop ship take them off planet."

Riddick shook his head, he couldn't stand the stupidity anymore and he could tell from the rising cinnamon in her scent that River was getting more and more irritated by the conversation. She hadn't had any meditation or quiet in the past two days and getting her irritated was a sure way to provoke one of her screaming fits. She needed a routine his girl did, something to work off her energy, meditation to help reach the animal, quiet time with her partner to read and talk. "These people didn't leave. C'mon," He finally spoke, glancing down at River where she sat with her satchel and glass, her eyes distant as she listened to ghosts. "Whoever got Zeke and Logan got them. They're all dead."

He paused putting down his water and fixed his goggles back over his eyes before he looked at them and continued speaking, "You don't really think they left with their clothes on hooks, photos on the shelves..."

"Maybe they had weight limits," Shazza suggested a bit desperately.

Riddick shook his head again amazed at peoples capacity for self-deception, "I know you don't prep your emergency ship unless there's a fucking emergency."

"Tā mā de, he is right," River spoke casually, her eyes still distant.

"Watch your mouth," Johns reprimanded her lightly and she gave him a look like he was a moron. Riddick grinned, he didn't get that look too often anymore, but it was damn funny to see Johns get it. River speared him with a glare that reminded him he had to sleep with this woman and poking fun at her even in his thoughts was liable to make his bed very uncomfortable.

"He's just saying what we're all thinking," Fry squared her shoulders and turned to look at Riddick. "So what happened? Where are they?"

Before either River or Riddick could answer her, Imam came back into the room, his demeanor agitated, "Has anyone seen the little one? Ali?"

Riddick looked back at the man and almost sighed, he could smell blood on the air and Ali was already dead, "Has anyone checked the coring room?"
There was a mass exodus as everyone including Simon raced away. River got up and poured herself another glass of water and then handed the clear stuff to Riddick before taking Fry's glass. "Now they'll begin to understand," She said softly. "Now they'll begin to see. But it's too late."

"Suns are startin' their downwards slide ain't they," Riddick nodded sipping the water and using his other hand to caress her cheek and hair. "You an' me River, us here, that's priority for me. Your brother, I know you love him, and I'll save him if I can, but not at expense of you or me. I can't promise you that."

"Did not ask him to promise such a foolish thing," River turned her lips to his palm and kissed it. "She can make sure Simon lives; he isn't stupid, only gentle hearted. But he can be ruthless."

"He never did say what he did to get into the Academy did he?" Riddick realized, "That'll be quite the story won't it."

"It will," River smiled and showed him the satchel. "An upgraded version of a Molotov's cocktail," She explained. "Doesn't require flame to ignite, but the liquid must be exposed to air."

"You're all sortsa clever aren't you gorgeous," Riddick grinned. He tilted his head as blood on the air thickened and this time he did sigh, "You already knew Ali was dead."

"Yes," River nodded, "Closed my mind to him, but still felt it when he died, little boy, died crying, hatchlings feasting on his flesh and blood." She gave his palm one final kiss and moved out from under his hand, taking a strip of cloth from her pocket and winding her hair into a knot, tying it tightly into place so it wouldn't catch on anything.

"Well let's go enlighten 'em," Riddick put his glass down and followed her out the door.

River watched as Johns dropped a flare down the shaft of the coring room and Riddick explained what had happened to the people of the settlement. "Other buildings weren't secure," Her partner's dark coffee voice explained, "So they ran here. Heaviest doors. Thought they'd be safe inside." He paused and looked down the shaft seeing the pile of bones at the bottom. "But they forgot to lock the cellar."

"Whatever those things were, they seem to stick to darkness," Johns said matter-of-factly drawing River's annoyed look. "So if we stick to daylight, we should be okay. All right. Let's go."

River shook her head and spoke at the same time as Fry, "Twenty-two years ago."

"What?" Johns turned in irritation ready to be done with the whole mess, ready for his next spike, ready to leave this hot god forsaken planet.

Fry was the one who answered him, River leaning against the wall and shaking her head. Riddick watched his girl with concerned eyes. She'd taken off her sling and stuck it in her pocket, her satchel was slung cross body and the hiking boots that had probably belonged to a child were covered in dust. Her scent was roiling with cinnamon, blood and silk and steel as she fought to control everything she was forced to feel.

"These coring samples are dated," Fry told Johns, "Last one's twenty two years ago this month."

John's was not placated by this seemingly random fact, "Is there something special about that Carolyn?"
"I don't know..." Fry was thinking and trying to remember where she'd seen the date before, "There could be."

She was shaking her head when River spoke, her voice shaking, "Hateful is the dark-blue sky, vaulted o'er the dark-blue sea. Death is the end of life; ah, why should life all labor be?"

That did something to Fry's memory; she took off at a fast walk that turned into a trot and then a run as she made for the room with the planetarium inside it. Riddick took River's arm and gently steered her out of the coring room and in Fry's wake. "Breathe River," He murmured, "Remember to listen to my heartbeat and breathe. That's all you gotta do right now. I'll take care of everything else." He heard someone else coming and began to ease away until he saw Simon.

"River are you all right?" Simon looked from his sister to Riddick. "Is she all right?"

"She needs to sit quiet for a while and meditate," Riddick told him. "I'm gonna go play big bad an' keep their minds off her. Get her somewhere she can sit and remind her to listen for my heartbeat."

"But, I mean why--" Simon began to argue.

"Doc I ain't got time to debate this with you," Riddick hissed, "I know her; I know what she needs to do. We've been through this before." He kissed River's forehead and hurried off after Fry, entering the room just in time to see her clicking the solar system model along to year twenty, twenty one, twenty two... and the moon on which they stood went dark as night.

"Eclipse," Fry whispered.

"You're not afraid of the dark, are you?" Riddick drawled. He turned away, nodding to Imam who stood quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

nǐ zì - little girl

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

pì gu - butt

jī ba - dick/penis

Wǒ de mā - my mother!/My god!

zhì 'ài - most beloved

yǎng nǚ - adopted daughter

yīn dì - clitoris

bǎo bèi = treasured object used for "darling," "honey,"

Tā mā de – fucking/damn it!
dì yù - hell

gē ge - big brother

Cào dàn - damn it

mèi mei - little sister

Quote Sources:

Hateful is the dark-blue sky, vaulted o’er the dark-blue sea. Death is the end of life; ah, why should life all labor be? – Hateful Is the Dark-Blue Sky (from The Lotus-Eaters), Alfred Lord Tennyson
River sat and listened, listened to Riddick's heartbeat, his elegant mind her haven as her brain and animal argued about who should have control of her. Johns was explaining to Fry why Riddick couldn't be trusted. Explaining that Riddick had hijacked a prison transport and flown it to freedom, had killed the pilot. Riddick was helping Imam patch the wings of the skiff while Shazza worked on the sand cat. Riddick could hear her, he'd told her once that he could pick out her voice from a thousand shouts he knew it so well.

"Maybe you haven't noticed but chains don't work on this guy," River repeated the conversation. "I'm not going to give him a chance to steal another ship, or kill another pilot, not on my watch," Her voice was barely a whisper. "He's not the sort you give second chances to Carolyn, he takes those and he makes you pay for them. Right now he's eyeing that little girl out there, she can't be more than fourteen if she's a day. You want him to leave us all for dead and take off with her? Can you imagine the hell he'd put her through?"

"She doesn't seem too afraid of him Johns," River whispered Fry's words, "She's young, he's...obvious. He's the bad boy that all the good little girls fall for until they get their shiny new hearts broken. So she's been eyeing him right back." Johns' consternation brought a half smile to her face and she tilted her head imitating Fry, "So what do you do about that Johns?" Her tone when she spoke again held speculation and interest, and Johns' intonation. "So maybe I give her somethin' else to think about 'side's Riddick."

She stopped speaking as Johns exited the skiff and began walking towards her, ignoring him she continued to draw an elaborate picture in the sand with a stick and put a rock in the middle of it. Johns stepped on the edge of the picture, disrupting the swirls and she lashed out with her stick hitting him in the shins.

"Hey," Johns backhanded her without a second thought and River hissed at him from her half sprawled position on the ground.

"What in the hell was that for," Simon jumped to his feet and got in Johns' face his body stiff with fury.

"She it me with her stick," Johns snapped at him," For no good reason."

"She has to meditate and just spent twenty minutes creating a zen rock garden which you then stepped all over," Simon retorted. "You ruined her work and then to top if off when she tries to reprimand you physically, which from my perspective seems to be the only method you'd even understand let alone respond to, you hit her. I'm starting to think she might be safer with Riddick guarding her. He may have hit me over the head but he hasn't struck a little girl."

"What'n the bloody hell is goin' on?" Shazza walked up to them arms akimbo, "We all got work to do." She extended a hand to River, "C'mon with me ni zi, let's try some zen mechanics for mediation."

"All right," River put her hand into Shazza's and let the other woman pull her up. Sticking out her
tongue at Johns she walked away with the prospector woman.

Simon regarded Johns angrily, "Stay away from my sister." He admonished, "Or you'll wish you had."

"Or you'll do what?" Johns sneered.

"I just might find a way to shoot you up with something that'll counteract those painkiller drops you've been taking," Simon returned the sneer with interest and scorn as Johns blinked in surprise. "I'm a doctor, a trauma surgeon. I've worked emergency rooms on Osiris and Ariel and the one thing I saw a lot of were hypes coming down off their highs. They get fever, chills, sweats and twitches, along with dizzy spells and vicious cramps." Simon folded his arms as he regarded the taller man. "You think about that the next time you raise your hand to my sister."

Riddick smiled as he walked into the skiff, Simon had more balls than he'd given him credit for. Now it was time to scare Fry a little bit, if he could stand the scent of her long enough he should seed some doubts and break up the parental couple of this fucked up little family.

Riddick waited until Fry was in the pilot's chair, and ready to close the hatch before he slipped onto the skiff. She was absorbed in the routine checks every pilot makes on a new ship when he spoke, scaring her badly. "Looks like we're a few shy," He tilted his head at the blast of dill that came with the pounding of her heart and the catch in her throat that spoke of her fear. "Power cells," He elaborated when she stared at him blankly.

"They're coming," Fry turned slightly and switched off a screen.

"It's strange, not doing a run-up on the main drive yet," Riddick moved closer breathing in that scent of too ripe mint and dill, hearing her heart beat faster as she looked at him, a predator in a small confined space with her, the prey, "Unless he told you the particulars of my escape."

"I got the quick-and-ugly version," Fry turned off another screen, her fingers trembling visibly.

"You're worried about a repeat," Riddick stated the obvious. She was right to be worried, but if he played this well enough she might realize he wanted to kill Johns a lot more than he did her. And she might get the idea that he was safe to be around if he was attracted.

"It has entered our minds," Fry admitted, trying to stand her ground but shifting nervously as he moved slightly closer.

"I asked what you thought," He said quietly, keeping his sandpaper voice as gentle and quiet as he could. He would not pretend he was talking to River, that would make him too soft, but he didn’t want to spook Fry so badly she didn’t hear a thing he said.

"You scare me Riddick," Fry confessed and in an instant of bravado disguised as courage turned her back to him. "That's what you want to hear, isn't it? Now, can I just get back to work?"

He moved towards her, standing just behind her, his chest barely grazing her back, voice almost at her ear. "I've been meaning to catch up with you alone." He paused and dipped his head so his words would hit the tender skin of her neck, her shoulder, "Unrestrained." He took a breath, mint, in overwhelming waves now, "You think Johns is a do-right man? You think I could trust him to cut me loose?"
“Why?” Fry was trembling visibly now, from nerves or lust, waves of scent boiling off her skin like steam. “What did you hear?”

“I guess if it were ‘trickeration’,” Riddick said quietly moving slightly so he could breathe into her other ear, a sick game of seduction on a woman he’d rather kill than fuck. “He’d just ’X’ me out. He’d kill me.” He paused, letting her feel his breath on her sweaty skin, noticing her body responding to his closeness. He smiled grimly knowing she’d hear the smile in his voice, “Then again, I am worth twice as much alive.”

Her shock was easy to see, the flash of betrayal as she realized she’d been lied to, or allowed to assume a truth that was patently false. Riddick couldn’t help the amusement that crept into his voice, did his best to hide the contempt he felt for this weak-willed selfish creature. Keeping his voice soft was a challenge, “You didn't know that? Your Johns ain't a cop. He's got that nickel-slick badge. And that blue uniform.” He moved again, shifting behind her so his body brushed against hers minutely, the slight caress sending her pulse pounding and another wave of mint into his nose. “But he’s just a merc an’ I’m just a payday. That's why he won't kill me, see?” He dipped his head down as if to kiss her shoulder and spoke against her neck, just under her ear. She was getting angry now, angry that she wanted him and feared him at the same time. “The creed is greed.”

“Don't waste my time,” Fry’s words tumbled out on the heels of his, her body shuddering. “We're not gonna turn on each other, no matter how hard you try.”

Riddick shook his head as if he was disappointed and drew away slightly; her body followed his minutely craving the contact even as her mind rebelled against what he was saying. “I don't truly know what's gonna happen when the lights go out Carolyn,” He said candidly. “But I do know once the dying starts, this little psycho-fuck family of ours is gonna rip itself apart.”

He moved further away as the hull integrity test neared completion, “Ever wonder why Johns shakes like that?” He turned and looked at her as he stood near the hatch. “Ask him, ask why your crew pal had to scream so painfully before he died. Before the doc used his scalpel to give him mercy.” He turned away conscious of her eyes on him, the lust and fear that burst off her skin along with anger lingering as she realized how she might have been tricked.

The hull integrity test chimed complete and flashed one hundred percent integrity before he lowered the hatch and walked out into the sun.

Riddick smiled as he watched Fry go off in search of Johns. She hadn't much liked what he had to say but she had loved having him close to her. The scent of overripe mint had been enough to nearly make him gag but he'd kept his cool long enough to make the woman think he had an interest in her. Stupid jiàn huò noticed he was eyeing River but apparently didn't think he was the loyal type. Or else she didn't think River would hold his interest long.

Now everyone had stopped their work shock and despair filling their scents as the great rings showed on the horizon. Shazza had said what everyone was thinking. "If we need anything from the crash site, I suggest we kick on, that sand cat's solar."

Then it had been a mad dash for the sand cat and a dusty ride to the crashed ship, he'd known even as he carried two power cells to the sand cat that they were too late. They'd delayed too long, learned about the eclipse too late, Fry and Johns hadn't listened to River and now they were at the crash site with the great ringed planet rising slowly and inexorably to block out the suns.
Simon had gone to the cargo container to check for anything that might be medically helpful. Shazza was still running the sand cat. Imam had put the last power cell down while his boys wiped the dust from the solar collector but it was no use. The machine stopped running.

Riddick stopped and looked at the sun, for the first time it was dim enough that he didn't really need his goggles. River met his gaze as he pushed them up and tilted her head. "For each age is a dream that is dying, or one that is coming to birth."

Riddick nodded, "Let's not let it be us all right?" He watched as Johns and Fry ran for the cargo container, the shepherd and his two boys not far behind. "Shazza, time to go," He shouted to the dark haired woman.

"Right behind you; go," Shazza yelled and Riddick sent River to run ahead of him. The three of them had nearly reached the cargo container when the spires seemed to crumble away and erupt with what looked like black smoke. Riddick grabbed River and tackled her to the ground. Shazza kept running and barely made it into the cargo container.

Riddick could hear Simon almost screaming for his sister, and looked at the girl sheltered under his body. "All right beautiful," He said quietly as the hatchlings streamed and screamed overhead, "Whaddaya think?"

"Bombs require something to break against to be effective," River said quietly, "Side effect of not requiring fire which is in short supply." She squirmed under him and produced the sai Simon had given her. "Given the creatures propensity for dining on flesh and blood, suggest seeing if they are cannibalistic as well."

"All right," Riddick nodded, "It's worth a shot." Mentally he counted down and rolled off of her at the same time she flipped onto her back. Experimentally he raised the sai and caught the belly of one of the hatchlings. The effect was instantaneous as the other hatchlings turned on the wounded one the minute blood perfumed the air. "They go off blood," He observed and felt a pulse of burnt cinnamon from River, "What?"

"My time, it's near," River whispered, "Richard if they go off blood..." She shook her head, "I don't have much more than a day before I begin."

Riddick nodded his understanding, it had taken months before he and River could discuss her cycle without flinching at the academy, she because it was a private female thing and he because to the animal it seemed wrong to know the details about it if he wasn't intimate with her. "All right, you have anything with you?" He asked watching the hatchlings devour their own wounded.

"No," River shook her head, "Nothing that will block the scent of blood."

"What about Simon," Riddick thought aloud, "Ain't doc's got stuff that can repress it?"

"A birth control shot, maybe," River thought a moment. "He might have one. His bag is at the ship, I made him leave it. But he always puts things in his pockets. At the worst I'd spot a little, but as long as I get it soon...I won't be as much of a danger. I hope." She added darkly.

"All right then," Riddick nodded. "We tell Johns to start shooting the hatchlings, use that as a distraction, and calmly walk over to the cargo container." He looked at her, "Agreed?"

"Agreed," River nodded feeling somewhat surreal as she conversed with her potential lover about her menses and the possibility of surviving the next twenty four hours while a swarm of monsters flew overhead.
"Johns," Riddick shouted, "Give me a count of three and then start shooting into the swarm."

"What good's that gonna do?" Johns called back.

"They eat their own wounded," River called out the information. "If we give them something to eat we can get inside."

"Okay," Johns sounded doubtful but Riddick saw him raise the gun to his shoulder. "One," Riddick looked at River and they turned over to their stomachs, "Two," River nodded and took a deep breath. "Three!" Johns began firing three shots in a row into the heart of the swarm.

Riddick got up and dragged River to her feet, hustling her inside the cargo container. Before they slammed the door shut the planet blocked out the blue sun. Riddick stared out into the night, the first full darkness in twenty two years.

"What do you see?" Fry whispered.

Riddick looked down and saw a silver gleam deep within River's eyes as she stared into the darkness. Looking back at the landscape visible only to him and River he finally answered Fry. "Hunger," he murmured. "Twenty two years of hunger." He turned and regarded Fry as Imam and Johns slammed the door shut. "Like I said, it ain't me you gotta worry about." He saw Simon grab River and wrap her in his arms, could smell the man's fear and gratitude that she was alive. Heard River whisper to him of her problem, saw Simon nod.

"Come with me mèi mei," Simon drew her off to the side and fished in his pockets for the few things he'd stashed there, he didn't have birth control but there was a shot with a similar effect. "If you'll excuse us," He said quietly. "River needs a shot."

“A shot a what?” Johns wanted to know pushing forward to stare at the doctor.

“A shot that is not applicable or needful to you,” Simon drew himself up to his full height and stared at the merc.

“If she’s gonna go loopy we should know about it,” Johns persisted and Fry nodded her agreement.

“Gorram morons,” Shazza moved forward and murmured to River, unheard by any but the girl, Simon and Riddick. “It’s your cycle? And those things…” She didn’t finish but she didn’t need to.

River nodded and Shazza turned and glared at Johns and Fry, “You don’t need to know about this.” She told them flatly. “It’s none of your business. It’s hers.”

“If it affects the rest of us it’s our business,” Johns blustered.

Riddick rolled his eyes, “Johns get a grip would ya? I’m sure the doc would mention it if his sis were about to have convulsions or something that would make her get in your way.” He shook his head, folding his arms as he leaned back against the wall. “Ain’t like you’re someone she’d wanna be around, not with the black eye you gave her.”

The eyes of the remaining Chrislams along with Fry turned accusingly on Johns and the merc shrugged. “Someone hits me I hit back,” Was all he said in his defense.

“So do I,” Riddick said darkly.
River shuddered as the needle touched her flesh, felt for Riddick’s mind, felt his animal concentrate on her changing scent. His animal reached hers and she sighed, calm for a moment. Simon carefully administered the shot and in his doctor’s voice told her what side effects to watch for. His voice was low and affectionate as he tugged her pants back up and hugged her, whispering that it should take effect in no less than twelve hours but she might have some spotting. Simon was worried, she could feel it, worried that the shot he’d just given her would somehow conflict with whatever drugs the Academy had dosed her with and conflict further with the remains of the cryo drugs. “Don’t worry Simon,” She said quietly. When he looked at her she tilted her head, “About me, about drugs, don’t worry.” His eyes widened and he looked involuntarily from her to Riddick and back again but said nothing.

She tilted her head listening to the discussion that was ongoing about the monsters outside in the dark.

“You remember the boneyard?” Fry was saying.

“These just might be the fuckers that killed every living thing on this planet,” Riddick’s voice, coffee and sandpaper and dark chocolate, rumbled into the darkness.

“What are we gonna do now?” Shazza wanted to know, River could feel the woman’s fear and irritation that no one had listened to she and River. They could have been gone if someone had only listened.

“Are these the only lights we have?” One of the boys asked in a worried tone.

“Is this everything?” Fry looked at the collection of flares, and hand lights, shining in the glow of the one she held.

“No. There’s a cutting torch on the floor here,” Shazza told her, still feeling around for the tool. “I just can’t find it.”

“Quiet please, everyone,” Imam said suddenly and after a moment everyone hushed and listened. Clicking noises, as well as odd rising and falling calls, strangely toned, the same noises River and Riddick had heard at the grave site, the ominous noises of a predator trying to find its prey. River tilted her head, listening, trying to find language in the strangely lovely sounds but there was nothing, no vocabulary she recognized, just the buzz of alien minds.

“Why do they do that? Make that sound?” Simon wondered in a hushed voice. River could tell he was wracking his brain to remember why it seemed familiar but he didn’t have her memory.

Imam supplied a possibility, “Perhaps it’s the way they see,” He suggested, “With sound reflecting back.” River nodded to herself, remembering tales of dolphins and bats, mammals who used sonar to find their way.

Everyone stiffened as a noise came from the end of the hold, from inside the walls. River put a hand to her sai and moved closer to the group, slipping past Riddick to stand at the front of the group. Alien murmurs, mental voices with an unfamiliar vocabulary and no similar frames of reference came back to her and she shuddered.

“Could be a breach in the hull,” Fry shook her head, “I don't know.” The scraping noise of claws against metal, skittering noises, something definitely moving.

“Come on, Johns,” Riddick taunted the merc on principle not liking how far forward River was. “You got the big gauge.”
“I’d rather piss glass,” Johns returned almost laconically, “Why don’t you go fuckin’ check,” He added lazily clearly thinking of all of them Riddick was the most expendable.

Johns moved forward and River began to follow him only to be snatched back by Riddick, “No you don’t,” He pulled her back against his body and kept his arm solidly across her sternum. “He’s got a gun, you don’t. You stay put.” He looked down the hold to where Johns was walking as quietly as he could to an open container. Soft clicking noises drifted back to the tense group and Johns fired into one of the containers. He turned as if to speak and something swooped down at his head. The merc barely ducked in time and fired up at the ceiling before racing back to the group of survivors.

Riddick frowned and pulled River closer, letting his fingers stroke the skin of her upper arm, he could smell the tension on her, steel and blood and burnt cinnamon warring with each other as she fought to remain still. He could sympathize; the animals inside them were predators, wanting to defend themselves, to defend their pack. But the human part of them, the man, the woman, fought to control the animal, to keep back away from danger. It would be so easy to rush forward, destroy the enemy, but River’s cerebral nature would need to analyze, to plan. She was better at data analysis than he was he could admit that freely. But he was better at reading a group, knowing how they’d act, the baser nature of human beings was easy for him to predict. Between the two of them they were unstoppable, but they couldn’t act as a team right now. Later maybe, but for now… he didn’t resist as Simon moved towards him and tugged River out of his arms.

“Thank you,” The doctor said quietly, “For keeping her from…” He sighed, “From getting killed most likely.”

“Never did care to see kids get hurt,” Riddick murmured. “Spent too many years as a kid to enjoy beatin’ on ‘em,” His head turned to regard Johns who was reloading the shotgun, “Unlike some.”

There was an awful pounding and rattling outside and everyone jumped. “In here,” Imam held the door to a cargo container open and ushered everyone inside. Johns, typically, was the first one in, Riddick last. River looked around, there were crates in the container, and the light of Fry’s hand held, everyone was huddled into the center around the light as if it held safety. Imam was leaning against the door when something thudded against it, the door denting inwards. Imam jerked away just as a scythe like blade pierced the metal right where his skull had been.

River pulled her saï and tilted her head, this she could do, concentrate on the danger, let Riddick and his animal keep her steady. Simon’s worry tugged at her and she shrugged it off. Perching on a crate she was aware of Riddick grabbing up the welding torch and shoving crates out of the way to get to the container wall. A creature’s limb poked through the wall and quick as a cat she lashed out and slashed down with the saï. Bluish blood spurted from the limb and it yanked backwards. Sounds of a scuffle and screeching reached her ears from beyond the door and she turned to look at Riddick. Almost through.

Another limb probed the door and she slashed at it, missing this time. Angrily she stood got down from her crate and ignored the cramping in her belly to slice at another monster’s limb. This time she didn’t miss. Riddick kicked at the metal in the center of his burned opening and there was a clang as it hit the ground of the next container. “Everybody through the hole,” The convict ordered and turned to look at his tiny partner furiously slashing at monster fingers. “That means you too River,” He commanded.

“Coming,” She answered absently and waited until she and he were the last, “All right.”

Riddick nodded and pushed her through, grabbing the torch and coming in right behind her. “Well, here we are again,” he observed. Imam nodded silently, he and Shazza were standing by with crates while Simon had levered up the makeshift door. Riddick took it from him and cast a contemptuous
glance at Johns and Fry, one of whom was holding the light for two frightened pilgrim boys, the other was clutching his shotgun as if it was the sole source of safety. Simon drew River back from the opening and went to help Shazza with the crates while Imam held the metal in place for Riddick.

Finally they were closed into the container and everyone took a moment to breathe. The moment lasted precisely five minutes as pounding began on the makeshift door. River looked at Riddick and then at the cutting torch in his hand. “Time to go,” She said quietly and climbed on the crate above the weld line. A predator’s claw sliced into the container wall and she cut downward with her *sai*.

Riddick pushed past the two ‘leaders’ and began to cut a hole in the far wall and it all began again. River handed Shazza her bag of bombs and took one in her hand. “Don’t drop those please,” the girl told the older woman. “We won’t do well in a large explosion.”

“Too right,” Shazza shook her head watching as River slashed at another predator’s limb as it poked through a hole it had made. The diminutive girl held up her bottle to the hole and shook her head. Another claw hit the wall in a separate place and River shook her head in frustration. Behind her she felt Riddick wince away from the light of the welding torch and knew he’d hand it off to Johns soon. Sure enough, her partner came up behind her, his head level with her hip as he watched what she was doing.

He wouldn’t like her idea but it was the only way to get a hole big enough to throw the bomb through. She ran her finger over the sharp edge of the severed metal and felt the skin give. Blood oozed out coating the container edge and she smiled. In the next moment three separate monster limbs hit the same area making a hole as big as Riddick’s fist. River felt the fierce smile Riddick had taught her spread her lips as she hurled the bomb through the hole. The crash of glass drew everyone’s attention and she turned, leaping off the crate and pushing Riddick to the floor of the container under her weight. If her hair had still been loose it would have caught fire as a gout of flame burst through the hole. There was an inhuman screeching as the predators were caught in the blast.

“What did you do?” Fry stared at the little girl on top of the convict.

“*Nī zi* if you wanted to climb on me all ya gotta do is say,” Riddick smirked ignoring the blonde, “Didn’ need ta knock me over.”

“What did you do?” Fry repeated her voice tight with anger this time. She reached out and grabbed River’s arm trying to drag her off the convict.

Riddick sat up and patted River on the back before getting to his feet and helping the girl up, “She baited ’em. Used her blood and made ’em hit in one place. Then she hurled the bomb through the hole. The crash of glass drew everyone’s attention and she turned, leaping off the crate and pushing Riddick to the floor of the container under her weight. If her hair had still been loose it would have caught fire as a gout of flame burst through the hole. There was an inhuman screeching as the predators were caught in the blast.

“Your kill count’s higher than mine *nī zi* ain’t sure I care for that.” He cast a slightly irritated look at River, “Well that sounds like all sortsa good,” He drawled. “How many more a them things you got?”

River shook her head, “Her count is mitigated by Riddick’s aid earlier. Her kills are his.”

Riddick smiled slowly, a wicked expression that did nothing to reassure the pilot that the convict saw River as a little girl. “Well that sounds like all sortsa good,” He drawled. “How many more a them things you got?”

“River and I made at least a dozen, maybe a few more,” Simon said quietly. “That’s what we were doing while you fixed the sand cat.” He explained to Shazza.

“But why would you wish to manufacture such destructive devices,” One of the boys, Hassan, Riddick thought, inquired softly.
“Because a how Zeke an’ Logan died,” Shazza explained. “Because we knew there was somethin’ underground b’fore you went spelunking,” She looked at Fry. “Because River nearly got pulled under. We nearly lost three people at once.”

“And also River’s been saying since we arrived that the suns will sleep. No one paid attention to her,” Simon looked at Fry coldly. “My sister is a genius and when she says something I listen to her.”

Riddick sighed and bent to pick up another crate, placing it over the hole in the wall. “Johns is almost through, let’s get this moveable feast underway.”

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So Simon isn't as unobservant as Paris was. What do we all think of that?

Translations:

nī zi - little girl

jiàn huò - bitch

mèi mei - little sister

Quote Sources:

For each age is a dream that is dying, or one that is coming to birth - Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy
They’d gone through three more containers, River had stopped throwing her bombs after the second one since there seemed to be no end to the creatures and Simon suggested they might need them later. This container felt different to Riddick, the air was strange, a tang to it he couldn’t place. Johns had kept the torch and was containing his terror by burning through the walls as quickly as he could. Riddick added his weight to Simon’s as the doctor pressed against the crates. But the crates felt odd under his hand, he shook his head and moved a bit away from the others, lifting his goggles up so he could see in the darkness.

River looked around, catching Riddick’s thought, and shook her head, “This is not a good place to be,” She pushed Shazza towards Simon, “Stay with him, stay with the others…” She moved towards Riddick and then stared into the darkness beyond the crates where they stood. “Zāo gāo,” She muttered quietly as she realized where they were.

Riddick looked down at the slender woman he’d claimed and caught burnt cinnamon drifting off her, “Nǐ zǐ?” He asked questioningly.

River shook her head, “Just confirming what you already knew. Don’t let the others know.”

Riddick nodded and moved into the darkness, River following him until he found what he’d sought, reading it out of his mind. A predator was sitting on a crate eating one of the dead hatchlings, an ugly thing with a whip like tail tipped with a sharp tip, front legs clawed, spiky pointed teeth and an ugly bone crown on its triangular head. It didn’t seem to really have eyes, the two indentations on either side of its head seemed useless, but spearing out from either side of its skull were two sharp extensions, possibly what the things used to catch returning sound so they could identify their prey.

River took a deep breath and stuck her sai between her teeth. Looking up she nodded and began to climb the wall, bracing herself until she was in the corner, in the nick of time as a larger predator dropped out of a hole in the ceiling and began to run its blade like front leg over Riddick’s chest.

Hassan came around the corner and Riddick caught him in a viselike grip around his neck. “Extremely bad timing. Don’t move kid,” Riddick snarled and couldn’t believe his shit luck. Then another predator joined the first and he knew that unless there was some sort of distraction they were all screwed.

River braced herself a bit more firmly and reached into her shirt pulling out the one bomb she’d hidden there after she’d stopped throwing them. She hadn’t known why at the time but it had seemed like the right thing to do. “Distraction in five,” She whispered to Riddick, “Hide your eyes.”

“Four,” He responded tightening his grip on the boy, silently counting down with River and squinting his eyes as closed as possible. Three, two, one. As distractions went it was a good one. River threw a bomb at the far end of the container hitting another predator and covering it with goop that exploded into flames when it was exposed to the air. The monster that had been dropping down to join its brother retreated into the night. And River launched herself onto the one that had been poking at Riddick, her sai driving deeply into its back.

It screamed and threw her off its back so she tumbled to the ground. Riddick let go of the kid and grabbed for River only to have Hassan run like hell. The wounded predator took off after the moving
target and Hassan screamed as he was caught. Riddick picked up his partner and ran for the opening to the new container. He’d just made it when light flashed into his eyes and he stumbled into the container, falling and landing on top of River, knocking the breath out of both of them.

A third predator unseen by either of them dropped down in front of the opening and Johns, his trigger happy nature useful for once, blasted it twice with the shotgun.

“Hassan, where is Hassan?” Imam’s voice was asking desperately.

Riddick wheezed in a breath and tried to move. So far he and River were being ignored in favor of the predator which had dropped dead from the ceiling. River poked him with a demanding finger, “Riddick is much heavier than the girl. This is not an equitable exchange as could be supposed from hypothetical constructs.”

He was still a reeling from the light and lack of air and just shook his head, “Sorry what?”

“Heavy,” River simplified her words, her partner didn’t do well with bright light in his sensitive eyes and his head was sure to hurt, “The girl is smothering.”

“Oh,” Riddick rolled off her and lay on his back panting while she did the same, her head falling back to the floor now that the effort of speaking wasn’t required. “Sorry.”

“It is negligible now that she has access to oxygen once again,” River assured him. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked through the forest of legs to the dead predator, “Interesting.”

“What’s that nǐ zi,” Riddick concentrated on deep breaths and controlling the urge to pull River on top of him and kiss her just to remind their animals they were alive.

“The night has a thousand eyes, and the day but one; yet the light of the bright world dies with the dying sun,” River murmured. “The mind has a thousand eyes, and the heart but one; yet the light of a whole life dies when love is done.”

“Sorry, didn’t get that one,” Riddick pushed himself up and reached down to help her.

“Perhaps her meaning was obscured,” River conceded as she got to her feet and gestured towards the predator. “Light harms them, not like you, not an irritant to your eyes. Light burns their skin, erythema solare to the twentieth power.”

“Huh,” Riddick did his best to sound stupid mindful of Johns turning to look at him. “That’s handy ain’t it.”

There was a sound from the other container of squabbling and Imam’s face was a study in misery, “Is that Hassan?”

“We’ll burn a candle for him later,” Johns turned away, sensitive to grief as ever, “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Riddick leaned against the wall, River kitty corner from him was sharpening her sai with methodical strokes. He could tell she was using the repetitive motion to meditate, her eyes were focused completely on the blade. He spared a moment to think on when he could sharpen the sai she’d given him and shrugged, it would have to do as it was, letting Johns know he had it would only get it taken away. River moved slightly, her eyes flickering over him and he regretted the thought that had
distracted her. Johns had screwed with her meditation earlier and she needed all the calm she could
gather to deal with this bunch.

She moved then, shivered and walked over to stand beside him, paused a moment and then leaned
heavily against his body. Her hand slid behind his back drawing his *sai* from its hiding place and
replacing it with hers. Once his duller blade was in her hand she shivered again and nudged him.
Riddick looked down at her and tilted his head, those gorgeous dark eyes of hers were looking up at
him expectantly. With a mental shrug he draped an arm around her shoulders and snuggled her tight
against his side. That brought the expected objection from Johns.

“Girl get away from him, he ain’t a gorram doll for you to cuddle,” The merc snapped in annoyance.

River stuck out her tongue at him, “Cold. The big man is warm and doesn’t mind sharing with the
girl.” She looked up at Riddick, “Do you?” A small smile played about her lips as she began to
sharpen his *sai*.

“Nah, you're fine *nǐ zhī*,” Riddick rubbed her shoulder. "Don' 'xactly got heaters 'round here." He
looked at the boy, Suleiman thoughtfully, "You warm enough kid?"

The teenager nodded but smiled gratefully, "I am well thank you Mr. Riddick."

"And I don't want this *gūshīduī* to get ideas," Johns snarled before Simon stepped in.

"Johns, right now I'd rather River stayed closer to Riddick than near you," Simon interrupted. "My
sister has very good instincts and thus far on this planet they've proved right. He saved her life once
already and he won't do anything to her while we're all here."

Johns sneered but turned his attention back to Fry who was inventorying light. "So we've got one
cutting torch." She paused and nodded, "We've got two hand lights. There's gotta be something we
can rip out of the crash ship."

"Alcohol," Simon suggested. "Anything over forty five proof burns rather well."

"How many bottles have we got?" Fry wanted to know.

"I don't know," The doctor shrugged, "Maybe ten."

"Johns, you've got some flares," Fry said thoughtfully. "Maybe we got enough light."

"Enough for fuckin' what?" Johns demanded. When Fry just tilted her head at him, Johns held up his
hands as if to ward her off, “Lady if this is your right mind, I pray you go insane.”

"We stick to the plan," Fry said in determination. "We get the three cells back to the skiff. We're off
this rock."

Simon spoke reluctantly, shaking his head, "I hate to ruin a beautiful theory with an ugly fact...but
that sand cat is solar. It won't run at night."

"So we carry the cells," The pilot retorted, "We drag them. Whatever it takes."

"You mean tonight," It wasn't a question no matter how it sounded as River spoke.

Shazza blinked in astonishment, "With all those things still out there?"

Johns held up his hand for everyone to pause a moment, "All right. Now how long can this last?" He
asked looking around the room, "A few hours? A day, tops?"
Imam's voice was reluctant, understandable considering what he had to say, "I had the impression from the model...the two planets were moving as one and there would be a lasting darkness."

"These suns gotta come up sometime," The merc argued. "If these creatures are phobic about light, then we just sit tight and let the sun come up."

"I'm sure somebody else said that" Riddick drawled the words out in his darkest voice, "Locked inside that coring room."

"We need to think about everybody, especially the kids," Johns protested with false nobility, "They'll be scared out there in the dark."

"Don't use them like that," Fry sneered.

"Like what?" Johns rolled his eyes heavenward.

"As a smoke screen," The pilot lifted her chin, "Deal with your own fear."

"Why don't you shut up for two seconds," Johns' hands clenched into fists, "And let me come up with a plan that doesn't involve mass suicide?"

Riddick watched and knew that it wouldn't take long before Fry would drive Johns into doing something foolish. She wouldn't be able to help herself. She'd been ready to kill them all to save her skin, and now she wanted to save them all for the same reason. River's scent bloomed in tendrils of cinnamon and chocolate again, she really didn't like him thinking on Fry. "Tell you why later," River murmured in response to the thought.

Sure enough, it only took a few minutes before Fry was taunting Johns, "I'm waiting. How much do you weigh?"

"What's it matter?" Johns looked at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"How much?" Fry persisted.

"Around seventy nine kilos, if it's that important. Why?" Johns pushed a hand through his hair in frustration.

"Because you're seventy nine kilos of gutless white meat, and that's why you can't think of a plan," Fry smirked at him.

"Is that fuckin' right?" Johns snapped the shotgun up so it was all too casually aimed at Fry.

Riddick mentally sighed, knowing River wasn't going to like what he had to do, but if they were going to keep Fry as an ally, even temporarily, she was useless dead. He unwrapped his arm from River's shoulders and stepped between Johns and Fry, the shotgun rested both barrels on his sternum. "Think of the reward Johns," He smiled evilly.

"I'm willing to take a cut in pay," Johns snarled, pressing forward with the gun.

"And a cut to your gut?" Riddick pressed the point of the wickedly sharpened sai to Johns' belly. Most times bringing a knife to a gun fight would just get you shot, but with Johns, all bluster and bully and no brains or guts, that sharp tip against his flesh was all it took. He knew too well just how good Riddick was with a shiv.

"Trash baby you're gonna regret this move," Johns whispered but he backed off even as Imam
pleaded for the men to see reason.

Fry spoke from behind Riddick while River seethed in her corner over her partner protecting the unworthy blonde woman. “They're afraid of our light. That means we don't have to be afraid of them.”

“Yeah but,” Shazza shook her head, “And you are sure you can get us there?” She looked around the container shadows all around, “Even in the dark?”

“No, I can't,” Fry shook her head coming up right behind Riddick and laid her hands on his bare shoulder and bicep, “But he can.”

Riddick was violently aware of River’s eyes staring at Fry’s hands on him. Cinnamon and chocolate were bursting off of her along with roses and sugar and threads of citrus. He frowned, the anger, jealousy he could understand, no other woman should touch him but her, he liked that she was possessive of him, her mate. But why would she be confused, and embarrassed? And hurting? He really needed to get his woman alone and talk to her about this. Moving out from underneath Fry’s hands without a word he returned to River’s side and touched a hand to her skin. She was cold again, the desert planet chilly now that the suns were gone. It would get colder before it would get warmer.

“He does not have to share his warmth with her if he does not truly wish it,” River said in a small voice as Fry began marshaling their resources to create makeshift torches. “She has no wish to be an inconvenience.”

Riddick took a look around the area and drew her slightly away from the circle of light so they wouldn’t be seen talking immediately. “Are you doin’ that thing where you try not to read me ‘cause you think I deserve privacy?” He murmured into her ear. “Cause every time you do that we end up in a fight ‘cause of a misunderstanding’ and this ain’t the time or place for it zhì ài.” His lips touched the curve of her ear and tendrils of honey wove through her scent, sugar fading slightly, “You think I want that biǎo zi touchin’ me?”

“I know you encourage the not-captain so that she does not turn to Johns,” River spoke in that barely there whisper only he could hear. “I do not wish to make this more difficult for you, but to see her touch you…when I have to…act the child to have your touch, your comfort…” She shuddered and took a deep breath, “I thought if I didn’t listen it would be easier to bear, seeing her touch my mate.”

“All right, I got that,” Riddick kissed her hair. “But you listen an’ you’ll be able to tell exactly what I’m thinkin’ when she does that.” He tipped her chin up so he could see her face and kissed her forehead, thinking clearly at her, ‘Now what else is wrong zhì ài? I know you’re in pain.’

River shuddered and he could smell, as well as see, the tears that were streaming down her face. Before he could say anything else she buried her face in his shirt and sobbed, shoulders heaving, openly weeping like he hadn’t seen in a year or more. Automatically he wrapped an arm around her and rubbed her back trying to soothe her as if she were still the little girl he’d comforted back then. A half moment later he was grateful he’d done so, glad River had hidden her face as Fry and Johns held up the hand light to see River crying into his shirt.

“What’s wrong with her?” Johns asked with an ugly tone to his voice.

Fry narrowed her eyes and took in the relatively innocent position of Riddick’s hands, and the extremely unsexy way River was crying and shook her head. “She’s just a kid and he kept her warm Johns, she’s probably just having the nervous breakdown we all deserve,” The pilot said with a sigh, “You want me to get Simon?” She asked Riddick.
“Let’s see if she calms some, she was goin’ on ‘bout hurtin’ and worryin’ him,” Riddick gave a half shrug with the shoulder not holding River. “She smells like she’s in pain.” He patted River’s back a little awkwardly, “Uh, nī zi, how’re ya doin’?”

“Doesn’t need an audience for her sniffling,” River spoke clearly against his chest, though that she was still in tears was pretty evident.

“An’ what am I?” Riddick shook his head a half smile curving his lips. His girl was all sortsa smart, he could feel her animal and his calming some even from this ersatz embrace simply because Fry was witnessing it.

“Tiger tiger burning bright, in the forests of the night, what immortal hand or eye dare frame they fearful symmetry,” River spoke more clearly as she pulled her face away from his chest. “In what distant deeps or skies burnt the fire of thine eyes? On what wings dare he aspire, what the hand dare seize the fire? And what shoulder and what art could twist the sinews of thy heart? And when thy heart began to beat, what dread hand and what dread feet? What the hammer? what the chain? In what furnace was thy brain? What the anvil? What dread grasp dare its deadly torsors clasp? When the stars threw down their spears and water’d heaven with their tears, did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the lamb make thee?”

Fry was completely bewildered and it showed on her face. Johns gave snort of disgust and turned away muttering about crazy girls. River had drawn the attention of the others with her words and Simon made a small noise of amusement, not quite a chuckle. He apparently was the only one who’d understood what River meant. “Doc,” Riddick rumbled, “Care ta shed some light on the subject?”

“It’s an old Earth That Was poem,” Simon shrugged as he used his nimble surgeon’s fingers to make wicks out of rags and a cork. “Tigers, like all cats, can see well in the dark. I think River was comparing you to a predator, one that is comfortable in the darkness.” He smiled slightly, “Her way of giving you a compliment, and I suspect, thanking you for letting her cry. She’s never been comfortable with weakness.”

“Who is,” Shazza offered with a nod of agreement. “River, nī zi, can you give me a hand with this?” She held up a coil of fluorescent tubing. River nodded and took Riddick’s hand, trying to tug him along with her, much to Fry’s amusement.

“Guess she thinks you’re her pet tiger,” Fry smirked to Riddick, adult to adult.

“Eh, there’re worse things I could be than nī zi’s guardian tiger,” Riddick smirked back and felt another wave of citrus come off of River. Her hand pressed to her belly slightly and he frowned, inhaling deeply. Blood, old blood. The shot Simon had given her had been too late, or it wasn’t going to work completely.

River gave him a sharp look that only Shazza seemed to catch and the pioneer woman took River’s hand and tugged her down beside her, “You all right?” The dark haired woman asked as she handed River some tubing.

“The shot is effective but I will still have pain and some…of that we were hoping to avoid,” River murmured. “If I say anything…” She hesitated, her eyes flickering over Johns and Fry.

“Yeah, can see why you wouldn’t,” Shazza agreed. “Riddick seems to know something’s up though, he won’t say anything?”

“I think he…,” River looked at Riddick who returned her gaze blandly as he spoke with Fry. “I think he knows, he can smell the change, but he won’t say anything. Likes me more than Johns or Fry.”
“Good,” Shazza nodded, “Well here’s hoping it isn’t as bad as we think.”

River nodded even knowing that it was going to be much, much worse.

River held the torch high over Imam as he shrugged on the first harness of chains. Shazza was helping him into it, making sure the straps lay flat. Johns was fumbling with the second harness and Riddick's hands reached for the chains, easily moving them and helping Johns. Simon was on the opposite side of the sled, Suiliman behind it; everyone held a torch or was carrying something.

Riddick had a harness strung with a few small handhelds, and slung it over his body crossways so the lights were on his back like a beacon. Everyone was wrapped in fluorescent light tubing, leading like tentacles or webbing to the sled Imam and Johns would pull. River and Suleiman carried smaller bottles of whisky lit on fire for a wider halo of light to scare off the predators.

"I'll be runnin' ten paces ahead," The convict told Fry. "I want light on my back but not in my eyes. And check your cuts. These bad boys know our blood now." He looked at Shazza and nodded towards River.

"Are we actually going to do this?" Suleiman asked nervously looking around.

Simon turned and regarded the boy with calm eyes. "There was an old saying on Earth That Was, 'if God be for us who can be against us'," He offered with a half smile. "Even if I die, it will be enough to know that my sister and I are free."

"We stay together," Fry said firmly, "We keep the light burning. That's all we gotta do to live through this thing."

Johns looked at her as the pilot drew closer to the sled, "Are you ready?"

"Look, we're just wasting light here," Fry was clearly impatient to go. River wasn't sure she disagreed on this particular point but forbore from speaking. Johns always became more agitated when she talked and no one needed a twitchier Johns.

"You give him the cells and the ship," Johns told Fry in what he thought was a quiet voice, "And he'll leave you all out there to die." He stared at the pilot repeating the key words slowly, "He'll leave all of you."

"I don't get it," Fry shook her head at Johns, disbelief coming out of every pore. "What is so goddamn valuable in your life that you're worried about losing? Is there anything at all? Besides your next spike?"

Johns rolled his eyes, River fought the urge to do the same. Fry was irritating when she was self-righteous. She seemed to forget she'd tried to kill all of them and even if they'd made it to their destination, she was flying a slave ship. Her pep talks really weren't all that effective on people who knew the truth, though Imam, Suleiman and Shazza perked up noticeably.

Simon and River exchanged looks and River hefted her torch in one hand and kept her sai in the other. Riddick hadn't openly displayed his sai since his one threat to Johns, a wise move, the girl thought, considering Johns was nearly as afraid of Riddick as he was the other predators out there. For once Simon didn't have his bag with him, she'd convinced him it would be better to leave it aboard the skiff, hidden so Johns couldn't get at the drugs inside. Riddick had hidden it for her, that
had been part of why he'd nearly been late for the sand cat.

"I think there's something wrong with the torch," Suleiman called as from behind the sled. River glanced back, they'd been running for the better part of an hour but the boy's bottle couldn't be empty.

"Let's have a look," Shazza dropped back, examining his bottle, "You've got to make sure the rag stays in the liquid right? Don't shake it about or it won't have any fuel to draw from."

"Stay close," Fry admonished and Shazza nodded coming up to jog next to River.

It wasn't long before the boy was calling again that there was something wrong. "Wait," He had unwound his shield of tubing until it was only a coil or two over his chest and was feeling for something in the darkness, a dropped flare.

"Stay in the light," Suleiman’s wave of terror nearly sent her stumbling and she moaned slightly. Before she could get to the boy, or tell him to raise his torch, something snaked close in the shadows around them. River dropped her bottle on the sand and slashed out with her *sai*, blue blood spattered on the blade. "Suleiman, get into the light." She called urgently, picking up her bottle again to find him in the darkness. Suleiman stared at her, a curved appendage protruding from his belly, and reached out a hand. Before she could take it, he was gone, pulled out of the light and into the darkness with a scream of terror.

With Suleiman pulled away, his tubes had dislodged the little light generator on the sled, it fell to the ground, and everyone's shield of light died. River shuddered and reached for his torch, resting on the sand beside the sled, holding it up with her own to shield the others from the darkness. Shazza scrambled to grab another bottle and lit it on hers, light blazing through the darkness.

River shuddered as Suleiman died, and Fry hurried back to take the lost boy’s torch. Simon's arms wrapped around River as she shook violently in the aftermath. "Luò jǐng xià shí," She nearly wept the words. "God never listens or I'd beg to be a stone, please make me tiě shí xīn cháng," She knelt and covered her ears as if to block out the screams, "Too many dead all screaming at me."

Riddick turned at the sound of the commotion just in time to see River kneeling in the sand. Covering her ears was never a good sign, it meant everyone's emotions were too loud. Then there were the predators all around them, he'd gotten the distinct impression that she could sense their minds, which meant their hunger was pressing in on her as well. He moved quickly into the circle of light, only to be greeted sarcastically by Johns, "Well, it's good to see you're okay."

"Yeah whatever," Riddick ignored the merc to crouch by Simon and River, Shazza standing with a torch over the girl close by. "Hey nǐ zi," He greeted River. "What's goin' on?"

"Loud, they're all very loud," River muttered, "They won't stop yelling and its worse because its not in my ears." She had fisted her hand but her *sai* lay bloody in the sand. "I need to do it, but the blood will call them. What do I do, what do I do, what do I do..." She muttered shaking her head.

"Doc, you think you can get her on her feet?" Fry called, more than a little irritation in her voice, "We're burnin' light here."

Riddick didn't bother to glare at the pilot, "Listen to me River," He put a hand on her arm and squeezed. "Listen to me." He repeated until she looked up and met his eyes. She always met his eyes; no matter how dark his goggles, she could always meet his gaze, it was just one more thing he loved about her. "You do what you gotta, you hear me? Whatever you gotta to get through this."
"Need a sword, axe, any blade will do," River spoke more clearly once Riddick touched her, his animal reaching hers, calming her so she could find her own animal beyond the mind numbing terror everyone else was feeling. "Need to become what they made me."

"All right," Riddick picked up her sai and closed her fingers around it, "Got your blade. What's next?"

"Blood," River stretched her arm out and drew the tip of the sai over her inner arm, drawing a delicate line in her flesh. A thin red line of blood rose up and she took a deep breath along with Riddick, inhaling the scent and using it to bind herself back into her own body. Bringing her arm to her mouth she licked the wound and took another breath. "All right," She gripped the sai in a far more business like manner and rose to her feet. "Thank you," She looked at Riddick. "I was getting lost."

"Do I even want to know?" Fry asked in exasperation.

River stared at her, dark eyes cold as the starlit sky, "I have been one acquainted with the night." She spoke in chillingly correct tones. "Shall we continue?"

"Are we gettin' close?" Shazza asked after another hour or more had passed. There was no moon, nothing to indicate the passage of time, just unending night.

"Can we pick up the pace?" Fry asked from her place by the sled, casting a wary glance behind her. The sound of a shotgun ratcheting jerked her eyes back to the front of the sled. Johns had shrugged out of his chains and with quick steps forward jammed the shotgun into the back of Riddick's neck. River could almost sympathize with Fry's exhausted and disbelieving tone as she asked, "You want to tell me what's goin' on?"

"We crossed our own tracks," Imam explained, casting a wary glance upwards and around them into the darkness.

"Why have we circled?" Johns demanded to know as Fry looked at the tracks on the ground. Shazza drew in a fearful breath while Simon visibly braced himself for the worst.

"Are we lost?" Imam's voice wasn't judgmental but neither was he pleased.

"Listen," Riddick's voice cut through the fearful babble that was rising around him.

"Do you even know where we are?" Imam demanded.

"You all speak and speak but you never hear," River cried out in frustration, "Listen!" She'd never heard anything like it, the sound of Imam's beads multiplied and magnified by a thousand thousands. The sound of ball bearings cascading down a metal staircase or, more ominously, Geiger counters riding next to an atomic bomb.

"Canyon ahead," Riddick said quietly in the dead silence that followed, everyone suddenly listening to the sound of doom riding the wind. "I circled once to buy some time to think," He shook his head.

"To think about what?" Fry shook her head, "What's to think about?"

"About how to kill us and still get these cells to the skiff," Johns aimed the shotgun at Riddick's head, "Gorramnit, we're just doin' the heavy lifting for this prick!"
"I think we should go now," Imam said calmly taking hold of his chains again.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Riddick shook his head. "That's death row up there. Especially with the woman bleeding."

"What?" Fry looked at him in astonishment.

"What the fuck you talkin' about?" Johns actually lowered the shotgun in astonishment to look at Fry, "She's not cut."

"Not her," Riddick's grimace of an expression clearly explained what idiots he thought the self-proclaimed leaders were. "Her." His eyes were glued to River.

"You gotta be kidding me," Johns groaned as if finally sank in how River could be bleeding, "Sào zhou xīng." Both Simon and Riddick glared at him while Shazza just sighed.

"The shot helped, bleeding isn't as bad," River shook her head, "But any blood is bad enough," She looked at Simon, "They would have left me there. You couldn’t have stopped them, would have died trying. So I asked for the shot and hoped."

"Oh River," Simon wrapped his sister in his arms, "I'm sorry mèi mei."

"Are you really bleeding?" Fry asked quietly.

"You would've left me at the ship," River repeated with quiet certainty, "That's why I didn't say something sooner." She looked into the darkness, "Let those who are in favour with their stars, of public honour and proud titles boast, whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars, unlook’d for joy in that I honour most."

Simon blinked at her and then looked at Fry and Johns who both looked as annoyed as ever when River began speaking in poetry. Riddick however, wore a slight smile as he regarded the slender girl, almost as if he understood what she'd meant.

"They've been nose-open for her ever since we left," Riddick's tone was quiet as he spoke to Imam though matter of fact, but he cast a sympathetic look at River that no one except Shazza and Simon noticed, "In case you haven't noticed, they go off blood." No one spoke for a moment as the wind gusted and flames sputtered the sounds of the canyon ahead even more ominous on the rising wind.

"Look, this is not gonna work," Fry shook her head, "We're gonna have to go back."

"What did you say?" Johns had a new target for his rage and jitters and he jumped on it, "You're the one got us out here and made us into sled dogs."

"I was wrong." Fry shook her head, "I admit it." She spread her hands, "Can we just get back to the ship?"

"I don't know," Johns bit the words off in agitation, "Nice breeze. Wide-open space. I'm startin' to tā mā de enjoy myself out here."

"Are you high again? Just listen to yourself," Fry hissed fiercely.

"No, you're right," Johns sneered his anger with Riddick forgotten in the face of a new smaller and weaker target. "What's to be afraid of? My life's just a steaming pile of meaningless shī niào anyhow," He shook his head. "So I say, 'Mush on.' The canyon's only a couple hundred meters and after that it's skiff city." Johns pointed a finger at Fry, "Why don't you butch up, stuff a cork in this
"She's the captain," Imam was once again the voice of reason, "Listen to her."

"Listen to her?" Johns looked at him in incredulous derision. "When she was willing to sacrifice us?"

"What?" Shazza's head snapped around, while Imam's face showed his shock.

"This," Fry's voice was faint as she tried to stop Johns' flood of words, "does not help us."

"The crash," Johns' voice rose over Fry's protest, "She tried to blow the passenger cabin, kill us in our sleep."

"Shut your mouth!" Fry shouted furiously.

"We are disposable," Johns shouted back, "We're just walkin' ghosts to you?"

"Bì zuǐ! Shut your tā mā de qiào!" Fry launched herself at Johns, her fingers like claws only to be hurled to the ground.

"Fine," Imam shouted, "You made your point." He looked at Johns, "We can all be scared." Turning, Imam was studied Riddick, River and Simon, none of whom had moved or reacted to the scene at all, except to keep a wary eye out for the predators. "You are not...surprised by this?" He asked quietly, casting a glance at Shazza who was pale.

Riddick shrugged, "Johns forgets sometimes that cryo don't work on me," He looked at the merc, "That's what happens to hypes, priorities get a little skewed. I heard the whole thing, more'n half the ship gone in less'n five minutes. Had to drop more load, get the nose down."

"And you two?" Imam regarded Simon and River.

Simon didn't quite smile, "I was in cryo, oblivious just like the rest of you." He glanced at River, "But my sister trusts me, and she told me everything."

River tilted her head and regarded Fry thoughtfully, "The painful warrior famoused for fight, after a thousand victories once foil'd, is from the book of honour razed quite, and all the rest forgot for which he tol'd: then happy I, that love and am belov'd where I may not remove, nor be remov'd."

"I'm sorry but I don't understand," Imam shook his head. Shazza drew closer to the four of them while Johns looked around, surveying his new domain, master and commander.

"She's talkin' bout reputation," Riddick said slowly. "Anybody stakes their rep on one thing, an' then fails at that thing, well, they ain't remembered at all after that." He shrugged, "This planet's a lot like Slamcity, one wrong move and you're done." He looked at River and nearly smiled at how neatly she'd distracted the shepherd.

"How much do you weigh now Fry? Huh?" Johns sneered at the near weeping pilot in the dirty sand. He looked at the rest of them and cracked a flare open. "The verdict's in. The light moves forward."
Translations:
Zāo gāo - crap/nuts/crud/literally 'spoiled cake'
Nī zi - little girl
gǒushǐ duī - a person who behaves badly; literally a pile of dogshit
zhì ‘ài - most beloved
biāo zi - whore
Luò jīng xià shí - to hit a person when he is down
tiě shí xīn cháng - to have a heart of stone / hard-hearted / unfeeling
Sào zhou xìng - comet/jinx/bearer of ill luck
mèi mei - little sister
tā mā de - fucking
shǐ niào - shit and piss
jiàn huò - bitch
Bì zuǐ - shut up
tā mā de qiào - fucking hole/orifice

Quote sources:
The night has a thousand eyes, and the day but one; yet the light of the bright world dies with the dying sun. The mind has a thousand eyes, and the heart but one; yet the light of a whole life dies when love is done. - Francis William Bourdillon

Tiger tiger burning bright, in the forests of the night, what immortal hand or eye dare frame they fearful symmetry. In what distant deeps or skies burnt the fire of thine eyes? On what wings dare he aspire, what the hand dare seize the fire? And what shoulder and what art could twist the sinews of thy heart? And when thy heart began to beat, what dread hand and what dread feet? What the hammer? what the chain? In what furnace was thy brain? What the anvil? What dread grasp dare its deadly terrors clasp? When the stars threw down their spears and water’d heaven with their tears, did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the lamb make thee? - The Tiger - William Blake

I have been one acquainted with the night - Robert Frost

"Let those who are in favour with their stars, of public honour and proud titles boast, whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars, unlook’d for joy in that I honour most. - Sonnet XXV - William Shakespeare
The painful warrior famoused for fight, after a thousand victories once foil’d, is from the book of honour razed quite, and all the rest forgot for which he toil’d: then happy I, that love and am belov’d where I may not remove, nor be remov’d. - Sonnet XXV - William Shakespeare
Riddick moved through the dark towards Johns where the merc stood, his flare burning. Shielding his eyes from the glare the convict moved past his captor, unsurprised when Johns began speaking to him. "Ain't all of us gonna make it," Johns still sounded relaxed. Riddick took a minute to wonder if the merc was still hyped up on his drops or if he was just so far gone with shock that nothing fazed him anymore.

"Just realize that?" Riddick rolled his eyes and took point.

"Six of us left," Johns still had that conversational tone, as if he was discussing what he wanted to eat for breakfast. "If we could make it through the canyon and lose one, that'd be a feat."

Riddick wasn't sure he liked where this was going, "Not if I'm the one."

Johns had seemed to expect that, "What if you're one of five?"

"I'm listening," Riddick said slowly, hoping like hell that River was listening. If Johns was going to make the play Riddick thought he was, then River would have to be ready to keep everyone from running like scattered hens.

River nodded to herself as she heard Riddick's emphatic thought. A trick they'd learned in the Academy, for him to think her name loudly when he wanted to her to know something, when he wanted her to hear through his ears or see through his eyes. Now she didn't need to borrow Riddick's senses, she could simply listen in, his thoughts bringing her Johns' words.

"What are they doin' up there?" Shazza wondered, as she strained against the chains. She and Imam had taken to pulling the sled while River and Simon held torches next to them and Fry covered the rear. River hadn't liked having Fry at her back but the alternative was for the pilot to be pulling the sled and that was less desirable.

"They're talking about the canyon, I think," Imam was trying to be reassuring. Unfortunately he sounded far from certain, "How to get us through."

Johns had let Riddick think for a moment as if he wanted the convict to get the full impact of what he was about to say next, "Battlefield doctors decide who lives and dies. It's called triage."

Riddick really didn't like where this was going, especially given Johns' dislike for one slender woman in the group. Keeping his voice carefully neutral he shrugged, "Kept calling it murder when I did it."

"Either way, I figure it's something you can grab onto," Johns shrugged back.

"Sacrifice play. Hack up a body," Riddick supposed. "Leave it at the start of the canyon like a bucket of bait."

Johns shook his head, "Trawl with it," He explained, "You got extra cable on the sled. We drag the body forty, fifty feet behind us."

"Nice embellishment," Riddick knew from Johns' scent that the merc was tickled to death with this
idea; figured appealing to Riddick's sense of survival would get the convict on board.

"I don't want to feed them," Johns had a condescending tone to his voice now. "I just want to keep them off our scent."

Riddick glanced back deliberately, looking over the tiny group behind him, "So which one caught your eye?"

"Don't look," Johns cut him off before he could turn fully, "Jī dū, what the hell's wrong with you?"

"Imam, slow down," Fry whispered, clearly spooked by the idea that Riddick and Johns might join forces. "Just a little more space between us and them."

River shook her head, "No," She argued. "Space is the enemy, we will be cut off from them both, they will be flanked and we will be surrounded. Sōu zhǔ yì."

"All right," Johns had clearly had enough of the planning stage. "Enough of this shit. You do the girl and I'll keep the others off your back." He sneered at Riddick as the convict slowed, "It's not too big a job for you, is it?"

River felt Riddick fire with rage at Johns' words and felt warmth blaze through her. He might become angry with her sometimes, annoyed when she doubted him, but she was his. And no one was going to do harm to her, especially not a hyped up merc who would leave them all for dead quicker than they could blink. She moved forward with her torch, forcing the sled and Fry to move with her or be left without enough light.

Riddick turned slowly to look at Johns and saw River closing some of the distance between she and him. Part of the animal relaxed slightly, that had been his greatest concern, that Fry would force the others to drop back. "I'm just wondering," He drawled the words out in his darkest voice, "If we don't need a bigger piece of bait."

"Like who?" Johns met Riddick's gaze for one long moment before the convict moved. Striking out at the flare he dashed it from Johns' hand, whirled the merc around and snatched the shotgun off his belt. Johns blocked Riddick's swing of the gun before the convict could shoot at the merc's head.

As the gun fired Fry panicked, "Leave the sled! Let's move!" She cried. "Let's go!"

River grabbed Shazza's arm and held the woman even as Imam ran with Fry. Simon stood, steady as always in a crisis, his torch unwavering in the darkness. "Stay with us Shazza," River whispered in the woman's ear. "Safer with us, remember, Riddick won't hurt us. Johns will."

"How do you know?" Shazza was plainly terrified.

"I know," River whispered back watching the fight between Johns and Riddick. Her partner's elbow had been dislocated and he hurled Johns away as he popped his forearm back into place with scarcely a grimace though she could tell it pained him. "And I'll explain later. Right now, we keep the torches burning, and we stay alive."

"One rule," Riddick said in his slow dark voice as he unslung the harness of lights from his body circling with Johns, "Stay in the light." He pulled out the sai River had given him, lovingly sharpened and watched as Johns pulled his own blade.

The two men dove at each other, struggling, until Johns got the upper hand for just a moment, taking Riddick's legs out from under him. It didn't last long though, as Riddick toppled him, and they wrestled in the sand and dust, each trying to push the other's blade away. "Remember that moment?"
Riddick asked from below Johns, eerily calm even in the struggle. With one heave of his arms he shoved Johns off him and leapt to his feet, catching the merc and slicing him across the back. He watched as Johns began crawling towards the big gauge shotgun and clutched it to his chest. "Should've never taken the chains off," He taunted the merc as Johns began to fumblingly load the gun with the shells from his belt even as the light from the flare began to die. "You were one brave fuck before," He told the merc, "You were really bad-ass. The chains, the gauge," Riddick's voice grew quieter as he drifted back into the rising darkness, "The badge. I told you to ghost me." He watched as the predators began to close in, drawn by the smell of Johns' blood in the dark.

He thought loudly to River that he was going to circle round and bring Fry and Imam back. Unspoken even in his thoughts was his pride in her, how well she'd done by keeping Shazza and Simon with the sled. He moved quickly and it wasn't hard to outflank Fry. She'd nearly run in a circle anyway. When she and Imam stopped to get their bearings he waited until she turned back around to step out of the shadows. "Back to the ship?" He folded his arms and looked at her. "Huddle together until the lights burn out?"

"Get away from us," Fry sounded like a dying mouse, her fear of him eclipsing everything else.

"Till you can't see what's eating you," Riddick continued as if she hadn't spoken. "That the big plan?" He shook his head, "River, Simon and Shazza are this way, with the powercells. We're leaving this place. You come along if you like."

"Where's Johns?" Imam asked as he and Fry followed Riddick.

"Which half?" Riddick didn't even try to hide his amusement.

"We're gonna lose everybody out here," Fry nearly moaned.

"We should've stayed at the ship," Imam murmured in concern.

"He died fast," Riddick shrugged as they reached River and the others. "And if we have any choice about it, that's the way we should all go out."

"More mercy than he deserved," River sniffed derisively as Riddick knelt by her feet and began to untangle the chains and harness from the sled.

"That is an unkindness," Imam remonstrated.

"It is the truth," River retorted bluntly.

"She's right," Riddick supported his partner. "You think I just suddenly took it into my head to kill the man with the shotgun? Out of the blue? For no reason?" He shook his head, "He wanted me to kill the girl."

"That cannot be true," The shepherd seemed appalled by the very thought. "You must have misheard."

"I don't mishear things like that," Riddick picked up the harness only to have it taken from his hands by River.

"Truth," River agreed. "Wished to dangle the girl like a worm on a hook, drag her through the sand trailing blood, bait for the predators." She untwisted the leather and began strapping it to Riddick's upper body.

"But--"
Imam didn't get very far when Riddick interrupted him, "You really think Johns was that good shepherd? Or that I'm that evil? Not a very good judge of character are you?"

"Johns kept Riddick from coming to the girl's aid when she would have been pulled underground. Kept him from going to her when she screamed and smelled of burnt cinnamon. Blinded him with light and beat him with chains until he was dizzy with it to keep him from coming to help her."

River's voice was disturbingly certain, as if these were facts, not opinions. "Liked causing pain, liked having someone powerful and dangerous helpless. Wished to have the girl all to himself somewhere he could make her scream, see how much she could take. How much could he hurt her until she was completely broken. Wanted to see how innocent she really was, how all that white skin would look under a knife, how dark hair would look dripping and matted with blood." Her hand had rested on Riddick's shoulder as she spoke, she patted him affectionately. "Riddick saved the girl." She kissed the top of the big man's head as if he were the smaller one. "Thank you for my life. Again."

"Anytime," Riddick grinned and watched as she walked away to speak with Shazza. Leaving the powercells for a moment he moved towards something that had caught his eye. Amidst the other bones of the mass graveyard, the skeleton of a predator rested. The triangular crown on its bone head and sharp teeth were all there, but one of the hammerhead extensions had broken off. Riddick picked it up off the ground and held it next to the skull, measuring with his eyes and putting his face up against the bone crown. He thought River's name loudly until he was certain she'd heard him and would see what he was thinking. "Blind spot."

Returning to the powercells Riddick began to tie them to the harness, keeping one eye on River and the other on Fry. The pilot was the danger now, he was pretty sure she'd taken the handgun away from River before she'd gone spelunking.

Imam approached him quietly, "Shall we pray together?" He gestured to everyone but River, "I have already prayed with the others." When Riddick just looked at him, Imam continued, "It is painless."

"It's pointless," Riddick told him flatly.

"Because you do not believe in God does not mean God does not believe in--" Imam was cut off mid homily as Riddick began to speak.

"Think someone can spend half their life in the slam," The convict said slowly and inexorably, "with a horse bit in their mouth and not believe?" He looked at the shepherd, "Think he could start out in some trash bin with an umbilical cord wrapped around his neck and not believe?" He shook his head, his silver eyes gleaming in the light as he looked over at River. "Got it all wrong, Holy Man. I absolutely believe in God. And I absolutely hate the fucker."

"He is with us nonetheless," Imam persisted.

"Your boys are already dead," Riddick pointed out heartlessly, "How much faith do you have left, Father?"

"I have enough," The shepherd replied with a severe look. "But you have none."

"In God, no. I don't." Riddick shook his head, "I got faith in somethin' else."

"In what?" Imam's gaze followed Riddick's to the slender girl balancing a sai on her finger before she offered Shazza a strip of cloth to bind back the woman's thick hair in preparation for the run. "In the little witch?"

"Witch?" Riddick repeated, amused. He could smell cinnamon coming off of River and knew she
was irritated. "I wouldn't call her a witch shepherd."

"What would you call her then?"

Riddick smirked at the holy man, "I call her River." He shrugged as he tied the last knot in the rope binding the powercells to his harness, "It is her name."

He walked to the entrance of the valley, pulling the cells and gave Shazza a half grin as she grabbed a rope and began to pull with him. "Hey there shiny lady, you come here often?"

River giggled as she passed them to join her brother, "Shazza did say Riddick sounded like a charmer." She teased the woman.

"When Johns was saying Riddick'd come back to skullfuck us in our sleep," Shazza shook her head with a half grin.

"Nah," Riddick nearly laughed at the conversation he was having, "I like my women awake."

That startled a laugh out of Shazza, a short burst of mirth that faded as she lost her breath again. "Right, I'll be sure to let River know."

"Who nǐ zǐ?" Riddick pretended ignorance.

"Yeah, the girl who is a bit older than fourteen," Shazza murmured keeping her eyes on Fry, "The one you can't take your eyes off of." She slanted a glance at Riddick and then looked back at Fry, "Don' worry, doubt anyone else's noticed. Not Fry for certain."

"Keep River between you an' Simon," Riddick said quietly. "I know she'll be safe with you two."

"Yeah, you can count on that," Shazza halted when he did at the beginning of the valley.

"Only see one way. That way. Only way off this rock," Riddick pointed straight ahead. "Just keep the girl between you," He looked at Simon and Shazza who both nodded solemnly.

"What about the cells?" Fry asked worriedly.

"I'll take those," Riddick tightened the straps and got a good grip on the ropes. "Nǐ zǐ," He nodded respectfully.

"Half a league, half a league, half a league onward, all in the valley of Death rode the six hundred," River spoke clearly and smiled proudly.

Riddick grinned, "Forward the light brigade, charge for the guns he said: into the valley of death rode the six hundred." He pulled down his goggles, took a deep breath and ignored the astonishment of the others. "All right. Move."

"Are you sure you can keep up?" Fry asked as she began to lead them into the valley.

"Move!" He repeated loudly. And they began to run.

Hatchlings dove down into the valley, swarming them, evading the light, some catching fire and dive bombing Riddick's face. One of them took Imam's turban. It was madness. And then blue blood began to fall from the sky, "Do not look up!" He shouted as Fry began to falter.

As if she couldn't help being stupid, Fry looked up, "They're killing each other!"
She almost stopped and Riddick barreled into her, forcing her forward. "Move!"

The valley was blocked ahead, bones fallen across the floor of it, "Keep moving!" Riddick shouted at them as they paused trying to duck under the bones. "Keep moving!" He pushed forward, clearing part of the path and pulled Simon and River behind him, Shazza behind River. Fry followed and Imam followed her, ready to take the bottle torch until something whipped around his ankle.

Imam screamed in terror, and Fry turned back to grab the shepherd. River shuddered and dug into the satchel she still carried for her bombs. "Duck duck goose," She screamed and threw the bomb with all her might.

Riddick turned to see Fry trying to pull Imam away from a burning predator, the man's robes were red with blood. River had backed away from the sight almost instinctively, Simon and Shazza had hurried forward to help and River was alone.

One of the monsters saw its chance, saw a way to get the thing that smelled so gustily of blood and dove from the wall of the canyon. Riddick cursed and struggled to get the harness off as River dove beneath a bone skull, the predator trying to hammer its way through the bone as River tried to evade its attempts on the ground.

Shazza grabbed a hand light and a torch and began aiming them at the predator trying to get River, "Get off her!" The predictors skin sizzled and burned but it was too hungry to care anymore. "Get off her!"

Riddick drew his sai and cut the damn harness off, diving at the predator. It broke the bone River was hiding under, thrashing its wings and tail, it threw Shazza against the wall of the canyon, breaking the handlight and the torch. A hand on either of its hammerhead extensions Riddick managed to keep it from getting to the women; then was stuck in a stalemate as it tried to lunge forward. Again and again it tried to force its jaws forward to his face, until Riddick let it, let it lunge forward and ducked, slicing its underbelly, whirling and cutting at it over and over until it fell bloodied and broken. Deliberately Riddick moved to the fallen beast and took hold of its ugly crown, jerking it sideways with a crack. "He did not know who he was fuckin' with."

"Riddick saves her life again," River whispered for his ears alone. He looked at her, held tight in Shazza's protective arms and touched a finger to her nose.

"What would I do if you weren't around?" He shrugged and moved towards Fry and Imam. Simon was looking at Imam and then Fry with a stoic expression before he rose and backed away.

"Come on, get him up," Fry ordered and heaved Imam's arm over her own shoulders. Simon sighed heavily and helped, looking at Riddick with resigned eyes.

Riddick nodded and looked at River, "Keep those bombs a yours handy, get the feeling we're gonna need 'em." He moved to the powercells and gathered up the ropes, beginning the entire nightmare all over again.

River shuddered against Shazza, they weren't making good time, and the predators were attracted to the scent of she and Imam's blood. Hers was fading somewhat, but Imam's was only growing worse. He fell in the dirt, and it took everything Fry and Simon had to get him up again. And then things truly did get worse.

At first she thought it was more blood, braced herself for the odd smell and body parts to begin
falling around them again. But the liquid that hit her face and hands was clear and cool. "Shūǐ shěn húō rè," She shouted her frustration. "Now, now you give us water you hún dàn gōu niàng yāng de!"

Riddick turned at the sound and smell of River's fury, and shook his head in complete agreement, almost laughing at the irony, "So, where the hell's your God now?" He shouted at Imam ignoring the fact that the man was almost dead.

River pulled Shazza close to the valley wall, holding her hand over the torch to keep it from going out. Fry and Simon followed with Imam between them. Simon pulled off his shirt and began to rebind the wound on Imam's leg. Riddick climbed up to one of the narrow ledges and looked in the distance towards the settlement.

"Are we close?" Fry shouted to Riddick nearly in tears, "Just tell me that the settlement is right up there!"

"We can't make it," Riddick said quietly. He knew River heard him, knew she'd understand what he meant. They couldn't make it with all of them. He could. He could pull the powercells through the dark, get the skiff as ready as he could without her help, and come back for them. She smiled at him and he could smell it, allspice drifting towards him. She'd counted on him before, believed in him, in their partnership, in the Academy they hadn't had anyone but each other, but she trusted him now. Trusted without question, without doubt that he would return for her.

Before he could say anything something snaked down the cliff side, almost invisible in the rain, and wrapped around Imam's throat. The holy man was gone with a scream of shock from Fry and a shout of denial from Simon. River's scent twisted with burnt cinnamon but allspice, blood, steel and silk remained, threaded with honey as she read his thoughts.

He dropped back to the ground and began to scout out the area. A small crevice in the side of the valley would work, it would hold until he could come back. He'd seen a lot from these giant bugs but nothing to indicate they could use tools or teamwork to move something heavy. "Hide here. Now." He gestured for the four remaining to get inside. River stood beside the opening while the other three entered and he muscled a rock into position. Before he could object to her remaining she pulled out one of her bombs and threw it behind him. The explosion at his back was warm with heat and damp with blue blood. "All right River, get in now."

"Take these," River suggested. "Want you safe." She pressed a couple of her bombs into his hand.

"One," Riddick allowed and stuck it in his shirt and lowered his voice so only she could hear him over the rain, "You keep the rest zhī àì." He kissed her hard on the lips, "Now get in." Watching her slip inside he muscled the rock the rest of the way over the opening.

"Why is he still out there?" Shazza asked softly. River smiled in the light of the torches and sat down against the wall. Simon put an arm around her and she leaned into him, still smiling. She watched as Fry and Shazza worked to drain the whiskey from one bottle into the other, to make the torch last longer. They set the bottle down on the ground of the cave and watched.

River smiled and her eyes were far away and somehow amused to the women looking at her. She was listening to Riddick's verbal and mental curses as he struggled up the muddy slope dragging the three powercells. Now and then along with the curses she was learning, he'd thank her for insisting they carry two the first trip. But mostly she was being educated on new and creative ways to call someone a horse's ass or disparage their parentage. Riddick couldn't smell her scent anymore but he knew she was listening because whenever he made progress he thought her name.
When he reached the top of the hill he saw the settlement, and she could feel his relief, "Riddick can see the settlement now," She said softly, not caring if anyone really heard.

Shazza tilted her head thoughtfully, part of her was still hopeful, but it was in her nature to be pragmatic, "He's not comin' back, is he?"

River simply smiled at her and leaned against Simon. There was nothing she could say in front of Fry. The pilot was not to be trusted. As the torch guttered the sounds from outside the tiny cave grew louder, the clicking and eerie echoing calls more clear even through the rain. And then the torch went out.

River felt Shazza move closer to her in the dark, and groped blindly for the woman's hand to comfort her. Wet flesh moved over hers, and gleamed in the pale...blue...light. River looked up in surprise and smiled. Simon stood and reached for the ceiling, plucking a few blue stars from their stone sky and holding them in his palm. Fry began to scrap the label off the whiskey bottle.

River smiled as Shazza helped Fry and Simon fill the bottle she held with the glow worms. And then Fry was pushing against the rock, dislodging it, and trying to put it back the same way but failing. The promise the pilot called was nearly lost to the wind and rain. "I'll come back with more light."

River sighed in relief and sat down again as Simon and Shazza continued to gather the glow worms and filled another bottle slightly more than halfway. "Glad she left," She commented with a smile.

"Well she'll come back with more light," Shazza nodded though her expression was more curious than faithful as she looked at River. "Won't she?"

"Riddick will return with more light, though he made no promises," River said gravely. "Fry makes promises she has no intention of keeping."

"But he's..." Shazza shook her head trying to reconcile all she'd been told about Riddick with what she'd seen of the man's behavior. "You said you'd explain," She reminded the girl.

"Richard B. Riddick and I have known each other for nearly two years," River said quietly. "He is my best friend, my partner," She smiled happily as she felt him reach the skiff and connect the power cells. "We met when I was what he calls 'half past fifteen'," She nudged Simon with her shoulder and kissed her brother's cheek. "I was in a government school, I'd been there since I was fourteen. Riddick was beneath it, where the 'advanced' students were taken once they were elevated. He told me once he'd heard the other students, the few boys who had made it down to the level where he was kept, but he hadn't been allowed contact with them."

"What was he doing there?" Simon asked, "I don't think I ever asked."

"Some argument as to whether or not he's a psychopath or a sociopath," River shrugged. "Academy was interested in if he was either, or if he was something different." She smiled slightly, "Richard is different. Not a sociopath, not a psychopath. He's a survivor."

"He's not normal though," Shazza observed.

River laughed, "Of course not, but they had no idea of what he was, not being interested in archeology or anthropology."

"So why will he come back?" Shazza asked quietly, "I believe you, but why?"

"Because I'm his," River said simply, "And he's mine."
"River, you said, I mean you two, you said nothing happened between you at the Academy," Simon protested. "You're not even eighteen yet."

"Nothing happened, Riddick was very strict with himself," River agreed. "That's why he was making sure of how old I was when you broke us out."

"But now that you're out, there's no reason, I mean," Simon shook his head. "River, you're too young for him, and he's not a nice man. There can't be anything between the two of you. Especially if all you're feeling is gratitude for how he helped you at the Academy."

River sat up and looked at her brother, "Simon I'm past seventeen years old." Her voice was quiet but firm. "I know what my feelings are. Riddick and I have discussed this quite a bit since I wasn't asleep during cryo anymore than he was." She took a deep breath, "I won't discuss this with you because it's none of your business. But he is my dearest, closest, friend, I can talk to him about anything and he can do and say the same for me. But whatever we decide, it's going to be our decision and you aren't going to enter into it."

Shazza tilted her head, "Well I did wonder, since the man hasn't been looking at you like you were fourteen whenever Fry and Johns weren't around."

River grinned, "Wanted them to think I was too young, a child. Riddick and I talked about Johns. It was decided I would act younger than I was, to give Riddick an excuse for protecting me. It is known that Riddick doesn't harm children, goes out of his way to protect them."

"So that's why you were always acting so...childish and a little crazy?" Shazza wondered.

"Well I am a little crazy," River shrugged, "Technically. There are things that overwhelm me, set me off and I need to concentrate, meditate or get Richard to help me center my mind."

"Like when Suleiman was killed," Simon realized, "Riddick was helping you concentrate, by using blood."

"At the academy, he and I were never completely certain what they did to us," River said quietly, "But what they did, changed me, made my senses more acute, though they'll never match Riddick's." She looked down at her sai and listened to the monsters outside. "But I am different, changed. I'll never be the innocent fourteen year old girl I was again."

Simon wrapped his arm around her shoulder and sighed, "I'm just glad to have you back River, even if you did come with a man who looks as if he'd like to kill me in my sleep sometimes."

Shazza chuckled, "He's afraid you're going to take her away." She patted River's hand, "As long as you let the big man stay around her, I doubt he'll want to kill you."

Simon sighed again, "How could I take her away from him? If he cares about her half as much as I do it would be the cruelest thing in the world. How would that begin to thank him for helping her when I couldn't?"

"Well at least this all explains why River don't panic when Riddick does somethin' scary," Shazza looked at the glowing bottle and sighed. "No offense River, but your partner could shake a leg. Gettin' a little tired."

Riddick heard her first, through the rain, footsteps splashing, lungs heaving with exertion in the
oxygen poor atmosphere. Turning away from the control panels, he moved to the head of the ramp. “Strong survival instinct,” He observed in a neutral tone, the animal firing with rage as he saw that she was alone, “I admire that in a woman.”

“I promised them that we would go back with more light,” Fry called, out of breath, desperation underlining every word. Deceit drifted towards him like garlic on the wind and rain.

“Did you?” Riddick regarded Fry with thoughtfully and took a deep breath, “Did they believe you?” He leaned against the side of the ship and looked at her, “I know River wouldn’t have. And her brother…he might look naïve, but the boy’s got stones.” He folded his arms, “Shazza might have, but she’s been pretty close to River. So I’ll ask again Carolyn. Did they believe you when you said we’d come back with more light?”

“I—“ Fry obviously didn’t understand why he was asking, moving towards him, towards the safety of the ship.

“Because I don’t,” Riddick’s voice turned hard, the relaxed dark tones tightening with fury, “I can smell the lies on you Fry.”

“What does it matter to you?” Fry burst out, “Why do you care?”

“You think you’ve got everyone figured,” Riddick tilted his head. “River’s a crazy child. Shazza’s a grieving widow. Simon’s a naïve boy from the core. An’ I’m a murderer only looks out for himself.”

“So what!” Fry shook her head in frustration, “We can both fly this thing, let’s just go.”

“No,” His voice was flat and implacable, “Because River is a seventeen year old woman. My woman,” He growled the last word out with a possessive tone even the oblivious Fry could understand. “Alla this time you been tryin’ to wrap me round those fingers a yours, I’ve belonged to her. She’s mine Fry. An’ you left her alone in the dark, bleedin’, an’ knowin’ you weren’t gonna come back.”

“She, you, wait—“ Fry didn’t get a chance to say more as Riddick’s knife landed square in her chest. He strode forward and yanked the blade out of the blonde watching as she gasped out her last breath. He shut the hatch to the skiff and began to run back through the rain.

River rose and began to inventory her satchel, "Four left." She murmured, "Riddick has a sai, I have one. One bomb with him," She tilted her head as if listening to something, a distant roar sounded outside. "No bombs with Richard anymore."

"They're on their way?" Shazza asked her voice filled with repressed excitement.

"Fry was going to leave us behind," River shook her head. "Richard would not tolerate that."

"All right," Simon sounded worried. "So we've got Riddick's lights, hopefully the bottle that Fry took, and this bottle. All of which will work in the rain." He looked at River, "None of which are really bright enough to scare those things away."

"Richard was not attacked on his way to the settlement," River shook her head and gestured for silence. There was scratching at the stone that didn't entirely block the opening to the cave anymore. A claw reached in and River sliced at it, making the predator outside screech. River frowned and tilted her head, listening again, "Too many outside," She picked up a bomb and carefully began to
unscrew the cap.

"River, that's--" Simon began to protest.

"I know what it is Simon," River interrupted him in a mild voice. "You and I made them remember?" She took the cap off and kicked it out the opening, doing the same to the bomb after a moment. "If I threw them outside they wouldn't land with enough force to break. This way..." There was a violent explosion and a lot of alien screeching from outside their cave. "Once the canister is on its side the liquid oozes out and the bottom layer is exposed to the air. It acts as a timed device."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Shazza asked.

"Very," Simon nodded grimly. "But she's right. As long as we're constrained by lack of area to throw and nothing to break the glass against it's the only way to make them explode. We didn't have anyway to keep lighting them so we couldn't use conventional fuses."

"Hey River," Riddick's voice called, "You been killin' things without me?" He hauled the rock away from the entrance and looked in the cave.

River grinned at him and threw herself into his arms, "Partner has been killing without her. She only did what she must."

Riddick looked at the three of them as they emerged fully from the little cave, "How many you got left?"

"One sai, three bombs," River nodded, "Should be enough."

"All right," Riddick took a deep breath, "No fresh blood on any of you," He looked them over. "We're movin' at a run, and we ain't stoppin' til we reach the skiff. It's lit up so it should be ready for us." He took the sai from his belt and handed it to River. "Give me the bombs, I took Johns' knife so I'm good for hand to hand. It comes to that you need the longer reach of the sai." River nodded and gave him the satchel, watching as he slung it crossbody with a dull clink. Riddick looked at Simon and Shazza, "You go ahead of us, you've got longer legs than River and with your light they'll keep away from you. I'm running with River." He handed Simon the bottle he'd taken off of Fry and took the smaller light from the doctor to hold.

Simon nodded and looked at Shazza, extending his hand. The dark haired woman took it and looked at the bottle they held he held. "All right," She looked at River and then at the darkness around them. "Which way?"

Riddick pointed straight ahead, "From here it's a straight shot," He nodded in the right direction, "Watch the hill, the mud's a bitch in the dark. Go now." Without any further discussion Simon and Shazza began to run. Riddick took River's hand tightly in his, "You an' me gorgeous."

"Let's go," River nodded and Riddick began to run. The loping pace wasn't easy but he was deliberately taking shorter strides so she could keep up with him. He was more than five inches taller than she was. River opened her mind wider to his and felt his absolute determination that they would stay together, the man wasn't even trying to argue with the animal. If that meant he was in danger so he could stay with her, he didn't care anymore.

Riddick caught the sounds of the monsters in the darkness and looked at River, the rain might mess with his hearing about as much as it disturbed the bugs echolocation but River's mind wasn't fooled by extraneous sounds. "To the right, forty meters and closing, a pack of five," River said clearly. She smelled of burnt cinnamon and allspice, steel and blood and silk and he'd never smelled anything
more beautiful in his life. He grabbed a bomb from the satchel and threw it hard in the direction she indicated the minute the predators came into his view. The resulting explosion cleared the area between them and the running duo ahead.

The hill was thankfully clear of the bugs, Riddick and River caught up with Shazza and Simon on it, all of them reaching the top at the same time. Riddick caught Simon before he could start running again, a pack ahead catching his eye. Hurling a bomb at the waiting monsters he waited, averted his eyes until the explosion was over, "Go around the remains of the fire, an' then bear to your right. Skiff's lit, you should see it."

"Keep to the right, Fry's body on the left by the settlement," River added. She'd caught her breath while Riddick had thrown the bomb and cast a look behind her. "Go now!"

Riddick looked in the bag, one more bomb, "Best wait until we're closer," He suggested holding up the smaller light. "C'mon."

River didn't say anything, busily mapping out the predators she sensed in her mind, Simon and Shazza were safe as long as they ran towards the skiff. She and Riddick would need to hurry. She ran without a word until they reached the edge of the settlement and two groups began to converge upon she and Riddick. "Now," She told him, "Smash it down as we run, we'll outrun the blast, they'll head right into it."

Riddick mentally shrugged and did as she said. The last bomb was slightly larger, probably why it had ended up in the bottom of the bag, and that might have been why the explosion was so big. Perhaps River hadn't accounted for that, or maybe they were running slower, maybe feeling for the bomb had decreased their momentum. Whatever the reason, the blast drove them off their feet, Riddick ended up on his back in the dark, his light nearly hidden by the rain and mud.

River still had the bottle clutched in her hand, but Riddick had been thrown at least five feet away. The skiff was less than twenty feet ahead of them. And a monster was closing on Riddick. Her partner was down and his light was smothered. Absolute terror engulfed her and she lost her mind.

Riddick had been about to heave himself up to deal with the bug coming towards him when a half full bottle of blue light hit his stomach and a whirlwind of blades and pale skin engaged the monster. "No," He climbed to his feet and felt for the lights, still slightly warm on his back, the rain would wash away the mud. "River no!"

She didn't hear him, her entire being was concentrated on evading the tail and claws, ducking the hammerhead extensions and avoiding the jaws of the monster she fought, cinnamon rose over her normal scent of steel, silk and blood. Her sai cut into the monster again and again until it got in a lucky strike and a claw latched onto her upper thigh. River's scent thickened with blood as it dragged her forward and Riddick braced himself to dive after her. It's jaws opened to try and devour her and, just as he was leaping forward, her hand shot out and thrust the sai into its soft palate, driving the long dagger right into its brain, and pulling out just as quickly. Riddick grabbed his partner and yanked her backwards before the damn thing could topple onto her.

Wrapping her in his arms, Riddick smelt her blood and ran for the skiff, bellowing for Simon, as he charged up the ramp. Hitting the button to close the ramp behind him he lay River on the floor and reached behind a chair for the Doctor's bag. "She got in a fight with one of 'em, to save my worthless hide," Riddick told the doctor as he shoveled the man's bag into Simon's hands. "It got claws round her thigh an' she's bleedin'," He took the sai from River's hands and used it to cut open her pants leg.

"Get this ship running, I'll take care of her," Simon ordered. "Shazza I'm going to need your help."
Riddick ran through every preflight check he knew, his ears glued to the three people behind him. Simon's voice was tense and distant but void of the terror that should grip him if his baby sister was dying. Riddick tried to tell himself that was a good sign but he couldn't stand it anymore. He turned and looked and saw Simon's hands covered in blood as he worked on his sister's leg. His fancy doctor instruments were on the floor beside him and he was taking careful stitches on River's pretty white flesh.

"Shazza?" Riddick had to force the woman's name to his lips.

She looked up and nodded, "It didn't hit the femoral he says." Shazza looked down and then back up and smiled slightly, "He's just taking a while because she's his sister and he's not sure how quickly we'll find the space lanes. He's tryin' to make sure the wound was clean and the stitches will hold up but its rough going since we don't exactly have sterile conditions here."

Riddick nodded his understanding, resisting the urge to threaten the doctor with bodily harm if River wasn't all right, and left the pilot's chair to kneel by River's head, big hands gently stroking tendrils of wet hair away from her face. "Gonna be fine River girl," He kept his voice to a quiet rumble. "Ain't you always tellin' me your gē ge's the best?"

"Richard is worrying too much," River murmured. "His partner will be fine. Damage to muscle is negligible, smaller artery was nicked, much blood but no lasting damage done. Dancing and kung fu still in the girl's future." Her hand felt blindly for his and he took it carefully, "Richard must promise her something though," Her eyes opened to stare up into his.

"What's that beautiful?" Riddick nearly smiled at the stern look on her face.

"No more giant monsters with claws until she is recovered," River deadpanned and offered him a shy smile. "And he will teach her to fly with him."

"Promise," Riddick bent and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "You lie there and be all languid an' invalidish," He teased. "I'll do all the work."

"Actually it would be better if she could keep the leg immobilized for a while and we can't leave her on the floor," Simon spoke finally. "If you'll get her up to the co-pilot's chair, I'll rig her a harness or something. She'll be able to sit, but walking for a week won't be easy."

"Easier done than said," Riddick scooped River up into his arms and gently set her into the co-pilot's chair. Behind him Simon bustled about the cabin, almost tripping in the small space as he cleaned up his instruments as best he could before rigging a make shift cast out of Riddick's leftover harness and rope. Once that was done Riddick began doing the main drive run up and nodded in satisfaction, "All right folks, lets strap ourselves in and get off this rock."

River looked out the window and smiled, predators were assembling around the darkened skiff, "Partner should not be rude."

Riddick looked over at her curiously as Simon and Shazza strapped themselves in behind them. "Ohh..." He caught the tequila scent amidst her normal perfume and grinned. "You are absolutely right," He began to flick off the lights. "Can't leave."

"What?" Shazza looked at him like he was nuts and Simon sputtered his objection incoherently.

Riddick grinned wider and turned to look at the two of them, "We can't leave without saying good bye." He watched through the glass as the predators began to draw closer to the skiff, smelling River's blood even through the steel and glass.
When one finally dropped on top of the skiff to try and break in the glass Riddick smirked and began to fire the engines, "What's that old sayin'?" He drawled as he began to run the take off sequence while River watched with interest. "Good riddance to bad rubbish?"

"That's one of them," Simon gave a shaky laugh. "Another one is 'let's blow this pop stand'."

"Yeah I like that too," Riddick's hands moved quickly, grasping the throttle and readying the ship for liftoff. The rockets fired, running lights came up and the predators around the ship screamed in agony. Without any further ceremony Riddick began the launch. He was aware of River beside him, burnt cinnamon drifting through her scent as the little skiff shook against the effort of breaking atmo. "It's all right," He offered as he pulled back on the wheel. "We're gonna see stars in three, two, one..." True to his word the ship broke atmo a second later and they were in the black.

"When we were put in cryo, heard someone say we were headed past the Blue Sun system," River said softly. "We must be close enough to it that there was light from that sun."

"All right then," Riddick did a quick check of the navigation system and cursed as the star maps flashed and nearly blinded him, "Gorram heap of space junk." He rubbed his eyes.

"Let me Lù duān," River teased and brought the maps up.

"Lù duān," Simon tilted his head curiously, "You don't mean--"

"Yeah she does Doc," Riddick's voice rumbled through the tiny ship, "Lù duān, the mythical beast able to detect the truth."

"Richard always knows when someone is lying," River explained as she began to do mental calculations. "We will have to take this course if we want to get anywhere near the shipping lanes," She explained.

Shazza unbuckled her belt to get a look and frowned, "That area there, around this protostar, that's Reaver space."

"Tiào chū fǔ dī jìn huǒ kēng," Simon murmured, "Well what about a course partially around the Reavers?"

Riddick found himself impressed that the core doctor didn't even bother to argue about the existence of Reavers. "Could follow River's course, veer off it when we get too close, try to go around. Cain't use a distress beacon though, eats power and we'll need every bit for life support."

Shazza nodded and looked around the skiff, "Well we don't have a lot of water or food, so how quickly can we do this?"

Riddick began to enter the course into the computer, "We're starting on River's course now," He hit the button that engaged the engines. "We need to stay at a steady burn, nothing too fast, nothing too slow. That means until its time to change course we don't do anything. I'm gonna turn out the lights, go by my eyes."

"We should sleep as much as possible," Simon suggested, "Keeping close together. It'll use less oxygen and conserve heat." He produced a large bar wrapped in gold colored foil. "I wasn't sure how long River and I would be on the run so I bought this before I came to the Academy."

"You bought a protein bar?" Shazza stared at him, "Those cost...more'n I made in six months. They'll feed four adults for near a month."
"Feed three adults and Richard three weeks," River corrected the other woman with a smile. "My láng needs more protein than a full human male."

"Don' spect it'll be a problem," Riddick turned away from the instruments and regarded Shazza and Simon. "Let's figure out what we got, nice an' easy, rushin' just uses air."

Simon nodded and began to bring out everything he'd stocked the skiff with. "Gallon jugs of water, I was able to get five," He began, "Three oxygen units...I took them when..." He didn't finish.

"I grabbed medical supplies," Shazza offered, "Medications were no good but bandages and splints, everything else I grabbed."

Riddick chuckled, "So the prospector grabs bandages, the doc grabs water an' oxygen," He looked at River. "I'm afraid to ask what you got." River pointed to the recess below the co-pilot's seat. Careful not to bump her Riddick leaned forward and pulled a bucket of dirt, an empty roasting pan, and a bottle of chemicals. "I'm afraid I don't quite get it," Riddick admitted as he put the stuff back out of the way.

"Dirt had enough chemicals to react with the liquid," River said quietly, "A large pan to mix them in."

"River that's brilliant," Simon grinned. "You just bought us a few more hours."

"Still ain't gettin' it," Riddick shook his head and Shazza nodded her agreement.

"She brought in things to use as a carbon monoxide scrubber," Simon explained as River yawned. "The chemical composition of the soil as well as the liquid, in a pan to contain all of it to mix well in. It helps create oxygen out of carbon monoxide to put it plainly."

Riddick looked at River in amazement and grinned widely, "Bein' a genius must be all sortsa handy," He observed. He looked around and opened a storage unit. "Wasn't able to grab much, Johns an' Fry they were fair paranoid 'bout keepin' me outa here--"

"Wonder why that was?" Shazza remarked dryly sending he and River a small grin.

"Cain't imagine," Riddick chuckled. "But I did grab a few things outa the houses. I'm guessin' they packed thinkin' the planet'd have seasons. Knew the black gets cold so I put these inside when I got a half minute 'thout either a them in here." He pulled out four quilts in varying designs, all of them large enough to cover a decent full size bed.

"When Fry went to confront Johns about being a hype and a merc," River surmised. "Richard is very sneaky," Her tone was admiring even if her words sounded uncomplimentary.

"Yeah that's me," Riddick shrugged. "Oh, an' I grabbed a bucket, just in case somethin' went wrong with the head."

"Practical," Simon admitted. "If you're sure we're on course we should all get some rest," He suggested strongly. "If we move the power cells so they're vertical, strap them in, the aisle should be wide enough for all four of us." He studied Riddick, "Well maybe."

"Don' worry 'bout that Doc," Riddick began to muscle the powercells into the suggested position, "No matter how we start out, always end up wrapped 'round River," He grunted as he held the cells in place for Shazza to chain. "She get's cold an' I's always warm."

"Hmm..." Simon nodded his understanding but didn't comment any further.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Jī dū - Christ

Sōu zhǔ yì - rotten idea

nī zi - little girl

Shuǐ shēn huǒ rè - deep water and scorching fire/abyss of suffering

hún dàn gǒu niáng yǎng de - bastard son of a bitch

zhì 'ài - most beloved

gē ge's - big brother's

Tiào chū fǔ dǐ jīn huǒ kēng - out of the frying pan into the fire

Lù duān - a beast which could detect truth

láng - wolf

Quote Sources:

Half a league, half a league, half a league onward, all in the valley of Death rode the six hundred. - The Charge of the Light Brigade - Alfred Lord Tennyson

Forward the light brigade, charge for the guns he said: into the valley of death rode the six hundred. - The Charge of the Light Brigade - Alfred Lord Tennyson
Simon and Shazza had fallen asleep with exhaustion as Riddick was gathering River into his arms. "Richard," Her voice murmured his name sleepily and he kissed her fore head just as he had so often in the Academy before wrapping his body around hers. Her eyes flew wide as his lips touched her skin and she stared at him, "No," She shook her head. "Not going back to what we were then, no."

"No zhì 'ài, we ain't," Riddick soothed her. "Promise you, ain't goin' back to that." He lay down on the metal grating and pulled the blanket over them both, making sure she was lying on top of him and not metal, his arms around her waist. "You good?"

River propped squirmed around a little bit until her head was just under his chin, her ear to his jugular and kissed his throat. "If my láng is holding me I am fine," She murmured. "Just promise me," She looked up at him. "You won't let Simon talk you out of me."

"How could Simon--" Riddick frowned fiercely down at her. "He knows?"

"Knows that we are close," River said quietly. "Had to explain to Shazza that we knew each other or she wouldn't have trusted. Simon learning you and I are...in discussions is an unfortunate side effect. Couldn't exactly ask him to step outside. Said that I belong to you and you to me, and that it is between you and I."

"Good," Riddick let his hand slide down to the small of her back and caress the exposed skin there. "Why'd you think he could talk me outa bein' with you?"

"Richard is a good man," River said softly. "Afraid Simon will convince you I am too young, that I feel only gratitude, that you are unworthy, all the things a brother will say because she is not adult in his eyes."

"He ain't gonna," Riddick pulled her up so River's face was level with his and kissed her hard on the mouth, "An' if he does try that, don't mean I'll listen." He spread his hands over her back and let her feel his palms over her skin, his grip that was so possessive it meant more than any words. "Only thing keeps me from takin' you River, is you."

"Don't understand," River admitted softly, her lips still against his. Her hands had crept up to his neck, touching his skin.

"Yer young yet," Riddick told her quietly, "An' after all they did to ya 'fore you were with me, an' even after, wanna make sure you're ready." He slid one hand down to her hip, "I ain't such a tā mā de hún dàn that I cain't wait for my woman to be ready for me. Don't think I could..." He took a deep breath, "Rather have blue balls than scare you River. Rather be a faithful láng an' wait then have you an' then you regret it. I'm yours zhì 'ài, an' that means for the rest a my life I'm yours."

"Do you think I don't feel the same?" River wondered staring down at him. "I've... ever since I realized you wanted me but it meant nothing to you unless I returned the feeling I've loved you Richard B. Riddick. I've never met a man so strong and so independent but capable of so much kindness and warmth. If you told me that when we get planet side we'd have to leave Simon in order to be together I would follow you without question. I never thought you'd see me the way I did you. I never thought you'd want to keep me as yours. I still can't believe you want me sometimes Richard,
but I know I can trust you with everything important to me." She brushed her lips over his, a sweet kiss that seeped into his body like tequila setting his blood on fire in insidious ways.

"Hearin' you say that," Riddick returned the kiss with interest as he spoke. "You ain't gotta worry 'bout me ever leavin' you River. An' I won't take you away from Simon. Far's I'm concerned you an' he, you're my pack, you're my mate an' he's my omega." He kissed her again, groaning into her mouth, "That don't mean we're hittin' a mattress the minute we're alone, 'cept to sleep an' pet some." He told her firmly, "I know you're still a little scared a sexin', an' I can wait. An' I will wait. Don't want that 'til you're ready. You know I'm tellin' the truth liàn rén."

"I know," River kissed him again. "And I won't be able to seduce you or lie to you about whether or not I'm ready. I just don't want to take too long." She sighed into his mouth, "The animal is so eager to feel your flesh in mine."

"Yeah," Riddick chuckled, his laugh rumbling beneath her chest. "Yeah, I know that feelin' too well." He kissed her gently and let his mouth trail over her cheek and forehead. "But it ain't happening now, an' not too soon in the future either. So let's get some sleep."

"I love you," River kissed him one last time and snuggled down into his embrace.

Riddick listened as her breathing evened out, knew she was on the edge of sleep and finally said the words he'd been holding back for years. "I love you too River." Her scent changed minutely and he knew she'd heard him, even in her half sleep.

Riddick watched with slitted eyes as Simon unwrapped the bandages from River's leg and throttled back the rage that gripped him. The wounds weren't healing like they should, red and swollen to the touch. Simon dug into his bag and loaded up a shot. "This is a broad spectrum antibiotic, it should help," The doctor explained as he slid the needle beneath the skin of River's hip. "I've got some oral antibiotics that you can take as well. I'm not taking any chances."

Riddick gathered River into his arms and lent her his warmth, she was feverish and chilled and they were nowhere near the space lanes yet. Shazza had been increasingly withdrawn and smelt of misery, it had finally hit that her husband was dead and she was alive. Simon was terrified, excellent at hiding it but there was no hiding the scent of fear from a predator.

River was shuddering and lifting her face to his, "Richard, please, please," She moaned, "Need." Her fingers crept up to his face, her skin boiling against his. "Can't stand it, in my head, it hurts, it hurts. Please make it stop."

Riddick pulled her tight to his chest and kissed her forehead, "You feel me," He growled the words out. "You breathe with me River, an' you feel me." He pushed his goggles up and ignored the ache in his eyes to look down at her. "What do I have in me for you? Tell me bāo bāo," He touched her face and looked into her eyes. "You know me River, feel my heartbeat and tell me what you see in me. Nothin' else." She was feverish and stuck in the middle of the black with three other people, two of whom weren't used to controlling their emotions. That she cared about all three of them made it worse for her.

"Richard..." River shuddered and fought to feel him, only her Furyan, only her partner, her mate. "Possessive," She gasped out. "Furious. Worried. Protective." She kissed the pulse pounding in his throat and sighed, "Love."
Riddick kissed her forehead again and held her closely, "Yeah, you got that right." He kissed her cheek and then her forehead and nose and finally a gentle kiss on her lips. "What else you got baby?" His hands touched her forehead hoping the fever would break but she was still too warm to his touch.

"My mate," River whispered. "My láng," She shuddered against him, listening to his pulse in his throat, "Angry with me for getting hurt protecting her wolf. Wishes she had let him die." Tears started to roll down her cheeks and she shook her head. "She can never do that, can't ever leave her láng, loves him."

"No River," Riddick shook his head, "Ain't wishin' I was dead, never, not when I got you. Only woman in the 'verse that can keep up with me? No, wanna live baby, just hate that you was hurt." He kissed her hard on the mouth, held her face in his hands and forced her to feel just how much he needed her. "You feel that?" He put her hand over his heart, "Belongs to you zhì 'ài. It's always been yours." He kissed her again, more gently, "I ain't ever gonna leave you River, I promise. If I ain't with you, I'm comin' back to you."

"Please," River put her head against his chest, hearing his heart beat, "Need your words to drown out the voices." She shuddered against him again and he knew she was hearing more than just Shazza and Simon. He looked out the window as if he could see what she was hearing. There wasn't anything out there but that didn't mean much, only that it was too far for him to see. The voices of the dead were the worst for River. They were never silent.

"All right," He thought a moment, "I always thought this guy got a bad shake," Riddick smiled slightly. "I wonder that thou, being, as thou sayst thou art, born under Saturn, goest about to apply a moral medicine to a mortifying mischief. I cannot hide what I am. I must be sad when I have cause and smile at no man’s jests, eat when I have stomach and wait for no man’s leisure, sleep when I am drowsy and tend on no man’s business, laugh when I am merry and claw no man in his humor. " He looked down at River and kissed her forehead, "More?"

"Please, Richard's voice is comforting." River sighed against him and shivered slightly whimpering.

"All right," Riddick thought a moment, "I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog; therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage. If I had my mouth, I would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do my liking. In the meantime, let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me." River giggled tiredly and Riddick knew she'd either sleep or start quoting something at him. "How 'bout somethin' different?" He asked quietly beginning a sonnet he knew she loved. "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes..."

When he'd finished the sonnet River was asleep against his chest. Simon was staring at him in amazement and even Shazza had come out of her daze to blink at him. "Where did you learn that?" The doctor asked softly, "I don't know anyone but River who knows so much Earth That Was poetry."

"Doc, I spent more'n half my life in slams or on the run," Riddick pointed out quietly. "Cain't remember a time I couldn't read. Cain't remember any part a my life books weren't more've an escape than running could be."

"But that--" Simon was obviously confused. "You have it memorized."

"Yeah, little trick I got," Riddick shrugged. "It's how I learn stuff so easy, how I can pilot. I see something once I remember. I read it, I got it forever. It's a good trick for a slam kid. Even if I don't
got books, got everythin' I ever read or saw, locked away inside."

"So films on the cortex, if you've seen them once, you don't need to see them again?" Simon asked curiously.

"Still like holdin' a book in my hands, even if I read it before," Riddick shook his head. "An' seein' films, its always nice, don't have to worry 'bout anythin' 'cept watchin'."

"River is like that too," Simon said quietly. "If she reads something, sees something, she's learnt it. Used to drive her teachers crazy."

"Yeah mine didn' like me much either," Riddick agreed. He was glad Simon wasn't bringing up everything he'd said to River. He wasn't sure Simon was really ready for that talk just yet. "Get some sleep Doc. I'll keep an eye out for anything in the Black."

Five days later River's infection wasn't worse but it wasn't much better. The fever came and went, and River wasn't eating much. Shazza had seemed to realize that she'd be more helpful if she wasn't so depressed so she had visibly put off mourning for a while. The water was nearly gone, and the air was getting thinner. River had insisted that Riddick let her help mix the earth and chemicals.

The scrubber she'd made had helped enormously, had bought them another few hours, but it was almost freezing in the skiff. They were all huddled together on the floor, blankets wrapped around them. Riddick had taken off his shirt and put it over Shazza, clutching River to his bare chest in the hopes that his body heat would keep her going.

The sound of a ship was the only thing that could have made him move and even then he wasn't letting go of River. He listened closely before he forced himself to the control panels to use precious energy to open a wave. "Hailing all passing ships, we are on emergency life support and failing."

"Hail back to ya," A voice responded immediately, "We're homing in on your signal. How much oxygen you got left in atmo?"

"Maybe forty minutes worth an' that's optimistic," Riddick responded carefully, "We got a wounded woman here, an' two others ain't doin' so well. Almost outa water, last thirty six hours have been tight."

"This's the Rascal Puff," The man's voice returned, "I'm on my way, gimme thirty minutes tops, an' we'll have you safe aboard. Even got a doctor here, should be able to see to your woman."

"We'll be here," Riddick sat down against the bulkhead and cradled River in his arms. All he had to do was wait until the ship came and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done. River was shivering in his arms, her fever was back, and all he could do was count the minutes.

Simon woke; his arms wrapped around Shazza, and noted that Riddick had moved. "Something happen?"

Riddick nodded, his head tilted as he kept listening, the sound of the engines was coming closer. "Ship's engines; heard 'em out there. Sent an emergency wave, they said half hour tops."

"When was that?" Shazza asked from within Simon's arms.

"Twenty minutes ago," Riddick stroked River's hair, loose down her back for added warmth. Simon
nodded his understanding, and pulled Shazza closer, wrapping the blanket tighter around them both. Riddick took a deep breath and kissed River's cheek, "They're coming River, they're comin'.'"

The bump of a ship sealing to their hatch was almost anticlimactic. Shazza and Simon managed to get into standing positions, and Riddick hauled himself to his feet, River still clutched in his arms. The hatch opened to reveal an airlock and a man with a custom fit orange EVA suit and black hair cropped close to his head. Two men stood behind him, both of them armed to the teeth and taller than anyone on the skiff. The light was close to blinding after so many days in the dark conserving power and Riddick cursed.

Simon held up a hand against the light, "Please, we haven't been in full light in weeks."

"Lower the lights," The man in front said. "Sorry for the armed welcoming committee folks, but we sometimes get pirates trying to use a distress beacon."

"Pirates in our condition would still require rescue," Simon said with dignity. He stood straighter and wrapped the blanket around Shazza whose clothing had not been equal to the cold of the Black. "I'm Simon, this is Shazza," He gestured to Riddick, "This is Richard and he's holding River. She was injured, she has infection and a fever, I've treated her but..."


River giggled weakly in Riddick's arms and began to sing a funny tune about a magic dragon living by the sea. Riddick spoke for the first time, "You said you got a doc on board? Simon's a surgeon. River's his sister," He began moving forward really not caring about the pain in his eyes or if he ended up shot so long as River got to medical help. "The wound was nasty, got infected, Simon was working mostly in the dark when he stitched her up."

Jack nodded and gestured for the men behind him to help Simon and Shazza, leading Riddick to a ten by five room just aft of the airlock. "Claudia, got a patient for you and a consulting physician." He told the woman inside.

Riddick blinked at the way the woman was dressed, mens-style clothing, a dress shirt, vest and trousers with her hair back in dreadlocks and bound back out of her way. He laid River on the table the woman indicated and smoothed her hair back. "Wound is on her left thigh," He told her.

"You might want to sit down," Jack Paper commented, "You look like you're not going to have a choice about it soon." He turned as Simon was escorted in and nodded, "Simon, Richard, this is Dr. Claudia Fong."

Riddick pulled a stool up and kept his hand on River's as Simon began to explain to Claudia what he'd done and the nature of the wounds. "Sir, maybe you should leave," Doctor Claudia suggested looking at Riddick. "This is the closest we have to an infirmary and--"

"Exactly," Riddick interrupted. "She's terrified a hospitals an' doctors she don' know." He looked up at the new doctor, "She's mine Doc, I ain't leavin' her."

Simon shook his head when Claudia would have argued further. "I wouldn't," He advised. "My mèi fu has a stubborn streak wider than Capital City."

"She's afraid of doctor's and hospitals but her brother's a doctor?" Claudia didn't address it further as Riddick glared up at her and River began to moan.
Riddick moved his stool closer to River's head, "It's all right zhì 'ài I'm here. Simon's here, him an' the new doc, they're gonna fix you up." He gathered her hair in his hand and kissed her forehead. He looked at the doctors who had ripped River's pants open and were cutting the stitches. "You breathe with me now," Riddick stopped looking at the wound and looked at River, "Remember? Much have I traveled in realms of gold And many goodly states and kingdoms seen; Round many western islands have I been Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold."

River's voice was faint but unwavering as she continued the poem for him, "Oft of one wide expanse had I been told that deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne: yet never did I breathe its pure serene till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold," She took a deep breath and shuddered, "Say the rest with me."

Riddick nodded and spoke slowly with her, knowing she was using each word to bind her mind to his, to concentrate and keep from moving or crying out. "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken; or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes he stared at the Pacific--and all his men look'd at each other with a wild surmise--silent, upon a peak in Darien."

He kissed her forehead again as she stopped speaking with him and let her grip his hand tighter, "Breathe River, remember?" Riddick hated feeling so helpless, hated that his woman was in pain and there was nothing he could do to help. "It's just like before, breathe with me and we'll get through this."

Simon was cursing steadily in a low voice as he irrigated the wound and Doctor Claudia handed him instrument after instrument. "I need my bag," He said finally. "Shazza--"

"I've got it," Shazza brought it in and began taking out the instruments, "Which one do you need?"

"That's it, right there," Simon grabbed it out of the woman's hand, "Thank you."

He looked at Riddick, "I don't suppose you know what blood type you are?"

"I'm compatible with River, we found that out already," Riddick nodded.

"Good," Simon nearly smiled, "Doctor Fong if you'd run a line from Richard to River I'd be very grateful."

"What was wrong?" Riddick asked as Claudia inserted a needle into a vein in his arm.

"Well all I have to say is that doctors are not supposed to operate or treat the people they love for a reason," Simon said in his calm voice. "That was compounded by treating her in the dark. And further compounded by the fact that the claws had some sort of contaminant on them."

"So the perfect storm of shit," Riddick surmised and soothed River as the needle went into her arm. "It's all right, I'm here River, I'm right here. Simon's takin' care a you."

"No more needles, you won't let them, no more needles in my brain," River murmured weakly.

"No, I promise," Riddick kept one hand in River's and the other smoothed away the tears trickling down her cheeks. "Simon an' me won't ever let them hurt you again."

"I'm going to load her up with antibiotics once he's finished," Doctor Claudia said quietly. "We won't need a lot of blood from you Richard, but I'll bring you something to eat so you keep up your strength."

"How's it goin' in here?" Jack came to the door of the room.
"She's going to be fine," Claudia smiled at her captain. "How's it going out there?"

"We're thinkin' if we can get a coupla suits on might be able to take the wings off the skiff, fold 'em down like, an' get it into the cargo bay." Jack explained, "That'll give you folks a stake to get you started again."

"That's kind a you," Shazza said quietly. "Lost everything I had in the crash, an' these three...didn't have much to start with."

"We were supposed to head to Persephone," Simon supplied that information without a flinch. "All of my belongings and the rest of the things I managed to salvage are in storage there."

Riddick looked at Jack and the two men behind him, "We'd appreciate any help you can give us. I can hire on iffen you need an extra hand. I can also pilot if yours needs to be spelled any."

"Well talk about that in the mornin'," Jack hit a button on the wall and spoke into the comm, "Hey Kim, shut 'er down for a while, we're gonna suit up an' get the skiff inside."

"Yes sir," A smooth voice replied immediately.

"We'll get the skiff in," Jack looked at the four new faces, "We've got beds and spare clothing in rooms upstairs, we'll get some water and a meal in you and you can get some shut eye. We'll talk about what to do in the morning."

"Thank you Captain," Simon said quietly. Shazza's voice echoed his a moment later.

Riddick looked up at the man and then back at River, "Don't seem like enough to just say it. She woulda died."

"This is what we do," Jack shrugged and went to retrieve the skiff.

The rooms were more like storerooms with beds put in them but they were better than the floor of the skiff. Riddick had been the healthiest of the four of them so he’d taken charge of making certain they hadn’t left anything they’d value on the skiff, like the sais he and River used and the quilts that had kept them from dying of hypothermia. Once he’d gotten some water he’d felt about a million times better and it hadn’t been hard to push through his lingering fatigue in order to be certain his fellow refugees were being taken care of. River had been his first priority but once Simon had finished with her leg she’d fallen into a deep sleep. She was still feverish; Doc Claudia had told him that would linger for a few days but with the antibiotics the infection should clear right up.

“What about her leg,” Riddick had forced himself to ask the question. If River had problems with her leg he’d have a hard time with that. “She’s...she’s a dancer.”

“She’ll need to stay off it,” Claudia had seemed to know sugar coating the truth wouldn’t be a kindness to him. “And she’ll have to work on it so the scar tissue doesn’t stiffen. But there’s no reason that she can’t dance on it. Once it heals completely it will be as strong as her other leg.” She’d begun to write down treatments and therapies for River to do once the infection cleared and more for when the wounds stopped hurting. “If she follows this, and anything else you can think of to do to keep her limber, she’ll be perfectly fine. Simon did a brilliant job on the surgery, even in the dark, she’ll have minimal scarring.”

“Weren’t the scars I cared ‘bout,” Riddick shook his head. “But if she couldn’t dance again...be like
clipping her wings.”

“That won’t happen,” Doc Claudia had smiled her reassurance and suggested that he get some rest. He’d begun to lift River into his arms to take her to bed and then the doctor’s smile had faded. “I’m sorry but she has to remain here, I’ll stay with her, but she should remain under observation.”

Riddick shook his head, “Then I stay with her.”

“No offense, but you’re filthy, you’re exhausted and in no condition to be staying awake any longer than the next five minutes,” He’d been told bluntly. “She’s sedated, she won’t know if you’re here or not.”

“I’ll wash, I’ll sleep even, but I ain’t leavin’ her doc;” Riddick shook his head stubbornly. “We done talked ‘bout this already. Ain’t gonna have her wakin’ up terrified.”

Claudia had eyed him thoughtfully but said nothing. Leaving the room she’d returned shortly after with a large towel, a sponge, soap and a bucket of water. “If you won’t leave her I’m afraid this is the best I can do in the way of bathing supplies.” She eyed him up and down measuringly, “I’ll find you something to wear that isn’t covered in…blood and dirt.”

Riddick hadn’t quite grinned but he had begun to wash, taking off his shirt as she left the room. When she’d come back he’d been bare-assed naked which had seemed to bother her a lot more than it did him, so he’d wrapped the towel around his waist and thanked her for the pants she’d found. They were long, as most tended to be; if they fit him in the waist inevitably he’d be rolling up the hems. The shirt was a little tight but again something he could live with. He looked at River as he finished dressing and then at Claudia, “Don’t s’pose I could do the same for her?” He asked hopefully. “Other’n getting caught in the rain ain’t either of us gotten much in the way of baths.”

“Tomorrow when she wakes up I can give you something to keep the wound dry and she can use the head,” The doctor promised. “Give her a quick sponge bath and I’ll find her something she can sleep in.”

He’d done that, braided her hair so it wouldn’t tangle after combing through it with his fingers, gotten the oversized shirt onto her and sat down in the chair next to the exam table/bed his hand still in hers. “Thanks doc,” He nodded, pushing his goggles up so they wouldn’t press into his eye sockets when he rested his head on the bed next to River.

“Are you all right?” Doc Claudia had sounded concerned, “Your eyes…”

Riddick winced away from the bright light over the table and shook his head, “I see fine Doc,” He assured her. “Bright light’s irksome is all. Price a seein’ good in dark I guess.”

“I see, I think,” She’d frowned and then shrugged and turned down the lights. “You can sleep next to her, if you can keep from jostling the wound,” She’d said before leaving the tiny infirmary.

Riddick hadn’t needed to be told twice, in less than a minute he’d gotten up next to River and cradled her upper body against his. It was only then he’d been able to sleep.

In the morning River was burrowing into his side, seeking his warmth and the sound of his heartbeat in her sleep. Riddick woke to the feel of her hands clutching at his shirt and her shivering against him. Her wound had precluded him wrapping her up in their normal position for sleeping, so he carefully wrapped as much of her upper body in his arms as he could and held her until she stopped
shivering in her sleep.

His stomach protested being awake and not eating anything but the animal found simply holding his mate to be a more worthwhile use of his time. All too soon she’d wake or someone would come in, and he’d have to let go of her.

“Richard is making an erroneous assumption,” River murmured sleepily. “If she belongs to him, there is no reason for her to be released.”

“Yeah?” Riddick smiled down at her, “You feelin’ better?”

“Still hot then cold, but my leg doesn’t hurt as much as it did,” River’s brow furrowed with the effort of objective analysis. “Hungry.”

“That is the best news I’ve heard in days,” Riddick kissed her forehead and slowly began to untangle his arms from her body. “Doc Claudia said you could have a shower today.” He looked at her in the huge tee shirt and at the bandage on her leg, "but we gotta get somethin’ to cover that up, she don’t want it getting’ wet.”

“Food first,” River suggested, “Stomach feels like my throat’s been cut.”

“An’ water,” Riddick agreed. “Let’s see who’s up an’ about.” He slid an arm around her back and one under her knees, “This feel all right?”

“No pain thus far,” River took advantage of her positioning relative to his face and kissed him softly. “Thank you Richard.”

“What for,” Riddick lifted her up and waited to be sure the position did hurt her. “I ain’t done anything.”

“Yes, you have,” River wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again. “And this doesn’t hurt much, rather a little pain and have something to eat, not in the white room.”

“All right,” He frowned and concentrated on moving as smoothly as possible up the stairs. Peeking in the room where Simon and Shazza were revealed that they’d abandoned the cots and had slept on the floor, clinging to each other for comfort it looked like. Both were still asleep so he kept moving, to the upper deck where the galley, crew quarters and head were located. Jack Paper, Claudia and another woman he hadn’t met were sitting around the galley table along with Matt and Bran.

“Folks,” He nodded as politely as he could manage.

“Someone’s feeling a little better today?” Jack smiled and a sigh of relief seemed to go around the room. Riddick looked at River and she nodded so he hadn’t imagined that tiny release in tension.

“Yeah, you all seem pretty worried ‘bout someone you ain’t even met properly yet,” Riddick said slowly. “There a reason for that or are ya’ll just good Samaritans?”

“A little of both,” Jack stood up and pulled out a chair for Riddick who nodded his thanks and sat down still holding River in his lap. “We don’ like to lose people Richard, we come out here to help them as need it. Bein’ too late…well that weighs on us all.”

“Uh huh,” Riddick wasn’t quite certain that was the entire explanation and it showed on his face and in his deep coffee voice.

River patted his shoulder gently, “Crew is able to recognize a dangerous man, much experience in these matters, worried over your reaction should I not recover. Worried you would do harm to
Riddick blinked at her, it was rare he was surprised by people’s baser instincts. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” River nodded. “Very worried over what you would do if your nǚ ren died.”

He couldn’t help smiling at that, even knowing it was a fiction, he liked having River tied to him with those words. “Well I’ll say you weren’t wrong to worry,” He tried to make his voice sound less threatening. “River’s the only person ever mattered to me. She got hurt defendin’ me.”

“So your nội xiông explained,” Jack nodded. He had moved to the cooker and pulled something out of hot storage, now he set two plates in front of the refugees, and handed Riddick a cup of something suspiciously like hot tea.

“Well, since River weren’t exactly rational last night,” Riddick sipped the tea and nearly groaned at the taste of it. It had been years since he’d had hot tea. “Gorram that’s good,” He sidetracked himself. “Wanna sip River? Just a sip, guessin’ too much won’t go with your meds.”

“Hmm… missed hot tea,” River nodded and reached for the cup, taking the tiniest sip and savoring the flavor of the liquid on her tongue like some would savor wine. Swallowing finally she sighed, “Lovely, thank you so much.”

“Uh,” The oriental woman Riddick hadn’t met tilted her head. “Where’ve you been that you haven’t gotten hot tea?”

Riddick exchanged a look with River and knew from her scent that she liked these people but she was as reluctant as he to trust them. “Took ship from Bernadette,” He began quietly and popped some of the egg protein in his mouth with his fingers. River smacked his hand with her delicate fingers and he grumbled but picked up his chopsticks. “River an’ me we don’t sleep through cryo like regular folks so it were a long trip for us. An’ we figured almost as soon’s we got on that it were a slave ship, takin’ us past the Rim.” He took another gulp of tea to loosen his throat.

River continued in her quiet elegant voice, “Difficulties beset the Hunter Gratzner the tail of a falling star hit the ship. The captain was killed and the docking pilot had to land the ship on a planet no one knew. She dropped every container but one, the one we were in.”

“How many were lost,” Claudia asked, her eyes bleak at the thought of all those lives snuffed out.

“All told, two hundred souls died before we hit the planet. Once on planet there were thirteen of us. We four are all that is left,” River said softly. “The ones who died first, before we were on planet were the lucky ones.”

“Why do you say that?” The oriental woman wondered, “Isn’t it better to live?”

“Only to die screaming? Afraid for your life? Knowing you will die before you see the sun again?” River shook her head.

“Eat somethin’,” Riddick told her kissing her cheek. “An’ I’ll tell the rest.”

Simon and Shazza entered the galley before he could start and were greeted with smiles and questions as to their well-being. Matt and Bran stood and fetched a couple more chairs so the latecomers could sit and when everyone had tea and food in front of them Riddick began to tell the tale of the planet from hell, carefully edited so no one had the idea that he was an escaped convict.

“No wonder those wounds were so bad,” Claudia shook her head looking at River. “You’re a very
strong woman.”

“She’s had to be,” Simon said quietly. He smiled then, at the face his sister made at him. “I don’t think you’ve actually met River,” He said then. “Please meet my sister, Richard’s nǚ ren, River.”

Riddick smiled again when Simon called River his wife and kissed her cheek, “Case you couldn’t tell liàn rén, this is Jack Paper, ships captain,” He pointed to each of the crew in turn. “Doc Claudia, she an’ Simon fixed you up. That’s Matt an’ that’s Bran, and I’m ‘fraid you an’ I never met, guessin’ you were flyin’ the boat.” He said to the skinny oriental woman.

“Kim Lu, pilot.” The woman nodded politely. “I was indeed flying the boat when you came aboard. It is a great pleasure to meet all of you.”

“You said this mornin’ we’d talk on what we could do,” Riddick reminded Jack. “An’ I ain’t ever heard what ya’ll are doing out this way?”

“We help folks as need it,” Jack explained quietly. “We go out into the edges of Reaver space and rescue them as need help. Too many folks go missin’ and we aim to keep them from bein’ lost.” He spread his hands. “That’s why we came so quick when we heard you, you were drifting a bit too close to Reaver territory.”

“Yeah we knew it was hereabouts, but we were trying to avoid it an’ still make the space lanes,” Shazza said quietly. “Iffen ya’ll need a cook I’m pretty good. Also not bad at fixin’ things.”

“I’m a surgeon,” Simon said quietly. “Not a very practical vocation out in the black but if there’s an emergency I can pretty much deal with it. I worked as a trauma surgeon since I graduated MedAcad.”

“Told ya I’m a good hand,” Riddick said quietly. “I can pilot too iffen you need it. You need muscle, I’m good at that too.”

“Dancing is also not a practical profession for the black,” River wrinkled her nose, “But I am also an expert in history, astrophysics, and theoretical physics as well as literature and dance.” She shrugged, “Mathematician. Good at husking too. Expert shot with a gun, experience with Reavers.”

“Yeah,” Riddick nodded slowly, “River an’ me, once we get past the screamin’ bit, Reavers don’t—“

“What!” Simon’s voice rose to a dangerously high level. “What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t think it was all theoretical did you Simon?” River tilted her head and regarded her older brother. “They wanted to know what we could do. They tested us.”

“Tested you,” Simon repeated the words and covered his mouth with his hand. He rose and left the room his body stiff with anger.

“Sorry ‘bout that folks,” Riddick shrugged. “River an’ me, we ain’t had the easiest life, past coupla years,” He kissed River’s cheek. “River don’ like the Reavers much, their screamin’ bothers her head lessen I’m around. But we ain’t afraid of ‘em like most folks. Healthy respect for what they can do, yeah, but they die just like everyone else.”

The reaction he got was a shocked stare from everybody at the table and River shook her head, “They want to believe you but they can’t bring themselves to.” She explained. Changing the subject she addressed Claudia, “Richard said I might shower this morning? Get the blood out of my hair? But that the bandages have to be kept dry.”
“Yes,” Claudia nodded, clearly distracted. “I’ll find a stool for you to sit on while you—“

“Don’ worry ‘bout that,” Riddick shook his head. “I can help River.”

“It ain’t a big shower,” Bran pointed out.

“I ain’t ‘xactly a giant, case you didn’t notice,” Riddick chuckled. “An’ River’s hardly bigger’n a hiccups.”

“There will be no mocking of my diminutive size,” River poked him in the chest.

“Hey, I been told good things come in small packages,” Her partner grinned at her unrepentantly. “An’ you’re quality goods, every bit of you.”

“So long as he remembers it,” River replied with dignity. Claudia returned to the galley with a plastic sleeve and helped River pull it up over her bandages. River winced as it put pressure on the wounds but shrugged when Riddick looked at her. “A bit painful but rather deal with it and be able to get clean.”

“I’ll bring you some things to wear,” Kim offered. “We’re almost the same size, I might have a couple of inches on you but that’s all.”

“You are most kind,” River thanked her.

Riddick set River down on the toilet and kissed her forehead. “I’m thinkin’ I might get to shave one a these days,” He chuckled looking at his scruffy self in the mirror.

“Richard fishes for compliments, he knows he is far too handsome for her peace of mind,” River told him primly.

“An’ you’re too pretty for mine,” Riddick pulled off his clothes and turned on the water, looking at River to see her pulling the oversized shirt off. “Gorram you’re beautiful,” He took a deep breath. “An’ we ain’t doin’ a thing but getting’ clean in here.” He said more to remind himself than her.

“Too much pain to do much anyway,” River said sadly. “She would like to shower with her mate and enjoy water and his hands fully.”

“Well let’s just concentrate on cleaning you up for now,” Riddick couldn’t help how his body reacted but he could ignore it at least. Getting her into the shower was easy, soaping her up while she leaned against him or the wall for support was easier said than done since part of him was extremely conscious of exactly who he was washing. Bluish black blood ran out of her hair and down the drain as he washed her long dark locks. Ducking his own head under the water and giving himself the same treatment didn’t take much time since he really wasn’t worried about hurting himself. “All right, lets rinse off an’ then we’re good, I think,” He looked up at the showerhead and frowned, it wasn’t adjustable. “Gonna have to lean against me iffen we’re gonna get alla the soap off.”

That was torture, her pretty body pressed against his, soap running down her white skin, face tilted up to the water as if waiting for a kiss. The only thing in his memory more erotic was how she’d looked riding his hand to her fall. River moaned as she read his thoughts and Riddick muttered a curse at his own idiocy, “Sorry Qing Xiāng, there’s a reason guards call me a animal.”

“She likes that he thinks of her,” River kissed his chest right over his heart. “I look forward to
“Yeah me too,” Riddick admitted with a wicked grin. “How’s your skin feel? Need another rinse?”

“Squeaky clean,” River sighed happily. “You are very good to me.”

“Hey, you’re happy, usually makes me happy too,” Riddick shrugged off his supposed better nature. “Let’s get you all dry.” He felt her forehead, “Don’t seem to be as feverish.”

“No, antibiotics are doing their work well.” River agreed as he grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her body, using the one that was for him on her hair. She sighed as she watched him, his big strong body still ready for hers, her mate patiently ignoring the animal. He had scars on his back, on his legs, even one across his shoulder and arm but she’d never seen any male so beautiful. “You should be sculpted,” She murmured, “Michelangelo’s David couldn’t possibly be more beautiful than you are.”

Riddick blinked and tilted his head to look at her, River was staring at him, the hunger in her eyes for once not accompanied by the scent of honey. She was simply looking at him, hungry to see him, as if she couldn’t get enough of the sight. He’d never thought of how he looked to women, hadn’t ever cared how he looked past being intimidating. But this woman, his woman, appreciated how he was made, his strength and scars. “Don’ know ‘bout that zhì ‘ài, but I know I could look at you forever.”

He patted the last of her skin dry and watched as she unwrapped the towel from her hair.

“You should take this one,” River indicated the one he’d wrapped around her. “It isn’t as damp.”

“No,” Riddick briskly dried himself off and hung the cloth on the edge of the sink before pulling on his pants and shirt. “Ain’t havin’ you catch a chill sittin’ round in a damp towel.” He opened the door to see Kim raising her hand to knock, a bundle of clothes in her hand. “Thanks Miss Kim,” he smiled, “Just was tellin’ River I don’t want her to catch a chill.”

“A pleasure,” Kim bowed a little bit to cover her surprise before he closed the door again.

Riddick shook out the clothes, pleasantly surprised to find that she’d brought several different outfits. “Skirt might be better for your leg,” He suggested. “Nothin’ to chafe ‘gainst the bandages.”

“Hmm…and a shirt and the sweater over it,” River agreed pulling the items in question over her head. Getting into the skirt was a matter of Riddick putting it up to her knees and then with one hand on his shoulder, River put her weight on her good leg while he tugged the soft denim up to her waist and wrapped the ties around her body. The thin tee shirt didn’t do much to hide her figure but the sweater was a funny thing that wrapped around her upper ribs and breasts and tied in a bow beneath her cleavage. Long sleeves belled at the ends and River rubbed the soft knit against Riddick’s neck knowing how much his animal enjoyed sensations.

“C’mon, we’ll borrow a comb and I’ll work on your hair,” Riddick suggested, “You can nap if you like.”

River nodded and watched as he picked up the tee shirt she’d worn as a nightgown and hung the other towel over the shower door to dry. As if she weighed next to nothing he scooped her back up and carried her out of the head. Shazza looked up as they entered the galley and gave them a small smile, grief shadowing her eyes. “Figured your hair would be in knots,” She told River. “Claudia an’ Kim, they keep extras of things like brushes and hair ties, Kim said the men would never remember stuff like that.”

Riddick smiled as he saw the simple plastic brush and comb, the handles held together with a couple
of hair ties. “Startin’ to think these folks are too good to be true,” He remarked only half humorously.

“Well ‘pparently you ain’t the only one to have a run in with Reavers,” Shazza explained. “Jack, he was with search and rescue and came on a ship bein’ boarded. He managed to win the fight but he’s got nightmares in his eyes.” She shrugged, “Some folks, they gotta do somethin’ iffen they see a wrong. He faces his fears every time they come out here but I guess he can’t see how to do anything else.”

Riddick nodded his understanding. He took a seat and touched River’s thigh carefully, “Think we need to take that sleeve offa your leg?”

River nodded, “Skin needs to breathe.”

He nodded and River pulled her skirt up so he could see. Citrus bloomed in the air along with steel and silk and he shuddered but kept working the tight plastic sleeve off River’s flesh. When it was finally around her ankle and then on the table they were both vibrating with nerves. Riddick took a deep breath and kissed her forehead before settling her into his chair and propping her leg up on another one. Separating the comb and brush he sat behind her and began to work on untangling her hair. He didn’t know why this soothed him so much, even at the Academy when he’d been angry or upset, brushing River’s hair had calmed him like nothing else. The scent of her long dark hair was like nothing else, it had a perfume all its own and a silky texture that made the animal purr. River turned to look at him sitting behind her and smiled, “The animal takes comfort in handling and grooming its mate.”

"Yeah, could be it," Riddick chuckled. "Just love how it feels, an' how it smells." He lifted the dark locks to his nose and inhaled. He was aware of Shazza chuckling at him and knew he must look ridiculous. "I know it looks stupid, but you ain't got my sense a smell. Ain't anyone smells the same, even if they come from the same place an' wear the same clothes.” He tilted his head at the pioneer woman, "You smell a leather an' green pepper an' warm rain."

"What did Fry smell like?” Shazza asked curiously.

Riddick wrinkled his nose in an unconscious imitation of River, "Overripe mint, salt, onion sometimes." He shook his head, "Nothin' I liked."

"An' what does River smell like?” Shazza tilted her head, "If she smells so good to you."

"River's scent...she's like steel an' blood an' silk. An' sometimes honey or apples," Riddick said slowly drawing a brush from River's scalp to the ends of her hair and eliciting a purr from the girl. "Cinnamon or burnt cinnamon dependin' on her mood, sometimes sugar or burnt sugar. Tequila when she's laughin', an' chocolate when she's jealous."

"She doesn't have the olfactory superiority of Richard," River's voice was a low lazy murmur as her mate seduced her brush stroke by stroke. "But I know he smells good to me, like a man should smell."

"River sometimes you say she and sometimes you say I," Shazza looked at the girl. "Does it mean something different?"

"Sometimes, not always," River shrugged. "The things they did to me, make me confused sometimes. And I use language that doesn't always make sense. Part of why I speak in verses or the words of other people, it makes it easier for me to talk." She tilted her head back as Riddick drew the brush through her hair again. "Sometimes when I say she I mean my animal. Like just now. Occasionally its when I want to distance myself from what I'm saying or if I'm unsure."
"What they done to River, it made it hard for her brain to work the way it used to," Riddick said quietly. "She's a genius still, but when I first met her, she wasn't the way she is now. They woke the animal inside her by doin' surgeries on her brain. Made her feel everything just like an animal would, made it so she couldn't shunt it aside and think. Iffen she weren't so smart it probably would have made her really insane instead of just a little touched."

"Richard taught me how to live with what they'd done," River murmured. "Taught me how to embrace the animal, to feel as she would. Animals can't put aside what they feel, they have to work through it or run from it. Fight or flight. So I learned to react on instinct like the animal. And when I could do that I was able to use my mind again."

"So what they did made you stupid?" Shazza didn't quite understand and it was apparent in her tone.

"No, they couldn't take away my intelligence," River giggled a little. "But when I was overwhelmed with emotions, I couldn't think, couldn't breathe, it was as if I had to relearn everything with a new element attached."

"When did they make you fight Reavers?" Jack asked from the doorway. Shazza started in surprise while River and her partner didn't even react.

"About six months ago...give or take," Riddick shrugged. "We didn't have a way to keep time. It was after River stabilized after the last surgery."

"You were askin' what you could do to earn passage," Jack said quietly. "We can always use another hand."

"How far in are you folks headed?" The escaped convict slowly drew the brush through River's hair again.

"Well we might could take you to Persephone," Jack offered leaning against the wall. "Or we can drop you anywhere along the way iffen you choose."

"And River an' Shazza?" Riddick asked surprising the woman sitting across from him, "What if Shazza don't want to go to Persephone?"

"We'll figure something out," Jack gave a one shouldered shrug. "But we don't pick folks up an' keep 'em as slaves. Generally there's a way to get people where they need to go."

"Persephone's good," Shazza nodded. "I got a relative there; he might be able to help me find work."

"All right then," Jack nodded with a half smile on his face. "Shazza I'd appreciate any help with cooking and since I'm the engineer as well as the Captain, might need you in a mechanical capacity as well."

Shazza's face lightened briefly as the thought of being useful broke through her grief for a moment, "That's fine by me."

"Richard, if you'd lend a hand with anything Matt and Bran need, that'd be a great help," Jack looked at the man who even sitting brushing a girl's hair still managed to look intimidating. "And if we do run into Reavers, your skills will be very useful indeed."

"And the girl?" River asked hopefully, "What may I do to be useful?"

"I'd like you to sit with Kim," Jack told her, "She's saying the cortex needs some programming, courses we set always seem to go a little off. She thinks the cortex has some sort of virus."
"Shì," River smiled happily. "It will be a pleasure."

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: So what do all of you think? I didn’t want them to meet Serenity right away. The folks who picked them up are from a very cool Serenity/Firefly RPG sourcebook called Serenity Six-Shooters & Spaceships and all credit goes to that book for the characters and details of the ship (such as they are).

Translations:
zhì ˈài - most beloved
láng - wolf
tā mā de hún dàn - fucking bastard
liàn rén - sweetheart
bǎo bǎo - baby/darling
mèi fu - younger sister's husband
nǚ ren - wife
nèi xiōng - wife’s eldest brother
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
Shì - yes

Quote Sources:
I wonder that thou, being, as thou sayst thou art, born under Saturn, goest about to apply a moral medicine to a mortifying mischief. I cannot hide what I am. I must be sad when I have cause and smile at no man’s jests, eat when I have stomach and wait for no man’s leisure, sleep when I am drowsy and tend on no man’s business, laugh when I am merry and claw no man in his humor. – Much Ado About Nothing – William Shakespeare

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog; therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage. If I had my mouth, I would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do my liking. In the meantime, let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me. – Much Ado About Nothing – William Shakespeare

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes – Sonnet XXIX – William Shakespeare

Much have I traveled in realms of gold And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold. – On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer – John Keats

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told that deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne: yet never did I breathe its pure serene till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold. – On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer – John Keats

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken; or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes he stared at the Pacific--and all his men look’d at each other with a wild surmise--silent, upon a peak in Darien. – On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer – John Keats
River spun and kicked and uttered a mild curse as her leg wobbled and she nearly lost her balance. Riddick shook his head, relaxing out of his guarded position and moved forward, kneeling to take a closer look at her thigh. “Pushin’ too hard Qing Xiang, time to stop for the day.” He kissed the scars that were enflamed with her efforts and stood, scooping her up for a kiss. “Let’s do some katas, cool down a bit.”

“Frustrating,” River sighed and complied with his suggestion, aware of Simon and the other’s on the ship watching from various points around the mid deck cargo bay. The steady movements of the kata served to reinforce her meditation and cooled down her overheated muscles. She was vividly aware of Riddick moving beside her, his large body duplicating her movements perfectly as they moved through the kata.

Riddick nearly smiled as they finished the routine and bowed to each other. He wouldn’t have ever thought he’d like something like a kata, or have much use for the refined fighting styles of kung fu or tai chi, but they were interesting, and it was a challenge to force his body into a different way of moving. River had pointed out that just because they were no longer in the Academy it didn’t mean they had to stop learning from each other.

So now only a few days out from Persephone they were practicing and working to keep River’s leg limber, to give flexibility to the scar tissue. So far it seemed to be working, River hadn’t reported any stiffening in her thigh, the only issues were working her leg too hard in her efforts to regain her full measure of grace. Even walking normally wasn’t difficult, it was only when she danced or fought that the weakness was apparent.

Simon approached them as River took a seat on a crate and Riddick covered his hands in the lotion they used on her scars to ease the throbbing and keep the skin pliable. “I’ve been thinking about what to do when we reach Persephone,” He said quietly.

“Worried my face will be seen,” River surmised, “Hard to take ship if I’m recognized.”

“Yes,” Simon agreed, looking at Riddick, “You stand out, but I don’t think you’ll be too unique on the docks.”

“But River is,” Riddick nodded his understanding. “What’d you have in mind?”

“A more advanced form of cryo,” Simon explained in his quietest voice, “Originally it was how I was to smuggle River from the core out to the rim. I checked and the cryo chamber was sent along with my other things when I arranged to have everything shipped to Persephone.”

“Wants me to sleep and sleep,” River whispered. “Don’t want to.”

Riddick looked at her, “I ain’t thrilled ‘bout it either.” He looked at Simon, “How long?”

“At the most, two weeks,” Simon promised, “I’m hoping less. But we’ve got to get aboard a ship and get to some planet where no one looks too closely at new arrivals.”

“River,” Riddick looked at his woman and touched her cheek. “I ain’t sayin’ you gotta, won’t ever say that.” He made sure she was meeting his eyes. “Can you think of another way?”
“Nothing that does not endanger you and Simon overly,” River sighed and leaned into his hand.

Taking the hint Riddick gathered her into his lap and held her so she could look at Simon, resting his cheek against River’s temple. “Would she be able to hear us? Feel us?”

“I can’t say,” Simon shook his head. “I have no idea how much what they did to her will change how the cryo drugs work on her system. It’s a much deeper and safer form of sleep than what the Hunter Gratzner used, I know that much.”

“Won’t agree to it unless River does,” Riddick told the doctor plainly. “I don’ like the idea a her getting’ pumped fulla drugs an’ not bein’ able to talk to her.”

“I don’t either,” Simon spread his hands and sat down in the spot River had vacated. “But I can’t think of any other way to get her on a ship.”

“There is no other way without much bloodshed and hijacking, piracy,” River murmured. “Do not wish to take that route.” She looked up at Riddick, “I can do it, I’m strong enough, as long as you and Simon will be there when the box opens.”

“That’s a promise,” Riddick nodded and Simon mirrored him. “Speakin’ a goin’ unnoticed,” The convict changed the subject. “We’re gonna need ID an’ provisions. An’ I gotta get River an’ me some firearms.”

“I imagine without some obvious weaponry we would truly stand out,” Simon agreed. “We just need to get to the storage unit at Eavesdown docks, I’ve got belongings, the box, fake ident cards, and money stashed there. Not much, but enough to book passage for us on a ship. You tell me how much you think you’ll need and I’ll try to find cheap passage with the rest.” He looked at Riddick thoughtfully, “You’ll need clothes too. I’ve got things for River, some of her belongings from home.”

River smiled hopefully, “You brought my books?”

“I did,” Simon’s smile was adoring. “I couldn’t get all the science texts, but your literature collections and your advanced mathematics are all in a truck with your sketch pads and dance supplies.”

“You brought my toe shoes?” River’s eyes filled with tears, “I’ll be able to dance.”

Riddick met Simon’s eyes and gave him a half smile, whatever else the doc might be, he loved his sister more than anything. That was something Riddick could understand, since the same woman was just as important as his own life as he listed his current priorities. “Now that’s somethin’ I’ll look forward to,” Was all he said. “Heard plenty ‘bout it, ain’t ever seen it.”

“She will dance for you and Simon when she is fully recovered,” River promised, relaxing back against her partner in way that made Riddick feel like his personal ‘Verse was complete. Catching that thought she tilted her head back and smiled at him. “Richard would like to brush my hair for me?” She cajoled.

Simon chuckled, “I love how she uses this persuasive tone when she wants you to do something you’ll enjoy anyway,” He shook his head. “And when you want to give her an argument she just looks at you as if you should be grateful to be obeying her command.” He rose from his seat and began to walk towards the stairs, clearly intending on assisting Claudia with her duties.

Riddick grinned and kissed River’s temple, “She’s gotta do that Doc, she knows I’m the most stubborn man in the ‘Verse.” As Simon disappeared down the stairs he bent and caught River’s lips in a soft passionate kiss, “An’ yeah, Qing Xiang, I wanna brush your hair. Only thing that makes the
animal happier is holding and kissing you."

"And my man?" River smiled as he rose with her in his arms and carried her possessively before setting her on her feet. "What makes him happy?"

"Same as the animal," Riddick’s grin tilted wickedly. "Ain’t much separatin’ the two an’ you know it."

"To her pleasure," River’s smile was womanly and deliciously wicked to his eyes. "Perhaps her mate should remind her of how he plans to kiss her when they’re alone?"

"I might could do that," Riddick laughed as he followed her into the room they shared with Shazza and Simon still. He eyed the bundles of quilts on the floor and shrugged. The widow and the doctor hadn’t been sexin’ that he could tell, and very little got past his sense of smell, but they continued to sleep on the floor and hold each other at night.

"Shazza needs the comfort at night and it makes Simon feel less helpless, to do that for her," River explained quietly. "Neither of them is interested in sex from the other. Only healing. It’s good for them. Shazza will be ready to begin again when we reach Persephone."

"Wish we could take her with us to wherever we end up," Riddick said thoughtfully. "Don’t feel right somehow, just leavin’ and not keepin’ track of her."

"I have extracted a promise from her that we exchange letters and waves when possible," River reassured him. "She is our friend and we want her safe and happy."

"Good," Riddick nodded. "Gonna talk to her tonight, ‘bout escortin’ her to see her relative on Persephone. Don’t want anything to happen betwixt here an’ there you know?"

"Good thought," Dark eyes smiled up at him hopefully. "Perhaps we could begin with the kissing since we are alone?"

"Wicked woman," He sat down on the cot they shared and pulled her into his lap to be thoroughly kissed. "How can I say no to that?"

Riddick looked at Shazza and tilted his head, "This ain't a great part a town," He observed. "I'll make sure you get right to your relation if that's all the same."

"That's not needful," Shazza shook her head. "He runs this whole place, I'll be fine."

"An' if he ain't the way you remember?" Riddick shook his head grimly, "No, you're a friend Shazza, ain't leavin' ya 'til I'm sure you're all right an' I can go back an' tell River as much."

"Fine, then, come on." Shazza led the way into a regular warren of apartments until she was greeted at a draperied door by a man with a gun. "Oi, tell Badger his favorite baker's dozen is here."

The man made a face and Riddick folded his arms in a mute threat behind Shazza. Turning and bellowing something unintelligible through the doorway he turned back and regarded the two visitors, "Now he knows."

Riddick frowned and laid a finger on Shazza's shoulder, "I don' like it."

"It don' mean he's no good," Shazza insisted. "I'll be fine."
"You oughta listen to the big man Shaz," A short man with a crushed derby and an ugly suit appeared behind the doorman. "Sounds like 'e's got 'is 'ead on straight." He motioned for the two of them to come back. Once in the door he hugged Shazza and then leaned back against a desk. "How'd ya get to my doorstep cuz? Last I 'eard you were married an' on your way ta new climes."

"New climes turned out to be a crash landing on a dead planet with monsters," Riddick said shortly, "Via a slave ship. Those that didn't die in the crash didn't last long."

"My cousin brokered as a slave," Badger wasn't pleased if Riddick was any judge of character. "An' 'ow did you get back 'ere ta me?"

"Well, this one, an' two others," Shazza pointed at Riddick, "Weren't for them, I'd be dead 'long with Zeke."

"Wanted to be sure Shazza'd be all right 'fore me an' the others took off for the rim," Riddick said shortly. "She's a friend. Ain't gonna just leave her 'thout bein' sure."

"An' you'd be?" Badger folded his arms and regarded Riddick with an entirely too intelligent gaze.

"Nobody you wanna know too well," Riddick scowled. The little man smelled like lies and whores. "Shazza thought you'd be able to help her find work. She right?"

"Yeah she's right," Badger looked up at the man with dark goggles, bulging muscles and a shaved head. "Richard B. Riddick."

"Uh, Badger, you really--"

Shazza wasn't able to say much more than that before her cousin shrugged, "Just because I recognize one of the 'Verse's most wanted escaped convicts doesn't mean I intend to do anything with that information." Badger looked at his cousin, "'E saved your life. That means I don't know who 'e is. 'Sides, the man's dangerous enough that spillin' information could get me killed."

"An' not just by him," Shazza muttered. "He needs to weapon up an' get supplies 'fore he heads out. Been a while since I been on Persephone, is Wang's still the best place?"

"Nah, go on by John Ho's down Baker street," Badger shook his head. "Don' mention I sent ya, he'll talk your ear off. Just tell him you want the warren special, he'll know to give you the best a what he's got."

Riddick looked at Badger thoughtfully, "So what kinda job you gonna find for Shazza?"

"Dunno, depends what she wants to do," Badger shrugged. "She's always been tough an' good with a gun, could use 'er in the office. Or I can put her in charge a something needs runnin', Shazza's a dab 'and at orderin' men around."

"She's got steady nerves," Riddick nodded, "An' she can be trusted at your back. Hard to find."

"Yeah, be good to have someone trustworthy 'round 'ere," Badger mused.

"Shazza, I gotta get goin' iffen you're all right," Riddick tilted his head at his newest friend inquiringly.

"You go on, give 'em my love," Shazza leaned up to kiss his cheek. "An' you wave me, an' write to me here, lemme know how ya'll are doin'."
"You know she'll make sure I do," Riddick tugged the curly end of Shazza's braid in farewell and left.

Behind him he could hear Badger whistling in amazement. "Ya know who that is right? He's gotta be the most dangerous man in the 'Verse what ain't in government."

Shazza laughed, and Riddick knew she was shaking her head, "He's dangerous yeah, but so's his girl. 'Tween the two of 'em? Iffen they wanted us dead we'd be sittin' here corpsified twenty minutes 'fore we knew it."

A duffle full of necessary equipment and a weeks worth of clothing later at a cutthroat rate Riddick was returning to the docks. His animal had been so agitated by the thought of River being in a cryochamber that she'd sent him off to take care of Shazza while Simon put her under. Now all he had to do was find Simon. The faint scent of antiseptic, cloves and the coriander streak of Simon’s tense worry reached him faintly and Riddick smirked and began to track the doc.

When he did see him Riddick nodded in approval, the ship the doctor had chosen wasn't the most respectable looking, wasn't even the biggest. It was a battered looking mid-class freighter, a Firefly ought three, with a more than slightly disreputable looking crew. A tall man in a long brown coat, a dark woman in the same colors and a huge man who was clearly the gun hand among them. There was a girl who didn't even look twenty welcoming passengers, a pretty girl. Riddick threaded his way through the crowd and came up at Simon's back, "I think I see why you picked this boat doc.”

"They aren't looking at papers too closely,” Simon murmured back as a reddish blonde man in a garish shirt used a mule to lift the cryo box. The mule was none too smooth and Riddick found himself growling under his breath, Simon spoke over him, requesting the man be very careful with the huge blue steel box. Another passenger nearly tripped over his own luggage as he brought it up the ramp.

Riddick looked at Simon and shrugged before following the doctor aboard. The gun hand was a familiar sight, and Riddick smirked to see a mustache and goatee on the face of someone he’d known as a thirteen year old boy. The boy grown to a gun hand nodded to him and jerked his thumb back towards the passenger quarters. Riddick nodded and hefted his duffle on his back, carrying the other bag in one hand and moving quietly past the scrum of people in the cargo bay.

His positioning didn't keep him from hearing what was being said though, and what he heard just confirmed that Simon had done well picking the ship. "Now we have a boatful of citizens right on top of our... stolen cargo." It was clearly the dark woman's voice, "That's a fun mix."

The man who must be the captain replied in a tone more hopeful than certain, "Ain't no way in the 'verse they could find that compartment, even--" There was a pause and Riddick heard the clumsy guy walking down the hall. "Even if they were lookin' for it."

Riddick had to hand it to the man's crew, she didn't believe in fairy tales, "Why not?"

When the captain replied it was with abject uncertainty, "'Cause...?"

Riddick smirked and shook his head as the woman sighed. "Oh yeah, this is gonna go great."

The captain didn't appear to be overly worried, or else he was so used to worrying it didn't bother him anymore. "If anyone gets nosy, just, you know...shoot 'em."
Riddick almost laughed as the woman repeated what her captain had said, "Shoot 'em?"

"Politely," The captain specified and Riddick did chuckle then. At least this boat wouldn't be boring until they got to Boros.

Riddick looked up as Simon poked his head in and dug in his pocket for what was left of the cash he'd been given, "Got enough to hold us over for a while, but I got a deal," He explained quietly. "An' Shazza seems like she'll be okay."

"Good," Simon nodded, he handed half of what Riddick had given him back, "For emergencies; I'll feel better if you've got cash." He looked around, "Does it make sense that I'm more terrified now than I ever was on that planet?"

"Yeah," Riddick nodded pocketing the coin. "On planet, weren't anything we could do, but what we did was up to us. Now? You're on someone else's boat, under his rule. What he says goes. An' iffen things go badly...the Black is mighty cold."

"Maybe that's it," Simon shook his head. "Something...it doesn't feel right, I don't know if its the ship, or the people, but..."

"Crew is part time criminals an' full time Browncoats," Riddick shrugged, "Could be part a what you're feelin'."

"I hope so," Simon tilted his head. "She'll be fine. We'll be on Boros in less than a week and then everything will be fine."

"I'll believe it when I see it Doc," Riddick turned down the lights and lifted his goggles. "Lemme borrow your specs would ya? I got a pair somewhere but by the time I dig 'em out..."

Simon unclipped the blue tinted spectacles from his coat pocket, "Keep them until you find yours." He offered, "Less conspicuous than goggles I imagine." He smiled as Riddick put them on. "Different," He shook his head again, "Captain said to come up to the galley when we'd gotten our rooms sorted out."

"Yeah, think I'll stay in the back, quiet like," Riddick nodded.

When everyone else gathered in the dining area of the galley Riddick kept to the shadowy hall. It wasn't a perfect solution and certainly the captain and gun hand were tall enough to see him while the dark female first mate was observant enough, but it wasn’t the crew he was interested in avoiding. The clumsy passenger Dobson set his teeth on edge. That was a feeling he'd learned was dangerous to ignore.

The captain, Malcolm Reynolds, was giving a welcome aboard speech, which was rife with small deceits, little misdirections and mostly harmless lies that stung his nose like pepper. “Meals are taken up here in the dining area, the kitchen is pretty much self-explanatory, you're welcome to eat what there is any time, what there is is is pretty standard fare, I guess, protein in all the colors of the rainbow. We do have sit-down meals, the next one being at about 1800.”

“I think Shepherd Book has offered to help me prepare something,” The pretty little mechanic Kaylee chirped.

Riddick nearly shook his head, the captain was truly unobservant, he was surprised he had a
shepherd aboard. “You're a Shepherd?”

Shepherd Book though, he was like the first mate, like the gun hand, saw a lot more than he let on, “Thought the outfit gave it away. Is it a problem?”

It was, that much was obvious to everyone in the room. Of course the cheery little mechanic, she didn’t care for trouble, “Of course not!” She gave her captain a look that said plainly to straighten up and fly right, “It's no problem, 'cause it's not.

“No,” Mal agreed in what was a pretty obvious lie even to those who couldn’t smell them like Riddick could. “As I said, you're welcome to visit the dining area any time. Apart from that, I have to ask you to stay in the passenger dorm while we're in the air. The bridge, the engine room, cargo bay- they're all off limits without an escort.”

Riddick straightened slowly at that and the motion caught Simon’s eye. Neither he or Simon cared much for that, like either of them would leave River alone in the bay for anyone to stumble over and bump. The cryo chamber was pretty well disguised but it wouldn’t take a lot to figure out what it was, not to a knowledgeable eye. Simon spoke before Riddick’s animal could get the better of him and voice an objection, “Some of my personal effects are in the cargo bay.”

The captain nodded his understanding though his face was pretty unsympathetic, “I figure you all got luggage you're gonna need to get into. Soon as we're done here we'll be happy to fetch 'em with you. Now I have to tell ya'll one other thing and I apologize in advance for the inconvenience. Unfortunately, we've been ordered by the Alliance to drop some medical supplies off on Whitefall. It's the fourth moon on Athens, a little out of our way, but we should have you on Boros no more than a day off schedule.”

That caught Simon’s interest and Riddick smirked, captain should have thought of a better lie, “What medical supplies?”

“I honestly didn't ask,” Mal was plainly not pleased with the question though the first mate covered her captain’s pi gu pretty well.

“Probably plasma, insulin, whatever they ain't got enough of on the border moons,” She elaborated.

Mal really didn’t care for what he was saying, Riddick could smell the hate boiling off him at the truth in his next words for all that he’d been lying the past five minutes, “Alliance says jump...”

Simon was smart enough to let it lie, “All right.”

“Zoe, you wanna take 'em to the cargo bay?” Mal suggested and turned towards the shorter man in the awful shirt, Wash the pilot of the boat.

“Yes, Sir,” Zoe nodded.

“Anything else you need, just...ask. We, uh, we're here to serve,” Mal plainly didn’t make this speech often. Riddick watched everyone file past him, unnoticed in the shadows, listening to the conversation Mal was having with his pilot before he followed the rest of the bunch down to the cargo bay.

“Did you send word to Patience?” The captain asked quietly.

“Ain't heard back yet. Didn't she shoot you one time?” The pilot didn’t seem overly worried which Riddick found amusing, even funnier was the captain’s reaction. He seemed honestly baffled.
"Everybody's makin' a fuss."

Riddick wandered down to the cargo bay, peering curiously down the hall at engineering as he went. He’d explore the ship more thoroughly after everyone had gone to sleep; there was no way he would travel on a boat he didn’t know every inch of, not with River in so vulnerable a state.

He stood in the shadow of the stairs and watched as Simon loaded things from his trunk into a valise. The doc was pretty good at not showing his nerves, but he kept eyeing River’s box like it was a time bomb. Riddick knew exactly how Simon felt, he’d most likely be the same if he wasn’t just as worried about the clumsy passenger Dobson. The man was just a little too klutzy, as if it was an act, and he stunk of deceit. Riddick’s gaze sharpened as Dobson passed behind Simon and stumbled into him with an apology. Even the apology was a lie, Riddick made a mental note to keep an eye on the man. He had a twitchiness about him, you only saw that in lousy criminals or equally lousy undercover feds. Telling the difference was the trick.

As he watched the first mate walked down the steps, nodding to the shepherd who passed her carrying a few things he handed to the mechanic. Kaylee seemed pleased to get whatever it was, fresh fruit and vegetables by the smell. A hatch opened up by the catwalk and one of the most obviously beautiful women Riddick had ever seen began to descend the steps. She had to be a Companion, there weren’t any others in the ‘Verse that were so beautiful and graceful practiced without being stilted. Riddick leaned against the stair support and smirked. The captain’s scent had changed the minute the Companion had walked in, there were about to be fireworks of some sort.

"Ah, the Ambassador graces us with her presence," Mal had a smirk in his voice if not on his face. The shepherd blinked after a beat and looked at the woman.

"Hello, Mal. I see we have some new faces," Even her voice was gorgeous, too bad there wasn’t anything surprising about her, Riddick might have liked her better with one sour note, something to break the perfection. But the affectionate exchange between she and the mechanic indicated a level of friendship most Companions didn’t have with rim girls like Kaylee.

"Ambassador, this is Shepherd Book," Mal introduced the woman to the man still standing there.

"I’d have to say this is the first time we’ve had a preacher on board," The woman was the epitome of graciousness.

"Well, I wasn’t expecting to see a state official, either," Book bowed over the elegant woman’s hand, "Ambassador." Mal laughed and the Companion glowered at him. Book looked from one to the other, nonplussed. "I’m missing something funny."

Little Kaylee glared at her captain, "Not so funny."

The Companion smiled slightly, "’Ambassador’ is Mal's way of –"

She wasn’t allowed to continue her words as Mal interrupted, "She's a whore, Shepherd."

Riddick couldn’t see the man’s face, but guessed it was a study in contrasts. Shepherds of the Christian orders didn’t usually approve of Companions or whores.

Kaylee continued to correct her captain, though her voice was less sweet and more ‘my captain is clearly a bèn dàn, ‘The term is 'Companion'.’"

Mal didn’t miss a beat, "Yeah, I always get those mixed up. How’s business?"

"None of yours." Inara replied sweetly.
Riddick shifted slightly to see the Shepherd’s face as the captain began to explain, “She is pretty much our ambassador. There’s plenty of planets won’t even let you dock without a decent Companion on board. This... this isn’t a problem for you, is it, Shepherd?”

“Well, I... I certainly...” Book was clearly still recovering from his surprise and stumbled over his words. The woman, predictably enough, took it the wrong way ad turned to leave.

“It’s all right. I mostly keep to myself.” She sent a glance at Mal that should have shot him dead, “When I'm not whoring.”

He must have been used to dagger looks because it didn’t faze him any, “Don’t you wanna meet the rest of the bunch?”

“Why don't you make sure they want to meet me first?” Was the acidly sweet reply.

Riddick hadn’t gone up to dinner, staying below on the mid deck stairs and listening to the conversation as he carved pieces off the protein bar and ate them absently. Everyone was oohing and ahhing over the food, which did smell pretty good, and talking over each other. The mechanic was trying to flirt with Simon who was oblivious and wasn’t that a shock. And then the gun hand made a deliberately crude remark. Riddick could almost picture the man’s face, overlaid with the boy he’d known, saying something designed to shock and embarrass. And the captain was throwing the man out of the galley, telling him to leave the table.

Deliberately heavy steps sounded on the stairs and the gun hand came down bearing a loaded plate and a cup. “Hey Rick,” the bigger man moved down past Riddick and handed the convict the plate. Riddick blinked at the man in the dim light, “Knew you’d done it a purpose,” He smirked. “Didn’ realize it was to keep me from eatin’ molded protein.”

“Eh,” The gun hand shrugged, “There’s only so much happy family time I can stand ‘fore I wanna hit somethin’ just...sorta reminds me...”

“Yeah, ‘s I recall you weren’t ever the sociable type, lessen we were headed to a whore house,” Riddick remembered, “I guess since you’re here you never found her?”

“Nah, still lookin’,” The big man shook his head. “Don’ think they ever tol’ ya my name.”

“No,” Riddick shook his head, “Didn’ wanna slip an’ call ya Shea or Cobh, so I just kep’ my mouth shut.”

“Jayne Cobb,” The big man stuck out his hand. “Gun hand, mercenary, public relations officer.”

Riddick almost laughed but settled for a wide grin at the last title, “Richard B. Riddick, escaped convict, murderer, survivor.”

“Good to see you again Rick,” Jayne waited until Riddick had quickly and neatly finished the meal and took the plate. “Ain’t gonna tell you where to go, never did much good iffen I rec’lect, but don’t let the Cap’n catch you slippin’ round.”

“When’s anyone ever caught me?” Riddick contrived to look insulted.
“Somebody musta, or you wouldn’t be an escaped convict,” Jayne retorted.

“Fair point,” Riddick smirked. “You want any help?”

“Đì yù I’d take help from the devil hisself iffen it meant findin’ Ciara,” Jayne nodded. He looked at Riddick thoughtfully, “How ‘bout you? Doin’ all right?”

“Well enough,” Riddick shrugged, “Got a girl I’m courtin’ if ya can believe it.”

“Where’s she at?” Jayne blinked but didn’t chuckle which Riddick had half expected.

“Oh, she’s around,” The convict smiled then. “An’ just as dangerous as either a us ever were.”

“What’s wrong with her?” The gun hand leaned against the wall. When Riddick just looked at him Jayne elaborated, “You ain’t ever done anythin’ easy Rick, so what’s wrong with her?”

“Cain’t sex her, don’t wanna right now, it’d scare her too bad,” Riddick shrugged like it didn’t make a difference, which to him it didn’t. “She…she was tortured Jayne, worse’n anythin’ we ever saw in the war.” He looked at his old friend, “They hurt her bad, an’ she was only a bit past fifteen.”

“So you’re courtin’ her? How’s she takin’ that?” Jayne wondered.

“Pretty well,” He shrugged again, “Seems to like me as much as I do her. So that’s somethin’.”

“That’s all ya can ask.” Jayne nodded, “Like ta meet her when she comes ‘round. Be interestin’ to see who can deal with the Furyan Wolf.” He looked up towards the galley at the sound of scrapin’ chairs and wasn’t surprised to see Riddick gone when he looked back. “Same ol’ Rick,” He muttered with a half grin and went to dump his plate in the cleaner.

Riddick waited in his room until everyone was settled and then moved up to the mid deck again, exploring the various nooks and crannies of the old boat. The catwalks didn't even creak as he moved along them to the forward stairs leading to the galley. It wasn't hard to hear everything going on around him, through the walls even. Jayne, Riddick had to repress a smirk at the name, was snoring a bit. Someone else was up on the bridge, the pilot most likely. Still another person was running water in their bunk. The comm system on the boat was as old as the Firefly but barely staticky so the pilot's voice was quite clear as he called his captain. "Mal, you might wanna get up here..."

Running footsteps up a ladder, down the hall to the bridge, "What is it?"

Riddick's eyes narrowed as he listened, considering the possibilities, "Signal. Somebody went on the Cortex, hailed the nearest Alliance Cruiser." The pilot sounded worried.

Mal on the other hand was tense but to the point, "Tell me you scrambled it."

Riddick thanked the uncaring god that the pilot wasn't stupid, "All to hell, but I don't know how much got through. Alliance got a pin in us for sure."

The curse Mal ground out through his teeth was barely audible but Riddick got the gist in spite of that. "Ni ta ma de tian xia suo yu de ren dou gaisi."

Then the pilot stated the obvious and Riddick took off at a light run back towards the passenger cabins to warn Simon, "We got a mole on board."
Riddick reached the cargo bay just ahead of the captain and nearly groaned to see Simon checking on River. He bit back the curse on his lips and stayed in the shadows out of sight until he saw the right moment.

Mal, being the man Riddick figured him for, immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion, "Forget your toothpaste?" He threw a punch that would have been more impressive had his opponent been expecting it and a bit larger, and sent Simon sprawling.

Riddick almost felt sorry for Simon, but he'd warned the doctor to stay in his bunk for a good five hours at least, "Are you out of your mind?" Simon yelped.

"Yeah, just about," Mal snarled, "What'd you tell them?"

Silver eyes watched as Simon got to his feet, rubbing his jaw, "Tell who?"

The captain drew his side arm and pointed it directly at Simon's face. Riddick wanted to curse the captain but considering who was standing there, speaking would have been the most idiotic thing possible. "I have exactly no time for games. What do they know?"

Simon still didn't understand, nor did he see the two other people beside Riddick now in the cargo bay. "You're a lunatic."

"And you're a gorram fed," Mal snapped back.

Book spoke then, announcing his presence, "Hate to say it, Captain, but you've got the wrong man."

As Riddick watched Simon and Mal both looked at the Shepherd and then realized where his eye line led. Behind them Dobson was holding a gun on Mal.

Riddick would have felt sorry for the captain if he'd shown a lick of sense in the previous five minutes, "Son of a bitch." The tall man cursed.

"Drop that firearm, Captain Reynolds," Dobson snapped.

There was half a beat and then Riddick watched the captain do as he was told, with great reluctance, "This is not my best day ever."

Then Dobson pointed the gun at Simon, "Simon Tam, you are bound by law to stand down."

Riddick nearly rolled his eyes as Mal realized the fed was after Simon, the look on his face was both funny and irritating as hell, especially given Riddick's own status as a wanted felon. "What, the doctor? Oh," Mal looked at Simon, "Hey!" He turned and regarded Dobson hopefully, "Is there, is there a reward?"

Riddick didn't like how tense the fed's hand was on that pistol of his. The cop must be spectacularly bad at his job to be so tightly wound during an arrest. "Get on the ground. Get on the ground!"

Simon tried to protest, "You are making a mistake."

Mal apparently recognized the same thing Riddick did, that a nervous fed was a dangerous fed, "I think you best get on the ground, son. The man seems a mite twitchy."

Riddick kept an eye on the fed, noticing that the shepherd was moving slowly towards Dobson, "I think everybody could stand to calm down a bit." Books voice in contrast to Dobson was remarkably composed.
"This isn't your business, Shepherd," Dobson snapped.

Once again Book's voice was calm, almost humorous, "The boy's not going anywhere, lawman. As I understand it, it's pretty cold outside."

Mal, of course, did what Riddick could have warned him to not do, he started to reach for his gun on the ground as he addressed that concern. "Not to worry. Put Lord Fauntleroy here in a passenger cell, won't make a peep 'til you hand him over to--"

For a moment the escaped convict allowed himself to appreciate that Mal even knew the name Lord Fauntleroy before Dobson pointed the gun back at the captain twitching with angry nerves. "Get the hell away from that weapon! You think I'm a complete backbirth?" He snapped, "You're carrying a fugitive across interplanetary borders, and you think I actually believe you're bringing medical supplies to Whitefall? As far as I care, everyone on this ship is culpable."

Riddick could have told him that was the wrong thing to say, as Mal's reaction was predictable, "Well now. That has an effect on the landscape."

Book was still trying to make peace, "Please, we're very close to true stupidity here--"

Dobson sneered, "I got a cruiser en route for intercept, so talk all you want. You got about twenty minutes." His hands were still taut with nerves.

Mal on the other hand was almost calm, "Might have less than that."

The fed wasn't happy with that apparently, "Yeah, threaten me.."

Book was getting closer to Dobson but not close enough, "For God's sake--"

"You think I wouldn't shoot a Shepherd? Back off!" Dobson aimed the gun at Book for a half a moment as Mal grabbed Simon to shove at the fed, Riddick took the moment everyone was shouting at once to jump from the shadows and tackle Dobson. As he reached the man he heard Kaylee's voice behind him; Dobson spun and shot just as Riddick got within two inches of him. Pain in his side, front and back, Riddick cursed and in the moment of shock a gunshot creates Dobson broke loose of his hold. The convict was vaguely aware of Mal diving for his gun, Book on Dobson as the fed turned to fire at Mal and then Dobson being pistol whipped with his own weapon by a shepherd at least twice his age.

Simon had rushed towards Kaylee, the Companion and Jayne had heard the shot, both running in, Inara to Kaylee's side, Jayne to point a gun on Dobson. Riddick stood up straight again and watched as Mal hurried towards Kaylee. Simon was doing his doctor thing, Riddick could hear him plain even as he concentrated on Dobson.

Jayne took a look at Riddick and receiving a nod from his old friend, moved towards Dobson with purpose. Book turned slightly to face the much larger man, seemingly undisturbed by Jayne's threatening demeanor and Riddick's stone face. "Outta the way," The gun hand snarled.

Book shook his head, "You're not killing this man."

"Not right away..." Jayne agreed harshly.

Riddick nodded, "Seconded."

"He's no threat," Book argued.
Riddick could smell the thick rich blood of the mechanic, blood and a hint of bowel and acid, stomach wounds were bad. If anyone could help her it would be Simon, and worrying about her wouldn't change a thing. He focused his gaze on the shepherd and Dobson, "Beware the fury of a patient man."

"Move," Jayne gave a snarl that was almost as threatening as Riddick's.

The shepherd being equally stubborn shook his head, "Not gonna happen."

Jayne being himself raised his gun, "I ain't joking with you, Preacher"

Riddick scowled furiously at both of them, "He is mine to kill." His growl put Jayne's to shame, all his pain and rage contained in five words.

The first mate appeared on the catwalk and put paid to any idea of immediate vengeance, "Jayne!" Riddick tilted his head slightly and saw her mare's leg, aimed right at he and Jayne. "Just tie him up. Do it."

Jayne hesitated half a second and grabbed a roll of duct tape from a peg by the mule. Riddick took that time to sit on a crate, his arm pressed surreptitiously to his side minutely grateful that black didn't show blood overmuch. Simon was still working on Kaylee, Zoe approached Book and Dobson, "The gun, Shepherd. Please." Book calmly handed her Dobson's gun.

Riddick watched and heard the crackle of the comm as Simon began to plan a surgery. The pilot's voice came on the overhead and Simon stiffened, "Captain, we've been hailed by a Cruiser. Ordered to stay on course and dock for prisoner transfer."

To Riddick's surprise, Simon stepped away from Kaylee, tension binding his limbs, but his voice was shockingly calm, "Change course. Run."

"Hell with you. You brought this down on us, I'm dumping you with the law," Mal swore at him. Riddick tuned out the drama laden comments, concentrating his attention on Simon. The doctor meant every word he said, he would truly let Kaylee die if the captain didn't run from the feds. Everyone was arguing, with Simon, with the captain, even the Companion was standing up to Mal, and Simon stood steadfast through it all. And then finally, the captain gave the order to run.

The minute he did Simon started moving so quickly that anyone without Riddick's reflexes might have been hard pressed to keep pace. As Jayne made to go into the lounge Riddick put a hand on the big man's arm, "Cobh, you got any of that duct tape left?"

"Yeah, what kinda stupid question is that," Cobb didn't blink at Riddick's using his real name, the sounds were similar enough.

"The kind people who are bleedin' tend ta ask, you horse's pì gu," Riddick retorted. "Tear me off a coupla big pieces will ya,"

Jayne nodded and hissed in sympathy as Riddick raised the black exercise tank to expose his torso. "Through an' through, it looks like," Jayne offered as he slapped silver tape onto Riddick's wounds.

"Yeah, probably good for your girl in there that it was, that bullet went any deeper in she'd be gone in less'n ten minutes," Riddick muttered. Once Jayne had taped the slightly larger exit wound Riddick shoed him off, "Go on, go watch over her, that's what you do here ain't it?" Jayne nodded and Riddick sat back down on his crate to breath and rest.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

pì gu - butt

bèn dàn - fool

dì yù - hell

Script Quote:

Ni ta ma de tian xia suo yu de ren dou gaisi. - Fuck everyone in the universe to death.

Quote sources:

Beware the fury of a patient man. - John Dryden
Riddick sat and listened to the surgery. Simon was calm and collected, in his element. Riddick had to hand it to the kid, he had balls of steel to stand up to the Captain and bargain using the life of the girl he was even now saving. He'd sent the Companion, Inara her name was, to get a red bag from his room, apparently it had more delicate instruments in it. All told it was at least three hours and Simon showed no sign of quailing or fatigue.

Finally it was over and Simon was talking to Mal about the girl, Riddick stood up from his crate and settled for leaning against it as if he had the perfect right to be there. And then the convict heard the Companion ask what was going on.

Mal came barreling out of the infirmary, "Well then why don't we find out?" He strode towards River's case as Simon protested, "Stay away from that! Aah!" Riddick saw Jayne grab the doctor to keep him from interfering. Straightening up Riddick moved slightly, putting himself in a good position to clock Mal if the situation seemed to call for it.

The captain actually seemed calm for once, asking Jayne about the fed, "Where's the Fed?"

Jayne shrugged, easily holding Simon by the arms, "Secure. Shepherd's with him. Seems to think he's not safe alone with me."

"Don't!" Simon's voice was frantic as Mal began fiddling with the dials on River's box and pulled a release lever. Riddick tensed as everyone on the boat but Kaylee, the Shepherd and Dobson joined them in the cargo bay. Frost fog poured out of the cracks in the cryo box.

"Well, let's see what a man like you would kill for," Mal suggested coldly.

"No, don't!" Simon shouted, but it was too late. Mal kicked the top off River's box sending it to the floor with a clatter. More fog rose from the opening Riddick moved closer to the box, closer to Mal and River, knowing exactly what the captain would see. A naked, unconscious teenage girl. Fury was rising in him, he was ready to kill the captain should Mal touch River while she was in such a state.

The captain actually seemed confused for a moment and Riddick wanted to hit him more than ever, "Huh."

Riddick took another step closer as Simon tried desperately to wrest himself free of Jayne, "I need to check her vitals."

"Oh, is that what they call it?" Mal looked at him hard.

"She's not supposed to wake up for another week! The shock—" Simon was still struggling.

"The shock of what? Waking up? Finding out she's been sold to some borderworld baron? Or, I'm sorry," He paused mockingly, "Was this one for you? Is it true love? Because you do seem a little—"

River screamed as she lurched out of her box, making Mal yelp a bit as he turned in his surprise. Riddick hurried forward as River tumbled out of her box, she was terrified, the awful scent of burnt cinnamon filling his nose. Mal was in the way and staring to boot. Punching the captain was
something he'd been wanting to do for a while now, and it certainly got the idiot out of the way. Tearing off his shirt and ignoring the pull of the tape and muscle on his wounds he dropped it over River's head, helping her put her arms through the sleeves. "River, its all right, we're here, I gotcha, its all right," Riddick wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

"River?" Simon had gotten free of Jayne, as a naked girl was quite the distraction, and rushed forward to touch River's hair, her face still buried in Riddick's bare shoulder. She screamed at his touch but began to calm at the sound of their voices. "River. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay, I'm here."

Riddick rubbed her back gently, trying to ease all the tight muscles he felt under her skin. "It’s all right Qīng Xiāng. I promise bǎo bǎo. It’s all right."

She calmed a bit finally, looking at them, her eyes slowly focusing, though her breath still came in pants. Riddick could tell when she began to calm, to take in her surroundings.

Simon spoke her name, "River..."

She whispered their names as if afraid they weren't real, "Richard…Simon…?" Riddick felt like he'd break in two as she began to cry, "Simon... There’s blood, there’s blood on me..."

"No mèi mei," Simon tried to reassure her, "We're safe now. We're safe. We’re safe, I'm here."

Her voice was rising and coming close to hysterical again, "No, its red and it’s on me and it shouldn’t be. And he’s bleeding and you have to stop it, stop it, stop it!"

Riddick groaned and kissed her neck before leaning back slightly so that Simon could see her face and know she wasn't crazy. Everyone else in the room was quiet, almost respectful.

Well, most people in the room, Mal just had to open his mouth, "What the hell is this?"

Simon glared at Mal defiantly as River clung to Riddick again, still crying, "This is my sister." He took a moment and looked at Riddick, registering what the man had done. "Are you insane? You have a top flight surgeon around and you bandage yourself with duct tape?"

Riddick shrugged, "The girl was hurt worse, it’s a through an’ through." He looked down at the blood smeared tape, "Duct tape works, an’ it can wait."

"No, fix him now, now, now, now!" River sobbed into her partner's shoulder.

"All right," Simon agreed. "It won't take long, of all the places to get hit, it probably just missed vital organs." He watched as Riddick easily lifted River and began to carry her into the infirmary, everyone else following. River stood silently, the white walls giving her chills as she held Riddick's hand while Simon worked on the wound.

"When did you even get shot?" Mal demanded to know.

"How's that any a your business?" Riddick stared the man down from behind the goggles he'd had to wear in the too bright infirmary.

"I got wounded aboard my boat I wanna know 'bout it," Mal retorted.

"Yeah, whatever," Riddick looked up to see River staring at him, her lips curved in a tiny smile.

"Leapt upon the lawman, bullets pass through flesh like veils and break apart in the sunshine and
strawberries," River whispered.

Simon glanced at River sharply and then at Riddick. "Is she right Rick? Did you take Kaylee's bullet first?"

"Doc, do it make a difference?" Riddick groaned his irritation.

"The bullets he used tended to splinter. I'll need to use the extractor on the wound and make sure you don't have anything embedded," Simon grabbed the tool and began to use it on Riddick, his head bending to his work as if he was fresh as a daisy.

Finally they were done and Simon looked at River, "You'll need a smoother, the cryo drugs will throw your system off," He began to say when River made a face at him and Riddick sat up to wrap his arm around his partner.

"She'll burn through the drugs quick 'nough now that she's wakeful Simon," Riddick shook his head. "Call it a side effect."

"One of many," Simon muttered cleaning the instruments and putting them away. Turning and looking at the crew he sighed. "I suppose you'll be wanting an explanation."

"You'd suppose right," Mal gave a credible snarl though from the look on Jayne's face he found it to be a weak attempt.

"All right," Simon nodded, "Rick will you—"

"Yeah I'll get River into somethin' side's my bloody shirt," Riddick lifted his girl into his arms and carried her out of the infirmary. He turned slightly to glare at Jayne, "An' don’ think I didn’ notice you starin’ Cobh, you get your eyes back in yer head or I’ll rip ‘em out."

Mal looked at Jayne who by all rights should have begun blustering and making threats in return, but instead just shrugged and grinned at the burly man’s back. “Now I find that downright unsettling,” The captain muttered.

Simon stood, somewhat uncomfortably before an assembled crew and remaining passenger in the galley. He’d never liked public speaking much, “I am very smart. I went to the best Medacad in Osiris, top three percent of my class, finished my internship in eight months.” He hesitated as Riddick entered, carrying River, his big hand massaging her scarred thigh absently. “‘Gifted’ is the term. So when I tell you that my little sister makes me look like an idiot child, I want you to understand my full meaning."

Riddick pulled a chair back from the table and positioned it against one of the storage cabinets so he and River could see both Simon and the other occupants of the room. River leaned her head against Riddick’s neck and yawned a bit, the big man carrying her grinned, he rarely smelled boredom on her; peppermint was odd along with blood, silk and steel.

Simon spread his hands, “River was more than gifted. She...she was a gift. Everything she did, music, math, theoretical physics, even...even dance. There was nothing that didn't come as naturally to her as breathing does to us.” He smiled as he recalled something she’d done and River grinned in return from Riddick’s arms, “She could be a real...brat about it, too. I mean, she used to—“ His words trailed off, lost in the memory for a moment. Jayne rose to refill his mug and his motion startled Simon back into the train of thought he’d had. “There was a... a school... a, uh, a
government-sponsored academy, we had never even heard of it but it had the most exciting program, the most challenging. We could have sent her anywhere, we had the money, but she wanted to go. She wanted to learn. She was fourteen.”

He looked at his sister who was hiding her face in Riddick’s neck now. The convict’s arms were around her protectively, and his face was like stone. “Tell the rest doc,” Riddick growled and nodded, “Ain’t gonna get any easier with waitin’.”

River lifted her head from Riddick’s shoulder briefly and took a deep breath, “I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul; freeze thy young blood; Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres; Thy knotted and combined locks to part, And each particular hair to stand on end, Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.” Riddick nodded his agreement and stroked a hand down her hair, a gesture that comforted them both and nodded for Simon to continue.

Simon nodded, his face twisted with pain and regret and took a deep breath regaining his calm distance, “I...I got a few letters at first, and then I didn't hear anything for months. Finally I got a letter that made no sense. She, she talked about things that never happened, jokes we never...” He shook his head, “It was code. It just said...” He took a deep breath and in spite of his calm demeanor his voice nearly broke. “They're hurting us. Get me out.” Riddick’s growl of anger at the memory had River calming him now, patting his shoulder and face gently.

Zoe broke the silence, her stoic face the same though her eyes blazed, “How did you do it?”

“Money. And, and luck.” Simon admitted, “For two years, I couldn't get near her. Then I was contacted by some men, some underground movement. They, they said she was in danger, that, that the government was...playing with her brain. If I funded them they could sneak her out in cryo. Get her to Persephone, and from there, I could take her... wherever.”

Riddick found himself liking the companion more and more as she asked in a gentle voice, “Will she be all right?”

Simon shook his head in bewilderment, “I don't know if she'll be all right. I don't know what they did to her, or why. I, I just have to keep her safe.” He looked at Riddick, “Of course there are always complications.”

“Yeah, how does the scary man fit into this,” Wash wanted to know.

“River, you wanna tell ‘em or ya like me ta?” Riddick asked his partner.

“You please, drugs make my words fade in and out,” River sighed and snuggled closer.

“Academy weren’t just for kids,” Riddick began his dark coffee voice quiet in deference to his tired partner. “They brought me in, bought me from a merc who’d caught me by killing three people ‘round me, an’ dumped me in a cell.” His silver eyes flashed with anger, “They was interested in folks had abnormal brains, all sortsa abnormal, sociopaths, psychopaths, geniuses, a few autistics, savants, studyin’ on what made us all different.”

“Which are you?” Jayne asked with a grin, “I’m guessin’ you’re disabled ‘cuz you’re so short.”

Riddick chuckled and shook his head, “Short but tough Cobh, ya remember that.” He thought a moment and gave a one shouldered shrug, “They ain’t ever been able to classify me.” He said in the same quiet voice, “They can’t measure me, cain’t figure me. They couldn’t even figure out iffen I was smart or stupid. Alla their tests were useless come to me, so they kep’ me ‘round.”

He looked at the crew thoughtfully, Mal and Zoe were soldiers, Jayne a soldier of a completely
different type, Wash with his own darkness deeply hidden, Inara, her perfection a mask over her heart and Shepherd Book a man with so many lies tangled about him his scent reeked with the detris of past lives. “I knew there’s a school above us, could hear the kids, talkin’, laughin’, not knowin’ there’s hell right b’low their feet. A few boys were brought down; the oldest one was maybe seventeen. I had to listen to ‘em all die, screamin’.”

“Whadda ya mean you had to listen?” Mal shook his head, “Ain’t quite understandin’ how you could hear alla that.”

River’s voice spoke again, her hand stroking over Riddick’s shaved pate, adoration in her words, “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a God!”

Riddick’s smile was wolfish and brought an unseen answering grin to Jayne’s lips, “River figured out what they had even if they couldn’t, but then she is fairly smart.” He glanced at her teasingly and was rewarded with a little smile, “After what they’d done to her, she couldn’t help knowin’ all about me.” He regarded the captain with his uncanny silver eyes, “Academy got themsel’s a near pureblooded Furyan an’ they didn’ even know it.”

“A whosit?” Wash asked the question on everyone else’s face but Jayne’s.

“Furyan’s were the people who lived on Londinium before the ark ships arrived,” Simon said slowly, his eyes riveted to Riddick. “They were thought to be the descendants of the American tribes from Earth That Was, those who’d left the planet hundreds of years before the ark ships. Our ancestors called them Furyans because of their fierceness in warfare and refusal to give up their lands.”

“Dunno ‘bout that Doc,” Riddick shrugged, “But one thing Furyan’s was known for was keen senses.”

Simon nodded, “Suddenly half of your vocabulary makes complete sense.” When he was given inquiring looks by the captain and Zoe, Simon elaborated. “He’s mentioned more than once smelling a lie on someone, or how someone’s fear smells. His pet name for River is Qīng Xiāng.”

“Sweet Scent,” Inara murmured thoughtfully. “I assume something about River and her varying emotions are appealing to your sense of smell?”

“Ya could say,” Riddick agreed. “So I could hear helluva lot more’n I ever let on to the scientists there. An’ ‘bout two years after I got there, I smelt a little girl, fear like burnt cinnamon, an’ I see them bringin’ River down the hall.” He shuddered and held her more tightly, “She ain’t ever said alla what they did to her in the six months ‘fore we officially met, but I had to hear her screamin’.” He kissed the top of River’s head, “What they done to her…” He shook his head.

“I’ll need to speak with you about that,” Simon told him quietly. “If I’m to help her I need to know what they did.”

“An’ when she wants to tell ya, you’ll be the first to know.” Riddick growled back at him, “But River an’ me met when they was doin’ one a their tests, havin’ her an’ me fight one a the last psychopaths they had in stock, sick hún dàn liked to rape children. I don’t hold with that an’ I’d been itchin’ to gut the gòu niáng yǎng de for weeks so I went for him. River jumped in to help out an’ I managed to kill the hún dàn.” He rubbed River’s back, “They partnered us up after that. Guess at first they figured I’d do somethin’ to screw it up an’ they’d be able to punish me, cuz they stuck her in my room.”
“You never mentioned that,” Simon pointed out. “That you’d been living together.”

“Geez Doc, you make it sound like I was sexin’ the girl while she was still a baby,” Riddick made a disgusted face, which River imitated, sticking her tongue out at her brother. “It were a test. One wrong step an’ I’m prolly dead, an’ River’s back to the scientists. So we made a deal, I’d teach her, she’d teach me, an’ we got to be partners.” He shrugged.

“Mutually beneficial arrangement,” River said quietly from within his arms. “Richard protected me, helped me deal with what they’d done, helped me live with it, taught me.” She looked at her brother sternly, “My partner. My best friend.”

“That don’t explain why he’s holdin’ ya like you’re his,” Mal pointed out in a hard voice that promised pain for anyone who’d been doing wrong to a child.

River shifted and looked at Mal with dark chocolate eyes, “Richard would never have touched me like this when I was so young,” She said flatly. “He thought I was twelve when he first met me. When he found out I was almost sixteen he still tried to think of me as if I was twelve because it was easier that way.”

“An’ now?” Mal raised an eyebrow, looking at how Riddick was holding her, “He ain’t treatin’ ya like you’re twelve now.”

“I am not,” River shook her head. “Nor would I wish him to treat me as such, the last year inside I did not wish him to treat me as a child, but it protected us both.” She looked at the rest of the crew and then spearred the captain with cold eyes. “I will be eighteen in less than a year. Richard is… courting me,” She smiled at her partner in delight as she read his conversation with Jayne from the two men in question. “He knows I have fears; he gives me time and safety to get past them. He would never hurt me. I’m his. And he is mine. We belong to each other.”

“Yeah, there ain’t gonna be any belongin’ until you’re eighteen,” Mal told the two of them flatly. “This is my boat an’ when you’re on my boat you don’t touch girls under eighteen in any wrong fashion. Which means you get offa his lap young lady.”

“Won’t,” River stuck out her tongue. “Need Richard. Need him to keep me safe, help me walk.” She shook her head, “Been sleeping enfolded in his arms since I was fifteen, keeps me safe, keeps our nightmares away. Can’t sleep without him,” She looked at Simon, “Was already coming out of cryo because of it. Changes made to physiology manifest when the mind wills it.”

“The hell you say,” Simon’s normal eloquent and elegant speech disintegrated. “You’re making fun of me now River.”

“No, she ain’t doc,” Riddick shook his head. “The mind controls the body ya know.” He kissed River’s cheek tenderly. “What do you think I taught her? How’d you think I walked around with holes in me b’fore? Animals know how to do it natural. Academy just made River get in touch with her animal side.”

“I’m still stuck on the sciency talk,” Wash shook his head, “What did you mean?” He looked at River curiously.

“Hoban Washburne,” River tilted her head, “Second in his class, gifted pilot. Likes to play with toys. Married to warrior woman Zoe Alleyne Washburne.” She frowned a second trying to answer his question. “The academy played with my brain. In order to make my mind work, I had to embrace my instincts instead of ignoring them. What Richard calls the animal side, the part of the mind that controls heartbeat and breathing and all the things the body does without conscious thought. I always
used my brain like a tool. Richard taught me to approach it more...organically."

“And what do you mean ‘won’t’,” Mal blustered. “I’m the captain on this boat an’ what I say goes.”

“Not my captain,” River shook her head, “Maritime law is not applicable in this instance. Not your crew, paying passenger. Will remain with my partner, safe with him.” She leaned against Riddick with a stubborn look on her face that her partner knew all too well.

“‘Fore you go spoutin’ off more lè sè,” Riddick interjected, “Might be you wanna really think ‘bout what you’re sayin’.” He sent a hard glance at the captain, “You sayin’ what I can or cannot do with my woman ain’t gonna endear you to anybody. Her brother don’ even do that.” He smoothed down River’s hair with a gentle hand, “That bein’ said, I’m a lotta things, but impatient ain’t one of ‘em. River an’ me, we’ll get where we’re goin’ when we get there. Ain’t in a rush. Wanna do right by her, an’ that means takin’ care a her, an’ lettin’ her take care a me.”

River straightened and stared into his eyes with a frown, “But, we, you…” She hesitated, visibly struggling for words and Riddick could smell her confusion and worry. “We said…”

“I know what we said on planet, Qing Xiāng,” Riddick soothed her. “An’ I know a lotta that, our time, was us both thinkin’ we’s gonna die. Impendin’ death situation ain’t applicable anymore, so we’re gonna take this slow.” He laid his lips tenderly against hers, wanting only his affection for her in the kiss, holding back the passion that drove his blood whenever he was near her. “Don’t mean I ain’t gonna hold you at night. It don’t change what we decided on. Ain’t gonna be hidin’ anythin’ from you that’s all. Ain’t a reason for it anymore.”

“Good,” River let her lips linger over his and nestled into his embrace.

“Help you to walk?” Book had focused on something entirely different, “Child are you injured?”

“On planet,” River nodded, “Wounds to thigh, time in cryo stiffened the muscles; need more therapy and exercise to mitigate the effects.” She looked at Riddick anxiously, “Saw my books in the trunk; didn’t see my toe shoes.”

“They’re there,” Simon promised, “We didn’t leave anything of yours behind.”

Book took a deep breath and regarded Simon and then River sitting in Riddick’s lap, and then Simon again, “That's... quite a story, son.”

“Yeah, it's a tale of woe. Very stirring, but in the meantime, you've heaped a world of trouble on me and mine,” Mal wasn’t happy, that much was obvious.

Simon shook his head, “I never thought—“

Mal looked at him hard, “No, I don’t imagine you thought. In consequence of which we got a kidnapped federal officer on board, we got the Alliance hard on our trail, and Kaylee...”

Riddick sighed, “Gotta admit it’s as much my fault as Simon’s; didn’t occur to me that they might track his luggage since the underground folk were the ones as smuggled it out. River was supposed to be in that cryo tank from the core all the way out to Boros originally.” He rubbed her back gently, “I guess they coulda had folks watching alla the ports, ain’t like they don’t have money to spare.”

Zoe looked at Wash, “How much does the Alliance know?”

Wash shook his head, “I can't say. I killed the message pretty quick, so they might just have had our position.”
“Or they might have personal profiles on each and every one of us. 'Til that Fed wakes up, we won't know,” Mal was thinking.

“So what do we do?” Jayne wanted to know.

Mal took a deep breath and went with what he knew, what he could do best, “The job. We finish the job. I got word from Patience, she's waiting for us. We circle 'round to Whitefall, make the deal, get out. Keep flying.”

“What about us?” Simon asked quietly.

Mal looked at him, it was the merciless look of a man with very little left to lose, “Kaylee comes through you, and him, and your sister'll get off at Whitefall.”

“If she doesn't come through?” Simon had to ask.

Mal's expression didn’t change, “Then you're gettin' off a mite sooner.” He ignored the growl of fury from Riddick though Jayne looked visibly concerned.

Book protested, “That’d be murder.”

“Boy made a decision,” Mal said flatly. Riddick narrowed his eyes at the captain.

“He didn't shoot her,” Inara pointed out in her own protest.

Jayne shook his head, “No, but somebody on this boat did and I'm scratching my head as to why we ain't dealt with him.”

River watched, detached from it all in her partner’s arms as everyone began arguing, Zoe pointing out killing a fed was idiocy, Wash disagreeing with killing anyone, the shepherd quietly furious at the thought of murder. Simon dove into the quarrel wanting his sister kept out of any impending death. The noise was so loud and the emotions so intense she had to stop looking and bury her face in Richard's neck to just breathe. “As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies, that keep her from her rest,” She moaned into his skin and his arms tightened around her comfortingly.

“Ni men de bi zui!” Mal finally hollered and River took a deep breath into the silence. “Way it is, is the way it is. We got to deal with what's in front of us.”

Inara shook her head, “Mal, you know they wouldn't survive a day in Whitefall anyway. You throw them out, I'm leaving too.

The captain looked at her and River knew he hated the public confrontation, was upset by the thought of her leaving and doing his best to hide both. “It might be best you do. You ain't a part of this business.” He left the galley, followed by Simon.

“What business is that, exactly?” The fugitive doctor inquired. When Mal gave him a look that rightly should have killed him Simon shrugged minutely in response, “I'm a dead man, I can't know? Is it gold? Drugs? Pirate treasure? What is it that makes you so afraid of the Alliance?”

“You don't wanna go down this road with me, boy,” The words were a quiet snarl of anger.

“Oh, you're not afraid of them?” Simon sniffed derogatively, “I already know you'd sell me out to them for a pat on the head. Hell, you should probably be working for them. You certainly fit the profile—“
River sighed as she heard her brother hit the ground and the flash of pain from him and knew Mal had hit him again. Jayne looked over his cup down the hall and smirked, “Saw that comin’.”

Riddick waited out of sight as Jayne and Mal walked into the room where the fed was being held. The captain as usual was making a speech, though in this case Riddick agreed with him as to the content. “I'm in a tricky position, I guess you know. Got me a boatload of terrible strange folk making my life a little more interesting than I generally like, chief among them an Alliance mole. Likes to shoot at girls when he's nervous. Now I got to know how close the Alliance is, exactly how much you told them before Wash scrambled your call. So...I've given Jayne here the job of finding out.”

Riddick could practically see the grin on Cobh’s face as he spoke; chances were he was holding one of his favorite knives, a big thing with a blade as long as Riddick’s forearm. “He was non-specific as to how.”

Riddick could barely hear Mal speak to Jayne, “Now you only gotta scare him.”

Jayne was grinning again, Riddick could hear it in his voice, the big scary man grin that he’d perfected a long time ago, “Pain is scary...”

There was irritation in the captain’s voice this time, just before he came out the shoji door. “Just do it right.”

Riddick waited for the captain to pass before he moved silently down the corridor and into the room with Cobh, “Mind an audience?”

Jayne grinned at him, “You’re late.”

“Like to make an entrance,” Riddick smirked and folded his arms to stare down at the Fed.

Dobson quailed under the look, silver eyes glowing in the pale shiplight, goggles across Riddick’s forehead. The gun on his hip and the knife on his leg weren’t even drawn and Riddick could smell the man’s fear of he and Jayne. Soon enough he began to bluster, “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in?”

Jayne sat down in the chair across from Dobson and smirked, “Gee, I never been in trouble with the law before...”

“No like this you haven't,” Dobson’s words tumbled out. “You think this is just a smuggling rap? The package that boy is carrying—”

“It's a girl,” Jayne interrupted the fed, “She's cute, too, but I don't think she's all there, y'know?” His grin was deliberately ugly and if Riddick hadn’t known the man had no such thought in mind he would have gutted him for it. “Course, not all of her has to be...”

“That girl is a precious commodity,” Dobson shook his head, “They'll come after her. Long after you bury me they'll be coming.”

Riddick’s growl started low in his chest, he wasn’t even aware of making the sound until it came out in his voice, “I know exactly how precious she is.” He leaned down and snarled almost in Dobson’s face, “She’s mine.” He smiled, “An’ long after I bury you, she’ll still be mine.”
Jayne shook his head, “I’m not gonna kill him, Rick where’s the fun in that,” He looked at Dobson, “I’m not gonna kill you, Dobson—“ He paused as if thinking for a moment and Riddick almost laughed, “What’s your first name?”

“Laurence,” Dobson said reluctantly.

Jayne nodded eagerly as Riddick watched, “Laurence. No, I'm just gonna cut on ya' 'til you tell me how much they know.”

Riddick knew Jayne would be disappointed just from the man’s scent as he spoke, “They know everything. They know every name, every record,” Dobson paused and then pressed on, “They know how many nose hairs you've got.”

Jayne frowned and shook his head in disgust, genuinely disappointed, “Ah, see, they don't know a damn thing. It's all over your face, I ain't even... Was gonna get me a ear, too.” His voice became somewhat accusatory. “Aren't you an officer of the law? Well, don't they teach you how to withstand interrogation? Can't even tell a damn lie.” Jayne was almost pouting like the boy Riddick had known and the convict found himself putting his hand over his mouth to hide his amusement despite the situation.

“Okay,” Dobson was clearly reevaluating his would be torturer, “I can see you're not an idiot.”

“Wish I could say the same, Laurence,” Jayne returned in a put out tone, “But...this is disappointing as hell.”

Dobson leaned towards Jayne as if that would keep Riddick from hearing his voice, “Let me speak the language you will understand. Money. This girl is worth a lot of money. I mean a lot. You kill me, there's nothing. But if you help me out, you'll have enough to buy your own ship. A better one than this piece of crap.”

Jayne frowned, hesitant at first and then asked what two days ago would have been the defining question, “Does helping you out mean turning on the Captain?”

“Yes it does,” Dobson returned gravely.

Riddick watched as his old friend thought about it. After a moment Jayne smiled, a cold cruel smile that promised untold pain if he had his way, “That mighta made a difference to me a coupla days ago Lawrence.” He said quietly, “But that girl you’re so anxious to get ahold of? She belongs to him,” He jerked his thumb back at Riddick who hadn’t moved.

“You're bigger than he is, and he’s one man,” Dobson retorted. “Nobody’ll miss him.”

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“I would,” Jayne shot back. “I been through the war with this man, two of us no more’n boys. He ain’t a man to cross,” Jayne shook his head. “Part from that? You got any idea who you’re tellin’ me to kill? They bother to mention who escaped along with the girl, or’d they think that bit a information mighta put off morons like you as wanted the payday?” Dobson’s eyes were wide as he looked at Riddick, obviously trying to piece together the clues Jayne had given him. Jayne waited a moment and shook his head in disgust, “Most wanted man in the ‘Verse an’ he strolled onta this boat right past ya an’ ya don’t even notice, so wrapped up in watchin’ the doc.”

“He can’t be,” Dobson shook his head. “He’s dead, died on a ship out past Qing Long system.”

“Nah, I ain’t dead,” Riddick spoke finally in his dark rumbling voice. “I’m alive an’ well an’ I’m gonna kill you Dobson. If I get the time I’m gonna kill you slow, make you feel all the pain they inflicted on her, everything you wanna send her back to.” He let that sink in a moment. “See I didn’t
get to hurt them’s as tortured River. Had to leave ‘fore I could so’s we could get her out. I only got to beat on a few guards. But you, you I can make pay for every hurt they put her through.”

Jayne smiled and pulled Dobson forward to check the duct tape, “He ain’t goin’ anywhere for a while.” The gun hand looked at Riddick, “Let’s do a coupla sets, get your girl and she can do some reps with my weights, unkink that leg a hers.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
bǎo bǎo - baby/darling
mèi mei - little sister
hún dàn - bastard
gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch
lè sè - garbage

Script Translations:

Ni men de bi zui! - Everybody shut the hell up!

Quote Sources:

I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul; freeze thy young blood; Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres; Thy knotted and combined locks to part, And each particular hair to stand on end, Like quills upon the fretful porcupine. - Hamlet - William Shakespeare

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a God! - Hamlet - William Shakespeare

As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies, that keep her from her rest - MacBeth - William Shakespeare
River was sitting on Jayne’s weight bench with Riddick when she felt them, “Richard, they’re here,” she whispered painfully. “The screaming is starting again, and it brings the secret with it. They won’t lie down, they never lie down. I don’t want to see.”

Riddick pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard on the mouth, “You don’t have to see, just look into me, see me an’ Cobh, that’s somethin’ we ain’t talked on.” He listened for where everyone else was on the boat and knew River was doing the same, listening to their minds, calming herself by hearing his heartbeat and blood. In the distance past Serenity’s engines he could faintly hear another ship, its engine’s skewed somehow.

The captain’s voice came over the intercom gravely calm and Riddick knew River had been right as usual. “This is the captain. We’re passing another ship. Looks to be Reavers. From the size, probably a raiding party. Could be they’re headed somewhere particular, could be they’ve already hit someone and they’re full up. So everyone stay calm.”

Riddick kissed River softly on the lips, giving her something else to think about, the scent of burnt cinnamon faded as he reminded her silently of how they’d fought the Reavers and won, how they were only men. Mal’s voice continued on the overhead, “We try to run, they’ll have to chase us. It’s their way. We’re holding course. We should be passing ‘em in a minute, so we’ll see what they do. Zoe, you come on up to the bridge.”

Riddick turned and saw Simon move towards the infirmary and kissed River again, “I know we don’t like the room but it’s where Simon feels safest,” He said the suggestion in his mind if not his words.

River nodded gravely and rose from his lap, taking a limping step. “We can bear it long enough, and it will comfort him to have us near,” Riddick stood and would have scooped her into his arms but she shook her head, slipping her hand into his elbow, “Walking will hurt but it will loosen the muscles.”

Riddick nodded and they made their way into the infirmary with Book, Simon and the unconscious Kaylee

Riddick had sent Simon to get some rest, promising he and River would stay with Kaylee. The two fugitives were laying on the narrow side bed, the girl on top of the man, his arms wrapped around her back, her legs tangled with his. Mal stepped into the infirmary quietly and Riddick took a moment to be grateful he had pulled his goggles down to shield his eyes; the captain couldn’t tell he was awake. Mal was standing in between Kaylee and River, his eyes on Riddick’s woman, thoughtful and a little sad.

Kaylee’s voice broke the silence, “Hey, Captain.”

Mal turned at her voice, “Hey...Hey little Kaylee, what’s the news?”

She was still woozy, but her smile was sweet, “I’m shiny, Captain. A-okay. And I can’t feel much below my belly, though. It’s gettin’ cold.”
“Well, you just gotta rest,” Mal brought another blanket and spread it over her. “Something’s gonna break down on this boat real soon. Who else I got to fix it?”

Kaylee smiled up at him, “Well, don’t you worry none. Doc fixed me up pretty good. He’s nice.”

Mal’s voice held a smile, “Don’t go working too hard on that crush, mèi mei. Doc won’t be with us for long.”

Kaylee was obviously still dopey from pain meds, Riddick thought, “You’re nice, too.”

“No, I’m not. I’m a mean old man,” Mal contradicted her.

“He wasn’t gonna let me die. He was just trying to...” Kaylee sighed, “It’s nobody’s fault. Okay? Just promise me you’ll remember that?”

Mal took her hand in his, feeling her chilly fingers, “I’ll keep it in mind.”

The chirpy little mechanic clearly adored her captain like a daddy, “You are a nice man, Captain. You always looking after us. You just gotta have faith in people.” Mal didn’t say anything, just held her hand as he looked at her. Kaylee’s eyes drifted over to River, sleeping on top of Riddick. “She is a real beauty, isn’t she?” She smiled and her eyes slipped closed.

Riddick tilted his head as Mal left and looked down at River who’d woken up as Mal left. “How much a that did you hear Qīng Xiāng?”

“Most,” River yawned and kissed him gently. Riddick groaned a bit at the feel of her on top of him and resolved to enjoy this before they got interrupted. River’s lips dwelt over his, soft and sweet, sipping from his, sending fire through him. Determined to let her set the pace he kept his hands on her back, letting her kiss him, nipping at her mouth a little bit in response. He lost track of time and nearly didn’t hear Book enter the infirmary, he hadn’t even noticed Kaylee awake and staring at he and River kissing languidly.

Book stopped and blinked at the sight of two such disparate individuals engaged in the sweetness of tender kisses and Riddick groaned as River pulled her mouth away. The convict looked at his girl and sighed, “Well anymore an’ I might a lost it so I guess interruptions are all to the good.”

River smiled down at him, “I arise from dreams of thee,” She murmured.

Riddick returned her smile and traced his finger down her soft cheek, “In the first sweet sleep of night, when the winds are breathing low, and the stars are shining bright.”

“A man of unexpected depths,” Book commented but said nothing further on the subject.

Riddick smirked and looked at River catching the citrusy scent of her pain, “Your leg again?” He asked.

She nodded and winced slightly as she tried to flex it. Riddick frowned and flipped them so he was on top of her for a moment before he rose and began to look through the drawers for a salve. “Kaylee, your boss keep any sorta muscle cream? You know, for strains an’ backaches an’ the like?” He asked.

Book helped Kaylee to sit up a bit and she nodded. “Try the secon’ drawer from the door on the
right,” She pointed. “First one sticks so we don’ put much in there.”

Riddick came up with a small jar and nodded in satisfaction, “This’ll help some Qing Xiang.” He promised as he helped her ease her cargo pants down. He grinned wolfishly as he looked at her legs, “Damn.”

River poked him in the shoulder, “Appreciation is noted.” She told him with a smile. “He may look all he likes after the muscles stop their spasms.” Her partner kissed her mouth with a mischievous smacking sound and covered his hands in the salve, surrounding her thigh with his fingers and working it into her skin.

Kaylee and Book seemed a bit confused and finally Kaylee asked, “I know ya came on with Simon, but I don’t think I ever got yer name.”

Riddick sent her a grin as he carefully rubbed River’s thigh muscles, tearing his gaze from his partner’s face. “Name’s Richard,” He offered. “Ya’ll can call me Rick.” He shrugged. “Don’ wanna scare ya none.”

“Scare me?” Kaylee looked at Book, “Lookit how you’re takin’ such care a her, how could ya scare me?”

Riddick looked at Kaylee and tilted his head, “I ain’t a nice man, River’s mine, that’s why I’m like this with her.”

Book nodded his understanding and looked at Kaylee with a gentle smile, “Men who otherwise pursue wicked ways, often are diametrically gentle with their women.” He seemed to seek an example for a moment, continuing with the observation, “Surely your gun hand, Jayne, is kinder to you than he is to those he deals with otherwise.”

Kaylee laughed a little, and stopped pressing a hand to her belly, “Jayne ain’t ever scared me, even when he first come aboard.” She shrugged and seemed to regret that action as well. “He’s sorta rude sometimes but he ain’t cruel nor overly mean.”

“I hate ta break that optimistic streak you got Miss Frye,” Riddick shook his head and lifted his hands from River’s thigh finally, eyeing it for a moment and then relaxing as River nodded happily. “But your gun hand is a big ole teddy bear compared to the likes a me.”

“But,” Kaylee tilted her head and looked from Book to Riddick, “Ya jumped on the lawman, I saw ya.”

Riddick was busy helping River put her pants back on and didn’t answer right away, “Ain’t ever much liked feds,” He said finally. “Got my reasons,” He put his arm out for River to balance against and watched as she executed a high kick and then a fancy fan kick. By the time she was done Kaylee’s eyes were wide.

River smiled at Kaylee, “You keep Serenity running.” She sat on the bench and tugged Riddick down to sit beside her, throwing her legs over his and boosting herself into his lap. “I have no experience with practical application of aeromechanics, is it hard to learn?”

Kaylee smiled and shook her head, “Always just known,” She explained. Riddick tilted his head looking towards the door as he heard running footsteps and Simon burst in a few minutes later. Simon glanced back out the door, shock on his face, and panted, “That man’s psychotic.”
River narrowed her eyes at her brother and then began to giggle. Riddick smiled and poked her in the side, “C’mon Qīng Xiāng, share the joke with the rest of us.” Between giggles River did and was pleased to have Riddick laughing along with her while Kaylee smiled weakly over her Captain’s foolishness and tried to soothe Simon.

Riddick was still grinning as he carried River up to the galley and began rooting around for something for her to eat, the conversation from the bridge drifted down the hall and he caught the scent of River’s curiosity, as she listened to what was happening. Riddick listened with half an ear as he pulled down a can of protein and vegetables that was chow mein according to the label. He and River were happily sharing a plate of the not so awful stuff when there was a crash and yelling.

River put her hand on his, “We could stay on this boat,” She whispered. “If we prove useful, he’ll offer us a place.”

“I ain’t havin’ him put you to use,” Riddick retorted harshly, “Ain’t havin’ anyone know ‘bout you until I’m sure we can trust ‘em. Simon an’ me, we ‘greed on that. ‘S why we didn’t tell ‘em all ‘bout the planet an’ Shazza. Too much explainin’.”

River nodded her agreement, “Understood, but genius doesn’t mean Reader.” She said quietly. “Have to be a person in my own right.”

“I know,” Riddick nodded. “But you’d like to stay?” He looked around, “Long’s you want to, I’m fine with it. Offered Cobh my help anyway.”

“Needs to find Ciara,” River murmured, “Here comes the captain.” She bent her head to her food, delicately wielding the chopsticks as Mal barged into the galley spoiling for a fight.

“Sounds like you got yourself a little trouble,” Riddick observed neutrally. When Mal looked at him, he elaborated, “Told ya, got superior senses. I can hear what’s goin’ on up on your bridge from two decks down iffen I’m in the right place. Don’t mean I talk on what I hear, just can’t help hearin’.”

“Then why’re you talkin’ on it now?” Mal grabbed a cup and began to fill it with coffee as Jayne ambled in and brightened when he saw the food.

“Any left?” The gun hand asked hopefully and was motioned towards the cooker. Scraping the leftovers onto a plate he brought it over to the table and generously dumped more onto Riddick’s and River’s plate before diggin’ into what was left. Mal watched this with not a little surprise.

“Just who in the hell are you that my gun hand will give you his food an’ he ain’t threatenin’ back when you tell him plain as day you’ll put his eyes out if he don’t stop looking at a girl’s legs?” Mal demanded more than a little put out.

River tilted her head up and looked at the captain, “Very tall.” She observed and ate some more of the food. When Riddick didn’t say anything for a moment she looked up and glared at him. “My làng is being rude,” She prodded. “Answer the captain please.”

“Do I really gotta?” Riddick wrinkled his nose at her, “Was kinda enjoyin’ this.”

“Rudeness is counterproductive. Be found out sooner or later, best to own up,” River reminded him. “Doesn’t change us,” She said quietly obviously trying to offer reassurance. “Doesn’t change who you are to me.”

Riddick glanced at Jayne who nodded calmly at him and continued eating, “Fine,” Riddick stood and folded his arms. “But they start panickin’ an’ I get to say I told you so.”
River nodded stealing a piece of protein from his side of the plate, “My láng’s terms are acceptable.”

He took a deep breath and looked at Mal and then at Zoe who’d come to join her captain, leaning against the door frame, “Met your gun hand in a past life, that’s how he knows me. Ain’t anythin’ I’m gonna talk on.” Riddick forced himself to not tense, “Richard B. Riddick.” There was a blank look from Mal, and Riddick shook his head, sitting down again, “That was anticlimactic.”

Zoe shook her head, “Seems to me I’ve heard that name before.” She murmured thoughtfully.

Mal echoed her movements, “I haven’t, not that I recall. Should it mean somethin’ to me?” He looked at Riddick, Zoe, and then at Jayne. “Jayne?”

His gun hand shrugged, “Man I knew made me look like a puppy.” He said between mouthfuls, “He don’ make threats. Man makes statements. Don’ change his mind neither.”

“All right, you make Jayne look like a sweetheart, but I ain’t ever seen Jayne carryin’ a girl around,” Mal pointed out.

“Why ya call ‘im that?” Zoe asked, “His name’s Cobb.”

“Just how I pronounce it,” Riddick shrugged. “Never got much formal education.”

“What do you mean Slam?” Mal had zeroed in on that.

“It’s what the inmates call the maximum security prison for extremely violent offenders,” Riddick drawled, “Happens when ya kill someone as needs killin’ an’ he turns out to be important. When ya escape an’ kill a few guards in the process they tend to get mad an’ serious ‘bout puttin’ ya back where they think ya belong.”

“So you murdered someone, an’ you escaped custody,” Mal shook his head. “An’ you get put in with a fifteen year old girl who now you say two years later that she’s yours.”

Riddick looked at him and shook his head, “Yeah.” He looked at River, “An’ now you’re thinkin’ she’s got Stockholm syndrome, in love with someone who was part of the place that hurt her.”

River put her chopsticks down and stood, “Excuse me please.” She looked at Riddick, “The captain is self righteous.” She looked at Mal and sneered, the expression out of place on her delicately lovely face. “I take it back, let him get shot, it will serve him right.” She turned and left the galley.

Riddick chuckled and shook his head, “Well now ya done it,” He looked at Mal. “River wants to stay here, she felt safe for whatever reason.” He shrugged, “She an’ I had the idea that I could prove I had skills you’d find useful. She’s a genius, probably wouldn’t have a problem doin’ anythin’ you needed ‘round here.”

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“An’ what can you do?” Zoe asked quietly. “Sides kill folks as need it?”

“Well mostly I’m good at that,” Riddick shrugged. “At night, none to equal me as a scout or tracker,” He looked at Jayne, “Cobb can tell ya.”
“It’s true,” Jayne finished his meal and took his plate to the cleaner. “Anythin’ I can do durin’ the day, he can do it at night.” He took Riddick’s empty plate and put it in the cleaner as well before drawing a couple glasses of water and putting one in front of his old friend before drinking the other. “Fact is Mal, this is a man you want around if you like stayin’ alive, an’ like to not get shot.” Jayne sat down and stretched out his legs, “Man’s every bit as good as I am with a gun an’ better with a knife. Just as strong as I am, even if he is short.”

“Fuck you Cobh,” Riddick said easily. He shrugged and looked at Mal, “Here’s the thing, dunno if I wanna work with someone thinks I’m scum. I been around people who hate me my whole life an’ I got precisely two an a half people who don’t.” He looked at Jayne, “Want your opinion a this man. He gonna treat me like I’m dirt ‘cause I killed some gŏushī daī’what deserved it?”

Jayne looked at Riddick and shook his head, “Dunno what to say to that Rick.” He said quietly. “Truth is I turned on my old crew an’ took this man’s offer. They’s rat scum an’ treated me like crap so I’s just tradin’ up. Ain’t a day goes by he don’t judge me for it one way or ‘nother.” The big gun hand gave a shrug, “An’ most days it don’t bother me none, I know what I am. ‘Cept days like today when I see him doin’ it to you.” He looked at his captain and first mate and then back at his oldest friend living. “Most days I guess I deserve it. I ain’t like Mal, never fought in no war, never had a cause I believed in. Fight for money, or my share a whatever it is the job is. I got a bunk a my own, two or three squares a day, an’ a cut of every job. He’s a fair boss parsin’ out chores, an’ he don’ hold with no rudeness to womenfolk.”

Riddick nodded his understanding, that would have been the sticking point for Cobh, the eldest son in a family full of daughters, he despised men who harassed or beat women. And the man wasn’t lying to him, he wouldn’t even bother to try knowing what he did of Riddick. The only lie he’d told was about the war. “That why you stay with this judgmental ass? The money? Free trip ‘round the ‘Verse.”

“Yeah that’s part of it,” Jayne nodded, “But he ain’t ever turned his back on crew. Ain’t ever tried to leave me for the crows. Crew can count on him to look out for ‘em an’ that ain’t nothing.”

“But he always thinks he’s right,” Riddick drawled. “Maybe he’s right, maybe we should just get off at Whitefall. Man’s just gonna kick up a fuss ‘bout me an’ River an’ I ain’t exactly got the full support of her brother. Last thing he needs is reinforcements. An’ I don’t want River to feel like she’s sneakin’ around. Woman deserves better.” He stood and walked out of the room.

“Mal, you know I’m good,” Jayne said quietly as his oldest friend left the room. “I don’t say it in front a him, but he’s better’n me at hand to hand. There ain’t much the man cain’t do or learn to do.”

“He’s dangerous,” Zoe said quietly. “Looks like he’d slit all our throats as soon as look at us.”

“An’ he threw himself in front of a bullet for a girl he didn’t even know,” Jayne retorted. “That sound like a cold blooded murderer to you? Because I’ll tell ya, if he wanted to, he coulda taken Dobson down, he for sure coulda done it without gettin’ shot. Then he got me to bandage him with duct tape ‘cause the girl he took a bullet for was gettin’ fixed. How many murderers you know do that?” He stood in disgust, “Dunno why I’m wastin’ my breath, ain’t like ya ever took my word for nothin’.”

Riddick smiled slightly as he continued down the stairs in search of River, Cobh was a good friend.

River waited until Riddick was nearly to the infirmary and stepped out of the shadows, “Shea is a
“good friend.” She said softly. “Good that you have him.”

“Well some things stick with you I guess,” Riddick traced her cheekbone with his finger. “Ain’t anythin’ like the gaze of a self righteous man to make a sinner doubt himself.”

River held his hand to her cheek and stared up at him. “Do you doubt me Richard?” She felt her heart falter at the thought, as if the muscle actually twisted with pain that Riddick might believe she didn’t truly love him. “I’ll prove it in anyway you need,” She whispered. “You know there’s nothing you ask of me that I won’t do.”

Riddick took a deep shaking breath and gathered her into his arms, burying his face in her hair, “No zhì ‘ài, you don’t gotta prove anythin’ to me. I know your heart an’ you know mine.” He kissed her cheek and neck and ear finally arriving at her lips with a hunger that couldn’t be denied.

River moaned into his mouth as his lips nipped and teased hers in light tormenting kisses. His hands stroked her back and ran through her hair, tugging her head back so he could trail his lips over her neck in a fiery trail. It felt as if wherever he touched her, fire bloomed. “Richard,” She moaned his name breathlessly. “Please.” He groaned in his chest and his mouth came down on hers, in a deep kiss, his tongue thrusting past her lips to stroke hers, his mouth devouring her.

She shuddered in his arms and wondered if it was possible to simply die of pleasure, of the need for it. “Richard, please, I need your hands my love, my lǎng.”

Riddick managed to tear his mouth from hers breathing heavily and stared at her dark eyes, wide open and staring into his. “We can’t, not here, an’ really not now,” He groaned dropping his head to her shoulder. “An’ I said I weren’t gonna do this to you.”

“She has done it to him,” River’s voice held a smile even as she shivered with need in his arms. “Think we can find a place on Whitefall?”

“Guess we ain’t gettin’ a choice,” Riddick sighed. “Less somethin’ changes.”

“Everything changes,” River said absently. “Come with me,” She suggested as he let her slide down his body to the floor.

“Oh?” Riddick tilted his head, “An’ what am I doin’?”

“Keep watch while she takes care of the ache Richard has given her.” River smiled wickedly.

“Oh no,” Riddick shook his head. “You know I ain’t got that kinda self control.” He kissed her cheek, “You know I cain’t do that.”

“She knows,” River admitted. “Still would like you to see someday.”

“Someday,” Riddick promised, “Not today.”

River watched as the captain, his first mate and his gun hand left the ship with a crate on the back of a mule. Tilting her head she looked up at the sky and frowned thoughtfully. Her dark eyes narrowed and she turned and looked at Riddick who was making use of Jayne’s weight bench. “Richard,” She murmured his name knowing he’d hear her, attuned as he was to her voice.

“Yeah Qīng Xiāng,” Riddick didn’t stop his rhythmic motion with the barbell. “What’s goin’ on?”
“Shea will require your help,” River said quietly. “They will not lie down and will find our trail. There will be a third man watching the snipers, Shea will not be aware of him. If you do not follow our friend he will die. Then the captain and Zoe will die as well. The pilot will delay leaving until it is too late. We will have to fight a raiding party. I am not at full strength yet, and you are tired my lâng.”

Riddick had stopped working out the minute River had said Shea’s name. Pulling on his shirt he grabbed his gunbelt and strapped it on, “Gimme my shivs will ya gorgeous?”

She picked up the utilitarian knives he’d purchased, and handed them to him one by one, “Keep one for later,” She admonished him. “It will be important.”

“You gonna be all right here?” Riddick kissed her, his mouth hot on hers.

“Shì, I’ll sit with Kaylee,” She nodded. “Go on now love, he’ll need you.”

Riddick shook his head as Cobh stopped with the mule and picked his spot, shovel in hand, “You get bored with shootin’ folks an’ decided to dig ‘em graves?” He called to the bigger man with a grin.

“Seein’ as I like to put ‘em there, only seems fair;” The gun hand shrugged. “Nah, gotta bury the goods. Patience is gonna try somethin’.”

“Yeah, River said you’d get shot in the back by a third guy iffen I didn’t show up to cover you,” Riddick nodded. He handed the big man a bottle of water and took the shovel for a turn at digging. “She might talk a little different but she ain’t ever been wrong ‘bout these things. Saved our collective pì gu on planet. Knew when they were comin’ to take her for another surgery. I learned to listen.”

Jayne regarded his friend thoughtfully, an expression the rest of his crew would have been surprised to see on his face given the personality he displayed to them. “I figured somethin’ like that,” He admitted, “Seein’ as she flat out told me to expect company.”

“Shoulda known,” Riddick climbed out of the hole and looked at it and then at the case. “How hard do you wanna make it for ‘em?”

“Well she shot Mal, an’ she’s plannin’ to do it again,” Jayne chuckled.

“So not too hard?” Riddick grinned. “Good enough then,” He climbed out of the hole and helped Jayne lower the crate in.

“So you stayin’ then?” Jayne asked as they began covering the goods up with dirt.

“Depends on how alla this goes I think,” Riddick shrugged, “Your Cap’n don’ want us, ain’t like we can make him take us.”

“Well, you could,” Jayne chuckled again, “But you’d have to kill him or somethin’ an’ that’d be kinda counterproductive.”

“Ya might say,” The convict agreed. “Guess you gotta put alla this back,” He looked around the area and smiled at Jayne, “Go on, do your job, I’ll be here when Mal tells ya to take a walk. We’ll do it like we used to.”
Jayne shook his head, “Mal’s gonna say somethin’ ‘bout no killin’.” He said slowly, “Patience usually gives a good price, so iffen we gotta work with her again dead folks ain’t good for business.”

Riddick rolled his eyes, “Won’t that be fun,” He snarled. “Fine, but if it bites me in the ass you’re explainin’ to River how I got shot twice in a week.”

“No offense Rick, but that ain’t exactly the type a threat I’m used ta gettin’ from you,” Jayne shook his head.

“You ain’t dealt with River when she’s pissed,” Riddick pointed out. “You do, you’ll understand that little woman is scarier than I ever could be.”

“You’ll have to explain that to me sometime,” Jayne got on the mule and started driving.

River looked up as Jayne drove the mule into the bay, “I will be very angry if Richard is shot on account of your captain,” She told the large man, a dark frown on her face. “But I understand that you feel you must abide by his orders.”

“Little girl, I ain’t accountable to you,” Jayne shook his head as he turned off the mule and stowed his tools.

“You should take some flash bangs and bury them at the meeting site,” River said quietly. “Mal and Zoe will be grateful for the distraction.”

“Rick said you tend to give helpful advice,” Jayne grinned. “How many you think?” He looked up to find River walking slowly and gracefully away. “Well three’s always a lucky number.” He muttered to himself as he grabbed his caltrop grenades.

Riddick watched as Cobh left Mal and Zoe down in the valley and began his walk about the hills. Cobh hadn’t changed much, and what had changed was improved. The man moved like a cat, lighter than ever despite his huge size. He was faster too, tracking the path of the first sniper easily. Riddick kept out of sight and nodded as the watching man River had warned him of came into view, taking aim at Jayne’s back.

Riddick flanked the man easily and wrapped an arm around his neck squeezing tightly, “Relax an’ go to sleep.” He muttered. “You ain’t shootin’ anyone in the back today.” He waited until he was certain the man was out cold and then dropped him on his face. Not having any duct tape handy he hogtied the would-be ambusher with his own belt and moved out of the shade of the trees.

Cobh nodded and kept moving, Riddick circling around to keep out of the enemy’s sight until Cobh found the second sniper. True to the tactics they’d learned in the war Jayne had picked up the first sniper’s rifle and now handed it to Riddick. “Fancy takin’ a few potshots at Patience?”

“Sure you trust me not to shoot Mal?” Riddick retorted with a grin.

“I don’t trust me to not shoot at Mal, “Jayne shook his head. “Course he does get shot enough on his own, got the worst luck like that.”

“How ‘bout you?” Riddick asked quietly. “You get shot a lot in his employ?”
“No more’n I ever did,” Jayne shrugged and put his eye to the scope. “Here comes Patience, and quite a few fellas for a simple buy.”

“So maybe I get to shoot her?” Riddick teased with a hopeful note in his voice.

“Same ole bloodthirsty Rick,” Jayne grumbled.

“Least I don’ have a girls name,” The convict retorted.

“Weren’t ‘xactly planned,” Jayne muttered. “You know what happens when I try to read an’ write.”

“Shit, still?” Riddick sighed, “We get to stay on, me an’ River can help with that too. River better’n me probably.”

“Be appreciated,” Jayne’s voice indicated his sincerity even if he didn’t move his eye from the scope. “Can you hear what they’re sayin’ from up here?”

“What I can’t catch on the wind I get with your earwig,” Riddick had picked his target and smiled, his wicked expression matching Jayne’s. “Nothing but zāng tū so far, she’s takin’ way too long with this for it to be legit.”

“Yeah, but we did at least expect it,” Jayne muttered in irritation. “I still think it's her turn to get shot.”

“I feel bad for the horses,” Riddick sighed slightly, “Them horses are as close to innocent bystanders as I ever saw.”

“Well maybe they’ll buck an’ run,” Jayne said hopefully. “Ah, I think they’re gonna make a move soon, Mal’s comin’ to the end a his little speech.”

“Man likes to hear himself talk don’ he,” The escaped murderer observed.

“Not alla time,” The gun hand disagreed. “Just when he wants folks to underestimate him. He’s gotta whole different tone when he’s pissed or wants ya to pay attention.”

River had been enjoying her chat with Kaylee, lying on her side on the infirmary’s shelf, part of her recalling how she and Riddick had kissed there, setting her at ease enough to ignore the fact that she was in an infirmary. She sat up suddenly and looked towards the door, “Stay in bed Kaylee.” Sliding down from her shelf she moved towards the door.

“What’s wrong sweetie?” Kaylee looked confused as River ignored her, walking to the door.

River took a deep breath and braced herself against Dobson’s mind as he readied himself to grab her. This would be a good test of just how well she could manage without Riddick. If she could just stay calm, not panic, all she had to do was wait for her partner to return. Dobson’s hands weren’t gentle, an arm wrapping around her throat and aiming a gun at her head. “Look at you, all woke up,” He smirked.

Kaylee opened her mouth to protest, tried to move and Dobson pointed the second gun at her. “Oh, I’m sorry about what happened before. But make so much as a sound, the next one goes through your throat.”

River truly felt bad for Kaylee, her fear and horror were like an awful mask over her sweet face. The
hostage tried to smile at her new friend as Dobson pulled her from the room.

“Yeah, he’s throwin’ the money back,” Jayne sighed, “Guess it was too much to hope this would go smooth.”

“Guessin’ that’s clue number one that you get to shoot folks?” Riddick asked with a grin in his voice.

“Yeah, an’ then Mal’ll say something stupid an’ obvious,” The gun hand agreed. “I got the guy with the dumb hat an’ big gun.”

“Damn, really wanted to shoot that hat,” Riddick grumbled and picked another target that wasn’t Patience.

“We cain’t always get what we want Rick,” Jayne teased his friend. “Mal’s commentin’ on the gun, any minute now,” He chuckled. “Here we go.” He took his shot.

Riddick gave an evil smirk and took his as Mal hit the button for the flash bangs, panicking the horses. The mass panic in the valley made it hard to find targets but Mal might be a decent shot because he accounted for one that Riddick could see and Zoe for another before a shotgun blast threw her backwards. Riddick took a deep breath, found his mark, felt Jayne do the same and on his exhale squeezed the trigger. Two more went down. Zoe managed to raise her head and gun and shoot a panicking deserter in the back. As Riddick found another target the man shot Mal in the arm. Riddick’s bullet hit him in the heart just as Mal’s hit his hip.

Mal shot the horse Patience was hiding behind and Riddick cursed. Jayne looked at him, “It’s only one horse Rick, that ain’t too bad.”

“That ain’t it,” Riddick shook his head. “River’s afraid, controlling it but afraid,” He tilted his head listening. “An’ the Reavers are back. I’m headed to the ship for River. You get those two and the money or this little dance is for nothing,” He called the last over his shoulder, still carrying the sniper rifle as he sprinted towards Serenity.

River knew the moment Simon became aware of what Dobson had done. Her brother’s panic almost drove her own animal into a frenzy. Finding Riddick’s mind, feeling his deliberate actions as he found a target, aimed, and fired on the exhale calmed her but she still didn’t like how nervous she was. Dobson was pushing her towards the airlock, hitting the release button, and Simon jumped down on top of him.

River shuddered and fought for control, as Dobson lunged for his gun and Simon threw himself on top of him. It was all she could do to not scream and cry, her brother’s fear and desperation were infectious without Riddick there to help her find calm. But there was anger too, such rage and screaming and... “Xuě shàng jiā shuāng.” She threw herself at Dobson’s other gun, beating Simon to it and pointing it at the fed as Dobson got his gun, and stumbled to his feet, aiming at her.

“To move would be sōu zhǔ yī,” River said coldly.

On the comm system Wash’s voice wasn’t panicked but he wasn’t calm either, “Reavers! Reavers incoming and headed straight for us. We are in the air in one minute.”
River felt the ship’s engines begin their warm up and kept her eyes on Dobson who was trying to talk her down. “You gonna do it? You’re gonna kill a lawman in cold blood? Escaping a prison doesn’t make you a murderer.” River could see Book at the entrance to the cargo hold, beaten and bloody as Dobson continued, “I don’t wanna hurt anybody. I have a job to do. To uphold the law, that’s what we’re talking about here.”

River tilted her head thoughtfully, “You’re mistaken.” She told him coldly, “I am a killer. I am what they made me after all. And you do hurt people. You hurt the one person on the ship who would have helped you. Was intent upon helping you when you beat him into unconsciousness.”

“There’s no where you can go that they won’t find you,” Dobson told her flatly.

“I know that,” River nodded. Her eyes flickered over Simon, still far too close to the fed for her comfort. It was becoming harder and harder to maintain her facade of stoicism with the Reavers approaching and Wash near to panicking on the bridge, Simon’s fear and Kaylee’s terror.

Behind her the airlock started to open, the noise startling her just enough that Dobson took advantage of her moment of inattention and grabbed Simon. “I’m not playing anymore,” The lawman sneered. River felt Riddick reach the ship just as the other three did and part of her relaxed as he walked up the ramp behind her. Dobson started to make another threat, “Anybody makes so much as a--”

A knife hit his belly just as a gunshot sounded behind her and River lowered the gun finally as Dobson fell backwards. Moving forward she tugged Simon away from the body, pulling out Riddick’s knife and wiping it clean on Dobson’s clothes. “Still alive,” She remarked quietly.

“Jayne,” Mal’s voice called. River watched as her partner and his friend lifted Dobson like so much trash and threw him out the airlock as Zoe hit the comm and told Wash they were aboard. River handed her partner his knife and smiled as she showed him her new gun. The captain hadn’t seemed to noticed she had a gun at all.

Riddick grinned and took five seconds to give his girl the kiss she deserved, “Proud a you Qing Xiāng.”

River nearly blushed and took a deep breath, “Wasn’t easy.” She looked up towards the bridge, “You will be able to help Wash. I’ll be with Kaylee.”

“All right, but after this, you an’ me, we gotta date with a quiet couch,” Riddick promised, giving her one last kiss.

River smiled as she went to reassure Kaylee that everyone was fine. Simon was already helping Book to his feet as she walked softly past them

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: So how does everyone feel about this? It might seem like an odd place to stop the chapter but I’ve got my reasons. Hope you folks like this. I wanted River to be able to take a little more action commensurate with Riddick being in the Academy with her and not quite as traumatized as she was in the show. I’d love to hear what you think so please let me know.

Chinese Translations:
mèi mei - little sister
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
láng - wolf
gǒushǐ duī - person who behaves badly/pile of dogshit
zhì `ài most beloved
Shì - yes
pi gus - butts
zāng tǔ - trash
Xuě shàng jiā shuāng - to add hail to snow/one disaster on top of another
sōu zhǔ yi - a rotten idea

Quote Sources:
I arise from dreams of thee - Percy Bysshe Shelley
In the first sweet sleep of night, when the winds are breathing low, and the stars are shining bright - Percy Bysshe Shelley
Riddick walked onto the bridge as Jayne was demanding that Wash dodge the Reavers. “Ain’t that easy Cobh,” He observed.

“If everyone could just be quiet for a moment...” Wash’s voice was incredibly calm. Riddick nearly smiled at the scent coming off the man, like leaves and oak trees in the summer. A warm breeze. This man was incredibly gifted as a pilot. River had been right, but when wasn’t she. “I need Kaylee in the engine room please.” He said after a moment of silence.

“Can she even--” Zoe frowned and was interrupted by her captain talking to Jayne.

“Get her in there. Now.” Jayne took off at a run.

Inara entered the bridge and Riddick heard Mal telling her to get the civilians into the shuttle and ready to go. He waited until the two of them had their moment and Inara had gone before he spoke.

“River an’ me are stayin’,” He said quietly.

“Don’t recall invitin’ ya,” Mal pointed out.

Riddick took his eyes off the window and cortex screen for a half minute to spear Mal with a silver gaze. “I ain’t as good a pilot as yours, but I am a damn good co-pilot. He might not need my help but when it comes time to pull a fast one on those things I’ll be handy to have.” He turned his gaze back to the screens, “An’ River won’t leave. She’ll knock your Companion, her brother and the shepherd unconscious before she’ll leave me to Reavers. She’ll be with Kaylee in the engine room. She’ll be able to help.”

“And if we get boarded?” Zoe asked quietly.

“Then she and I are the best chance you got of survivin’,” Riddick’s voice was flat. “Reavers ain’t anythin’ we ain’t faced together before.”

“That’s for later,” River’s soft voice said from behind Mal. “Knew you wouldn’t believe him,” She said in explanation for her presence. “He’s right. I won’t leave him. I’ll die with him fighting before I’ll leave his side.” She slid between Mal and Zoe to slide a hand over Riddick’s shoulder, press a kiss to his cheek and then retreated, “I’ll be with Kaylee in the engine room. Shepherd Book is already there.”

Zoe watched her go and shook her head, “She’s that calm she ain’t really all there.”

Mal ignored that for the moment, standing behind Wash, “How we doin’?”

Wash’s answer was typical of the man Riddick was beginning to know, “I don’t mean to alarm anybody... but I think... we’re being followed.” He spared a glance at Riddick, “Can you follow what I’m doing without getting in the way?”

Riddick took the co-pilot’s seat and nodded. “Light hand when you’re steering, hard when you’re bankin’, heavy when you want a sharp turn,” He smiled slightly. “This ain’t my first rodeo.”

Wash’s answering grin was like the sun, “Good to know.” He hit the switch for the comm, “Kaylee,
River patted Jayne’s arm as he set Kaylee down and gave the big man a smile, “She’ll be fine.” She reassured the gun hand. On the overhead Wash’s voice was asking them about status. “Gonna need a little push here.”

“You want me to go for full burn?” Kaylee asked, her voice a little weak but otherwise cheery.

River listened as Wash’s voice spoke overhead, “Not just yet, but set it up.” She looked at Kaylee and listened the sunshine and cheerful music in the girl’s head, filled with living ships and joyful machines that functioned as they should without people hurting them or breaking them.

Kaylee was talking to Book, “You know where the press regulator is?” When Book looked around and then pointed to a part of the engine Kaylee smiled, “Head of the class.”

Riddick concentrated on matching Wash’s movements as precisely as possible. He was learning more about the man from his flying that he would in conversation with him. Kaylee’s voice called through the comm, “We’re ready for full burn on your mark.”

Zoe sounded concerned but Riddick couldn’t be bothered to worry about it, “Full burn in atmo? That won’t cause a blowback? Burn us out?”

Mal seemed less concerned, from the tone of his voice he was already thinking of a way out, “Even if it doesn’t, they can push just as hard, keep right on us.” He paused, plainly deciding on a course of action, “Wash, you gotta give me an Ivan.”

Wash nodded as if Mal had just requested pancakes for breakfast, “I’ll see what I can do.” Riddick hit the button to open the com and Wash shot him a grin in thanks, “Kaylee, how would you feel about pulling a Crazy Ivan?”

River watched as Kaylee grinned weakly in response to Wash’s question, “Always wanted to try one. Jayne. Open the port jet control. Cut the hydraulics.”

Jayne looked around, plainly confused, “Where the hell is--”

River took the big man’s arm and guided him as Kaylee said, “Look. Look! Look where I’m pointing.” Jayne opened a panel near the floor and Kaylee smiled, her fingers flexing in anticipation, “Okay. Now it’s real simple.”

Jayne and River looked at the tangled mess of wires and River could hear the thought from Jayne that Kaylee and he had different definitions of simple. “It’s all right Jayne,” River nodded, “I know what she wants. Just need your strength to help me do it.” She began to sort through the wires, showing him what needed to be done.

Riddick wished the backseat drivers would be a little quieter in their comments, as Zoe observed the Reavers grappling hook warming up. “They’re on us,” The first mate reported.
Wash spoke into the com, “Kaylee...?”

Riddick concentrated on mimicking Wash, ignoring the extremely tense duo behind him, Mal muttering “C’mon, c’mon, c’mon, c’mon...”

Kaylee’s voice sounded almost as good as River’s when she called through the com that they were ready. Wash sent Riddick a grin and called back, “Everybody hold on to something.” His voice softened as he spoke to his opponent, “Here’s something you can’t do...” Riddick held the wheel steady as Wash slammed down a lever, spinning Serenity into a perfect one eighty, reversing their trajectory so they were headed straight for the Reaver ship which dodged at the last second. Wash hit the com again and shouted down to Kaylee, “NOW!”

River held Kaylee steady while Book hit a button and Jayne used all his strength to pull on an overhead lever. The engine glowed bright as a star turning faster and faster. She could hear the explosion of the atmosphere around them, full burn roaring like a lion as they headed towards the black.

Wash pulled up at the controls and Riddick matched him, both of them fighting the atmosphere with all their might until they hit the black. Finally they were done, and Wash eased off the controls. Riddick nodded his satisfaction and shot a grin at the pilot, “So when can we do that again?”

Wash chuckled and looked back at his captain and his wife, the whooping and hollering of Jayne in the engine room was audible even on the bridge. Mal and Zoe had almost identical expressions of amazement on their faces. Finally Mal spoke, his voice still a bit awed, “Knew I hired you for somethin’.”

Zoe leaned over the back of Wash’s chair, “Ain’t no way we they can come around in time to follow us now.”

Mal pulled the com talkie down and spoke into it. “We’re good, people. We’re out of the woods.” There was more whooping from the engine room and Riddick grinned.

Wash checked a gauge and looked up at Mal, “We should have just enough left in us to hit a fuel station. We’ll need to do some patching up. I hope we got paid today.”

“We did,” Mal nodded.

Zoe looked at her husband, “Sir? I’d like you to take the helm, please. I need this man to tear all my clothes off.”

Mal smiled and spread his hand toward the door as Wash climbed out of the chair and followed his wife, his voice drifted back to Riddick, “Work, work, work...”

Riddick chuckled and watched as Mal threw himself into the pilot’s seat but didn’t take the controls, just sat and watched Riddick calmly flying. “Wouldn’t have taken you for someone who can follow another’s lead, ‘specially someone you could break in two.”

Riddick glanced at him and checked his instruments, double-checked the autopilot and sat back in his chair, “You don’t know me Cap’n Reynolds.” He shrugged, “You might think you do, but there’s
only one person in the ‘Verse truly knows me, an’ you ain’t her. Though Cobh’s a close second.” He paused a moment, picking up one of Wash’s dinos and smiling slightly over it. Now that they were in the black he didn’t need his goggles, sliding them up so Mal could see his eyes. “I can pilot your shuttles, an’ after I watch Wash long enough I’ll be able to pilot the boat, but I ain’t...” He shook his head, “That man is gifted at flyin’ the way Simon is gifted as a surgeon. I might could match him skill for skill technically after I learnt enough, but I won’t ever have his...panache or creativity.”

“Still comes as a surprise,” Mal prodded.

“Why? ‘Cause I could snap him in half?” Riddick shrugged, “I could kill him but it wouldn’t buy me his gift. Fact is I could kill every man and woman on this boat without breakin’ a sweat, except River. That don’t make me a better man, just makes me skilled.” He shook his head as River came onto the bridge and sat in his lap. “Like I told you b’fore Cap’n, I don’t worry ‘bout my image, my rep, haven’t for a long time. I know what I can do. I don’t gotta prove it to anyone.”

“You ain’t as much like Jayne as I thought then,” The captain was looking at River and talking to Riddick. “That man don’t let a quip go unanswered.”

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts,” River said softly, “Jayne Cobb plays his part just as you do Captain.”

“My ears are burnin’,” Jayne walked onto the bridge and looked out at the stars. “There ya are,” He said to River, “Thanks for the help earlier.”

River nodded, “My pleasure,” She smiled.

“What was that?” Mal looked at the three people exchanging smiles.

“Weren’t for Rick an’ River here, the meet woulda gone a lot less smooth,” Jayne sat in the remaining chair, stretching his legs out with a sigh. “Rick come out an’ kept me from gettin’ shot in the back. Out flanked someone keepin’ an eye on the snipers.” He rubbed his chin, “He also grabbed one a the rifles an’ took up arms, shot quite a few a them as were tryin’ to kill you an’ Zoe. An’ River, when I brought the mule back, she suggested maybe a coupla flash bangs buried in the dirt would be helpful to ya’ll when Patience made her move.”

“Thought I said everybody should stay on the boat,” Mal wasn’t irritated but he wasn’t thrilled either. “River stayed,” Riddick pointed out. “I never said I would. Never agreed to follow your orders Cap’n.”

“An’ if he hadn’t come along? I’d be dead an’ so’d you an’ Zoe,” Jayne said bluntly. He looked at River and then Riddick, “That bein’ said, lawman was goin’ on ‘bout how they’d never stop lookin’ for her.” He aimed a light sneer in Riddick’s direction, “Guess you ain’t so valuable to them, or ya scared ‘em so much they don’ wancha back.”

“Yeah,” Mal frowned. “Funny how the lawman got out of his room. You having tied him up so well and all.”

Jayne shook his head, “I didn’t have nothing to do with that. Anyway it all turned out just fine. Buzzards’re the only ones gonna find him...”

Riddick had to admit, the captain might be a fool, but he wasn’t stupid. Mal stared right at Jayne, “But he did try to make a deal with you, right?” Jayne didn’t speak, just looked out at the stars. “How come you didn’t turn on me, Jayne?”
Jayne turned his chair slightly, and winked at Riddick so Mal wouldn’t see, “Money wasn’t good enough.”

“What happens when it is?” Mal wanted to know.

Jayne smiled and stood up, “Well... that’ll be an interesting day.”

Mal nodded thoughtfully, “Imagine it will.”

Riddick watched as Jayne left, and said nothing to contradict his old friend. If it suited Cobh to be thought a heartless mercenary thug he wouldn’t interfere with that. On the other hand he wasn’t going to treat his old friend like he was dirt either.

Simon entered the bridge as Jayne left it, his eyes seeking River’s first and then lighting on Mal’s bloody arm. “You need me to look at that?”

“Just a graze,” Mal shook his head.

Simon slanted a glance at Riddick and River and visibly steeled himself, “So, where do you plan on dumping us?”

Mal spoke slowly, looking at the instrument panel at first. “There’s places you might be safe. You want the truth, though, you’re probably safer on the move.” He turned and looked at Simon, “And we never stop moving.”

Simon frowned, “I’m confused. No wait, I, I think maybe you’re confused.”

Mal folded his arms and spoke steadily, “It may have become apparent to you that the ship could use a medic. You ain’t weak. I don’t know how bright you are, top three percent, but you ain’t weak and that’s not nothing. You live by my rule, you keep your sister from doing anything crazy, you could maybe find a place here. ‘Til you find better.”

“I appreciate the offer,” Simon’s voice was quiet but steady. “But I can’t accept. Or I won’t accept unless Riddick can find a place here as well. My sister...isn’t crazy per se. She’s traumatized and unstable but she isn’t mad. And she cares about him. He is...undoubtedly dangerous but he cares for her as much as I do. I...much as it tempts me to keep River away from him, I can’t divide them. I can’t think of a crueler thing to do to them both.”

“I appreciate it Doc,” Riddick’s voice sandpaper voice was rough, “But if he don’ want me, I cain’t force him to have me.” He looked at Mal, “You don’t want a co-pilot an’ extra gun hand that’s fine. I’ll pay a fare. I know how ta find work.”

“Never said I wouldn’t hire you, never said I would,” Mal pointed out. “It’s plain you’re useful.” He frowned thoughtfully, “I hire you on, you’d get a bunk and a share just like Jayne. But my rule about shipboard romances stands. She ain’t eighteen you don’t spend time in a locked room with her. I know that seems highhanded, but that’s the way it is. This is my boat and that makes me responsible for what happens on it.”

Riddick tilted his head, “Well neither one a us sleep ‘thout the other.”

Simon nodded, “We spent some time on another ship and I can vouch for the truth of that. The one time I insisted, River woke up screaming. And Rick never slept.”

Mal sighed, “Ain’t anything ever easy?” He rolled his eyes heavenward. “Fine, but you don’t shut the door to your bunk then. You wanna sleep with this girl, an’ I mean only sleep, you keep the
hatch open.”

Riddick tilted his head at River, “Ain’t just my decision,” He reminded her.

River tilted her head, “Would like some time to court in privacy,” She said softly. “But I think it is a fair deal. Provided I can join the crew if I prove...stable.”

“Ya’ll can work courtin’ out ‘mongst yourselves,” Mal shook his head. “As for crew, what can you do?”

River smiled, “Good at husking,” She said quietly using the rim term for hacking a cortex. “Martial artist, good with guns, knives and swords. Good at science and math.”

Mal frowned, “Dunno if I need a full time crew member for that, but could have ya on a consultin’ basis. See how much we’d need you. Maybe make you full time iffen it seems to be workin’ out.”

“Then we got a deal,” Riddick nodded.

The doctor hesitated, and finally spoke, “I’m trying to put this as delicately as I can... How do I know you won’t kill me in my sleep?”

“You don’t know me, son. So let me explain this to you once: If I ever kill you, you’ll be awake, you’ll be facing me, and you’ll be armed,” Mal said quietly and slanted a glance at Riddick, “That goes for you too and I expect the same courtesy.”

Simon half smiled, “Are you always this sentimental?”

“Had a good day,” Mal had a half smile on his face.

“You had the Alliance on you, criminals and savages...” Simon enumerated the ways in which the day had gone wrong, “Half the people on the ship have been shot or wounded including yourself, and you’re harboring known fugitives.”

Mal looked out the window at the black sky, “We’re still flying.”

Simon shook his head, “That’s not much.”

Mal’s voice was soft, almost as if he was talking to himself. Riddick wrapped his arms around River so his cheek pressed to hers and turned the chair so she could look at the black too. Her voice echoed Mal’s, “It’s enough.”

Riddick watched as Simon left and turned back to River, “I’m thinkin’ we oughta talk to Miss Inara,” He suggested.

“’Nara don’t service crew,” Mal said absently.

“Ain’t wantin’ service,” Riddick replied shortly. “Think I’d want a...” He bit off the rude word, “Even a woman as beautiful as Inara,” He looked at River. “No, I have what I want. Don’t want Inara for me. Want her for River.”

“Uh, dunno if Inara will go for that or not,” Mal shrugged. “River ain’t crew officially, it’d be up to Inara.” He tilted his head, “You don’t seem the sort to share.”

“I ain’t,” Riddick rolled his eyes. “But I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout this with you. Ain’t your business anyway.”
“I don’t mind Richard,” River laid her palm against his cheek. “You can tell him. He should know anyway.” Riddick’s growl vibrated through his chest and River poked him, “I know you think it’s private, and it is, but he won’t say anything. He saw...in the war, so he knows.”

Mal was looking mystified during this little speech and Riddick sighed, “Fine. We just ain’t even told her brother. Didn’t wanna lay that on him along with everything else.”

Mal nodded his understanding, “Got my word I won’t speak of it to him or anyone else lessen it becomes somethin’ that effects my crew or boat.”

“River has a hard time talkin’ bout it,” Riddick said quietly, his dark coffee voice pained in a way Mal hadn’t ever heard a man’s. “She told me,” He kissed River’s temple, “I thought she was a virgin, was givin’ her an argument bout not bein’ good ‘nough for her, an’ she,” His voice caught and he took a deep breath. “She told me she wasn’t. They,” He kissed River’s temple and cheek and hair visibly trying to control his rage at the thought.

River kissed his cheek and turned to look at Mal, “I resisted the training at first,” She explained. “The first time I deliberately failed a test...they raped me. It wasn’t a man, they didn’t want to contaminate their experiment. But they raping me.” She kissed Riddick’s cheek and lips softly, “Richard is the only man who has ever touched me. But between the rape and the torture...I am...unready for intimacy.”

“Wanna talk to Miss Inara about therapy for River,” Riddick had managed to get his fury back under control enough to speak. “I had really tried to convince myself that they hadn’t done that to River, that maybe they were too high minded to--” He shook his head. “Last piece of naïveté left in me.”

“She said you’re the only man to touch her,” Mal frowned. “What did she mean? I’m guessin’ you two ain’t had much time alone.”

“No,” Riddick shook his head. “We had about a quarter of an hour once, thought we were gonna die on that godforsaken planet, an’ we,” He sighed and looked at River not wanting to discuss something so private with another man.

“My làng does not wish to be rude, our animals wish to keep such things private,” River explained quietly. “We kissed, passionately, my first kisses with Richard were when he was in chains and could not touch me. But for a little while we were alone, and he could hold me, could kiss me. And I could kiss him. It was the first time I’d felt passion...” She smiled at her partner, her mate. “I knew I loved him, knew he was my best friend, I could trust him with my life. But I’d never felt like that before, as if his hands on me were the only way the hunger could be satisfied.”

“But it was cause you thought you were gonna die,” Mal nodded. “An’ when you’re safe, that’s hard to recapture.”

“Not so much as you’d think,” River shook her head, blushing a little. “I love kissing my Richard.” She smiled at her man. “He’s so gentle with me. I know he’s afraid of scaring me. And I’m afraid of...well everything. Except for that first time, fear comes along with...passion. I don’t want my time with Richard to be tainted by anything.”

Mal nodded, “I think I’d better go with ya’ll an’ talk to Inara, let her know that crew or not, you’re both gonna need some help.” He looked at Riddick. “I know you think you’re fine, but protective as you are a her? You’re gonna take that to extremes if you don’t get some way a dealin’ with it.”

He checked the autopilot and strode out the bridge, leading them to Inara’s shuttle. He was about to walk in when River grabbed his arm. “When asking favors it is better to begin politely,” She said and
stepped in front of him to knock on the door.

It took a moment but Inara opened the door to her shuttle in surprise, “River, and...Rick and Mal.” She didn’t quite frown but she was obviously puzzled.

River bowed politely, “Please, may we come in? We have something to discuss.”

“Be welcome,” Inara stepped back and gestured in welcome. “Would you like some tea?”

“Please,” Riddick nodded gratefully and took a seat on the couch, River sitting beside him. Mal sat in one of the chairs opposite Inara, visibly uncomfortable in the elegant space. Riddick waited politely through the slightly ceremonial brewing and pouring of the tea and when given his cup waited for River to have hers before he lifted it to his face to inhale.

He was aware of a spurt of surprise from Inara when he didn’t immediately dump sugar into his tea or gulp it down. “Hot tea ain’t somethin’ River an’ I got regular,” He gave the companion a slight smile. “She taught me how to do a tea ceremony. I liked it, made tea last longer, always liked smellin’ it anyway. An’ there’s somethin’ zen ‘bout tea ceremony.”

Inara’s face was a study in masked shock at such an elegant sentiment coming from the escaped convict. “I’m glad you enjoy it, few men truly do.” She sent an unreadable glance at Mal, “It is a pleasure to see you, but I’m certain you didn’t seek me out just for tea.”

“No,” Riddick shook his head. “Dunno if you caught it when Simon an’ River an’ me were tellin’ ya’ll bout how we got here,” He looked at River, “But River was tortured. An’ she were raped, not by a man, but all the same, she’s violated.”

“And you and she are beginning a relationship,” Inara said slowly, “Or building on the relationship you already have.”

River nodded, “Richard makes me feel...wonderful.” She offered quietly. “But along with everything else, I’m afraid. I don’t want to be. I know he would never hurt me. He’d slit his own throat before he’d hurt me. But I...”

“But the fear is always there,” Inara nodded her understanding. “I assume you told Mal this or he wouldn’t be so calm right now.”

“Just a few minutes ago,” Mal nodded his hands tight around his tea cup. “Riddick is crew now. An’ River’s gonna be a kinda consultant for us on what jobs it’s applicable to.” He looked at the companion steadily. “I know you don’t service crew. But I’m hopin’ you’ll make an exception for these two.”

The companion seemed nonplussed, her gaze went from Mal to Riddick to River and back again, “Perhaps you could explain what it is you’d need?”

“Richard thought you could talk with me,” River said quietly. “I think it's a good idea, because Companions are trained as healers of spirit among other things.” She took Riddick’s hand in hers as he set down his cup. “Mal made the point that Richard should also speak with you because he is so protective of me, and that could become unhealthy as well.”

“Miss Inara, ain’t askin’ that you...do anything you don’t want,” Riddick said quietly. “Know its guild law that Companions choose their clients. But the only other person on this boat with any trainin’ is Simon an’ River an’ I...we can’t talk ‘bout this to Simon. Shepherd Book, prolly is a good man, but he’s a shepherd. This ain’t exactly his forte.”
“No,” Inara smiled. “First I would like to talk to you both privately.” She looked at Mal, “You’ve thrown your weight in on their side which is why you came. But you shouldn’t hear the next part I think. I can promise to do my best for them.”

Mal nodded and pushed himself up from the chair. “When ya’ll are done here, come by the bridge or find Jayne, tell him to show ya the empty bunk.” He told Riddick.

Inara looked at the two of them thoughtfully, “Anything we discuss in this shuttle, or elsewhere regarding this situation or your history will remain confidential. I will not repeat anything we discuss to the crew or any other person. I’m going to ask you some questions that you’ll undoubtedly find intrusive. These are not meant to be titillating or for any prurient interest, but they will tell me a great deal about the two of you.” She rose and retrieved a book from a drawer and opened it to a blank page. “First please tell me your ages.”

“Don’t know exactly,” Riddick frowned in thought. “I’m about twenty five.”

“And I’m three months past seventeen,” River said quietly.

“So about eight years between the two of you,” Inara wrote the information down. “That’s actually a nice gap, usually the male is a bit more experienced and with such a young lady that’s important.” She looked at the two of them, “These questions will give me an idea of how the two of you see sex, and the value you place on it. I know it might seem embarrassing but honest answers will truly help me to help you.”

Riddick looked at her, “I don’ hide anything from River, I can’t.” He said quietly.

“And I don’t conceal things from Richard,” River’s voice was soft. “You must understand Miss Inara, we lived in close quarters for nearly two years. He knows when I’m in pain, when my menses are due, he’s seen me ill, and injured, he holds me at night, he knows when I have nightmares.”

“There ain’t a thought or feeling I’ve had since I met River that she ain’t known about,” Riddick explained, “She knows everything about me. She’s seen me piss for gods sake. She’s seen me helpless an’ beaten. We trust each other.”

“All right then,” Inara nodded. “That’s rare; trust is usually the hardest achievement for a couple.” She made a note or two and smiled. “All right, Rick I’d like you to tell me about your first sexual encounter.”

“Huh,” Riddick tilted his head, “You mean my first or first with River?”

“Your first,” The companion clarified. “Can you tell me what it was like?”

“It was during the war,” Riddick said quietly. “I was ‘bout fifteen, an’ one a the women in my unit an’ I had shore leave same time. My buddy, he wanted a beer, an’ so we all go in to town together. I ain’t had any type a alcohol before so I weren’t used to it. Turns out my animal don’t care for whiskey too much, though a beer is all right.” He smiled at River who nodded encouragingly. “Don’t remember much, recall bein’ randy an’ there bein’ women for hire. An’ I was asking my buddy, what did he think. He’s sweet on a girl already so he didn’t want one. An’ the woman in our unit, Jen, her name was, she sits in my lap an’ kisses me, which I kinda liked, an’ told me I didn’ have ta pay if I wanted a woman.”

Riddick looked at River, “She was a nice woman, ‘bout ten years older’n me, though she didn’t know that. My buddy an’ me, we’d both lied ‘bout our ages. So Jen thought I was eighteen. An I weren’t gonna tell her different.”
“So your first experience with sex was with a friend, who initiated you,” Inara clarified. “What was it like?”

“Ain’t ever felt anythin’ so good,” Riddick chuckled. “Thought my animal was gonna go crazy with the sensations. Wanted to touch her, an’ taste her everywhere. An’ it turned out that I got some sorta weird thing that even after I fall once I’m still ready to go, takes twice ‘fore my body thinks it’s done. Leastways ‘til recent.”

“So that was the first time you’d ever even kissed a woman and the two of you had sex,” Inara said quietly. “Do you remember if she fell?”

Riddick nodded, a wicked grin splitting his face, “Dunno how it is for other men, but...I don’t much like it less I can get the girl to fall. Feels wrong. First time we started an’ I was galloping ahead a her an’ realized her moanin’ weren’t real, she just didn’t want me to feel bad.” He chuckled, “She didn’t know I could tell and was tryin’ to fake her fall when I stopped an’ called her on it. Tol’ her iffen I weren’t doin’ somethin’ she liked I’d ‘preciate if she’d tell me.” He kissed River’s temple, “I liked it a lot better when I knew what she liked an’ what she didn’t.”

“And had you any experience with sex before that, any kissing or petting with girls your own age?” Inara asked gently.

“Rape ain’t sex,” Riddick said flatly. “An’ that was the only thing I’d seen ‘fore the war. That was why I joined up. Saw too many high an’ mighty folk abusin’ kids. Killed one of ‘em when I was fourteen an’ joined up to hide out an’ hurt them as had hurt kids like me.”

“So your only positive experience with sex came at fifteen,” Inara murmured. “All right.” She looked at River. “What about you River? What was your first sexual encounter?”

River smiled shyly and squeezed Riddick’s hand, “My láng,” She began, “Found me attractive but would do nothing about it until I was old enough and we were safe from the academy. But I could feel that he desired me even though he did nothing. His animal recognized mine, loved me. But he wouldn’t touch me.” She brought Riddick’s hand to her lips and kissed his palm. “When we crashed on planet, a merc chained Richard up. I snuck into see him. We argued a bit, and finally agreed that we would court. And I was able to kiss him.” She shivered in desire, “I hadn’t ever felt anything like it in my life, not even...” She looked down.

“And was kissing all the two of you did when you had time alone?” Inara inquired, making notes in her book.

“No,” Riddick shook his head, “Really hadn’t intended to get as far as it did,” He slanted a glance at River. “River an’ me we found a spot with some privacy.” He shrugged a bit, “Just wanted to kiss her an’ hold her, make sure my hands on her weren’t gonna scare her.”

“Hmm...” Inara made an encouraging noise. “The ‘impending death situation’ accelerated what was intended as only kissing?”

“Richard tried to stop,” River said quietly. “Didn’t wish to scare his girl, but I didn’t wish to stop. He felt so good, to have him against me,” She looked at Riddick, “Only time I feel safe is when you’re against me, holding me.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek, “I tempted him.” She explained, “Until he put his hands on me, and touched me...” She shivered again, “Never felt such pleasure as when Richard’s hands began to touch my flesh.”

Riddick groaned at the scent of honey rising off River’s skin and kissed her hungrily, “Gorram you smell so good.” He released her mouth and kissed her cheek and neck, loving how she shivered
under his mouth.

“Take it that you brought River to her fall,” Inara smiled at the display of passion and obvious affection. “You weren’t afraid?” She asked River.

“No,” River shook her head. “Felt Richards mouth on my breast, his hand between my thighs,” She smiled wickedly. “Learned that Richard’s fingers inside felt better than my own. Screamed into his mouth. Made Richard fall,” She added with a mischievous grin.

“Ain’t ever finished that fast in my life,” Riddick kissed her fingers, “Weren’t more’n five strokes an’ I’m fallin’ hard and groanin’ into her mouth.” He chuckled, “An’ then she pulls her hand outta my trousers and licks my seed off her hand, tells me I taste salty.” His smile was iniquitous and slow, “River tastes like apples an’ honey.” He watched as the blush bloomed over River’s cheeks and kissed her adoringly. “Love how you taste.”

Inara’s smile widened and she nodded, “So the two of you had no difficulty then.” She looked at them thoughtfully, “But since then?”

“River’s...when we’re kissin’ its fine,” Riddick began slowly. “But the more we kiss, more passionate we get, River gets frightened, I can smell her fear,” He kissed the back of River’s hand, “I know you ain’t scared a me. You’d tell me if I’s scarin’ you, I know. So it’s gotta be what they did comin’ back whenever you start to feel passionate.”

“He’s right,” River nodded, “I never feel so safe as when Richard is holding me, he’s rolled so that he’s nearly on top of me at night and it's wonderful, as if his body is instinctively putting itself between me and the rest of the world. It’s arousing to have his body pinning mine to a bed. But when we’re kissing or touching, I start to stiffen up, I remember how the metal felt between my thighs, the pain of it, and how when I struggled it became worse. They had beat me before they...and every time I screamed it felt as if I were being stabbed.” She felt Riddick’s hand stroking her hair and knew he was smelling burnt cinnamon that meant her fear.

Inara nodded thoughtfully, “I do not wish to belittle your difficulties,” She said quietly. “But what you are experiencing is quite common among victims of rape. That you aren’t afraid of Richard is a very good sign.” She smiled and regarded them both. “One more question, and then we’ll leave it for a day or so while I think on a course of treatment. for you.” River nodded her understanding and Riddick wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “I want to know what you think of sex,” Inara explained. “How do you feel about it in general?”

River frowned thoughtfully, “In general, I’m... angry about it I suppose,” She shook her head. “I know it’s supposed to be enjoyable, a natural act between two people who are attracted to each other, or in love or married. I suppose I find it a little embarrassing, it’s so... impolite. But until Richard kissed me, I didn’t see any of that in what I experienced. Self exploration was enjoyable but only to a point, after that it was always vaguely dissatisfactory.”

Riddick smiled at his girl, and waited a moment to be certain she was finished before he gave his answer, “Suppose I always thought it was something the body just...needed now an’ then, like food or sleep. Never gave any thought to love until I met River, thought that was some sorta fairytale made up so the race wouldn’t die out.” He chuckled, “But in an orphanage an’ on the streets, ain’t a lotta privacy an’ I just got used to folks doin’ whatever as they needed to. Never much liked whores or Companions, not that I could afford a Companion even if she would look twice at me, they weren’t always interested in sex. I could always tell if a woman actually wanted me, or if she wanted somethin’ else. Animal makes bein’ with anyone who ain’t honest uncomfortable as hell.”

“Is that part of why you’re so adamant that you’ll wait for River to be ready?” Inara asked curiously,
“Because to do otherwise feels wrong?”

“Yeah,” Riddick looked at his woman and smiled. “Animal has wanted her since I first saw her, an’ that were damn disturbin’ considerin’ she was hardly past fifteen. I learned a long time ago that if a girl didn’t want me there weren’t no changin’ her mind. So I never expected River to like me back. When she started to care ‘bout me, was like a sip a heaven. An’ if I weren’t gonna push even a whore into havin’ me when she weren’t interested, I damn sure wasn’t going to do it to my partner, the woman I love,” Riddick shook his head.

“All right,” Inara closed her book and looked at the two of them. “I’m going to think about this for a day or two,” She told them. “I want you both to come back here after dinner in two days.” Dark eyes were evaluating them thoughtfully, “For now, I want you two to practice kissing and some mild touching, going as far as you want so long as you’re both feeling safe, when you’re together at night. Rick, you being on top of River will be important since that’s how she feels the safest.”

“All right,” Riddick nodded, “Ain’t gonna be easy though, Mal said iffen we share a bunk we cain’t shut the door until River’s eighteen.”

“I’ll speak with him about it,” Inara said quietly. “You won’t feel safe if you don’t have privacy and if you don’t have privacy you won’t be able to do the homework I’m going to give the two of you.”

River blushed at the thought of homework for this sort of therapy and leaned into Riddick, “Should go, need to make sure your bunk is set up well.”

“Our bunk Qīng Xiāng,” Riddick corrected her. “If it ain’t ours, no point in me havin’ it. I’ll sleep on the floor in your room.”

“Our bunk,” River repeated with a shy smile and giggled as Riddick scooped her up and carried her out of the shuttle with a hasty thanks for the tea as they left.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

láng - wolf
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

Quote Sources:

All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts - As You Like It - William Shakespeare
Jayne was waiting in the galley when they came out of Inara’s shuttle, “Rick, River,” He nodded. “Lemme show ya your bunk,” He led them down the hall and kicked open a hatch, dropping down into the bunk. “C’mon I’ll show ya how stuff works.”

Riddick rolled his eyes and put River down to let her climb down the ladder and saw Jayne reach to take her waist only to be kicked against the wall and held there by River’s foot. “Chòu mǎniào,” Riddick swore. “River, let him down,” He reached down to touch her hair and she looked up with huge dark eyes, a pulse of burnt cinnamon floating off her skin.

“Shǐniào,” River cursed herself and removed her foot from Jayne’s throat. “I’m so sorry Jayne, are you all right?” She leapt off the ladder and backed up so Riddick had plenty of space to come down coincidentally giving Jayne plenty of room as well.

“Nah ’s all right,” Jayne shrugged, “I shoulda recalled you mightn’t want any man side’s Rick or your brother touchin’ ya.” He looked at her a bit sadly and River tilted her head; he was worried that someone would hurt his girl like that. That she wouldn’t want anything to do with him when he found her.

“I’ll get better I hope,” River offered quietly. “And Richard will help you find her. I’ll start searching the cortex for her the moment I’m allowed.” She smiled tentatively.

“I ’ppreciate that,” Jayne smiled back, a startlingly sweet smile on such a big man. “So the bunk comes with a sink an’ a head,” He pointed them out. “The bed’s only a standard size, but Mal don’t care how you decorate or what ya do down here so long’s you’re ready for work.”

“Might hold true for you,” Riddick shook his head and leaned against the wall. “But long’s I got River down here with me, that hatch is s’posed to stay open.”

“Yeah, that’s gonna last,” Jayne rolled his eyes. “Anyway, figure ya don’ need me to really show ya much, but wanted a word with ya ‘bout—” He shook his head. “Ain’t rightly sure how to say it.”

“This ’bout you bein’ dyslexic?” Riddick tilted his head, “Already figured you play the big scary man so’s no one gets into your business when you’re looking for her.”

“If that’s what its called that the letters an’ words get all mixed up when I look at ‘em an’ I cain’t hardly write my name,” Jayne muttered. “Cain’t rightly ask for help from Kaylee or Wash or anyone else, they don’ like me all that much an’ with good reason.”

“Kaylee would help you,” River said quietly. “But you never told her you needed help.” She looked up the ladder hearing footsteps. “Should go get Richard’s things and move them in here.”
Riddick looked at River and frowned thoughtfully, “C’mere a second,” He held out his hand and when she took it tugged her close, and turned so her body was pressed to the wall and he was pressed up against her. Her scent was alive with allspice and apples, honey and silk and but not burnt cinnamon. “What’s wrong Qing Xiāng? Why’re you talkin’ ’bout me movin’ in an’ not you?” He was aware of Jayne climbing the ladder behind him, and finally semi-private, Riddick pressed his mouth to River’s in a soft deep kiss that set her shivering with need in his arms and fire boiling through his blood. “Zhì ài, what is it? Are you nervous ‘bout livin’ with me? Do you wanna see if you like bein’ in a room a your own all right so’s you got a choice?”

River tore her mouth from his and her hands cupped his face, “Nervous about making noise and someone hearing,” She explained, “Not sure how you feel about someone hearing the girl scream your name.” She rubbed her hips against his and groaned at the heat the motion caused in her lower body. “Don’t want the hatch open so any woman can hear Richard’s voice groaning over his girl’s hands on him. Mine. Won’t share.”

“Inara’s gonna talk to Mal ‘bout that,” Riddick reminded her. “Mean time, lets get our stuff. We’ll get everythin’ in here an’ get some rest, an’ put it all up in the mornin’.”

“Yes,” River nodded. “Richard,” She asked before he let go of her, “Will we sleep skin to skin?”

“I’m thinkin’ something coverin’ our nethers at least for a while,” Riddick took her mouth in another hot kiss and let his hands hold onto her hips. “But I wanna feel your skin ‘gainst mine Zhì ài. Been starved for it.”

“Hmm...I like this so much,” River moaned into his mouth, “Want to stay like this,” Her hands slid under the neck of his shirt and stroked his back and shoulders.

“Yeah,” Riddick groaned as her hands clung to his body, “You feel so good zhì ài.” He moved his mouth to her neck and couldn’t restrain his moan at the taste of her tender skin. “You taste so good love,” Riddick shuddered. “So beautiful,” He heard her moan as his teeth nipped her pulse point and her legs left the wall and wrapped around his waist. He let his hands slide down from her hips to cup her pretty little pì gu and felt his jī ba throb with need against her mound.

River shivered and moaned as his mouth trailed over her neck, wanting nothing more than to feel his lips on even more sensitive skin. “Richard, Richard please,” She slid her hand down to his waist and nimbly unbuttoned his trousers. “Fall for me,” She begged against his ear. “I want to feel you fall, please.”

Riddick knew he’d never be able to fall without her, she was hot and wild in his arms and he needed to feel her come apart in his hands. “S’all right River,” He promised, finding zip of her cargos and sliding his hand inside her panties to cup her mound slick with honey. “Kiss me Zhī yīn, gonna make you fall so hard,” He muttered into her ear before he covered her mouth with his. His fingers slid inside her, and he moaned as her hand tightened on his diǎo with her surprise. She was so tight and wet, Riddick groaned into her mouth and felt her shudder in ecstasy as his thumb found her yīn dì.
River nearly shrieked as Riddick’s fingers pushed up inside her, filling her so tightly she was stretching in agonizing pleasure around him. And then his thumb began to rub her clit and she knew she’d fall far too quickly. “Zhī yīn, zhēn ‘ài,” She nearly wept into his mouth. “I, I’m--”

Riddick nearly growled his pleasure as her hand tugged on his cock, drinking in her cries as she began to fall, she was so beautiful, passion overtaking her, honey and caramel overtaking all the other notes of her scent. She screamed into his mouth until his ears rang with it and he’d never heard a sweeter sound in his life. Her hand gripped him, shuddered and squeezed until he thought he’d die of the pleasure before his fall swept over him, as he thrust into her hand. Riddick gentled his touch on River’s mouth, his lips easing over hers as they both panted in their release, she was shivering in his arms, her body still in spasms around his fingers. Gently he began to move his fingers inside her, his thumb tenderly rubbing her clit.

River bit back her cries as Riddick took his mouth from hers and gently began to whisper in her ear how much he loved her, loved watching her fall, wanted to watch her for the rest of his life. How good she felt around him, how beautiful she was, how someday he was going to feast on her, his tongue where his fingers were, his lips sucking on her yīn dì until she fell under his mouth. His body was ready again under her hand, his hips rocking slightly to thrust against her stroking fingers. Everything she heard from his lips at her ear Riddick’s mind showed her, the images he had of her as she came to her fall were overlaid with erotic belief in her beauty, his love, how attractive he found her, how much he longed to do what he was saying until she was bowing her head forward and biting down to stifle her cries.

Riddick shuddered as River’s teeth bit into his shoulder hard enough to bruise in her passion. He shuddered and groaned, the feeling of her falling against his gently thrusting fingers was enough to send him over the edge again. He groaned and kissed her neck, wishing he could give her a mark to prove to her that she was his. Once she’d calmed a bit and he’d regained his breath he carefully eased his fingers out of her body, licking and sucking her honey off his flesh. “I’m gonna make up the bunk,” He kissed her gently on the cheek, “You use the head,” He watched and growled deep in his chest as she slipped her fingers from his trousers and began licking his seed off her fingers.

“Why?” River tilted her head curiously, “I mean, I don’t quite,” She pulled off her boots and cargo pants, regarding her sodden panties with resignation.

Riddick nodded and called his name before he mounted the ladder, when he turned to look at her curiously she nodded towards his pants, “Do not show off to Kaylee and Zoe that which I so enjoy please.” Riddick chuckled and buttoned his pants back up before he started out of the bunk. River looked around thoughtfully and poked at the bed when she’d finished washing her hands. It would be a nice bunk though she thought Riddick would enjoy a wider bed once they’d gotten some coin. They could hang their weapons above the bunk like Jayne had done, she’d gotten a good look at his bunk from his thoughts, though if Riddick wanted to hang up girly pictures she’d draw him some of herself.

“What’s the frown?” Riddick asked as he made his way down the ladder with two duffles over his shoulders and another bag hanging from his elbow.

“Oh, was thinking we could be like Jayne and hang weapons over the bunk, handy in emergencies,” River told him coming to help with the bags. “Then I thought if you wanted girly pictures up on your
walls that I’d have to draw you some of me naked.”

Riddick turned and looked at her with a smile, “I’d like pictures of you gorgeous, but they don’t have to be naked. Just draw what you want. It’s your bunk too.” He looked at the bags and then at River, “Let’s just get you outta the damp underwear,” He suggested. “An’ I’ll pull on a pair a shorts. Bought some specific for sleepin’ in so’s we’d be decent if there was an ‘mergency.”

“Yes please,” River looked at her partner and smiled warily. “Very long day.” She knelt and opened one bag, and then shut it again when it was full of guns and knives. “Not appropriate sleepwear,” River’s lips twisted wryly as she opened another bag, more successfully this time and dug out a pair of panties to sleep in. “Richard would prefer she wear a shirt? Or something else?”

Riddick was busy shucking his clothes and watching her, “Wear what you’ll be comfortable in liàn rén,” He told her as he pulled on a pair of knit shorts. “You got skin privileges with me, but don’t want you to feel you gotta only wear what I wear.”

River pulled off her teeshirt and bra, setting them aside and pulled off her damp panties, standing naked in front of him for a moment while he took a deep breath and concentrated on fixing the image of her in his mind. She blinked and tilted her head at him as she pulled on a dry pair of underwear. “Richard finds her body attractive in and of itself, not just because it is hers?”

“Thought you were gorgeous when I first saw ya,” Riddick grabbed a quilt out of a bag and spread it on top of the bed. “That ain’t changed, but knowin’ how sweet an’ smart you are, that just makes you the jué dài jià rén.” He pulled the quilts and sheet back so the bed was ready for her. “C’mon Qing Xiāng, let’s get some shut eye.”

River nodded happily and padded over to him in nothing but her panties, “Want Richard to have skin privileges with her equally.” She said as she climbed into the bed.

“That don’t hurt my feelin’s none,” Riddick slid into the bed and waited for her to lie down and be comfortable before he arranged himself so he was wrapped around her, his body nearly covering hers. “River,” He murmured into her hair, “You feel all right like this?”

“Safe, warm, loved,” River murmured. She kissed his bicep and shivered against him, “And very tempted by all of Richard’s flesh.”

“Hmm...” Riddick kissed hair again. “I love you River.”

“Love you too Richard B. Riddick,” River snuggled closer and closed her eyes.

River shuddered and took a deep breath regaining control over herself before gratefully letting Riddick wrap her in his arms. It had been several weeks since they’d started therapy with Inara, and until today she hadn’t had to talk about what had happened to her. They discussed other things, Riddick’s childhood, her life before the Academy, how they’d both come to be there. And then Inara had asked what had happened to her when she’d been elevated. She hadn’t been able to answer at first. Inara had told them to seat themselves in separate chairs and for River to speak without Riddick touching her.

She’d started to talk and had gotten as far as being manacled to a table when the panic attack had started, it had taken every bit of Riddick’s teachings for her to breathe through it. She’d heard her partner’s mind, everything in him howling that he needed to protect her, and then methodically silenced so she could regain control on her own. Finally she could think and breathe and Inara
nodded at Riddick that he could hold her. “Thank you,” River gasped out. “For waiting, know you wanted to hold me.”

“Animal don’t always understand, gotta let you alone sometimes, let you be strong,” Riddick kissed her hair and temple, his voice a murmur Inara wouldn't hear. “Hurts to watch you but I try to keep it outa my head so you don’t have to see it.”

“River, can you talk about the rest of it?” Inara asked quietly, “You’ll need to do it without Rick touching you if possible.”

River looked at her partner and nodded, whispering in her softest tone, “You’ll have to close your mind to me my láng, so I am truly alone. I’m sorry.”

Riddick nodded and groaned, pressing a soft kiss to her lips before letting go of her and retreating to his chair, locking down his animal and his thoughts tightly as he did. River shivered as his mind became the blank slate he’d perfected each time the scientists took her away. “They put me on the metal table,” She picked up where she’d left off, “Manacled my wrists above my head, pulled my legs apart and manacled my ankles and thighs to the table. I’m small and the manacles were scaled too far apart for my height so every joint was strained. Put a collar around my throat like a dog, metal that pushed into my flesh. Everything pushed against bruises; I could smell blood in my hair from the beating. And then they put something over my eyes, made sure I couldn’t see what was about to happen to me.” She shuddered, “I don’t know why that made it worse, more terrifying.” She fixed her eyes on her teacup and continued slowly. “They whipped me, varying the strokes so I couldn’t time them. They even made sure to whip my genitals. The pain was blinding, and then something metallic and cold was pushed between my thighs, up and into me. I didn’t think I could hurt anymore than the whipping but this was excruciating.” She shuddered as the sensations came flooding back. “Each time I screamed when they moved whatever it was, fucked me with it, it felt as if someone was stabbing me in the lung. I had a broken rib apparently.”

She looked up at Inara and was surprised to see the Companion’s eyes were damp while Riddick’s fists were clenched as if he wanted to beat someone. “I don’t know how long it went on, it seemed like hours, I passed out before they were done with me. When I woke up I was back in my cell, my ribs and wounds had been healed, as if it had never happened.” She looked at Riddick and felt the cracks in his shield, the pain that he’d felt leaking out as if it were too much for even the strongest mind to hold. “Richard, please, I need to--”

She wasn’t given a chance to finish, Riddick’s mind opened to hers, his animal surrounding hers with love as his arms wrapped around her body. His face was buried in her hair; she could feel the salt of the tears he would never show anyone else seeping into her hair before he got his emotions under control. “I promise River, we’ll get better,” He murmured, his dark chocolate and coffee voice thrilling her nerve endings even as his hands soothed her fears. “We’ll find a way to live with this. Won’t ever leave you zhēn ‘ài, I promise.”

“Just need to feel your hands on me,” River whispered. “Please Richard, need your touch.” She shivered and pressed her lips to his neck, nipping lightly. Riddick growled under her touch and turned so his mouth met hers only to be summarily halted by Inara’s sharp clap.

“No you two will not,” The Companion shook her head. “It is perfectly normal to seek comfort with the man you love River,” She said quietly. “But avoiding the memory won’t help you.” She looked at Riddick. “The two of you will learn to deal with this in a healthy way.” Her dark eyes were compassionate as she met River’s eyes. “We’re going to meet again in two days, and in the mean time your homework is to touch and please each other without Riddick being on top of you River. Go as far as you can, until you can’t anymore, Riddick you’ll have to make sure you don’t
instinctively do what River wants instead of what she needs.”

Riddick nodded and looked at River, “I can do that.” He tilted his head, “Mal an’ the others are back. Better get to work.” He kissed River gently. “C’mon gorgeous, let’s get changed and see what sorta job we got.” He nodded his thanks to Inara and River smiled a bit tremulously.

When they got climbed out of their bunk Riddick could hear Jayne laughing, “Damn yokels can’t even tell a transport ship ain’t got no guns on it. ‘Blow a new crater in this moon’.”

Riddick looked down at the bridge and saw Mal and Zoe, Mal had a smile in his voice, “My thanks Wash, nice save as always.”

“A pleasure,” Wash turned in his seat and sent Riddick a smile that Mal hadn’t noticed.

“And how are our passengers?” The captain asked curiously.

Kaylee replied cheerily, not much more observant than her captain though that could be explained by her position on the floor, “Rick an’ River been in with Inara, an’ Simon an’ Shepherd are fine.” She tilted her head and her voice became excited. “So...what happened? Was there a terrible brawl?”

Zoe had perched on the side of her husband’s chair, “Oddly enough, there was. “

Wash looked at Mal as if to scold him, “Are you gettin’ my wife into trouble?”

“Wha?” Mal contrived to look injured, “I didn’t start it! Just wanted a quiet drink.”

“On U-day?” Riddick asked from behind the captain, “That don’ seem likely.” He looked down at River for a second opinion, “Do it?”

River shook her head solemnly, “It does not, not knowing of Captain Reynolds’s proclivities,” She agreed.

Zoe apparently agreed with them because her voice was deadpan when she spoke, “Funny, sir, how you always seem to find yourself in an Alliance-friendly bar come U-day, looking for a ‘quiet drink’.”

Riddick chuckled quietly as Mal retorted, “See, this is another sign of your tragic space dementia, all paranoid and crotchety. Makes it hard.”

Kaylee giggled as she gathered up her tools, whatever she’d been fixing completed, as Wash asked the most important question. “Did we at least make a contact?”

Mal pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, “Ladies and menfolk, we have ourselves a job.” Zoe grabbed the paper with a smile as Mal addressed Wash, “Take us out of the world, Wash, got us some crime to be done.”

River shook her head, a shiver stealing over her flesh and Riddick looked at her in concern, cinnamon and burnt cinnamon coming off her flesh along with blood and steel and silk. “Shouldn’t take it,” She murmured, “You won’t like it when you get it, won’t like what you’ll have to do. It will lead to disaster unless you steel your hearts to do wrong.”

Only Riddick was paying attention to her until her partner snapped his fingers at Mal, “Who’s this job for?” He asked grimly.

“Fellow by the name of Adlai Niska,” Mal told him, “We gotta meet him to get the particulars.”
“Know I’m new, an’ I know my word don’ count for much, but River says there’ll be trouble an’ she’d know,” Riddick leaned against the cabinets on the wall, River snuggled against his side.

“Ain’t in a position to be turnin’ down work,” Mal said shortly. “Regardless a how the resident genius feels ‘bout it.”

Riddick nodded, “Then I wanna go to the meet with you.” He looked at River, “Ain’t havin’ that man think we’re easy to play.”

“Fine,” Mal shrugged, “Don’ ‘spect it’ll hurt nothin’.”

Riddick looked at River as they all ate dinner that night, Kaylee was still attempting to convince her captain that a compression coil was needed. Mal was eating steadily and trying to placate his engineer while not giving into her. Zoe and Wash were talking quietly with Book and Simon while Inara had ended up next to Jayne. She was doing her best to not be put off by his playful leering and atrocious table manners. River had tried to nap on the couch near the infirmary while Riddick and Jayne had been working out.

They’d been about forty minutes into it when River’s scent had spiked with burnt cinnamon and Riddick had jerked the barbell out of Jayne’s hand to put it on the bar before the big man died because his spotter wasn’t paying attention. “River,” Riddick ran for the lounge and grabbed River by the shoulders just as she’d screamed and Simon had come running.

She’d woken, another scream choking off as she did and realized where she was, “Richard? Simon?”

Riddick had just put a hand to her face, making sure she could see him, and then tugged Simon down so her brother was in her sight line as well. He was aware of Jayne behind him and the man backing off respectfully. Simon was taking her pulse and asking if she was dreaming. She’d just nodded and shuddered.

Riddick let her hand cover his and felt her turn her face so she could kiss his palm. Simon tried to ask River about her dream, “If you can talk about what happened there, and I know it’s hard but, the more I know, the faster you’ll get better.”

River had just looked at her brother and shook her head, “Simon, what was done to me isn’t something you can fix.” She whispered. “I can’t be fixed. I won’t ever be that girl again.” She looked at him sadly and then at Riddick. “I’m sorry, but...I... I can’t be that girl ever again.”

Riddick shook his head and glared at Simon through the smoked glass spectacles, “Ain’t anybody sayin’ you should River.”

“I just want to make her better,” Simon whispered. “Is that so hard to understand?”

“Doc we’ll talk later ‘bout what you think is wrong,” Riddick told him. “Meantime, River c’mon an’ we’ll do some workin’ out with Jayne. Get your blood goin’.”

They’d gone back to the cargo bay and the shepherd had joined them, showing a surprising aptitude for exercises and weights. It had been a relatively peaceful afternoon if you ignored the captain storming around after his mechanic and his sarcastic conversation with Book.

Riddick and River had the chore of fixing dinner and between the two of them they’d managed to
come up with a meal. Everyone seemed to be enjoying it though River was quiet after the nightmare and Riddick was worried she wouldn’t want to do their homework, not that he looked forward to River being afraid when he was touching her.

Mal finally looked around the table, “So we should hit the skycplex tomorrow, Zoe, me, Jayne and Riddick will be goin’ to the meet. Rest of you stay on the boat an’ keep it ready to go. This fella has a seriously unlovely reputation. Let’s not take any chances.”

“It’s a chancy thing just dealin’ with him,” Riddick remarked. “An’ we told ya as much.”

“And I believe I mentioned we ain’t in a position to turn down work,” Mal shot back

“At least let River try to figure a way out, or somethin’ we could hold over him if the job goes south,” Riddick argued. “Ain’t anyone to touch her for huskin’, an’ lets face it, from what I’ve heard, your jobs don’t always go as planned.”

“Jayne you been tellin’ tales?” Zoe’s tone was mild though her expression was stoic as ever.

“Hell I just took off my shirt an’ he saw the scars,” Jayne snorted. “When he heard how I got ‘em ain’t like he’s stupid. Figured someway or ‘nother I end up gettin’ shot a lot working our jobs.” He shrugged and looked at Riddick with a half grin, “Ain’t half as scarred as him though.”

River leaned her head against Riddick’s shoulder affectionately, and pressed a tiny kiss to his bare bicep as a reminder that she found him attractive. “Pay no attention to the big man with the girls name,” She murmured in a not quiet enough voice, “Richard B. Riddick is glorious.”

“Really?” Kaylee teased, “Wouldn’ mind hearin’ some ‘bout how glorious Rick is.” She smiled at the table in general, “We do have a fine bunch a men ‘round this table for a girl to look on.”

Riddick felt like he might just blush at the friendly lust in the girl’s eyes as she gazed at the men sitting at the table. Simon did blush and Jayne ducked his head in a manner Riddick knew meant he was embarrassed, Mal just cleared his throat and ate some more while Wash grinned his appreciation.

“Miss Kaylee if you don’ mind, I’d ‘preciate it if you an’ Miss Inara an’ Miss Zoe talk ‘bout that sorta thing when I ain’t around. Maybe when I’m on the opposite end a the boat an’ can’t hear ya.”

“Why do ya call us all Miss?” Kaylee asked curiously. “Heard you doin’ that with Inara when ya’ll were leavin’ her shuttle.”

Riddick smiled slightly, “Ain’t overly mannered, ya mighta noticed. An’ I don’t got much education,” He explained quietly. “River’s my first priority an’ chances are I’ll do somethin’ you’ll think is scary or mean or rude. Won’t mean to, it’ll just happen, like a scorpion stings. But I can give ya that courtesy at least. Ain’t much, but its somethin’.”

“Like a scorpion stings,” Book murmured. “Is that how you see yourself?”

“I don’t get it,” Kaylee admitted quietly. “I’ve seen how you are with River, you ain’t a bad man.”

“Yeah, I am,” Riddick rose from the table and took his plate to the cleaner. River excused herself with a murmur and did the same, bidding the table a good night.

Riddick listened as Book began to explain to Kaylee the tale of the frog and the scorpion, and the moral of the tale, that the behavior of some creatures is irrepressible, no matter how they are treated and no matter what the consequences.

“So he thinks he really is an animal? That he’s really a bad man?” Kaylee said sadly. “That’s just so
sad, he’s so sweet to her, you shoulda heard him when they was nappin’, he talked so pretty to her.”

“And as he pointed out Kaylee, she is his, the woman he places above all else, above any other,” Book reminded her. “To keep her from harm, he might happily sacrifice any of us.”

Simon nodded, “I doubt he knows I heard him, but he told her once, that she and he, their lives, were his priority, and that he would always help me if he could, but he wouldn’t lay down his life or hers for me. That she shouldn’t ask it of him. And my sister who has always loved me without reservation agreed, and understood, and told him she wouldn’t ask such a thing.” There was a pause as if Simon was moving around, “I find it comforting that if something ever happened to me, Riddick would make sure River was all right.”

“Why don’t I find that comforting,” Wash asked quietly.

“Because ya ain’t stupid little man,” Jayne’s voice was matter a fact. “An’ I’ll tell ya, iffen you want the man’s good opinion you stop talkin’ an’ gossipin’ ‘bout he an’ River. The man has ears an’ he’s tol’ ya he hears things.” The big man was movin’ around the kitchen. “An’ if you want my opinion, which ya don’ but you’re gettin’ anyway, you’ll let River do some diggin’. Cain’t hurt an’ it might help. Maybe the girl could nap ‘thout nightmares if she had somethin’ sides drawin’ and weights to keep her busy.”

Inara’s voice was surprised as she spoke, no doubt that she agreed with Jayne, “I...He’s right, Jayne’s right. River has a brain that works incredibly fast and never seems to stop. She has nothing to think about except her artwork, Riddick and her time in the academy. Riddick and her art are healthy but they can’t be her whole world. She needs something to work on.”

“Long’s nobody tracks it she can access the cortex as much as she wants,” Mal shrugged, “but only when someone else is on the bridge.”

“I’m sure that will help,” Inara had a smile in her voice. Riddick looked at River as she shut their hatch and grinned at the look of glee on her face.

“Now I can start looking for Ciara,” River whispered happily and threw herself into his arms. “Oh this is wonderful! I can be useful instead of crazy genius girl!”

Riddick kissed her and let himself enjoy just holding and kissing his woman for a bit. Time enough for homework in a while. For now he wanted to be alone with her and enjoy her company without eyes on them.

River tilted her head and sighed, putting her drawing pad away. She’d been happily drawing her mate laying on the bed reading, his strong body exposed to her appreciative gaze. Slowly she began to pull off her clothes and hang them up, putting her boots neatly beside his. Riddick looked up from his book and his silver eyes gleamed appreciatively as her bra and panties were revealed and then removed. “Time for homework now,” She said softly. “Richard has the harder job.”

“Ain’t a hardship to touch you River,” Riddick rolled onto his side and lazily stroked a hand up his half ready cock. “Just want to help you, want you to be able to enjoy everythin’ ‘tween us.”

“Want Richard to be free of this burden,” River whispered as she moved towards the bed. “Want you to be able to concentrate on pleasure, yours and mine, not have to worry about my fear.”

“Tell me where is fancy bred, or in the heart or in the head? How begot, how nourished? Reply,
reply. It is engender’d in the eyes, with gazing fed,” Riddick murmured staring at her. “How can you think I don’t enjoy every minute with you River? That brain a yours can hear everything I’m thinkin’ an’ feelin’. You know this is like heaven to me. Just to hold you skin to skin. To be livin’ with you an’ no one’s torturin’ either a us? I die tomorrow an’ my only regret will be leavin’ you, not havin’ more time with you.” He tugged her down to lie beside him and kissed her gently, “You’re mine River Diaochan Tam. Nothin’ changes that. Nothin’.”

“All right,” River turned on her side and kissed him, “Homework first,” She sighed as he wrapped his arms around her. “I’d better lie on my back and try to...” She was interrupted with another kiss as Riddick put her on her back and gently put her hands over her head.

“Hang onto the pillow for a little bit,” Riddick lay beside her body and ran his hand from her breast down to her hip. “I’m thinkin’ first time we try this, let’s pull a blanket over us, you’ll be in that position, your thighs spread a little, not a lot, but the blanket’ll help you feel less exposed.”

“Hmm...” River put her hands over her head and shuddered for a second until she looked up into Riddick’s eyes and saw the appreciative way he looked at her breasts. “You like how this makes my body look?” She half asked half realized, “You find me beautiful this way.”

“I find you beautiful in every way,” Riddick tugged the blanket up over her hips. “If I could draw you like this I would, your waist looks impossibly tiny, your breasts are so sweet and full,” He slid his hand up her waist to cover one impossibly gorgeous breast and rub his thumb over her nipple, breathing in the scent of her honey overtaking the scent of burnt cinnamon. “You’re so sexy River,” He bent and kissed her, not moving his hands anymore, kissed her and let her feel how much he loved her, wanted her, how impossibly erotic she looked.

River moaned into his mouth, “Richard, touch me,” She begged when his lips left hers, “Want your hands on me.”

“My hands are on you,” Riddick teased her with a smile as he pressed a light kiss to her lips. His finger and thumb tugged at her tight nipple and she moaned, “Tell me what else you want River.” He kissed her again, his mouth devouring hers until she was arching her back up to his hand and crying out in need.

“Want,” River caught a glimpse of his mind, his desire to put his mouth on her breasts while his big hand cupped and rubbed her mound. “Yes, that, please Richard, I want that, want to try, please,” She wiggled her hips and caught the blanket with her feet, stiffening with fear as the cool air hit her skin.

Riddick didn’t move as the smell of her fear hit him, kept his hand and mouth on her, and let her adjust, let her take a deep breath and slid his legs so they rested against hers. “Warmer now?” He murmured against her lips.

“Yes,” River nodded, “Want, want one of your legs over one of mine please,” She whispered, “Not your whole body, want to keep trying, but one of your legs, anchoring me...please.”

Riddick nodded throwing his thigh over hers, so their legs were twined together and felt her shiver with need as their skin touched. “Gonna keep the rest of my body away though River, put my mouth on you and my hand between your thighs,” He murmured, tracing his lips down over her throat, teasing her with sensation. “Want you to put your hand on me now. One hand over your head, the other on me. Gotta feel those fingers a yours on me River, goin’ crazy needin’ your touch.”

Her response was immediate, honey blooming through her scent as his flesh touched hers, one of her hands slid down to grasp his cock, knowing what he liked, her slender fingers sliding up and down his flesh. “Want to feel you come to your fall against me,” She whispered. “Someday, want you to
“Put me face down, rub your body over mine, have me every way the animal wants.” River’s mouth curved in an erotically wicked smile as Riddick’s heart pounded at the idea of having her in every way he could think of. “Touch me love,” She begged. “Want your lips on me, please.”

Riddick wasn’t going to resist her anymore, he trailed his lips from her neck to her breasts and began to tease and suckle the tight tips. The hand he’d been massaging her breasts with he glided down over her belly to spread over her hips and mound feeling her damp flesh under his fingers. River’s moan as his lips surrounded her nipple was like music, and his hand cupping her most intimate place made her shudder with need not fear. “River, you want my fingers in you?” He asked, his lips against her flesh.

“Please,” River shuddered with pleasure. “Want your fingers to fuck me please Richard. Make me fall.”

“Oh yeah,” Riddick slid one finger carefully up her slick channel and felt her moan, tight and clutching around him. “You’re so tight River, you feel so good.” He told her with a groan and put his mouth to her other breast.

“Love your mouth on me, love how your hands feel,” River’s hand expertly tugged on his cock and Riddick moaned against her skin. His hand began to move, slowly and tortuously sliding in and out of her for a while until she was thrusting her hips against his hand in need. “Please more, Richard, give me more,” She finally begged and he added a second finger, slowly thrusting into her. When she was squirming with frustration he moved his thumb so it rubbed up and down against her clit with every stroke, her honey over her flesh making her slick and easy to stroke and tease with pleasure. “Oh...” Her moan when he touched her clit was long and desperate.

“That’s it River,” Riddick coaxed her, his mouth against her breasts, his tongue teasing her nipples. “Want you to move your hips, you take your pleasure. You’re my woman, take it, you deserve it River, its your body. You tell me what you want.” He sucked hard on her nipple and felt the sudden surge of honey in her scent as his caress on her breasts roughened slightly.

“Want you to make me fall, fuck me with your hand, put your other hand in my hair and hold me down,” River moaned, “Want you to suck on my tits until I’m bruised and red and swollen from your teeth and tongue,” She shuddered as he began to obey her, his hand fisting in her hair, wrapping the long silky stuff around his hand. “Want you to mark me Riddick. Want my bàng jiār, my murderer to make me yours, leave your mark on me please.” Her words were punctuated with moans and gasps as Riddick did as she asked, his mouth and tongue sucking hard on her tits. Her hips thrust up to his hand, meeting every thrust of his fingers, her sheath tightening around his hand as she neared her fall.

“Gonna mark you when you fall River,” Riddick growled against her skin, his teeth scraping at her flesh teasingly. “Where do you want it?” He was thrusting against her hand, his fall coming so fast as he watched her striving for her own pleasure. “God you’re gorgeous River,” He groaned, “Gonna fall soon love.”

“Want your mark on my neck or my shoulder,” River moaned, “Want to see when I look in the mirror.” Her hips snapped against his hand and she shuddered. “Please Richard, please, harder, need you to make me fall...please, please.”

“You wanna fall River,” Riddick groaned as her hand drove him even harder. “What do you need to fall zhī yīn, tell me, what do you want? Tell me zhī yīn.”

“Richard,” River moaned, her free hand reaching for his shoulder, “Need to feel you over me, please, just need to be pressed against you somehow, your flesh against mine.” She shuddered and
rocked against his hand desperately, “Please, Richard, please,” River begged.

Riddick slid his hand from her hair down to her back and tugged her towards him, so her breasts were crushed against his chest, “Gorram River, you feel so good.” He groaned as her body began to tremble, shivering hotly around his fingers, as he thrust them into her, his thumb pressing against her clit. He shuddered as her hand moved up and down on his cock, moving with her hips against his groin as she neared her fall.

River moaned into Riddick’s neck as she felt her body wind tighter and tighter around his thick fingers, he felt so deep in her, rubbing in and out of her body delicious and hot and firm until she was trying to grind herself onto his hand. “Richard, love you, love you, Richard,” She knew she was babbling, mad with pleasure and need and pushed her hips onto his hand hard as he thrust upwards, it felt like a fire burst inside her. Her entire body flooding as if lava had replaced her blood, trying to stifle her scream against his skin as she fell, her body snapping tight and bursting around him.

She was falling in his hands, Riddick felt her shudder, tremble against him, her hand gripping his cock tightly and moving almost desperately on him. He groaned his need, ground his hips against hers, his hand on the small of her back lowering to her ass and pressing her body to his, so soft, sweet and hot and so fucking tight around his fingers. “Gonna fall for you River,” He nearly moaned the words out as her body fluttered in tiny aftershocks around his fingers. “Can you fall for me again Qing Xiāng?” He pushed his fingers deeper and rubbed his thumb over her clit and felt her shudder, was rewarded with a moan of delight as River kissed his neck.

She hadn’t been certain she could again, she’d taken so long the first time, but Richard’s body against hers, hot skin pressing to her flesh, his legs pressing her thighs apart and his thick clever fingers spearing her, “Please yes, Richard.” River moaned. “Yes, I can fall for you again, my lánɡ, need to, need to feel you.” She shivered and opened her mind to his, concentrating on his thoughts, his need for her, how she felt to him, the desire for her and gave a guttural moan as she felt how close he was. “Want my lánɡ’s seed on my belly, please, please Richard,” She began to beg him, feeling how much he loved to hear her voice. “Need my Richard’s hot fingers in me, so good and deep,” River shuddered as her body began climbing towards the pinnacle again, “Richard,” She pressed her face into his neck and shoulder, “Please don’t stop, need you so badly, love you so much.” She felt the instant his body rebelled against his control, when the animal took over as his hips snapped hard and frantic against hers, his cock jerking and thrusting into her hand.

Riddick groaned and pushed River onto her back, covering her body with his, his hips pressing hers down to the bed, forcing her thighs apart with his legs, his mouth sucking hard on her shoulder, one hand desperately fucking her sweet tight little channel while the other found her breast and began to tug and pinch her nipple. River screamed as she clamped down hard around his hand, her body bucking hard up to his even as he lost all control and thrust down his fall boiling through him, seed covering her belly even as his teeth bit down hard on her shoulder, holding her beneath him to push his fingers hard up into her, his thumb rubbing her clit, forcing her into one last hard fall. He felt her scream again, his shoulder muffling her cries, the sweet pain of her teeth biting into him.

River couldn’t stop trembling, his fingers inside her still gently stroking, rubbing her into climax after climax under him, tried to quiet her screams until she tasted his blood in her mouth. Riddick’s hips were still rubbing against hers, his body plainly willing to keep going if she encouraged him. Finally he lifted his mouth from her shoulder and began to kiss her hair and neck gently, his fingers easing out of her. River nearly whimpered when his hand left her, she felt so suddenly empty. “No...” She moaned.

Riddick looked down at their bodies, his seed smeared over her belly, her honey coating his fingers. “Look at us, look how messy we made each other,” He smiled and nuzzled her neck. “You look so
beautiful my River, my woman coming apart in my arms. So proud of you Qing Xiang, you did so good.”

River loved that Richard still cuddled her after they fell, “Couldn’t fall without you pressing against me though,” She murmured thoughtfully, “But got further than I thought I would.” She shivered, “I can still feel your fingers inside me, and now I feel so empty without you.”

“Hmm...” Riddick kissed her gently. “I know how you feel,” He reached up for a towel and wiped River’s belly clean of his seed. “Lemme straighten up the bed while you have a little wash, think you’re feelin’ a little sticky?”

River wasn’t quite sure how it was she went from such passion to giggling. Maybe it was Riddick’s mental image of her thighs covered in honey, or how emotionally exhausting the evening had been, but she was feeling a little giddy as she went to the head and took care of her necessities. Riddick licked his fingers and sent her a wicked grin, deliberately thinking of how he’d like to kneel between her thighs and drink her honey directly. “Richard is a very wicked man,” River moaned as her tender body reacted to the thought.

“Poor River,” Riddick chuckled as he scooped her up and carried her the short distance to the bed. “Is her big ole bad man wearin’ her out?”

“He just makes her weary with pleasure,” River murmured kissing his shoulder. “Did I hurt you?” She tried to keep her suddenly tired eyes open. “I tasted blood.”

“Why do you think I fell so hard River,” Riddick kissed her throat. “You marked me as yours, made the animal go crazy with the need to mark you.” He pulled the quilts over them both and wrapped her up in his arms. “Talk ‘bout it in the morning. I promise I’ve loved everything you’ve ever done to me.”

“Hmm... my làng is very enticing,” River wrapped her arms around his and let herself fall into sleep, feeling Richard’s deep satisfaction at the feel of her mark on his flesh.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: So we’ve begun the Train Job and found out a little more regarding River and the Academy. Please bear in mind that I do not have a degree in psychiatry or psychology and that the method of therapy Inara is using is based purely on my research and not on any medical expertise. Having been in group therapy for a while the focus was on determining the reasons for a reaction or fear and working towards dealing with that fear in healthy ways.

Chinese Translations:
Chòu mǎnìào - stinking horse piss
Shǐ niào - Shit and piss
Zhì ’ài - most beloved
pì gu - butt
jì ba - dick
Tā mā de dì yù - Fucking hell
zhī yīn - soul mate
láng - wolf
diǎo - cock
yǐn dì - clitoris
zhēn ’ài - true love
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
liàn rén - sweetheart
jué dài jiā rén - prettiest girl ever
bàng jiār - lover/partner

Quote Sources:

Tell me where is fancy bred, or in the heart or in the head? How begot, how nourished? Reply, reply. It is engender’d in the eyes, with gazing fed - The Merchant of Venice - William Shakespeare
Riddick brought River up to the bridge where Wash was sitting with Zoe the next morning. “Hey Wash,” She smiled at the pilot before taking a seat in the co-pilot’s seat. “Going to dig into the cortex this morning. You are to supervise me?”

Riddick laughed and shook his head as he double-checked his weapons and groaned as River’s slender hand slid up his thigh and untwisted the strap holding his knife. “River,” He growled her name and was rewarded with a wicked little smile. “Qīng Xiāng you know better’n to do that when we’re workin’.”

“Strap was twisted, and Richard goes to speak with evil,” River wasn’t at all intimidated by his manner. “The animal likes its mate’s hands on him before he goes from her.”

“Yeah,” Riddick’s sigh still sounded more like a growl as he jerked her up from the chair and kissed her hard on the mouth, groaning as her arms wrapped around his neck and her body rubbed against his. Reining the animal in and pulling his mouth from hers was one of the hardest things he’d done. “Gorram tā mā de work,” He snarled and gave her one last kiss. “Mal’s comin’ up here,” He said in explanation when Zoe looked at him, her face inscrutable but the gunpowder scent of her curiosity floating off her. Riddick looked down at River’s pretty face, her lips slightly swollen from his kiss. “If this job does go south, gonna need some leverage on this jiān xié.”

“I’ll find something,” River nodded, “You know I will.” She touched her fingertips to his face, gliding over his cheekbones and lips and chin as if memorizing his face. “Wash will keep me company, won’t you?” She turned her smile on the pilot who’d taken a moment to kiss his wife good bye.

“We also serve who sit and wait, or something like that,” Wash grinned at her. “And we can worry together.”

River shook her head, “Cannot insult Richard by worrying, implying that he will not return to me.” She took her seat and looked up at her big man. “Biggest badass in the ‘Verse,” She sent a mischievous look at Wash. “But I will help you worry about Zoe if you like.”

Riddick stole the chopstick from her chignon and took a deep breath of her scent as her hair came tumbling down, “Be a good little animal my River,” He teased before handing her the chopstick and turning as Mal entered the room.

“You go be a bad man my Richard,” River taunted him as she began to wind her hair back up.

“Always am,” Riddick chuckled and regarded Mal. “Just don’t get pissed at me in front a the guy. He’s gonna know my name, won’t take offense at anything I do. He’ll be impressed you got me working for you, just don’t imply I’m on your leash, he’ll know it for a lie.”

“I ain’t ever taken kindly to bein’ told my business,” Mal started to bluster.

“Ain’t tellin’ you your business,” Riddick replied reasonably. “But you call me Rick an’ he’s gonna take one look at me an’ know I m Richard B. Riddick. Especially if anyone gets in my face. I don’ care for it an’ I let ‘em know right quick an’ violent. That shows ‘em we ain’t to be trifled with. He’ll know my rep which will enhance yours. Might just pay more or he’ll think twice about a double
cross if that’s on his mind. But he’ll know I don’t work on a leash an’ I don’t work for stupid people what show weakness in front of the enemy.”

Zoe had been listening to the conversation without a word and held up a hand to forestall Mal’s next protest. “Sir, if Rick can act as scary as he looks, and I got no doubt he can, it might speak some as to our own unwillingness to be dealt an unfriendly hand. I don’t doubt Riddick’s rep is just as unlovely as Niska’s in his own way. We deal with a monster, may be its good we show off we’re working with one of our own.”

“Would you like to see Richard’s reputation?” River spoke in a strange accent, “Reputation is talk, is gossip.” She looked up at Riddick and her smile was adoring. “My big bad wolf, kills the pigs and the other wolves that hunt the little lambs,” She sent something to Wash’s screen eliciting a curse from the pilot.

Riddick looked at the information she’d sent and chuckled, “Yeah, that’d be the monster Niska’ll see walkin’ in his door.” He watched Mal’s face as he and Zoe scanned the file River had found. “Don’t doubt that Niska has his fingers in a lot of pies, includin’ access to Alliance databases.”

“Is all this true?” Wash had a strange scent like ginger ale to his fear and Riddick wrinkled his nose a bit.

“Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –Success in Circuit lies too bright for our infirm Delight the Truth’s superb surprise,” Riddick chuckled.

“As Lightning to the Children eased with explanation kind the Truth must dazzle gradually Or every man be blind–” River continued quietly.

Mal stared at the murderer and nodded slowly, “All right,” The captain said slowly. “We’ll try it your way, I go in first, something happens you don’t like, give the word I’ll move out of your way.”

“Just say his name,” Zoe suggested kissing her husband’s cheek. “That usually gets his attention.”

“Keep that in mind,” Riddick looked at River. “We good?”

“Never are,” River grinned back at him. “Richard and River are very bad.”

“Little tease,” Riddick kissed laid his lips over hers, more gently. He spoke quietly against her mouth, barely audible to the rest in the room. “To you my soul’s affections move devoutly, warmly, true,” His lips brushed against hers as he spoke.

“My life has been a task of love, one long, long thought of you,” River murmured back, and fused her mouth to his for a sweet hot kiss. “Now go and work, before I forget what I’m supposed to be doing with this cortex.” She smiled up at him and ignored the stares of the others in the room.

Riddick growled deep in his throat and forced himself to leave her, the animal nearly howling inside him to take her back to his bunk and make her his before something happened. This job wasn’t going to go smoothly he knew it.

Docking at the skyplex wasn’t hard, walking down the halls was easy enough. The first hint Riddick had of something going not quite right was when a big man covered in tattoos opened the door and stayed in the doorway. “Mal,” He growled the captain’s name and when the taller man turned, Riddick’s fist shot through the sudden opening and threw the tattooed fella backwards.
Riddick pushed past his captain and into the room, glaring down at the big man lying on the floor. A smaller man with a fussy voice was making a tsking noise, “Did I not tell you that someday this habit would not be a friend to you?” He admonished his henchman. “Come in, please all of you,” He looked at the other three, his eyes moving from Riddick to Mal. “And Captain Reynolds is which?”

Mal nodded and stepped forward, patting Riddick’s shoulder almost absently. Riddick growled down at the tattooed fellow who was slowly standing up again and moved to lean against the wall by the door. Something in this room or the chamber past it smelt like blood, urine and feces, pain and suffering. Someone was being tortured. Mal, not knowing any of that, spoke simply to Niska, “I’m Captain Reynolds. My first mate Zoe, this is Jayne an’ the man with the quick fist an’ all the knives is Rick.”

“Very nice,” The little man with the glasses and the odd accent nodded in pleasure. “I am Adelai Niska. You have seen Crow. He likes to stand at the door to say Boo!” He looked them over, his pleasure still evident though his eyes lingered on Riddick who still hadn’t said a word beyond Mal’s name. “This has not worked so well for him with your Rick.”

“Rick don’ like anybody gettin’ in his face,” Zoe’s voice was flat and brooked no argument. “The man’s alive.”

Before anyone could say anything that queer the deal Mal’s voice spoke into the silence, “We got word you might have a job for us.”

Niska stood up from his desk and nodded, “Yes! Yes, an exciting job. A train has, eh, something I need. You have worked a train before?” He eyed Riddick thoughtfully.

“We did a few,” Mal didn’t elaborate, not that he needed to.

“Are you going to ask me what it is I need?” Niska’s eyes moved from Riddick to Mal and then back again.

Mal shook his head, “As a rule, no.”

“Yes,” Niska smiled jovially, “Good! You have reputation! Malcolm Reynolds gets it done is the talk.”

Mal nodded, “Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

Niska regarded Riddick thoughtfully, “This one of your crew, he is new to your ship I think. He also has reputation.” Riddick growled lightly in his throat, not moving from his spot by the door as Niska continued, “He is not the sort whose reputation matches yours.”

“Got somethin’ to say, say it to me,” Riddick finally spoke, a growl reverberating through his voice.

“You are Rick, this is the nickname for Richard yes?” Niska clasped his hands. “One hears things about a man, a dangerous man whose name is Richard. Richard B. Riddick.” When Riddick didn’t speak he spread his hands, “Well, such things are the nature of rumor, no?”

“You askin’ a question?” Riddick pushed his goggles up and let his silver eyes shine through the shadows of the room. “Yeah my name is Richard. Yeah my middle name begins with a B. An’ yeah, I killed more’n a few folk needed killin’. Think I can’t do the job? Or you think I complicate thin’s unnecessarily? Just say. I can sit it out ‘thout a problem.”

“Arvey delish,” Niska shook his head, “I merely...wished to be certain who it is I am dealing with. One hears things you see...” He smiled slightly. “You know what is reputation? Is
people talking. Is gossip. I also have reputation. And not so pleasant I think you know. Crow?”

Crow had gotten to his feet and was standing by a door which he pulled open to reveal a man hanging by his feet from a hook in the ceiling, looking as if he’d been tortured to death. Niska nodded to Mal, “Now for you, my reputation is not from gossip. You see this man. Eh, he does not do the job. I show what I do him, and now my reputation for you is fact, is solid. You do the train job for me, then you are solid. No more gossip.”

Riddick pushed off from the wall and unfolded his arms coming to stand near Jayne and Zoe behind Mal. Inhaling deeply he caught the scent of the man’s blood still flowing, his heart still beating faintly. The animal was straining within him, shouting that this would happen to Mal, to Jayne and Zoe if they failed this job. Mal was fairly startled but nodded, “Right.”


Riddick bared his teeth in what was nothing like a grin, “He ain’t dead yet.”

Niska looked startled but glanced at the man, “Ah, a miscalculation.” He shrugged and looked at Mal, “You do not like that I will kill this man?”

Mal, to his credit, managed to conceal most of his horror. “Oh, no. I’m sure he was a very bad person.”

Niska’s gesture was dismissive but resigned, “My wife’s nephew. At dinner, I’m getting earful. There is no way out of that. So, oh! The train job. Come here!” He beckoned for them to gather around what was a beautiful desk of real wood and turned on a display of train cars. “Here, in fifth car, two boxes. Alliance goods. You don’t mind taking from Alliance I think. From your reputation? You get on train at Hancock, headed for Paradiso. You take boxes off, before you reach Paradiso, and deliver to Crow,” He touched a spot on the display, hi-lighting it, “Here. Half money now, Crow give you other half money at rendezvous point. Anything goes wrong, then, your reputation, only gossip, and things between us, not so solid. Yes?”

Riddick was ready to kill someone and didn’t really care who knew it. The idea that River had been within spitting distance of that sick twisted jiān xié. He raced up to the bridge and scared Wash half to death when he walked in without a sound. Simon had seen his face and raced after him.

River turned and offered her partner a smile as he strode soundless onto the bridge, Wash breaking the silence with a startled “Yah!”

Riddick looked at Wash, “We’re all on.” He looked at River and took a deep breath, no fear in her scent, nothing that would indicate he’d frightened her with any of his thoughts. “You find anything zhī yīn?”

River nodded, “Also got schematics of the train and began to formulate a plan. Wash was a great help.”

“I sat here and talked to you,” Wash objected. “I wish I’d known I was helping, I would have felt less, useless.”

Riddick scooped River up and wrapped her in his arms, a passionate kiss pressed to her lips. “Knew you could do it,” He breathed into her hair. “Gorram, I ain’t never letting that old snake near you.”
“He believes he is an original thinker,” River murmured. “But he isn’t. Just a sadistic psychopath.” She chuckled and Riddick inhaled her tequila scent. “Maybe we could ship him off to the Academy.”

That startled a laugh out of him and he sat down in the rear chair, “There’s a thought.” He looked up as Simon entered the bridge. “She’s all right doc, the animal was just panickin’ a bit.”

“I thought that,” Simon shook his head. “I’ve been so worried about River, but I never... Are you all right?”

“Don’t want you or River near this guy Simon,” Riddick looked at the doctor over River’s head, absently pulling out the chopstick so her hair spilled down again. “Especially you, like it or not, you’re my pack, an’ I don’t want Niska touching you.”

River smiled up at her partner and kissed his cheek, “My láng.” She slid her hands up to his face so he looked down at her, and kissed his lips gently. “Tell us what happened? I do not think the captain will go into details.”

Wash chuckled, “Oh you’d be right about that.” He looked up at footsteps and smiled at his wife before looking at the captain. “So I’m setting a course to where?”

“Regina,” Zoe said briskly. “Need to go over the details, but we’ll be startin’ out in Hancock.”

Wash’s hands moved over the console and he looked at Riddick, “Wanna take her out?” He grinned, “Unless holdin’ onto your girl is more important.”

“Promised River I’d teach her to fly,” Riddick grinned, “Seems like now’s a good time to start.”

“Ain’t havin’ her flyin’ my boat,” Mal objected though without much heat in his voice.

“She won’t be flyin’,” Riddick snorted and lifted River easily as he moved to the seat beside Wash. “I am, she’s just gonna watch.”

“Well we get a course set, c’mon into the galley alla ya,” Mal took one look at his new crew member piloting with a diminutive girl in his lap and sighed as he left the bridge.

Zoe looked at Riddick and then at Simon, “So why the mad dash to get in here Rick?”

“Wanted to be sure River was all right,” Riddick said as he disengaged the docking seals. “Whole skyplex smelled like rot an’ death. Couldn’t be sure they wouldn’t try to take the ship, an’ once we were on, too late to send someone back.” He kissed River’s head as he pulled back on the throttle easily and turned the ship away from the skyplex.

“Wash, you got a course set?” Mal hollered from the galley.

“Unable to picture anything larger than a battlefield in his head,” River observed placidly, “Mathematics and applied astrophysics not his strong suit.” She tilted her head to look at Wash’s course. “You don’t follow the straight paths, the space lanes,” She grinned, “More economical, avoid gravitational pull of the systems until you wish to be drawn into the planet’s gravity, keep from using too much fuel.”

Wash shot her a grin, “Nice to have more than one person understand what I’m doing.” He finished programming the course in and stood up, wrapping an arm around Zoe’s waist and kissing her
cheek. "C’mon co-pilot and entourage,” He chuckled. “Mal’s chafin’ at the bit.”

Riddick shook his head over the pilot’s antics and looked at Simon, “Sorry to scare you.” He offered. “Just...”

“I know how it feels,” Simon smiled. “I’m going to go and look over the infirmary, make sure I have all I need in case the job goes wrong.”

“Very good idea,” River nodded her support as she rose off of Riddick’s lap.

“Yeah, from what Jayne says nothin’ goes smooth around Mal,” Riddick muttered as he and River followed Wash down the hall to the galley.

River watched as Mal brought up the plans he’d gotten from Niska and began to lay out how they’d do the job. He and Zoe would board the train, go back to the cargo compartment and sneak in, and open up the roof. Serenity would fly over, Jayne or Riddick would drop down and they would all go out the roof with the cargo onto Serenity.

River poked at the plans and tilted her head, “This must happen on the plains, not in the mountains,” she observed. “The timing will be tight, it is only a half hours journey from the beginning of the plains to Paradiso.” She looked at Mal, “You will have to be in the cargo car before you get to the plains.”

Mal folded his arms, “Thank you, consultant, we were kinda aware of that little snag.”

“Do you know what you are stealing?” River asked with a frown, knowing the answer already.

“Didn’t want to know.” Mal retorted.

River pulled up a manifest on Simon’s encyclopedia and began to write it down, “This is everything the cargo car will hold.” She said quietly. “I hypothesize that the Pescaline D is the goal of the heist.” She drew up something else, “Regina is a planet with a peculiar element that causes Bowden’s malady, Pescaline D is the only treatment.” She looked at Mal. “I told you that you wouldn’t like the job once you got it.”

Riddick stroked his hand down River’s hair and looked at Jayne who nodded and began to bluster, “Ain’t nothin’ says that’s what Niska wants us to steal,” He argued. “An’ we ain’t had a decent payin’ job in weeks. Why don’t you keep your crazy theories to your crazy self.”

River looked down to hide her smile at the big man’s blustering and arguing. His name calling was quite brilliant, no one would ever believe she and Riddick spent several hours each night helping him with his reading and writing. Jayne acted as though he hated she and Simon with an admirable consistency.

“He ain’t wrong,” Mal said quietly. “We ain’t asked what we’re supposed to be after an’ we cain’t back out now. We gotta do the job.”

Riddick nodded thoughtfully and looked at River, “All right River, if we do the job, what can we do to make sure it goes smooth?”

River frowned at the train and began to pull up the layout. “Smoothest way to do the job is to disconnect the cargo car. No chance of interruptions, and take everything out of the car to ensure no
one knows Niska’s crates are the true goal.” She frowned at the train and tilted her head. “This train is not the same as the one located on Regina,” She shook her head and her fingers began dancing over the encyclopedia.

“How’d ya know that?” Jayne sneered.

“Regina is a mining planet. The chances of them using a train like the one represented is very unlikely. It’s a train more typical of the central planets,” She scowled at the plans. “The only trains running on Regina are of this type.” She grabbed a pointer and began to adjust the plans Mal had laid out on the table. “We will not be able to disconnect the cargo car. Thus we will not be able to rob the entire car at our leisure.” She sighed sadly. “Captain Reynold’s plan is the most likely to succeed, though I would recommend that Richard go down with Jayne and act as a guard and deterrent to anyone interrupting.” She put the encyclopedia back in its case and sighed. “I’m going to talk to Inara,” She kissed Riddick on the cheek and left the galley.

Riddick shook his head and watched as she left, he didn’t like the melancholy scent that was rising off of her. She wanted to feel useful, and not being able to help with the plan had made her feel useless. He sighed, he knew she was a genius, that she’d gotten something to hold over Niska was indication enough of that. He put his goggles down and ran a hand over his head as Mal began to drone on over his and Jayne’s part.

River knocked on Inara’s door and smiled when the Companion opened it, “I know it isn’t our appointment, I’d hoped you wouldn’t mind a visit?”

“Please come in,” Inara smiled and wrapped an arm around River’s shoulders. “What’s bothering you sweetie?”

“I wasn’t able to help in a consultant capacity with the crime,” River told her sadly. “Richard cannot think of a way to force Mal to let me help so he feels badly for me. My plan was foiled by faulty trains.”

“I’m sorry River,” Inara began to make some tea. “I know that its important to feel part of the crew.” She shook her head. “I’ve only been here for eight months but it feels as if I could be here for eight years and still be excluded.”

“Yes,” River nodded. “Simon let slip to the captain that I was tortured and surgery done on my brain, so now Captain Reynolds believes I am damaged and I will never be allowed to become crew.” She shook her head, “I didn’t inform Richard because I don’t wish him to kill either Simon or Captain Reynolds.”

“Probably wise,” Inara laughed and shook her head at River, “Sweetheart, don’t worry about becoming part of the crew. Richard loves you and he knows you are quite capable of doing anything necessary in order to prove your worth. Do something that will make you happy right now.” She put a cup of tea in front of her guest. “What did you do when we docked at the skyplex?”

“I hacked the system and searched for anything that would help us to keep Niska from pursuing violent alternatives should Captain Reynolds turn down the job,” River replied immediately. “I also copied every file I could from his business transactions including account numbers and encrypted transfers. I routed it through six other servers and data ports so if discovered,” She smirked at the impossibility, “No one would know the theft of information came from Serenity.”
“And how useful is the information you stole?” Inara asked curiously.

“If I wanted I could take every platinum he has,” River giggled. “And he’d never know who did it. But he does run several legitimate business enterprises and I don’t wish his employees to suffer.” She tilted her head thoughtfully, “I could siphon money out of one of his numbered accounts and steal that. That’s money that’s been laundered and its safe to use.”

“How much is in there,” Inara sipped her tea. When River casually named the amount tea spattered all over Inara’s gown. “River!” The companion sputtered and coughed before regaining her composure. “Sweetheart, what would happen if you did that?”

“Hmmm...” River frowned and began to think. After a moment she shrugged, “He would most likely kill whoever knew about that account. About three people.” She tilted her head, “I could make it look like one of them took it, seed their accounts with money and take the rest making it look as if it was spent.” She began to work on her encyclopedia and smiled. “I knew one of them was creepy,” Her smile spread to a grin. “He likes women who look like little girls, prefers actual little girls if he can get them, as young as fourteen. He’s actually been skimming for a while.”

“River I think you’ve found your new occupation,” Inara smiled. “Drink your tea before it gets cold.”

River sent her an impish grin, “Can’t wait to tell Richard. Don’t need to be crew. Can make money of my own. Enough to pay my fare and Simon’s. Enough to...” She stopped and frowned at her screen as if something had caught her attention and nodded. “Enough to get the money to make new ident cards for Simon and Richard and I.” She tilted her head thoughtfully and looked at Inara. “Richard has a friend who’s as good a husker as I am. Between the two of us I bet we could erase our names from the Alliance database.”

There was a knock at the door and Riddick walked in after Inara called for whoever it was to enter. He smiled when he saw River, “Sorry the train screwed up your plan.”

“Captain will end up giving the medicine back,” River said quietly. “But he won’t be able to see that until he gets into the town.” She looked at Riddick and tugged him down beside her. “Working on another way to make money,” She smiled, “Inara helped.”

Riddick grinned as he caught the scent of tequila and apples along with a touch of honey and steel. “Yeah? You huskin’ Niska?” He kissed her temple.

“Yes,” River’s grin matched his. “Don’t worry I’ll get caught?”

“You get caught huskin’? That’d be like Simon fumblin’ a surgery,” Riddick shook his head. “Or Inara trippin’ on her own doorstep.” He wrapped an’ arm around her shoulders. “So do I get to hear about this? Or ya gonna keep me in the dark like you tried to ‘bout Simon blabbin’ to Mal ‘bout your brain surgery?”

River blushed and he caught a whiff of sugar, “Didn’t want you to lose your temper and kill Mal or hit Simon. Simon might hit you back and hurt his hands.” She looked down at her data book. “Sorry I didn’t tell you. Didn’t want you to get thrown off the boat.”

“I know River,” Riddick smoothed a lock of hair back and looked at her. “Kinda figured it was somethin’ like that. Anytime you ever didn’t tell me somethin’ it was always you tryin’ to protect me.” He looked at Inara, “This woman used to not tell me when the guards would watch her in the shower. Try to hide it when one of them smacked her ass.” He looked down at River and smiled slightly, “I ain’t gonna kill Mal ‘cause he’s actin’ like a horse’s hind end River, an’ I know Simon
ain’t used to hidin’ his worries. Just tell me so I ain’t in the dark about it.”

Inara chuckled suddenly, “I imagine that’s a new sensation for you?” She nodded at his goggles, pushed back to his forehead.

Riddick chuckled and shook his head, “That is true.” He looked at River, “There ain’t anyone in the ‘Verse can spin me ‘bout like this woman can.” He let his eyes run over her, loving how she looked, there was no one more beautiful in the ‘Verse than River Tam. “So do I get to hear ‘bout what you’re gonna do to Niska?”

“Will tell Richard everything,” River grinned at him. “As an apology for not telling you about Simon’s blab.” He laughed and kissed her gently, settling back to listen to the whole idea.

Riddick concentrated on checking his weapons, standing well away from the hatch Kaylee was opening. His goggles would be enough to shield his eyes but the wind was fierce. Mal had listened to River enough that they were starting this well before the plains. Jayne was wearing his coat and gloves as he tightened up all his clothing so nothing caught in the wind. Simon was talking to Kaylee and telling her to call him Simon. Riddick listened as Kaylee explained how they were doing crime and sighed. He’d really been tickled with River’s idea of unhitching the cargo car. He moved closer to the open doors and listened, looking up at River who was sitting on the catwalk watching he and Jayne get ready.

Kaylee smiled at Simon, “It’s a train heist. See, we fly over the train car. The Captain and Zoe sneak in, we lower Jayne an’ Rick onto the car, and they bundle up the booty, and we haul ‘em all back up. Easy as lyin’.”

Simon, not surprisingly, was not as blasé about this plan, “They’ve done this before?”

Kaylee’s laugh was sweet, Riddick wondered if the girl ever lost her sunny nature, “Hell no. But I think it’s gonna work. The Captain’s a jué duì tiān cái when it comes to plans.”

Simon nodded, clearly not seeing it but unwilling to say so, “Uh, well, uh... Is there anything I can... something I should be doing?”

Jayne moved up behind Simon with Riddick and snapped at the doctor, “Stayin’ the hell outta everyone’s way.”

Kaylee frowned at the gun hand and shook her head, “There’s no call to be snappy, Jayne.”

“You about to jump on a movin’ train?” Jayne demanded to know, “Captain ain’t around. I’m in charge.”

“Since when?” Kaylee obviously didn’t agree with that.

Jayne wasn’t done though, “And just cause Mal say’s you’re Medic, don’t make you part of the crew.” He glanced up at River where she sat on the catwalk, her eyes glued to them, “You just, play at figurin’ what’s wrong with that moon-brained sister of yours till we call for ya. Dōng ma?”

“Right,” Simon’s voice was icy as he walked off towards the infirmary. Riddick watched as a cable was lowered and tilted his head thoughtfully.

“You shouldn’t be so rude to him,” Kaylee told Jayne.
“Why?” Jayne shrugged, “Cause he’s all rich and fancible?”

She shook her head, “He’s not rich. The Alliance crashed his accounts when he snuck out his sister.”

“Well, we could all be rich if we handed her back,” Jayne looked at Riddick, “Just sayin’.”

Riddick shrugged and looked up at River who just smiled down at him. Kaylee was looking appalled, “You’re not even thinking that.”

“Mal is,” Jayne shrugged again.

“That’s not funny,” Kaylee had definitely lost her smile. Riddick almost smirked at how Jayne was behaving, when his old friend took on an attitude he really went all out. He could see the smile on River’s face even in the shadows above them.

Jayne was still talking as Kaylee hooked and locked the cable onto Jayne and then to Riddick. “He ain’t stupid. Why would he bring on trouble like those two if there weren’t no profit in it?” Kaylee’s face did not have her usual happy expression as Jayne continued, “Captain’s got a move he ain’t made yet, you’ll see.”

Riddick finally spoke and his smile was not a pretty thing, “Nope, Cap’n ain’t stupid. He knows if he makes a move in that direction I’ll gut him and anyone else who thinks to profit on my woman’s misery.”

Jayne shrugged, “Well won’t be me, I ain’t smart ‘nough to figure how to do it ‘thout you findin’ out. Know you’re smarter’n me Rick, ya always have been.” Kaylee didn’t seem reassured but her lips curved upwards as Jayne took out a ridiculous looking hat with floppy ear covers and a chin strap, tying it on against the cold of the wind, “Time for some thrilling heroics.”

Riddick rolled his eyes and tightened his gloves around his wrists before he gave River a final grin. She smiled back before rising and he knew she was headed to the cockpit so she could monitor everything going on.

Jayne pulled on his goggles as the hatch opened wider, Riddick could see the train speeding along below them, just about to enter the plains.

River entered the bridge and sat down in the seat next to Wash. The pilot for once was wearing a plain black muscle shirt, and his entire being was concentrated on steering the boat in the low atmosphere. He gave her a quick smile as she sat beside him but didn’t speak, too busy navigating the hard winds above the train.

Riddick looked at Jayne and the bigger man nodded, “Here we go.” With the silent count they’d used during the war, they dropped out of the moving ship and onto the train, Jayne grunting with the impact of the landing. Tilting his head to listen Riddick nodded and bent to the panel, ready to slide in and guard the minute Mal pulled it down.

The captain’s face was all business when he appeared in the opening of the train’s ceiling, Riddick nodded and swung down, Jayne following him and looked at Zoe.

The first mate nodded towards the crates with the Alliance insignia and Riddick frowned thoughtfully before Mal unhooked the cable from his back. Zoe handed Riddick the cards they’d used to access the cargo car and the murderer silently moved towards the door. Behind him he was vividly aware of Mal and Jayne attaching the cargo to the cable and lift tray they’d rode down.

Riddick looked down at the threshold and noted the smoke trap Zoe’d set when they entered. The
click of a gun sounded from the other side of the door and he shook his head.

Mal spoke into the com, “Fifteen seconds.”

River tensed in her seat and began to work on the cortex, her fingers flying over the fairly ancient equipment. She was vaguely aware of Wash giving her a puzzled look but he didn’t say anything being too intent on his own job.

Riddick waited until the door opened and the smoke trap went off before he yanked the fed forward and did his best to impale the man’s liver on his boot. The door slid shut behind the purple belly but unfortunately his gun went off. He heard Jayne yell behind him and felt the burn of another bullet in the flesh of his shoulder.

Zoe cursed as Riddick knocked the fed out, “Gorram!”

Jayne hollered into his com, “Go! Go now!” He leaned forward and caught Riddick by his uninjured arm, hauling the shorter man onto the tray along with the cargo as Kaylee started lifting them up.

Riddick reached down to try and haul Zoe and the Captain up, only to have Jayne stop him, “They ain’t wanted like you Rick, they’ve got passes for Paradiso, hafta get ‘em there after.”

Riddick frowned as he saw Zoe and Mal leave the cargo car and shook his head, “I don’t like it.”

Jayne shrugged his agreement, and collapsed onto the deck as Kaylee hauled them and the cargo up into Serenity.

“Where are the others?” Kaylee was looking around as if she expected Mal and Zoe to pop out of a crate or Jayne’s voluminous pockets.

“They shot my gorram leg,” Jayne nearly howled and Riddick restrained an amused smile. River was on the bridge, her entire being concentrated on a way out for Mal and Zoe. They’d be in good hands.

Kaylee wasn’t quite panicked but she wasn’t totally calm either, “Jayne, are they still on the train? Are they gonna be okay?”

Riddick took a deep breath and knew to the minute River realized he was wounded, her scent spiked with cinnamon so quickly he could smell it from the cargo bay. “A purple belly came in and when I dealing him his gun went off a coupla times. Zoe an’ Mal are still on the train. I’m sure River an’ Wash are workin’ on something to get them out.”

River looked at Wash, “Need the frequency of Cap’n Mal’s earwig please.” She smiled in pleasure as he punched it up. “Cap’n Reynolds? Zoe? Have information for you on Paradiso.”

“Make it quick we’re ‘bout ten minutes from town,” Zoe’s voice came back.

“Joey Bloggs is dead,” River said quickly. “Killed himself. Alter the story to hoping for his job, pretend to be married. Be aware of the Bowden’s Malady but act as if you had no choice. Uncle giving you this last chance to get your life straightened out, not as benevolent as a wedding journey.” River’s words were rapid fire, “Sheriff not stupid, your story of newlyweds is not plausible due to Captain’s age. Act as if you aren’t thrilled to be there and possibly you’ll be believed. Working on a plan for extraction, be ready.”


River sat back and grinned at Wash, “She can be useful even if Mal and everyone but Richard thinks she is chī xiàn.”
“Never said you were crazy,” Wash objected mildly. “Figured you had PTSD some, but I’d say that’s half the folks on this ship.”

“Including you?” River tilted her head.

“Yeah,” Wash nodded, “Flew in the war. Ended up in a POW camp.” He shrugged. “C’mon, let’s hear what went wrong this time.” He picked a spot and landed, deliberately not at the rendezvous.

River shrugged, “Purple belly with bad timing.” She frowned, “Richard is wounded, as is Jayne, but both will be all right. Jayne will make a fuss.” She looked at Wash, “Don’t worry, Richard won’t let him get carried away.”

Riddick leaned against the wall and let River fuss over him. His woman had given him a look that said she expected better of her Furyan and proceeded to work on the wound herself. Simon had given her an uncertain glance but after watching her for a moment had turned his attention to Jayne. The big gun hand was kicking up a fuss as if he’d been shot mortally and it was hilarious to watch for someone who knew exactly how much pain Jayne could deal with.

“Gorram it, let’s get us moving,” Jayne snapped as Simon moved to work on his leg some more, looking at Wash who was standing near the doorway.

“Now, I’m not,” Simon was endeavoring to work on Jayne as he tried to move and talk, “I’m not finished.” He admonished the big man.

For someone acting like he was in agony Jayne wasn’t paying much attention to his doctor, intent upon yelling at Wash. “Why are you parked here? This ain’t the gou tsao de rendezvous spot.”

“It is now,” Wash was very firm considering he had a huge angry gun hand shouting at him.

“That’s cause people are waitin’, they ain’t partial to waitin’,” Jayne snarled back.

Riddick found himself liking the pilot more and more, the man didn’t back down though Riddick knew he was nervous about Jayne being off Mal’s leash so to speak. Wash was holding strong though his sarcastic speech was as evident as ever, “Let ‘em read a magazine. We don’t make the sale until Mal and Zoe are back on the boat.”

Jayne was a little more serious and Riddick got the idea that not all of this was an act, Jayne really didn’t want Crow and company to come onto Serenity and for good reason, “These are stone killers, little man. They ain’t cuddly like me.”

Wash shook his head, “I’m not flying anywhere without my wife.”

Kaylee was clearly trying to be supportive but it didn’t quite come through her nerves, “She’ll be okay. She’s with the Captain.”

Jayne began to stand up, “There, you see? Everybody wins.” Riddick just waited while River smoothed a bandage over his shoulder and kissed his bicep. Jayne was going to make a big fuss, Riddick could tell just from the tequila scent of River’s amusement over the big man’s thoughts. Sure enough, Jayne tried to put his leg down and nearly screamed in pain. “Doc, I need a pop to quiet this pain some.” Riddick watched as Book simply leaned in the doorway watching the hullabaloo.

Simon nodded at Jayne and opened a drawer taking out a syringe, “All right, but what about the
authorities? I mean, we’re sitting here with stolen Alliance goods. Won’t they be looking for us?”

Wash shook his head, “They buzz this canyon, we’ll hear them long before they ever see us. I figure we’re good for—”

River wrapped her hand around Riddick’s wrist and stared up at him, “Won’t stop. Won’t ever stop. They’ll just keep coming until they get back what you took. Two by two, hands of blue. Two by two, hands of blue.” She shuddered and leaned against her mate.

Jayne snarled at the girl, “How’s about you shut that crazy mouth? Is that a fun game?” He looked at the rest of them, “Now I’m in ruttin’ charge here, and I’m tellin’ you how it works. We don’t get the goods to Niska on time, he’ll make meat pies outa the lot of us. And I ain’t walkin’ into that.”

Book frowned thoughtfully and regarded Jayne as Simon injected him with a different shot than the one he’d first selected. “Is this Adelai Niska you’re talking about?”

Jayne looked at Riddick who was ignoring his wound to wrap his arms around River, but at the sound of the Shepherd’s voice looked up with a question, “Now how would a Shepherd know a name like that?” The Furyan asked thoughtfully.

“As I’ve heard it, he made a deal with the Captain,” Book paused deliberately, “If the Captain’s not there to finish it, if Niska finds out he’s being held, and may speak as to who hired him,” The dark man shook his head. “I think we’re better off being a little late.”

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So? Enough changes to satisfy? Too much? I’m a little worried that this is sounding as if it’s not very different from the regular season. Obviously some episodes will be changed more than others but I don’t want to disappoint all of you.

Chinese Translations:

tā mā de - fucking
jiān xié - treacherous villain
láng - wolf
zhī yīn - soul mate
jué duì tiān cái - absolute genius

Dǒng ma? - understand?/got it?
chī xiàn - crazy
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

Script Translations:
gou tsao de - dog humping

Quote Sources:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –Success in Circuit lies too bright for our infirm Delight the Truth’s superb surprise - Tell All the Truth - Emily Dickinson

As Lightning to the Children eased with explanation kind the Tr
Wash was nervously scanning the cortex yet again, even though River had told him she’d found nothing new. Kaylee had taken the co-pilot’s seat, she and Wash were sitting in companionable worried silence while River sat in Riddick’s lap in the third chair. No one was speaking much. Riddick was looking over everything River had transferred to Simon’s encyclopedia, and the two of them were quietly thinking over their options if Mal proved persistent in believing River was unstable. Riddick knew River was worrying on something, trying to figure out what ‘hands of blue’ meant, but it wasn’t coming to her. A threat to them both, nebulous or sufficiently cloaked in secrets that it would take time before it was revealed was the most likely scenario.

He took the encyclopedia out of her hands and quickly brought up an old story from Earth That Was, one that usually amused them both and nodded at Wash and Kaylee. River smiled and began to read, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” She had succeeded in distracting Wash and Kaylee with those words, as both turned to stare at her as she read on. “However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.”

Kaylee giggled at that and Wash smiled neither one of them having much experience in high society but quite a bit of familiarity with small towns. River continued to read, occasionally interrupted by one of her listeners with a question until the familiar stomping of Jayne was heard in the hallway. River closed her mouth and the encyclopedia at the same time, as Jayne entered the cockpit followed by Simon who was hovering with an usually worried expression on his face.

“That’s it! We’ve waited long enough,” Jayne declared roughly. “Let’s get this bird in the air.”

Every bit of the good mood River had so carefully fostered faded out of Wash’s expression, “No rutting way.”

Simon was still hovering, trying to get Jayne’s attention, “You really should sit down.”

Kaylee shook her head, “You can’t just leave the Captain and Zoe here.”

Jayne was clearly of the opinion that he could, “They ain’t comin’, we can’t walk in there and get ‘em, so they’re done. Now let’s fire it up.”

Riddick slid River off his lap and shook his head, “Cobh, I ain’t in a rush, why’re you?”

“Got no likin’ for bein’ hung wrong ways down on a hook by my ankles an’ skinned on top a it,” Jayne snarled. Riddick tilted his head, Jayne was genuinely worried but not about being tortured. It must be the ship’s position, Wash had set them down in the closest appropriate spot, but they weren’t exactly camouflaged.

“I still hold that the Shepherd’s notion of Niska not carin’ for Mal bein’ held is a true one,” Riddick folded his arms ignoring the twinge in his shoulder the movement caused.

“An’ that might still be a sound notion, but we’re sittin’ ducks, gotta least move some,” Jayne persisted. Inara and Book walked onto the bridge, no doubt drawn by all the hollering Jayne was doing.
The companion took in the situation at a glance, “What’s going on?”

“Strap in, we’re takin’ off.” Jayne told her shortly.

Wash was equally emphatic in his denial, “We’re Not.”

Jayne was clearly not willing to wait any longer, “Captain’d do the same if it was one of us.”

“Not in a million years!” Kaylee denied.

“Shove it,” Jayne snarled.

Wash was clearly not interested in Jayne’s perspective, “Listen to me!”

Neither was Jayne interested in Wash, Riddick listened in amusement as Cobh began to snarl in a very credible imitation of Riddick in a temper, “You know what the chain of command is? It’s the chain I go get and beat you with until you understand who’s in ruttin’ command here. Now we’re finishin’ this deal, and then maybe, maybe, we’ll come back for those morons who got themselves caught,” He started to breath heavily, and sway a bit, “You can’t change that by getting all...” His voice slurred and slowed a bit, “bendy.”

Wash was confused, as was everyone else, “All what?”

Jayne’s mouth had obviously stopped connecting with his brain because the babble was amusing but senseless, “You’ve got the lights.. from the console.. keep you, lift you up. They shine like,” He began grabbing at the air in front of his face, “Little angels...” As Riddick watched Jayne’s eyes rolled in the back of his head and he began to fall forward.

With a muttered curse Riddick caught his old friend and kept him from concussing himself on the chair back or the floor, his shoulder protesting the big man’s weight with angry pulling sensations.

Wash blinked in shock, “Did he just go crazy and fall asleep?”

“I told him to sit down,” Simon shook his head.

Kaylee stared at the newest crew member in amazement, “You doped him.”

“It was supposed to kick in a good deal sooner. I,” He ducked his head for a moment before continuing, “I just didn’t feel comfortable with him in charge. I hope... hope that’s all right.”

Riddick sighed, he wasn’t looking forward to lugging Jayne to the infirmary, but it wasn’t as if the man couldn’t use the rest from the crazy mask he’d been wearing. He looked at River and she nodded, she knew he was hoping Niska’s men didn’t find them before Jayne recuperated from whatever drug Simon had doped him with.

“So. How do we get the others?” Book came right to the point.

Wash sighed and sat back down in his chair, stepping over Jayne to do so, “Jayne was right about them not making contact. Chances are, they got pinched getting off that train.”

“We can’t just waltz in and pull them out,” Kaylee pointed out, her pragmatic nature winning out over her optimism.

“Someone respectable enough might be able to,” Book slanted a glance at Inara.
Riddick had managed to cart Jayne most of the way down to the cargo bay before his shoulder started arguing with him. River was frowning in concentration as she waited for Inara and the others to reach the ship. They were all ready to take off at a moments notice once the shuttle returned.

Kaylee smiled up at Inara as she stepped out onto the catwalk, “Hey. How’d it go?”

Mal scowled like a schoolboy, “She hit me.”

Wash hugged Zoe in relief as Kaylee explained about Jayne on the stair landing, “We tried to get him into the infirmary, he’s just heavy.”

Riddick looked at River, “Go get something that’ll wake Jayne up right quick ǎo bèi.” He sniffed the air, tilting his head only half listening to Wash and Mal.

“Captain, I’ve got the engine running, we’re good to go,” The pilot was clearly ready to leave Regina in his rearview.

“We’re not going,” Mal shook his head just as River had known he would.

“Not? What?” Wash was confused, “Not why?”

“We’re bringin’ the cargo back,” Zoe explained.

Riddick stood by Jayne as River came hurrying back with a syringe full of something that smelled noxious just as Jayne started to come out of his drugged nap. Even semiconscious Jayne still kept up his charade, “Wha? Whadda mean back? I waited for you guys!” Quickly River injected the drug into his thigh, hiding the syringe in her pocket.

Wash’s voice had a tight worried quality that Riddick found entirely too appropriate given what he was hearing, “What are you talking about? What about Niska? Won’t this put him in more or less a killing mood?”

Mal and Zoe were busy with the cargo, not paying attention to the open airlock, “There’s others need this more.” Mal said brusquely.

Zoe nodded her agreement, “Let’s get it on the mule.”

“My shuttle’s faster,” Inara offered.

Mal shook his head, “You already risked enough flying in there once. And...” He half grinned as he kept loading the crates, “I don’t wanna get slapped around no more. Far as Niska goes, we’ll just have to explain to him the job went south when we return the money.”

Wash pointed out what Riddick had been hearing for the past few minutes, “You wanna explain, now’s your chance.” Crow and several more men than they had crew were standing on the ramp of the airlock, giving Riddick a very bad feeling.

River looked at Riddick and nodded, darting up the stairs past Kaylee and Inara and disappearing into the upper deck. Riddick began to count mentally, Mal could delay Crow for a bit, but the faster River got back with her Ladysmiths the happier Riddick would be. Jayne had been quiet since his initial outburst and Riddick looked at him. Jayne nodded slowly, still drugged but his mind was apparently clearing faster than his body.
Crow’s ugly face started talking and Riddick took a deep breath, “You didn’t make the rendezvous.”

“Ran into a few complications,” Mal said easily. His tone couldn’t fool Riddick like it did Crow, the captain certain this would turn ugly and he was ready if it did.

“You were thinking of taking Mr. Niska’s money and his property, maybe,” Crow suggested with a frown.

Mal shook his head, “Ah, interestingly, neither.”

The tattooed thug wasn’t very bright, “I don’t understand.”

The captain’s tone became a trifle crisp, “Yeah, look. Here’s what it is. Deal’s off.” When Crow apparently wasn’t getting that, Mal continued in a tone of elaborate obviousness. “We changed our minds.”

Now Crow got it, “You entered into an arrangement with Mr. Niska. There is no mind changing.”

The nervous laugh Mal gave didn’t quite comfort Riddick who braced for the fight, “I’m afraid that’s where you’re wrong. We just... we can’t take this job, so you just relax. We’ll get you all the money Niska gave us up front, you return it to him, and we’ll call it even.”

“There is no even,” Crow shook his head.

“Is that right?” Mal wondered.

Crow’s response was to throw a knife that hit Mal in the shoulder. Riddick drew his side arm and shot one of the men at the ramp before jumping over the stair railing to attack directly. He heard Zoe’s mare’s leg with its distinctive firing sound. He was instantly aware when River pushed Inara and Kaylee aside and used her twin Ladysmith pistols from the catwalk, moving constantly so she wasn’t a fixed target. Wash got on the mule and ran over a few of the enemy ensuring they wouldn’t rise again. Mal was struggling upward and about to get speared by Crow when one last shot rang out. Crow’s legs went out from under him, his knee a bloody mess.

“Nice shot,” Mal complimented a slumped Jayne, gun still smoking in his hand.

Riddick had to hide his smile as Jayne slurred exaggeratedly, “I was aiming for his head.”

Riddick looked at Mal as the captain began to walk down the airlock ramp towards the tied up henchmen, Crow included among them, “You really mean to give back the money Niska paid us?” He asked curiously, his dark voice quiet against the night.

Mal nodded shortly, “I surely do. We didn’t do the job.”

“Niska’ll come after you regardless,” Riddick pointed out. “His reputation won’t stand for it otherwise.”

“I keep it, makes it that much worse. I don’t double-cross folks,” Mal retorted. “I do a job I get paid. I don’t do the job, I don’t get paid.”

“Yeah,” Riddick nodded his understanding of that, “Got a similar outlook.” He glanced back at the stairs up to the catwalk where River sat waiting. “You do what you gotta. We wanna talk to you when you’re done.”
“She ain’t gonna be crew,” Mal looked at Riddick, “I know you’re attached. An’ I ain’t sayin’ you shouldn’t be.”

“I don’t talk ‘bout my business in front a the enemy Mal,” Riddick snarled the words out, only mildly grateful the captain had been keeping his voice level with Riddick’s. “Take care a your mess an’ then come find us. We’ll talk then.”

Riddick stalked back into Serenity and sat next to River, nearly fuming over the older man’s idiocy, “Fool thinks he’s the only one ever lost a war.” He remarked to River quietly.

River nodded and wrinkled her nose as the sound of something large and meaty crunched through Serenity’s engine intake. “Crow wasn’t willing to listen.” She remarked placidly. “Stupid and loyal, but just cunning enough to be useful.”

Riddick nodded, “Yeah, we’re gonna have trouble with Niska.” He looked at her with a smile, “You empty out his accounts yet?”

“A good portion,” River nodded. “Want to wait, do others at different times and places, harder for anyone to track.” She rose as she saw Mal walking into the ship and close the ramp to the airlock behind him, “Going to visit Kaylee. She wishes to talk about Simon.”

“Have fun liàn rén,” Riddick kissed her hand affectionately and watched as she walked away, her stride smooth and slow and graceful. Mal was walking towards him, an irritated look on his face and Riddick decided he’d nip that in the bud, “Cain’t talk ‘bout my bein’ partial to a girl in front a Niska’s men.” He said flatly. “You want to give him a way to get to me? Guarantee I’ll have to kill everyone in sight to get her back? That’s the way to do it right there, just talk about the murderer bein’ ‘attached’ to a girl who won’t be crew.”

“Wasn’t speakin’ loud enough to be heard over the engines,” Mal objected his voice a bit milder than his expression would warrant.

“Anyone used to engines might have heard you,” Riddick shook his head and stood as Mal neared him. “Bet you Kaylee could have, Wash too. Jayne would have heard every word plain as day.” He folded his arms and looked at the Captain, “I don’t take chances with River. I can’t afford to.”

“I’ll pass the word that we don’t mention her or your association in public,” Mal said quietly, “But my point about her stands.”

“Yeah?” Riddick tilted his head, ‘Funny how everything she said happened. An’ everythin’ she told Zoe worked out pretty well didn’ it?” He eyed the Captain thoughtfully, “You be stubborn about it, that’s fine. Don’ really care. But River got the money to pay her fare usin’ her genius brain. Might be you should rethink your position a bit.” He lifted his uninjured shoulder in a shrug. “You oughta get Simon to look at that cut on your shoulder.”

He looked up as River appeared on the catwalk again, skipping lightly down the stairs to throw herself into Riddick’s good arm. “Serenity is being fussy, Kaylee has no time to talk now,” The slender woman explained as she kissed her partner’s cheek. “Sit with me and read?”

“You got it,” Riddick nodded to Mal and wrapped his arm around River’s waist, guiding her towards the couch in the passenger lounge.

He and River sat and listened as Simon stitched up Mal’s shoulder, admonishing the captain that it should have been seen to sooner. The conversation wasn’t terribly stimulating until Mal asked how River was.
Simon shook his head, “The same. One moment she seems perfectly cogent, the next...” He sighed, “She speaks nonsense, like a child. So difficult to diagnose. And I still don’t know what the government was trying to do with her, so I have no idea if they succeeded.”

“Cain’t Rick help with that?” Mal wondered as Simon stitched his shoulder up.

“He could if he would,” Simon’s voice was more than a touch irked. “But he claims to not know what they did exactly. He says to leave her alone, that I shouldn’t try to make her talk about it.”

River looked at Riddick and shook her head, “Two by two, hands of blue. Two by two, hands of blue.” She said softly, “Can’t see them yet. Just know they’re coming.”

“We’ll have to think on that some more then,” Riddick murmured. “You get anything ‘sides blue hands? They skin or gloves? Any faces?”

“Impression of blue...up to the neck, cadaverous faces, teeth too shiny, gleaming like sharks,” River whispered, “Asking about me.”

“All right so blue up to the neck, means some sorta body armor,” The convict frowned thoughtfully. “Jayne’s gonna hafta give you an’ Simon an’ even harder time after Simon drugged him.”

“Speaking of Jayne,” River smiled. “Thought it might be worthwhile to speak to your friend once I’ve narrowed the search a bit.”

“Yeah, an’ we gotta get set up with better ident cards than the ones Simon got off that underground railroad,” Riddick nodded. “You thinkin’ a gettin’ some equipment?”

“Thought a little business of my own would be a good idea,” River said quietly. “Can’t always find evil people to steal from. But I can forge papers and ident cards, backed with hacking perhaps, or short term temp cards.”

“Sounds good, what sorta equipment you need for that?” Her partner kissed the top of her head, “A dedicated sourcebox I’m guessin’.”

“And something to print with, laminated paper and a machine to embed holographs,” River ticked the items off on her fingers. “Would also be nice to have an encyclopedia of my own, or a databook.”

“Maybe two sourceboxes? One of ‘em portable?” Riddick suggested. “Need to find you some body armor too.”

“Much to plan,” River agreed and snuggled against his side.

“Meanwhile,” Riddick smoothed a strand of hair away from her face and kissed her gently when she looked up, “Why don’t we go up to the galley and sit with Jayne. Mal’ll come up there in a bit an’ you can give him your fare.” A wicked grin tilted his lips, “The shock’d serve him right for how stupid he’s bein’.”

River nodded happily, “Like him well enough, but wish he’d stop jumping to conclusions about me.”

“Exactly.” Riddick nodded.
Jayne gave River and Riddick a grin when they entered the galley, “Zoe an’ Wash are on the bridge,” He told them. “Nice shootin’ earlier River,” He nodded at the slender woman. “Don’t think Mal or Zoe even noticed.”

“Did not,” River shrugged, still a bit irked that only the two people aware of her secret knew of her contribution to the continued survival of the crew. “Only see what they expect to see.”

“You been helpin’ me out a lot, looking for Ciara, workin’ with me on my letters,” Jayne said slowly. “How’d you feel ’bout a trade?”

“What would the man called Jayne like to trade?” River asked promptly sitting down across from the big gun hand, Riddick pouring them all some tea before taking a seat himself.

“Rick’s good at takin’ care a his weapons,” Jayne began, “An’ I reckon you know how to clean yours. But Rick’ll tell ya, ain’t many to touch me for ’smithin’. I can teach ya how ta take something apart, find out if there’s anythin’ wrong, fix it, an’ put it all back together again.” He smiled slightly, “Most a the guns I got, I picked up from folks as didn’t need ‘em no more an’ I worked on ‘em ‘til they was solid every one. Figure you an’ Rick’ll have a collection a your own pretty soon. I took quite a few offa them boys what came to kill us all, you an’ Rick have a look, take your share of ‘em since ya’ll kept me from getting’ killed.”

“Simon shouldn’t have doped you, Richard said he would keep you from going too far,” River frowned. “Underestimated Simon’s concern about your blustering. Counteragent to the sedative shouldn’t have been needed. Sorry Jayne.” She nodded finally as she considered Jayne’s offer, “I would like to learn gun smithing from Jayne.”

“Eh,” Jayne shrugged, “Worked out fine.” He picked a canvas sack off the floor and set it on the table with a thump. “Why don’ ya’ll have a look see, take what ya like, an’ then we’ll have our first lesson. Don’t seem like them fellas really took good care a their tools.”

Riddick grinned at River and dumped the contents of the bag onto the table knowing that Jayne would have unloaded each gun before putting them in the sack. “Gorram Cobh, did ya leave ‘em anythin’?”

The bigger man shrugged, “They was loaded for bear.” He explained, “I left ‘em a gun each and enough ammo for it. That were more’n they deserved.”

River was looking over the plethora of weapons and picked up a nice LeMat, seeing how it fit in her hand. “This one is pretty,” She tried it with her left and her right, “Fits my hand.” She smiled, “What do you think?” Dark brown eyes looked up Riddick.

“Looks like a nice little piece,” Riddick nodded thoughtfully. “Anything we find that’s bigger, gonna have to custom fit the stock so it don’t hurt your hands.”

“Yeah, might see iffen you can find an Evangelista,” Jayne suggested. “They’s got nice slim stocks.”

“Slugger or a Marakov maybe,” Riddick said idly finding one that struck his fancy. “Gonna have to give these a good cleanin’,” He noted as he picked up another. “Gorraram,” He frowned, “This’s so filthy ya can hardly tell it’s a Python underneath.”

River had found another LeMat and was examining it, “Appears this was used to pistol whip someone, barrel is minutely bent.” She showed it to Riddick.

“Have to see iffen Jayne can fix that,” Riddick sighted down the barrel and nodded his agreement. “Ya’ll wanna start cleanin’ these now?”
“Yeah I brought up the gear from the armory,” Jayne nodded and put the supplies next to the pile of guns. “Figured whatever folks didn’t want for their private collections we’d stick down there.” He looked at Riddick thoughtfully, “Might be a good idea for you to take the doc out an’ get him some ‘perience handlin’ a gun. He’d do all right with a Slugger or a LeMat.”

“Simon isn’t ready to handle guns yet,” River disagreed. “But the thought is a sound one.” She began to take her new guns apart setting each piece down in an orderly row. “Please pass the gun oil.”

All three of them were immersed in their work when Mal entered the galley. The curse that dropped from the Captain’s lips was filthy enough that River looked around to see what was wrong. “Can someone tell me why the little crazy person is handlin’ guns?” Mal asked angrily. “I don’t want her messin’ about with weapons.”

“Too late for that,” Riddick drawled and continued to clean his new gun.

“I can see that, but that don’t mean I can’t put a stop to it,” Mal retorted.

“Richard means earlier today,” River said calmly. “And I’m not crazy.”

“Talkin’ nonsense out of the blue and dancin’ ‘thout music ain’t symptoms of sane,” Mal argued. “I don’t want you touching guns.”

“Geez,” Jayne shifted uncomfortably, “They ain’t even loaded Mal.” He looked down at the gun he was cleaning clearly feeling awkward.

“I think you have a problem with your brain being missing,” River spoke calmly. “You do not see what is obvious. You do not hear or notice what is plain as day.” She finished cleaning the pieces and assembled her gun with quick clever fingers.

“What’d ya think they taught her in the Academy Mal,” Riddick snorted derisively, “Tea ceremony?”

“Her brother’s the doc--” Mal was interrupted before he could continue that line of thought.

“Her brother ain’t the one who was there with her,” Riddick snarled. “She has her moments but she ain’t crazy.”

“Moments where a loaded gun could be dangerous,” The captain insisted.

“Hell, we all go a little mad sometimes.” The escaped convict was near to losing his patience. “And if you didn’t want River using a gun then maybe you should have put that in your rules before she saved your hide today.”

“Saved my hide?”

Jayne didn’t say anything, just snorted a laugh under his breath as he continued to clean his new weapons as if the captain was being deliberately obtuse.

Riddick sighed, “River has guns already, I bought her a set of Ladysmiths when I got my own equipment. Got her a sweet set a knives too,” A half smile curved his lips at the memory of River’s kiss of thanks for the weapons. “When Niska’s crew turned up River was shooting at them from the catwalks, on the move so she weren’t a sitting duck. Know she kept more’n one from shooting you or Zoe, or me or Jayne for that matter.”
Mal stared at River and then at Riddick, “Exactly what have you been trained to do?” He asked finally. “Because the Doc thinks you’re nuts.”

“Simon doesn’t think I’m crazy, but Simon isn’t ready to know yet and neither are you,” River said quietly. “I don’t have cash, but I can transfer credits to any account you like in payment for my passage, or we can wait until we get to Persephone and I’ll get you cash.” She finished cleaning the other LeMat and set it down near Jayne for him to examine before picking up another gun thoughtfully. “Simon doesn’t always understand me because he doesn’t see what I do, doesn’t hear the same things. Richard understands me because I’m like him now, the animal is aware and alive in me.”

“Still don’t like you touchin’ guns,” Mal objected half-heartedly.

“Don’t like you talking behind my back and calling me crazy,” River said flatly. “Guess we both have to live with what we don’t like.”

“Difference is I’m Captain of this boat,” This being pointed out seemed to make no impression on River. “What I say goes.”

“He must get used to disappointment,” The diminutive woman shrugged. “Will not go unarmed because you say so. Had ample opportunity to do harm to you and your crew and did not.” She tilted her head, “No interest in continuing this conversation,” She said abruptly, “Going to bed.” She picked up her new gun and kissed Riddick on the cheek before patting Jayne on the head as she passed, undiscouraged by his snarl of dislike.

Riddick shook his head, “Hate to leave you with the mess Cobh.” He said slowly, “But iffen she tries to sleep ’thout me she gets nightmares.”

“Yeah, go on,” Jayne waved his hand. “Didn’t figure on finishin’ tonight no ways.”

The murderer chuckled and shook his head at the captain, “Might be you should talk a little less an’ listen a little more. Simon ain’t the only one worried ‘bout this girl.” He paused in the doorway and looked back at Mal, “River’s mine. Don’t matter we can’t get married legally ‘thout drawing the Feds down on us, she’s still mine. An’ I wouldn’t give her anything she couldn’t or wouldn’t use.” He walked soundlessly out of the room.

Riddick heard Mal asking Jayne, “You ain’t gonna take it into your head to do something I don’t like next are ya?”

“Dunno Mal,” Jayne’s voice was amused, “S damn funny from where I’m sittin’.”

Riddick woke to the sound of Wash moving down the hall to the bridge, his steps slow and tired, the pilot had been doing his best to walk quietly but it wasn’t something that came naturally to him. For a moment the escaped convict just lay in the bed and savored holding River, the way she was nestled against him, her hands clasping his wrist between her breasts, soft hair against his cheek, legs tangled with his under the quilts. Even as he was appreciating the silkiness of her skin under his fingertips she gave a sleepy little groan and stretched against him, her body rubbing over his in ways his animal wanted to appreciate in detail. “Was I thinkin’ too loud?” He murmured the question with a kiss to her hair.

“Hmm…no, heard someone outside,” River mumbled. “Would Richard like our katas and perhaps combat before the rest of the crew rises from slumber? Would love to have a no holds barred.”
“Yeah, let’s do that,” Riddick agreed before turning her in his arms and kissing her firmly on the mouth. “Good morning partner, mate.”

“Good morning my mate, my Riddick,” River smiled up at him, her face perfectly illuminated in the darkness thanks to his peculiar vision. “Love waking up with you like this.”

“Hmm…” Riddick groaned his agreement. “Better get up though b’fore I get ideas ‘bout keepin’ you in bed.”

“She likes Riddick’s ideas,” The slender woman chuckled wickedly. “But routine is important, and we are to speak with Inara later today.”

“Yeah,” Riddick nodded, “How’re you feelin’ ‘bout alla that anyhow?” He asked as they finally forced themselves to leave the bed. River moved almost as easily in the dark as he did, finding her clothing and pulling on her workout gear. After a moment of self-indulgence watching his woman get dressed Riddick began to do the same, grabbing his goggles and a pair of pants.

River shrugged, “Uncomfortable but still glad of improvement,” She grimaced. “Like the therapy for my leg after the creature wounded me. It hurt but I’m stronger for it, able to walk and dance without a limp.” She smiled at her mate in the darkness, “Glad that my fear is less each time you touch me.”

The light of the hall was dim but not so dark as their bunk had been and River moved easily over the metal floors, every motion a study in grace. Flicking the lights on for the bay Riddick grinned at River and watched her pull on the brief suede bottomed shoes made for workouts on uneven flooring. He could go without any type of covering on his feet, but hers were so slender she risked snapping a toe or catching her foot in the grating.

The opening stance of the kata was familiar as breathing, and soon they were both moving through the meditation exercise, minds calming and entwining more firmly with the animals. Halfway through it River was aware of Wash coming to stand on the catwalk above them as was his habit. The pilot had his own way of zen, but enjoyed the slow deceptively lazy movements of the kata. She nearly smiled, today he was in for a surprise.

Riddick slanted a glance at River as he caught the tequila scent of her amusement and a half grin quirked his lips upward. He could hear other folk on the ship stirring, Book was up and Simon was beginning to wake. Zoe and the Captain were moving around in their bunks and Kaylee was half tumbling out of her hammock in the engine room. Even Jayne was waking up, stirred by his hunger more than anything else. Riddick pulled his mind out of those thoughts, letting the background noise of the ship and its crew settle into his mind, finding a place for each of them as he moved through the kata.

River’s scent still had traces of tequila but her base scent of silk, blood, steel and apples was strong in his nose, today was a good day, she was centered very strongly. He came to a halt at the end of the kata and bowed to her, smiling as she did the same. “Ready my mate?” She asked him teasingly.

“Born ready partner,” Riddick retorted. He was acutely aware of Mal and Zoe joining Wash on the catwalk and mentally teased River that they’d have to give the captain a good show.

“The game is afoot; follow your spirit, and upon this charge…” River’s smile was hovering about her lips as she dared him to finish the quote.

“Cry ‘God for Harry, England, and Saint George!’,” Riddick replied and they were off. River never began the same way twice, this time her first blow was a kick to his jaw rocking his head back before he aimed a punch at her side. It was exhilarating and fun and enormously taxing to evade and block
and hit back, she was damn fast and so graceful he could get distracted watching her make combat look like a dance.

River grinned as she ducked a blow and tried to kick the back of Riddick’s knee. He was very quick, and whenever he connected it took her time to recover, the strength of his blows were so powerful. Plus he knew to block her mind so she couldn’t read what he was going to do next, forcing her to concentrate on their combat. They were both gleaming with sweat, bodies straining and clashing again and again. As their sparring continued she was more aware of her surroundings while keeping her concentration on the fight. That was part of why she and Richard practiced so often, so she could work on that awareness, knowing it could save their lives.

Jayne and Kaylee had joined the other three on the catwalk, Inara coming in from the opposite side of the upper bay. Book was standing in the doorway of the lounge, amazed as the rest of them were, and then Simon joined him. Simon’s mind…screamed horror, guilt, fear and worry until she was struggling to block it out of her awareness.

Riddick frowned as River just barely ducked his kick and a wave of citrus and pecans invaded her normal scent. She was hurting and uncertain all of the sudden and he shook his head as her jaw set as if to continue their bout. “River,” It was enough to speak her name. She stopped mid kick and stood, almost swaying, shaking her head. “What is it?”

“Simon’s mind…he’s…” River whispered. “Worry and fear and guilt and he’s horrified at what they’ve done to me, what they turned me into.” She took a deep breath and let it out shakily. “Need to do the kata again. Or have tea and meditate…something…” She shook her head.

“How ’bout the kata?” Riddick suggested quietly, “That’ll cool us down too, less you wanna do some sets?”

River shook her head, “Won’t be able to concentrate on the workout like this.” She looked at his hands, he’d instinctively moved them to her bare shoulders, covering some of her scars. On her belly and her back more tiny white lines were traced over her flesh, trails of the pain she’d endured, matched on his body. Her hand reached out and traced the scar that ran from his shoulder down to his heart, a knife slash she’d been forced to give him after he’d taught her to use a shiv down and dirty, just bisecting the marks of her teeth in his shoulder.

“Love that you mark me,” Riddick murmured for her ears only. “Your teeth in my shoulder, makes the animal feel safe River.” He lifted a hand to touch her cheek and she smiled tremulously up at him, he could almost feel her gathering her strength, her steel discipline firming her resolve. “Take down your hair, let me catch your scent, soothes me like nothin’ else.” He suggested with a smile.

River nodded and pulled the chopstick out of her hair, setting it on the weight bench before taking up her position next to Riddick for their kata. It took some time, but finally she’d regained what she’d lost when Simon’s mind intruded upon hers. Tired but feeling pretty good about the morning she looked up at her partner and grinned, tilting her head inquiringly.

Riddick loved that mischievous little smile that curved her lips, that tilt of her head just for him, that said they were both hot and sweaty so how about a race? Dark eyes and hair, alabaster skin gleaming, she couldn’t be more perfect if she tried. “Round the boat an’ back here?” He suggested.

“Twice, once in reverse,” River suggested with a giggle, “Avoiding spectators will be key.”

“You’re on,” Riddick nodded his agreement, “So up the back stairs, to the back hall, down the front stairs, across the bay, to here, then back the way we came.” He laid out the course with a twitch of his lips knowing that Mal was going to start shouting any second when he caught on to what they
were planning.

“Five, four, three, two, one,” River blinked when Mal didn’t yell and took off at a dead run, Riddick tearing after her, both of them soundless even on vibrating stairs and old grating.

They’d made it halfway through the ship and were ready to turn and reverse their course when Mal started to yell that there weren’t any racin’ on his boat and there shouldn’t be runnin’ ‘less someone was dyin’. River stopped and looked up at the captain, “Someone could be dying.” She suggested. “How will we know if we can react in a proper fashion unless we move quickly.”

“That ain’t the point,” Mal shook his head. “Enough a the runnin’, my boat ain’t a raceway.”

“Could be,” River argued. “Just was.” She slipped her hand into Riddick’s and leaned against him. “Scared Simon earlier,” She said softly. “The race was fun, made him remember I’m still his sister.”

“Yeah, he distracted ya earlier didn’ he,” Riddick kissed the top of her head, winding her hair around his fingers. “First time he’s seen ya fight a person, seen you for what we both are.” He looked over at Simon, “Let’s have a little talk with him. Maybe enlighten him a bit. He’s guessed an awful lot, but he still thinks you’re unstable.”

“He’s not entirely wrong,” River sighed as Riddick’s hands moved over her shoulders and scalp. “Need to present a united front.”

“Yeah, lets have a chat with Simon ‘bout that.” Riddick nodded and let River lead the way over to her brother.

Simon looked at them and Riddick could hear the doctor’s sigh even from several feet away, “Come into my room.” Simon went back to the passenger quarters and slid open his door, taking a seat in the chair and gesturing for the two of them to make themselves comfortable on the bed.

“What I don’t get Doc, is exactly what you think is goin’ on with River?” Riddick said quietly, “You didn’t act surprised by anythin’ we did on planet. But we get on this boat an’ one minute you’re tellin’ Mal that River ain’t crazy. The next you let it slip that she’s had brain surgery and she’s unstable. You don’t blink when she holds a gun on Dobson, but she spars with me an’ you’re so upset that she almost took a punch.”

“Simon is confusing,” River said softly. “Seems to accept me, then does not. One moment pleased the next angry,” She shook her head. “Do you wish that you had not come for me?” She looked at her brother sadly, “I’m not the same girl. I’m what they made me now...but you’re still looking for your little sister.”

“How can you ask me that?” Simon shook his head, “River, you’re my little sister.” He left his chair and knelt in front of her, taking her hand. “River, I won’t deny...being confronted with the reality of what was done to you...shocks me at times. Horrifies me, what they must have done in order to force you to learn. But I couldn’t ever regret getting you and Rick out.”

“Why’d you talk to Mal ‘bout River not being stable then?” Riddick asked quietly. “She’s a better shot than he is but Mal was talkin’ after the train job ‘bout her not touchin’ guns.” He shook his head, “I’d understand a bit better if you were railin’ ‘bout me sharin’ a bunk with her. God knows I ain’t good ‘nuff for her. But you don’t act like you got a problem with me at all.”

“Oh I have problems with you,” Simon speared Riddick with a cold look. “I could go on a day about my problems with you, beginning with you bunking with River and ending with your lack of information on what was done to her by the Academy.” He sighed, “River is unstable. She has bouts
of random babbling, says things that make no sense. Neither of you will let me even try to help.” The slender man pushed himself up and took his seat again looking at the two of them.

“Simon,” River looked at her brother, “I just...you already have so much to deal with, I don’t think... I didn’t think you needed to hear anymore.” She looked at Riddick, “And Richard hasn’t talked to you about it because he honestly doesn’t know exactly what they did during the surgeries. I know that I’m different, and it must be easy to see Richard as the cause of the change... but he hasn’t done anything but help me live with what they did to me.”

“And your talks with Inara?” Simon asked quietly. “You both speak with her regularly, not merely social visits, but you won’t speak to me.”

“I ain’t told you about that because River didn’t want...” Riddick shook his head. “We didn’t want to lay another burden on you.”

“Please let me decide what sort of burden I can bear and what I can’t,” Simon looked at them both. “If its something you have trouble talking about I understand that, and that Inara can offer you a type of healing I can’t. But keeping me in the dark doesn’t help any of us.”

“All right,” River took a deep breath and her fingers slid over Riddick’s palm, interlacing with his. “I... I’m having problems... with... with intimacy.” She began quietly.

“Could it just be that you aren’t ready?” Simon offered gently, “I know you love him River, but that doesn’t mean you’re ready for sex.”

“At least you recognize that I love him, instead of saying it’s just gratitude,” River retorted dryly. “That’s an improvement.” She shuddered and shook her head slowly. “No, that isn’t what I meant when I said I was having problems,” She looked at Simon. “I’d appreciate it if you would let me tell it, and not...interrupt me with comments please. I’ve gotten it out once or twice but not without having a panic attack at least once.” She looked at Riddick, “Since it isn’t officially therapy...could you please, just keep touching me while I tell it?”

“You know I will,” Riddick slid closer to her so his legs were pressed up against hers, and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, his hand resting in her lap with their fingers twined together. “Just remember to breathe, an’ take your time, ain’t a rush.”

“Right,” River looked at Simon. “I’ve been having trouble with intimacy...Richard would kiss me and...we couldn’t even kiss for very long before I’d start to be afraid.” She shook her head, “I know Richard would never hurt me, and I wasn’t afraid of him, but I still was afraid.” She rubbed her head against Riddick’s arm and gave a shaky smile. “I knew why, Richard knew why, that was why he strongly suggested I talk to Inara. It was Mal that said Richard needed to talk to her too.” She looked at Simon, “You have to understand, the first year or so, I liked it at the Academy, I could study whatever I liked and I still had time for art and dance. But I was constantly challenged. It was only after I was elevated that I... I tried to resist the training.”

Dark eyes stared into Simon’s before River looked down at her hands, “I have at least one trigger. I’ve been hacking trying to find out what it is so that I can break it down.” She shuddered and Riddick’s lips pressed to the top of her head in silent reassurance. “I...tried to resist, refused to do the training, deliberately failed at a test,” Tears began to trickle down her face. “I...was punished.” The last word came out in a choked whisper, as River looked up at her brother again, only to see his own eyes moist, tear tracks on his face. “They...beat me, and blindfolded me and shackled me to a metal exam table...” The girl’s voice was barely a whisper as she continued, “They whipped me...and then they used metal to rape me.” She kept her eyes on Simon. “I passed out from the pain finally.”
Simon took a deep breath and visibly reined in his emotions, wiping his face and eyes of his tears. “And you didn’t tell me this earlier because you didn’t want to burden me with it.” He looked at Riddick, “And this happened to her before you met her. Was she afraid of you at first?”

“Yeah, had to tackle her, full body contact,” Riddick nodded, his hand rubbing River’s shoulder soothingly. “The animal recognized her right away, an’ that scared her ‘til she figured out I weren’t gonna do anythin’ she didn’t want.”

“Richard was...” River took a deep breath, “Invaluable in showing me that not all men are uncontrolled. Made me feel safe, as if his body was made to protect me, not hurt me. My...animal...it took me time to understand how to use my instincts and my intelligence together, to listen to the animal. But when I did, I realized my animal recognized Richard as his had me.”

“But surely...the physical reactions, men can’t always control...” Simon spread his hands helplessly, “That doesn’t upset you? Scare you?”

“Maybe if it had been a man holding me down, raping me, it might,” River said thoughtfully. “But even though Richard’s body might react to mine, Richard proved to me over two years that he would never do anything about the physical desire. Not even when I started wanting him to do something.” She looked up at her partner and future lover, “I feel the safest when I’m in bed with him, wrapped in his arms, or when he’s rolled so he’s practically on top of me, pressing me to the bed.” She raised Riddick’s hand to her lips and kissed it adoringly. “It feels as if he’s putting himself between me and anything that would harm me.”

“Its the way I feel best too, but its also one a the things Inara’s helpin’ us with,” Riddick explained quietly. “We both got things we need to work on. My animal’s instinct is to protect my mate, to shield her, but that ain’t always good for her. So I gotta learn when to let her be strong, like when we was doin’ therapy on her leg.”

Simon nodded his understanding, “Are you having the panic attacks any other time?” He asked quietly.

“Almost when I...heard the Reavers and Richard wasn’t here,” River said quietly. “But I listened for him and began to breathe along with his heartbeat.” She looked at Simon, “I am slightly unstable, but I’m not uncontrolled.”

“Do you want anything to help with the attacks?” Simon tilted his head, “Or would you like the attacks to be deliberately provoked so you know how to get through them more easily?”

“Any smoother you could give me would be absorbed by my system too quickly to be of much use,” River smiled her thanks. “I would like more practice in dealing with the panic attacks. It would be useful to be able to avoid them or at least function better when I’m having them.”

“Can you explain those times when you begin babbling nonsense?” Simon asked gently, “I’ve never known you to be insensible River, but you sometimes act as if you aren’t seeing what’s around you, as if you’re somewhere else, reacting to something else.”

“That’s ‘cause she is,” Riddick’s dark coffee voice was still quiet. “You know she’s a Reader Doc,” He looked at Simon, “You’ve known that since we were on planet. She hears the dead, hears Reavers, an’ thoughts of the folks around her.” He kissed River’s hair.

“You know that I was always intuitive,” River said softly, “I would get insights, flashes, now I get them and they’re more clear, easier for me to understand, though not always. Much of my ‘nonsense’ is when I’m seeing something that hasn’t happened yet, something that doesn’t make sense to me.”
“All right,” Simon’s voice was thoughtful and slow as he considered what he was being told. “I am sorry if I’ve made things more difficult. I didn’t realize everything you hear... I’m still trying to absorb everything that’s happened and now and then its hard to suddenly see everything and how you’ve changed.”

Riddick chuckled a little bit and shrugged slightly, “Might be you’re just not seein’ all the stuff that’s the same.” He suggested. “You should take a look at her sketchbook sometime.”

“Haven’t had time to dance much,” River said softly. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t still love it.” She leaned against Riddick and regarded her brother with thoughtful eyes. “I have secrets Simon, things that even Richard doesn’t know, because... I just can’t bear to think about them. Things that make me...afraid and crazy and hurt to think about.”

“Things that were done to you?” Simon asked with a frown of concern. “River if there’s anything that can be done medically to help you I’ll need to do an exam.” He sighed, “I know it seems as if I think medicine is the answer to everything, but how can I know how to help you if I’m not even allowed to try.”

“Not done to me,” River shook her head. “Things that I saw.” She rose from Riddick’s side and went to perch on the arm of Simon’s chair. “Medically, I don’t know if anything can be done for me Simon. They did surgery on my brain, I have the scars to prove it. I don’t think it can be reversed, and drugs...don’t react well with my system anymore.”

“Will you at least let me do an exam,” Simon asked quietly. “We’d need to be in the infirmary but Rick could be there the whole time, I’d make sure we stopped anytime you became afraid. If nothing else, I need a catalog of your prior injuries.”

Riddick sighed reluctantly, “River, much as I hate the idea, he’s right. He should do a full workup on both a us. Somethin’ happens an’ he ain’t familiar? I got lucky with Dobson’s bullet. Ain’t any tellin’ what’ll happen next.”

“Yes,” River nodded slowly. “The logic is plain, uncomfortable but plain.” She kissed Simon’s cheek. “Let me put on one of my old dresses, you’ll need me in something loose.”

“No, what you’re wearing is fine,” Simon shook his head. “I have no intention of...examining you internally River,” He continued with a blush. “Let’s table this for a little while, have some breakfast and you two can relax. We’ll deal with it afterwards.”

Riddick looked at River, “How’d you feel ‘bout that Qīng Xiāng?”

“Rather get it done, get it over with, eat afterwards when there is no threat of rebellion from my stomach.” River said promptly. “Won’t be able to eat anyway.”

“Then we’ll get it done as quickly as possible,” Simon rose purposefully. “You two just relax on the couch, I’ll get the infirmary ready so you can spend as little time as possible in it.” He picked up a folded quilt from the bottom of his bed and left the room.

River smiled at her partner and stood, waiting for him to rise and wrap her up in his arms before she spoke. “He goes to put something soft so that the exam table won’t remind me of the academy.”

“Yeah, Doc ain’t stupid,” Riddick nodded. He lifted her in his arms and kissed her almost delicately, “Want me to go first? Or you feel like gettin’ it over with?”

“Get it over with,” River returned with a kiss of her own in return. “Appreciate that you are willing to wait for her.”
“Hmmm...” Riddick let himself sink into River’s mouth, soft and sweet, the salt of her sweat intensifying every other note in her scent. Her lips were warm and eager under his, her body wrapped in his arms and pressed to his chest. Her tongue flickered out and teased over his lips until he groaned against her.

River shivered in delight as Riddick let her play the aggressor, parting his lips to her tongue so she could suck and tease his tongue and lips until she was moaning her passion into his mouth. “Richard is... he feels so good against her,” She whispered into his mouth. “He is pleased with her progress?”

“Keep tellin’ ya River,” Riddick rubbed his mouth over hers before tasting the skin of her jaw and throat, the softness below her ear, “Love you, wait as long as you need. Can’t stand you to be afraid when I touch you. Catch that scent an’ I wanna kill someone. Ain’t your fault. Ain’t mine. Fault a them as tortured an’ raped you.” He slid his hand down to rub the small of her back, “We’re gonna beat ‘em though. You an’ me an’ Inara an’ Simon, we ain’t gonna lie down for them.”

“No, you’re right,” River’s smile was blinding. “And I am getting better,” She wiggled against Riddick, loving how his solid body felt pressed to hers. “Sometimes wish I could seduce you, or get drunk so the animal could take over, so I wouldn’t be afraid. But I know that wouldn’t...”

“Yeah, I know,” Riddick smiled as he pressed a kiss to her jugular. “C’mon, let’s get this done. We can shower afterwards, an’ then we can eat.”

River nodded her agreement and slid down Riddick’s body as he relaxed his arms around her. Somehow as he led her from Simon’s room to the infirmary his fingers threaded into hers so their palms pressed together. The doorway to the infirmary was almost painfully bright but she nodded and walked through.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

bǎo bèi (darling/honey)
Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)
lìàn rén (lover/sweetheart)

Quote Sources:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. - Pride & Prejudice - Jane Austen

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. - Pride & Prejudice - Jane Austen

We all go a little mad sometimes - Scream
River looked at Inara as the Companion drank her tea, “You are thinking Richard and I should come to your shuttle.” She said softly, “Time to push the boundaries again?”

“Yes River, as usual, you’ve ascertained my intent,” Inara shook her head in rueful amusement. “I have something I’d like for the two of you to try.”

Riddick frowned thoughtfully at the woman and tilted his head, “The rest of ‘em won’t be wonderin’ what’s goin’ on?”

“I believe it is somewhat common knowledge that the three of us have regular appointments, but the nature of them is private,” Inara smiled a bit smugly. “Since I do not service crew the assumption seems to be that I am teaching you things River cannot.”

“But they ain’t asked you,” Riddick found that hard to believe, as caring as the crew was, they were a gossipy bunch. That was one of the reasons Cobh had cultivated his mercenary attitude, so that no one would get in his business, just assume the worst of him.

“Of course they have, and I just smile and don’t say a thing,” Inara rose from her seat and regarded the two of them, “Come with me, both of you.”

Riddick glanced at River and she nodded slowly her eyes thoughtful, “This will be good for us. Inara doesn’t judge, doesn’t see me as a child the way the Captain does.”

“You say so Qīng Xiāng,” Riddick rose from his seat and extended a hand to River, helping her rise. He knew if anybody saw him they’d gape but there was a part of him that took a great deal of pleasure in treating River in a proper manner.

River giggled a bit as she was helped to stand and kissed his cheek, “Richard enjoys employing the different parts of his character and confounding those who believe they know him. Vast and contains multitudes.”

“That I do,” Riddick tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow a smile cutting across his dark face.

Inara’s shuttle was as welcoming as it ever was, Riddick always found himself looking around enjoying the beauty of the space. “Was thinkin’, I don’t make a lotta coin workin’ for Mal, but iffen you needed muscle or protection when you’re out an’ about, I’m sure River wouldn’t mind me helpin’ you out.” He looked at River and then at Inara spreading his hands, “Sorry, just occurred to me that we ain’t offered to pay you for your time an’ a Companion’s time is valuable.”

“My payment is in the pleasure of your company and our conversations, as well as being able to help heal you both,” Inara smiled her gratitude. “It is part of every Companion’s sacred duty, to help heal those who have been traumatized by an act that should be only for pleasure or comfort.” Her smile tilted mischievously, “Besides, River has offered to help me look for investments. I think that is worth a great deal, though a strong arm would be appreciated when I need to do some shopping.”
“Then you got one, just say when,” Riddick nodded politely. He watched River as she drifted about
the room, touching the draperies and silks, a smile touching her lips. “So what was it you were
wantin’ us to do?”

“I had the idea for an experiment,” Inara gestured for him to take a seat. “The two of you tell me
you’re doing well with your homework. But not being in your bunk I’m not able to see where you’re
instinctively avoiding your problems.” She gestured to the bed. “I’d like for the two of you to attempt
intimacy here, with me observing if that isn’t entirely contrary to your nature.”

River tilted her head in that considering way she had and regarded Inara and then switched to
Riddick, “What does my mate think?” She asked quietly.

“I think if Inara was a man I’d be a lot less comfortable with the idea,” Riddick shrugged. “As it is,
only thing I care ‘bout is you Qing Xiang. If you’re okay with it so’m I.”

“I would like to try,” River nodded slowly. “Inara won’t hurt us.”

“Then I will stay here, and the two of you make yourselves comfortable on the bed,” Inara said
quietly taking a seat opposite the bed. “I encourage you to forget I’m here.”

“No ‘fense Miss Inara, but that ain’t possible,” Riddick shook his head as he pulled off his shirt and
unbuckled his belt. River was pulling off her clothing and his eyes were drawn to all of that white
skin. “But we’ll try to act like you ain’t ‘round if that’s what you want.” River had pulled off the last
of her clothing and he groaned, pulling off his boots and shucking his pants and shorts.

River watched as Riddick yanked off his goggles and his silver eyes gleamed with need as he took in
her bare body. She didn’t know how he did it, but that look made her heart pound every time, made
her want him to pin her to the bed and take what he needed. “Richard is too far away,” She sat on
the edge of the bed until he came closer to her and knelt in front of her, within reach of her hands.
“So handsome,” She whispered what she was thinking since he couldn’t read her the way she could
him. Her fingers traced the edges of his scars before she bent forward and put her mouth on his
shoulder, kissing the remains of the love bite she’d given him.

“You never scare me,” River’s voice was breathy with sensation. “Please, Richard, need you.” She
shuddered with the feelings he was waking in her again.

“All right then,” Riddick took a deep breath, “You get comfortable then, an’ you let me know when
you’re ready.” He watched her with hot eyes from the foot of the bed as she lay down on her back
and put her wrists over her head, sliding them beneath a pillow. She shivered as she spread her thighs
for him, fear not even a thought in her mind as she felt his eyes on her skin, sliding up her legs to her
eyes. He was breathing in her scent, she could feel how much he desired her every time he saw her,
and that was more reassuring than anything else could be.

“Want your hands on me please Richard,” River said finally, her breath catching in her throat as his
silver eyes seemed to glow with his need for her. “Want your hands and your mouth, need you.”

Riddick groaned audibly as River squirmed on the bed, honey drifting towards him on the air as she
waited for him to join her. Slowly so as not to startle her he took his place beside her on the bed and
set his hand on her waist before kissing her deeply. “So beautiful River,” He murmured. “How’re you doin’?”

“Want your mouth and hands,” River moaned, his kiss was like fire, his big hand on her waist a tease with its heat and strength. “Touch please Richard, my shuài láng, want your hands on me.”

“Hmm...” Riddick kept his legs and upper body from pressing down on River, ignoring the animal’s howl to cover her body with his and possess her completely. “You tell me when to stop,” He reminded her, as he slid his hand up to her breast and covered it with his hand, a groan of need vibrating through him at the feel of her tight nipple under his palm and her soft flesh swollen with need.

River moaned as he kissed her again, one hand rubbing and teasing her breasts, moving between the two of them as his mouth dwelt almost lazily over hers, his kisses nibbling and stroking her lips, his tormenting her with tiny taunting darts between her lips until he groaned into her mouth. She felt when he was close to losing control, when the animal overruled the man momentarily, his mouth plundering hers, need rising violently in them both. “Richard please, want to touch you,” She gasped the words out. “Want you, your lips, your hands...”

Riddick nearly growled into her mouth with the need for her hands on his body, “You touch then liàn rén. You know I’m yours, you do what you like with me.” He shuddered as her hands moved from beneath the pillow, one to touch his face, the other sliding down to cup his balls and carefully grasp his jī ba. “Gods River,” He kissed her again before moving his lips down to her breasts.

River felt the heat of his lips on her nipple like a bolt of fire to her core, and cried out at the shock of pleasure. “Oh, ohhh...Richard,” She panted his name as the hand that had been teasing her breasts slid down to cup her mound. “Soo...”

Riddick shuddered as her fingers wrapped around his cock and began to move slowly and torturously up and down. She’d gotten to know his body just as he had hers and knew he didn’t want to fall without her. If he thought he was going to he’d pull away from her before he’d let it happen. She was hot and wet against his palm and he groaned against her breast at the feel of her. Carefully he rubbed the heel of his hand against her yīn dì hidden within her folds and felt the shudder travel through her body. “Want to put my fingers in you River,” He murmured against her skin. “You ready for that?”

“Yes, yes please Richard,” River moved her thighs farther apart in encouragement and was immediately rewarded as Riddick pushed two of his thick fingers up into her sheath. She couldn’t help the moaning shriek of satisfaction that burst from her lips over the pleasure of being filled and cried out again as his thumb found her clit and rubbed it gently. His body was still held away from hers, his legs and hips kept from touching her skin. “Please fuck me with your fingers my lǎng, please, need you.”

She felt so good, her honey slick and sweet as his fingers began to move in and out of her body, finding that little spot deep inside her and making sure he touched it each time, loving how she gave off tiny convulsions of pleasure when he did. “You feel so good River,” Riddick muttered against her flesh. “So soft and warm and tight around my hand zhēn ‘ài.” He groaned as her fingers tightened around him, “Wanna feel you fall River.”

River moaned and bucked up to his hand steadily moving in hand out of her sheath, “Please, Richard Riddick, want you to...” She shuddered and cried out as tiny shocks swept over her skin, precursors to the explosion of pleasure. “Zhī yīn please, together...”

Riddick felt his body instinctively matching hers, “River, I,” He groaned the words and shuddered as
her hand pumped his cock, pushing him closer to the edge. “I gotta...”

“Yes please,” River had barely gotten the words out before one of his legs tangled with hers, their hips touching even if he wasn’t pressing her to the bed. The heat that radiated off of him sent pleasure spiraling through her and she screamed as his fingers thrust her over the edge and headlong into her fall. Sobbing and moaning in ecstasy she bucked up to his hand and felt his mouth release her breast finding her lips and moaning into her mouth. “Now you, Richard, you fall for me,” She begged against his lips.

“So close River, so...” Riddick groaned, “Can you again, let me feel you come apart again? Let me see you?” He looked down at her body, flushed and frantic with her pleasure and felt his fall creeping up on him in spite of his desires. His fingers thrust hard into her, his thumb firm on her clit in the way he knew she loved and he felt her shudder and draw tight around his moving fingers. “That’s it.” He groaned into her mouth, kissing her hard and frantic, “So sweet and tight, love to feel you like this, love you River,” He shuddered as he felt his fall rising through his body. “River, gorram, soo... River,” He nearly shouted at the pleasure of his fall as his body rebelled against his control and his seed jetted out, hitting the soft skin of River’s belly and thigh.

River moaned into his mate’s mouth as she felt him fall and gentled her hand on him even as her body strove for completion, her hips meeting the thrusts of his fingers desperately. She couldn’t stop moaning, his need to see her fall was stronger than his own need for pleasure. “Richard, love my...Richard,” She shuddered hard around his hand and felt the moment he knew what she needed, the hand he’d threaded into her hair, slid under her back and around her body, his palm pressing down on her breast in another burst of heat that sent her over the edge.

He groaned into her mouth at the feel of her and knew she needed something else to push her over that final precipice, some added pleasure to shock her body into feeling everything all over again. Her breast under his palm had him grinding his cock against her hip and her fingers tightening around him, pulling him to another fall even as she neared hers. He kissed her hard, thinking firmly about how she was his, and he was hers, their bodies belonged to each other even as their hearts did, until he felt her body surrender to pleasure again, her fall like a storm blazing through her, and his through him in near painful ecstasy.

River shrieked into his mouth as her fall exploded through her body, feeling Richard’s body find his pleasure as she did hers, his shout echoing in her ears. “Oh,” She whispered, looking down at their bodies, still fairly separated, “I...” She kissed him adoringly, “You are so patient with me Richard.”

“Ain’t patience,” Riddick let his body roll towards hers, tugging her up onto her side so that they were pressed together as he eased his fingers out of her and licked them clean. “Told ya, River.” He nuzzled her neck and shoulder, “Don’t care ‘bout my fall iffen you ain’t had yours. Don’t wanna be inside you ‘til that’s what you want too.” He caught a new scent in the air and stifled his amusement. Inara would probably not care for the fact that he, and thus River, were aware that their love play had aroused her. She’d made such a point of attempting a therapeutic distance it wouldn’t be kind to let her know. River nodded in response to his thought and sighed against him. “Richard is very messy,” She observed with a smile in her voice.

“Yeah well, someone tol’ me once that iffen it were polite ya probably weren’t doin’ it right,” Riddick chuckled. “But damn if you ain’t the prettiest woman in the ‘Verse.” He slid his hand down her back and kissed her again, “Gotta say, might have to see about getting a bigger bed for our bunk, kinda nice to cuddle with you an’ not worry ‘bout hitting the floor.”

River giggled at him and kissed him lightly on the lips, “Should use the head,” She sighed before she kissed him again and his hands loosened on her. “Wish I could...”
“What?” Riddick tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Wish you could what River?”

“Want to perform kǒu yín on you,” River confessed. “Not sure if you’d want to kiss me after though.”

“Well I always wanna kiss you River,” Riddick proved it by kissing her again. “Right after you done that with me, might ask you to have some water, rinse the taste away. That ain’t a taste or smell I like on a woman’s breath. But if you wanna all I ask is a chance to return the favor. An’ I’ll do the same, rinse my mouth or whatever you like so’s your comfortable kissin’ me after.”

“I don’t mind my taste on you,” River smiled as she began to rise from the bed. “Wasn’t sure how you felt about yours on me.”

Riddick watched as she disappeared into the head. Absently he began to pick up their clothes and straighten them out, meeting Inara’s gaze as he did. “So how’d we do?” He asked with a half-smile. “Gotta give you credit, you made ignorin’ ya easy.”

Inara smiled slightly and nodded her thanks, “I’ve a bowl and a sponge if you and River would like a quick wash.”

“Think we’d appreciate that,” Riddick smiled as River emerged and Inara rose from her seat to fetch the bowl and fill it with water. Placing it on the table she moved towards her tiny hotspot and began to make tea. Riddick picked up the sponge and squeezed most of the water from it before he knelt in front of River and began tenderly washing her.

River smiled happily as Riddick concentrated on cleaning her up, he was always so tender with her, careful and gentle, no one would ever guess at this side of him, or seeing only this side, believe he could be so violent in his affections. Taking the sponge away from him she began to do the same with his body, smiling over how quickly his desire for her and her touch affected him physically. His control was as impressive as his stamina though, and he simply stood, stoic until his blood cooled again. Afterward though, watching her dress, Riddick made no attempt to hide his thoughts and how much he wanted her, to sit in a big tub and bathe each other after they’d gotten each other sweaty and messy.

Inara regarded the two of them thoughtfully and poured them the tea before she spoke, “I’d be interested to hear what it is that the two of you believe you have trouble with,” She said finally, “Before I give you my opinion.”

“Can’t fall unless Richard is closer to me, need his flesh touching mine somehow,” River murmured. “Even just his leg pressed against mine.”

“Dunno if it’s a problem or not, but less River falls, I just don’ wanna,” Riddick shook his head. “Animal wants to take over sometimes an’ have her but even the animal don’ wanna fall ‘thout River.”

“All right,” Inara smiled, “And oddly enough, neither of these things are cause for any major concern.”

“What do you find is somethin’ to worry on,” Riddick asked knowing there had to be something.

“I find it interesting that River hasn’t attempted to assume a more dominant role,” Inara said gently. “River, you don’t touch yourself at all, you don’t touch Rick unless you’ve asked him for permission.”

“Oh, that,” Rick chuckled and shook his head, “River maybe you’d better explain.”
River nodded, a sweet smile on her lips, “Very conscious of how much Richard keeps control of his animal nature. How difficult being close to me and pleasuring me is for him and still allow him to maintain that control.” She leaned against her partner and rubbed her head lazily over his shoulder. “Asking for things, asking to touch or to be touched…I used to be embarrassed about my desires, my need for him. Richard wants me to ask for what I need so I know there is nothing to be embarrassed about. So that I understand I should enjoy my body and his.”

“River’s beautiful,” Riddick’s dark coffee voice was gentle as he stroked his woman’s hair. “Want her to have control over what happens, so I told her to tell me what she needs, when she needs it, so’s I wouldn’t go too fast, do something that would hurt her or scare her.” He smiled as he looked at River, “Might look like I’m in charge but she calls the shots.”

“Well that is…actually a very healthy attitude and a good way to get used to your desires,” Inara nodded. “I’m curious though, you’ve never wanted to be on top of Rick?”

“Oh yes,” River nodded. “Very much.” She slid a glance at Riddick feeling the wave of lust that washed over him at the thought of River riding him, taking her pleasure. “Just couldn’t think of a way that it would pleasure us both.”

“Without it being overly tempting?” Inara surmised with a smile, “Do you worry that he will overwhelm you?”

“No,” River smiled. “Richard might be larger than I am, but I trust him. I know he’d never use his strength to harm me.” She looked up at her mate, “Fantasize about Richard tying me down to a bed and torturing me with pleasure, let him do whatever he likes with my body.”

“Would you like to do the same thing with him?” Inara wanted to know, her dark eyes thoughtful.

“Might be the only way to perform kǒu yín on Richard without his animal going mad,” River giggled up at Riddick’s somewhat shocked face.

“You wanna tie me to a bed an’ have your way with me?” He blinked in surprise, inhaling her scent and noticing there was nothing that indicated a lack of truth, blood, steel, silk, all the base notes of her scent along with a lingering scent of honey and caramel.

“Never mentioned it because I know how you hate chains,” River’s mouth curved in a smile. “Thought it might help me though, to be completely helpless but safe with you.”

“On that note,” Inara smiled, “If the two of you think you’re ready for the next step, I bought something for you River.” She fetched a wooden box and handed it to River.

River blinked and set the box on her lap before cautiously opening the lid. Peeking inside she blushed and shut the lid before taking a deep breath and opening it fully so Riddick could see it.

Riddick blinked, it was an oblong object in lurid turquoise with sparkly bits inside. It was clearly electrical, he could see a switch and a cord and controller, it smelled like soft plasti and was shaped remarkably like... He blinked again and looked at River and then at Inara. “Tryin’ ta make me jealous?” He asked humorously.

Inara looked at River and giggled, the younger girl blinked in surprise and Riddick felt the moment humor overtook the sugar scent of embarrassment, “Not as impressive as your lover,” Inara admitted, “But you wouldn’t want a toy exactly like him. When the two of you finally join it should be new to the both of you.”

“So what’s our homework with this?” Riddick asked since River was still a bit surprised by the entire
“I want River to use it on herself, bring herself to orgasm, by herself or with you watching,” Inara explained. “It’s important for a woman to take responsibility for her own pleasure, regardless of her lover’s skill in bringing her fall. It’s a healthy step, self-exploration, a toy is a natural progression and something River should have.”

Riddick nodded seriously, Inara had very firm ideas about everyone being honest about what they liked, what they needed. “And what do you want me to do?” He tucked a strand of hair behind River’s ear, smiling as she blushed over his thoughts of her pleasuring herself.

“Help her,” Inara said quietly. “The first time you may need to press her to use it. You’ll have to refuse her your fingers so she uses the toy.” She looked directly at River, “Your subconscious needs to understand that not everything feels bad if it isn’t a person. Toys are made for women to enhance their enjoyment. This has several settings and speeds so you can experiment if you like. But unless you aren’t feeling well, I expect you to use this at least once a day, employment permitting.”

Riddick let his hand soothe River’s nervous shiver, “Hey, I’ll be right there, an’ this ain’t metal, it’s made for you.” He closed the lid of the box and put her hand on it. “But it is yours, an’ it’ll help you River. I ain’t turquoise an’ sparkly, but sooner or later, you’re gonna want me inside you liàn rén an’ your toy’ll help you stretch some, get ready for that.”

River nodded and opened the lid to look at the toy again, “Thank you Inara,” She said automatically her innate manners kicking in belatedly. “I... I am grateful if...a bit intimidated.”

“I recalled you mentioned Rick using his hands on you, inside you, so I made certain it wasn’t wider than two of his fingers,” Inara smiled slightly. “I’ll let you go put that away. But you both are doing very well.”

Riddick nodded and rubbed River’s shoulders, “Think the rest of the crew is having a hoopball game in the bay, wanna put that away and watch?”

“Yes please,” River nodded thoughtfully.

The Companion smiled, “That does sound like fun,” She looked at River. “Something relaxing, without pressures.”

River nodded again, her gaze far away, “Before the storm comes.”

When they emerged onto the catwalks Simon was standing with Inara watching the hoopball game. River grinned as she saw Jayne and Wash getting along, the two of them teaming up to outsmart Mal and Zoe. Zoe apparently scored and then Kaylee got the ball and got on Jayne’s shoulders to score for their team. Riddick beside her on the catwalk was grinning down at his friend and she could feel his amusement in the solemn Zoe competing so chaotically in such a disorganized game.

Inara and Simon were talking, watching the game and trying to figure out who was winning, the rules were so uncivilized as to be unintelligible to spectators. Inara was asking how Simon was, was he adjusting to ship life. River grinned slightly; it was good for her proper organized brother to learn to bend a little bit. Tugging Riddick over towards Inara and Simon she slipped her hand into her brothers and was rewarded with his most affectionate smile.

Riddick cursed as a loud alarm sounded, his ears ringing until the annoying blare ceased. Zoe
commented that it was the proximity alert. Her husband with his typical comedic timing cried out in alarm, “Oh my god. What can it be? We’re all doomed! Who’s flying this thing?” He paused and shook his head, his voice deadpan, “Oh right, that would be me. Back to work.” He took off up the stairs and Riddick looked at River quizzically.

River nodded slowly her eyes on the retreating pilot, “Should be with him. Nothing good will come of this.”

Riddick swore under his breath as River began to walk quickly towards the bridge. As they were leaving she heard Kaylee exhorting Simon to come and play with them.

Thanks to their quick pace the two of them arrived on the bridge just as Wash did. Riddick moved to take his place just as Wash sat down and a human body bumped into the window. Wash’s startled cry of “Yah!” echoed through the cockpit even as he bumped into the flight controls making the entire ship shudder until Riddick grabbed them to calm the ship back down. River frowned as she bumped into the wall and moved to the relative safety of the space behind Riddick’s chair. No sooner had she done so than Mal and Zoe entered the cockpit.

“Wash, you have a stroke or something?” Mal asked half in concern half jest.

Wash shook his head, “Near enough.”

Riddick nodded his agreement as he squinted at the rotating ship in view out the windows, “Not exactly your regular happenstance is it.” He felt River’s hand on his shoulder and inhaled, she was worried, this could go bad very quickly.

“What happened?” Zoe asked, her eyes on the slowly spinning ship. Before anyone could answer her the rest of the crew entered the bridge, Simon and Inara among them.

Jayne blew out a breath, “Wǒ dé mā.”

“Anybody home?” Mal wanted to know, his gaze still on the constantly spinning ship.

Wash shook his head, “Been hailing her, but if whoever’s there is as healthy as the guy we just ran over, can’t imagine anyone’s going to be picking up.”

Riddick nodded his agreement, “Anybody were able they’d be out tryin’ to repair the boat.”

“Bring us in a little closer,” Mal ordered his gaze alert.

Wash nodded his hands dancing over the instruments, “Get you close enough to ring the doorbell.”

Simon’s voice was appalled and amazed from the back of the group, “What is it?”

River shuddered and whispered loud enough for Riddick to hear if no one else, “Its ghosts.”

Riddick was vividly aware of River standing behind him, one white hand on his bare bicep. Her fingers were cold and she smelt of worry. She was staring at the rotating ship as if it was a puzzle to be solved and he could practically hear her mind clicking away as to what had happened to it. “Don’t have to think,” She whispered into his ear. “Reavers were here, they did this…and there are snakes
“Snakes huh?” Riddick frowned and then Mal was talking and he had to pay attention in case Wash did something tricky he had to match.

“So, what do we figure?” Mal asked thoughtfully, “Transport ship?”

Wash nodded, studying the ship, “Converted cargo hauler, maybe a short-range scow.”

Kaylee pointed at a particular area of the ship, “You can see she don’t want to be parked like that. The port thrust’s gone, that’s what’s making her spin the way she is.”

“A short range vessel,” Simon asked, his quiet voice concerned, “This far out in space?”

“Retrofitted to carry passengers,” Wash gave Simon the shorthand version.

Zoe elaborated, “Travelers pick them up cheap at government auction. A few modifications and they serve well enough for a one-way push to the outer planets.”

“Settlers,” Book said quietly.

Wash nodded, “Cram fifteen, maybe twenty families on a boat that size, you pack ‘em in tight enough.”

“Families?” Inara’s lovely voice was stricken.

Cobb spoke up with his usual grisly cheer, “Tell you what I think. I think that fellow we ran into did everyone on board, killed them all, then decided to take a swim through space, see how fast his blood would boil out of his ears.” Riddick chuckled hearing his old friend’s sarcasm even if no one else had. River smelt briefly of tequila as she giggled silently behind him.

No one else got it, though Wash did address the remark with his usual humor, “You’re a very ‘up’ person.”

“Shouldn’t we report this?” Book asked folding his arms.

“To who? Alliance?” Mal nearly rolled his eyes, “Right. They’re going to run out here lickety-split and make sure these taxpayers are okay.”

“Then we’ll have to,” Book retorted.

Riddick raised his hand, “As one a the wanted fugitives on board I vote no on callin’ the Feds.” He said dryly. “Ain’t anxious to examine the inside of a cell again nor lose my woman to their greedy paws.” He tossed a glance over his shoulder, “Don’t ‘spect they’d treat the Doc too well either.”

“Thanks Rick,” Simon’s voice was dry as dust.

Jayne brought up a valid point, “If there’s folks on board in need of help, why ain’t they beaming no distress call?”

“It’s true,” Zoe looked over the instrument panel, “There’s no beacon.”

“Cain’t hear anythin’,” Riddick put in.

“Which means it’s likely no one’s looking to find her,” Mal said thoughtfully.
“All the more reason for us to do the right thing,” The shepherd added staunchly.

“How about you just say a prayer when we slide on by,” Jayne suggested in a deliberately rude tone.

“Shall I remind you of the story of the Good Samaritan?” Book was getting a stubborn set to his jaw. The captain shook his head, “I’d rather you didn’t. But we’ll check it out. See if there are survivors. If not, then, well no one’s going to mind if we take a look around, see if there’s not something of value they might have left behind.”

Riddick chuckled openly as Cobb’s mind appeared to be radically changed, “Yeah, no, uh, someone could be hurt.” The bigger man said excitedly.

River’s hand squeezed Riddick’s shoulder, “Don’t dock, the snakes are waiting.” Her voice was urgent though quiet. “Wash don’t dock,” She said frantically.

“Belay that,” Mal ordered, “We’re right here, we ain’t sailin’ away.”

River turned furious eyes on Mal as Serenity linked to the derelict. “The snakes have us now,” She snarled in an excellent imitation of her partner. “Their fangs are sunk in deep.”

Mal did a masterful job of ignoring River’s infuriated words, turning to issue orders to Zoe and Jayne.

Riddick spun the chair around so he could look at River and tugged her into his lap, “Qīng Xiāng can you tell me? With less metaphor?”

She shook her head against his shoulder, “Words won’t come out. They won’t lie down, they trap and lie in wait but they never stop screaming. They make everyone around them afraid and it’s all so loud.” Her whisper trembled against the skin of his neck and Riddick looked up at Mal with narrowed eyes.

“How long you figure you’ll be over there?” He rubbed his hand up River’s back, “River ain’t talkin’ nonsense.”

“Well we’ll see won’t we,” Mal shrugged. “Ain’t a lotta snakes in the Black.”

“Yeah well River tends to use a lot of metaphor,” Riddick shrugged that off. “Don’t mean she’s wrong.”

“Don’t mean she’s right either,” Mal shrugged, “Figure on Zoe an’ me’ll head over, need to suit up for it. Shouldn’t take long to figure out what’s what.”

“Yeah,” Riddick nodded, his hand still stroking up and down River’s back. “Well you go on over an’ figure it out, River an’ me, we already know.”

Mal gave him an exasperated look before he left the bridge and Wash waited until his Captain had left before he turned to regard Riddick and River. “So what did happen?”

Riddick shook his head, “River talks ‘bout screamin’, ‘bout people that won’t lie down, that means Reavers.” He kissed River’s forehead. “When you hear everything, ain’t hard to hear folks screamin’ even after they’re dead.”

“That’s...not a comfortable thought,” Wash said slowly, his gaze thoughtful as it moved from Riddick’s eyes to the still rotating ship.
“Not a comfortable ability,” River spoke from within her partner’s arms. “Richard is the only one who understands what I hear.” She sighed slightly, “The snakes have us now, not easy to dislodge their fangs.”

“Yeah can you elaborate on that?” Wash was busily working the instrument panel.

“Reaver’s is known to leave traps behind,” Riddick said shortly. “River has a certain...talent that helps her figure out what they’ve done. Snakes... ain’t a good sign.”

“River?” Wash looked at the diminutive girl, “You see anything else ‘round that’ll cause trouble?”

“She hears too much to determine if any one voice will cause problems,” River murmured after a moment of thought. “We will scavenge and find treasure but it must be given up if we are to keep crew.” She looked at Wash, “Captain must take the obvious valuables but others should take all they can find or this stop will be for nothing.” She sighed, “Richard can explain her words.”

Wash shook his head, “No, I think I got it.” He flicked a few buttons. “Can you run some more scans?”

“She will look for more life signs, valuables, any other symptoms of trouble,” River agreed.

Wash nodded and looked at Riddick, “You’ve got the ship. I’m gonna try to seed a few ideas with my wife. I’ll send Jayne up for you to convince. He seems to listen to you.”

Riddick nodded his understanding before shifting River off his lap into the chair so he could take Wash’s seat. “Yeah, shared history’ll do that.” He slid into the pilot’s chair and began to run his own diagnostics of Serenity.

It wasn’t long until Jayne entered the cockpit, “Wash was sayin’ ‘bout you wantin’ ta talk to me?”

He threw himself into the third chair. “This got anything to do with the snakes?” The huge gunhand looked at River, “Just sayin’ I don’t care for how that sounds.”

“The vipers have their fangs in us already,” River shrugged. “She and Kaylee will be required to dislodge their teeth.” She turned from the cortex and looked at Jayne, “Very important.” Dark eyes regarded him solemnly, “Jayne must remember to take any and all valuables he finds. Captain will find a great treasure but we won’t be allowed to keep it. Kaylee and Jayne will need to scavenge for items of smaller value that we may keep.”

“You sayin’ the Feds are gonna show up?” Riddick tilted his head thoughtfully, “That ain’t good news.” He commented with a shrug and looked at Jayne. “I can come over with ya, help ya carry things. I’m guessin’ the more hands the better.” He slanted a silver glance at River, “That set all right with you Qīng Xiāng?”

“She will be fine with Wash here,” River agreed. “Will come over to show the Captain exactly where the bodies lie, he will take too long to find them elsewise.” She tilted her head at the cortex. “Jayne and Richard should concentrate their searches in the crew quarters, Captain and Zoe will find the treasure.” She looked at the two of them, “Once we leave we will not be able to return. We must take all we can before...before,” River turned to stare at the slowly rotating ship her lips tilting downwards, “before the not dead ghost is found.”

“That sounds sorta ominous,” Jayne frowned. “Right, so any idea where we can find treasure of our own?”

River nodded slowly, “Passenger quarters... will find things of value.” She tilted her head, “Kaylee and Simon will find things to repair Serenity, sadly no catalyzer but many other parts that will be
“Wash returns. Time for work.”

“All right,” Jayne nodded, “Let’s get to it then.” He took a deep breath, visibly shrugging on his persona of the ruthless mercenary just as Wash entered the cabin. “Little man,” Jayne nodded to the pilot as he stalked out.

“So how’d the chat go?” Wash gave Riddick and River a grin as the Furyan stood, vacating the pilot’s chair.

“Well enough that I think Cobh an’ me’l do all right getting valuables off the boat,” Riddick nodded. “You?”

“Yeah, it went okay,” Wash sighed. “Zoe tends to pay more attention to the captain’s orders than to my ideas.”

“Captain rules the ship,” River said absently. “Zoe obeys orders. Only one she ever disobeyed from the Captain.” The slender girl smiled at Wash, “First mate values her husband more highly than she does her Captain. Feels she must obey in order to make it up to him. Will always choose her husband over her oldest friend in matters of survival.”

“As it should be,” Riddick leaned over the back of River’s chair and let his hand trail down River’s long hair. “If the Captain’s in her head, you’re in her heart. Heart tends ta rule the head.”

“Nice of you to say,” Wash smiled slightly. “Just ain’t easy playin’ second fiddle.”

“Long’s you remember it’s only playin’,” Riddick advised. “Ain’t like it’s for real, you bein’ second. Comes down to it that woman’d rather have you than her own life.” He gave a one shouldered shrug when Wash blinked at him in astonishment, “River an’ me, ’tween the two of us, ain’t much we don’t see. Could tell the minute I saw you two together, Zoe’d rather die than see you harmed. It was all over her when we was tellin’ ya’ll what happened to River an’ me. She woulda put us off the boat the minute we looked like we’d send a hard look in your direction.”

River nodded her agreement as she sent information from her cortex to Wash’s screen, “Treasure for Mal and Zoe to find.” She told him, “Wash does not play second fiddle. Plays first fiddle badly disguised as second.” She tilted her head back to look up at Riddick, “Should start getting ready to go over with Jayne. Mal and Zoe already gone.”

Riddick dropped a kiss on her forehead, “I’m going Qing Xiāng, just wanted one last kiss.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
Zhēn ’ài - true love
shuài láng - handsome wolf
liàn rén - sweetheart/lover
jī ba - dick/penis
yīn dì - clitoris
láng - wolf
Zhī yīn - soul mate
kǒu yín - fellatio
Wǒ de mā - my mother/oh my god

Quote Sources:

No quotes in this chapter... I'm actually surprised. It's rare that I go without at least one.
Riddick stiffened as the air of the derelict ship hit his nose and held up his hand for Jayne to stop. “Know how you said that guy killed ev’ryone an’ took a walk outside?”

“Yeah,” Jayne sounded as if he was regretting that particular piece of fancy.

“You were right ‘bout ev’rybody gettin’ killed,” Riddick said slowly. “I can smell it. Rot and old blood, terror, it hangs in the air like screams. That’s why River said the ship was ghosts.”

“Well ain’t that tā mā de delightful,” The gun hand shook his head. “Your girl said to loot the passenger quarters, let’s head there then the kitchens. Always can use more protein.”

“I hear that,” Riddick tilted his head recalling what he’d learned off the cortex, “Guess we oughta check in with Mal first huh? Let him have the illusion he’s in charge of us?”

Jayne chuckled, “Yeah, man gets stroppy when he don’t get his captainy respect.”

Riddick chuckled and shook his head as they walked into the room where Mal, Zoe and Kaylee were looking at a cortex, “Ya’ll figure where the goods are?” A single look exchanged with Jayne confirmed that neither of them wanted to spook little Kaylee by mentioning the dead concentrated in some area of the ship.

“Got a good idea,” Kaylee said cheerfully. “I’m gonna see if there’s gizmos I can use for our girl.”

Riddick tilted his head at the sound of someone moving carefully in the hallway, the scent of mylar and glass and Jayne’s amusement reached his sensitive nose and he sighed looking up at his old friend, “You just had to mess with him Cobh?”

“Well, yeah?” Jayne grinned, his amusement contagious and Riddick shook his head as Simon entered the room, suited up and looking very uncomfortable.

Mal looked at him quizzically, “Hi.” Riddick watched as Simon realized what Jayne had done and began struggling to remove the helmet, Kaylee moved to help him and when it was off and Simon could hear him, Mal tilted his head, “Um, what are you doing here, and what’s with the suit?”

Jayne started to shake with laughter until his chuckles filled the cabin. Riddick just sighed as Simon managed a pretty good snarl for a core boy, “You’re hilarious. Sadist.”

Riddick shook his head and patted Simon on the back, “Leastways you were able to get it on pretty well Simon. Remind me though, go over a few things with you and River. Been forgettin’ you two ain’t used to the Black as yet.”

“All right, enough,” Mal shook his head over his gun hand’s antics. “Ain’t got time for games. As long as you’re here, you may as well lend a hand. You can run with Kaylee. Let’s be quick about this people, all right? A few loads each, no need to be greedy.”

Jayne exchanged another look with Riddick and the two of them nodded, for all appearances agreeing with Mal, each remembering what River had said earlier about the treasure being given back. “Yeah Mal, me an’ Rick’ll hit the passenger quarters and the galley.”
“Where are all the people?” Simon looked around in concern as if someone would come down the hall and screaming about pirates and trespassers.

Riddick could smell the lie on Mal even before the captain spoke, “Ship says lifeboat launched more than a week ago. We’re going to assume everyone got off okay. Anyway, we’re just here to pick the bones.” He glanced at Simon and Kaylee, “You two start in the engine room, make your way back here, picking up along the way. Jayne, you make sure you two strip the galley down as much as you can. We might not be able to sell it but food is always something we can use, ‘specially the way you two eat.”

Riddick shook his head as he heard Kaylee explain to Simon that his helmet was on wrong, Jayne was still chuckling, “You don’t think the doc believed Mal when Cap’n said the passengers took off on the life boat?” The big gun hand asked quietly, his mood sobering once they’d gotten out of earshot.

“Know for a fact he didn’t,” Riddick shook his head. “Simon acts naive, does a good job of it in front a Mal, but he made if off planet with us an’ that weren’t somethin’ that leaves much innocence left. He didn’t contradict Mal ‘cause he don’ wanna scare Lil Kaylee.”

“Sweet on her?” Jayne asked questioningly as he pulled sacks out of his pack and they began to systematically loot the passenger quarters.

“When he ain’t distracted with worry about River, yeah,” The Furryan grinned and then sobered. “Kaylee’s still innocent in a way River ain’t anymore. Not a lot Simon won’t do to keep that intact. Same’s River or me for that matter, same’s you.”

“Yeah, that’s somethin’ we’re all pretty agreed on,” Jayne said quietly. He took a deep breath, “River was pretty set on alla these people bein’ dead and this whole place is a trap. What say we do this as quick an’ thorough as we can?”

“Yeah, River’ll probably come over pretty soon. If we don’t find the bodies first she’ll lead Mal right to ‘em,” Riddick nodded slowly. “But I agree. I’m gettin’ hints of fresh blood, like a wound that’s still bleedin’. Don’t think we’re alone here so quick an’ cautious Cobb. Just like the old days.”

“You got it Rick,” Jayne nodded and the two of them began to move at double speed.

River was scanning the cortex with Wash, comparing manifests and outgoing ships from Bernadette to the ship before them, “Possibility,” She sent it to Wash’s screen, “Need experienced eyes to check it.” She tilted her head. “When they find it, they’ll want to take only that. Jayne and Riddick will disobey, Wash must distract the captain from noticing this or all the work will be for nothing.”

Wash sent her a grin, “Why River, an an are you suggesting I would deliberately subvert the Captain’s orders?”

“Shì,” River sent him a grin. “Was that the right ship?”

“It was,” Wash grinned at her. “And we’ve found our treasure.”

Mal’s voice crackled over the com, “Wash, any luck?”

Wash grinned, “Thanks to our resident genius husker I think we’ve found something that pretty well matches that class. Layout looks about right. Seems to me any valuables, if there are any, likely be
stored C-deck, aft.”

Mal’s voice sounded pleased even over the bad com, “Good work. Keep the engine running, shouldn’t be long.”

River took a deep breath, “She must go onto the ghost ship and find the bodies before blood becomes multiplied.”

“You be careful there partner,” Wash admonished with a smile. “Between you and your bigger half I’m getting spoiled for choice as to expertise.”

“She is always careful,” River smiled. “Partner insists on such. Except when she is not,” Her grin tilted wickedly and she bent to tighten her boots to her ankles, checking her weapons and knives.

“Well do me a favor and don’t get hurt, I wouldn’t like to meet angry worried Riddick,” The pilot quipped.

“No one does except her,” River smiled and left the bridge.

The ship smelled overwhelmingly of death when she stepped onto it and the screams of the murdered were abrāsively loud in her mind. She could hear Riddick’s mind, the beauty of it like a gem sparkling in the darkness like a blaze, a beacon only for her. The captain’s mind was also aglow, not like Riddick’s, ruby bright and sparkling, more like a garnet, a quieter fire. He and Zoe were discussing the passengers... She followed the dark glow of Mal’s thoughts until she was standing right beside him and looked up at the bodies. “No, they couldn’t have taken their belongings,” River murmured sadly looking up at the bodies hanging from the ceiling. “The mindless ravening, the screams that never cease, they took them and took them until all they had to give was blood.”

“No, nobody escaped,” Mal looked at River who tore her eyes off the bodies and met the captain’s gaze. For once they were in total accord. “Nobody.”

“Oh my god,” Zoe looked up in shock.

“Jen dao mei,” Mal muttered, “I know what did this.” He jerked his head at Zoe, “Get her out of here.”

But River was already moving, darkness was too close to Richard and Jayne, “Hunger goes to find Jayne.” The words fell from her mouth as she took one fluid step and broke into the graceful sprint she’d displayed only hours earlier. She could hear Mal behind her talking into the comm, giving Jayne instructions. Riddick was listening to Jayne’s comm, his thoughts guiding her but he wasn’t in the room with Jayne, only within hearing distance of his comm.

In her run she passed Simon and Kaylee, barely hearing Simon’s exclamation of surprise as she raced for the galley. Riddick joined her one room away and they burst into the galley to see a slight figure attack Jayne. Riddick growled low in his throat but River paid no heed, springing into action and diving at the man turned animal who was in the midst of leaping on Jayne.

Riddick changed course to keep Jayne from accidentally shooting River, jerking the big man’s gun up and away from the two figures fighting in the galley. “You shoot my nǚ ren an’ I’ll be fair pissed Cobh.” He held up a hand as Mal and Zoe followed by Simon and Kaylee entered the galley.

River blew out her breath in irritation as the new born reaver attempted to bite her again and spun, kicking him in the jaw, knocking him back and down. Her boot came down on the reaver’s neck and she bent down, growling and snapping her teeth at him until he subsided. “My Furyan, I am grateful for your trust,” She beamed at Riddick.
“You ain’t had much fun lately,” Riddick shrugged. He looked over at Simon and then at Kaylee, “Might be best if you go on back to the engine room, gather up what you can an’ head back to Serenity.” He looked at Mal and nodded at Kaylee whose pretty face was looking a little worried.

Jayne took a deep breath, “Why don’t I, uh, grab the haul we got an’ stay with the doc an’ Kaylee whilst they get the rest of what they need from the engine room?” He suggested, “Gonna need muscle to carry alla this back.”

“Yeah, you do that little thing Jayne,” Mal agreed. “Zoe you help ‘em.” He looked at the bags by Riddick and Jayne’s feet. When the other four had left Mal regarded Riddick and River, “Mind tellin’ me what’s goin’ on?”

“This one,” River regarded the would be reaver with a scowl, “This one was attacking Jayne. The big man with a girls name is my Richard’s friend. I did not want him injured.” She growled down at the Reaver again.

“He looks to be half starved,” Mal was regarding the man with a peculiar look. “Can you knock him out long enough for the doc to take a look at him?”

“Why’d we wanna do that,” Riddick folded his arms. “River ain’t hurt him.”

River shook her head, “He has stared too long into darkness, darkness that he did not carry within himself,” Her head tilted as she regarded Mal. “He did not have the strength to resist it. He has become his worst nightmare.” Mal was still regarding her with a slightly confused gaze and River turned to Riddick. “Please translate for your mate,” She demanded.

“She’s tryin’ to say the ship was hit by Reavers. They left him alive, who knows their reasons, but he couldn’t stand it, so he became a Reaver,” Riddick explained with a dark scowl.

“Still can’t leave him here,” Mal shrugged. “Knock him out.”

River sighed and tilted her head so she was looking only at Riddick, “Does her Furyan agree with this course of action?”

“No,” Riddick shook his head, “But he’s gotta learn from his mistakes same’s the rest of us.”

River nodded slowly and regarded Mal, “The girl will knock the Reaver out, on the condition that he not be given free run of the ship. Lock him away, the way you sometimes wish to lock the girl away when she becomes too strange for you to bear.”

“River, did he—” Riddick’s growl was furious.

“Never spoke of the desire,” River reassured her partner. “Only read it on his face. No action,” She said gently using the term they’d agreed upon to indicate she had Read someone.

“Don’ like it still,” Riddick glared at Mal. “Go ahead and knock him out though.”

River smirked down at her captive and lifted her foot from his throat, he immediately began an attempt to rise, only to have River’s heel come down on his head with a crack.

River stood watching through the windows of the infirmary as Simon examined the would be reaver. Everyone else on the crew had taken advantage of Mal’s distraction to haul away and hide as much
of their booty as they could. Wash had met Jayne at the airlock and grabbed bags of food taking them up to the pantry while the big man had gone back for another load. Unspoken by all in on the little conspiracy was the need to camouflage their finds, the notion that the Feds were on the way was an uncomfortable axe waiting to fall. So the food was put quickly into the pantry, the pioneer’s valuables secreted in the more subtle hiding places about the ship.

Even Kaylee had managed to put all her newly acquired spare parts in her storage places, Jayne and Riddick had put guns and knives in the armory and River had gone back to carry over as much kitchenware as she could. She and Riddick had nearly gutted the galley of the derelict but that was all to the good. Serenity wouldn’t want for food for a while at least. Shepherd Book had been somewhat nonplussed by all the rushing about but when Riddick had handed him a crate of books and told him to put them in his quarters he’d merely nodded. River had done the same thing with Inara, bringing a chest of tea that would augment the Companion's supply for some time.

She and Riddick had ignored the bodies hanging overhead and searched the hold as quickly as they could, books, clothing, anything that was well packed and could be transferred quickly they’d grabbed. Jayne had come back to help and River was grateful that Simon had understood her when she’d walked passed him saying ‘Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day’. He’d understood she wanted him to keep the captain busy and Wash had gotten Zoe and Mal involved in a conversation regarding their own position with the derelict. That had given them enough time to loot the derelict more thoroughly than they might have otherwise managed.

Now though, they’d put away all they’d taken, and everyone was gathered in the lounge outside the infirmary. River tilted her head listening to the others talk, keeping her eyes on the reaver from where she stood near the door.

Inara with her gentle heart was talking to Kaylee, “I wonder how long he’d been living like that?”

“I don’t know,” Kaylee sounded as if she were sorry for the reaver. “He must be real brave to survive like that when nobody else did.”

Jayne’s voice held a sneer and she knew he’d talked with Riddick about the scrawny boy in the infirmary, “Yeah, real hero, killing all them people.”

“What?” Kaylee was looking around in shock. “We don’t believe that.” Her gaze fell on Zoe, “We don’t do we?”

The first mate shook her head, “Captain wouldn’t have brought him on board, were that the case.”

River moved closer to the door, vividly aware of Riddick coming to stand behind her, his hands on her shoulders warm and reassuring. Simon was tending to the man, examining him while Mal watched, River tensed as the reaver began to regain consciousness.

“Pulse is rapid, blood pressure’s the high side of normal. That’s to be expected,” Simon was frowning slightly as he spoke.

“Weak,” The survivor rambled, “Cattle for the slaughter.”
Mal looked up and met River’s gaze and then Riddick’s, the dawning awareness in his eyes reflected fully in theirs, “Dope him.”

Simon shook his head, “I don’t think that’s…”

“Just do it Simon,” Riddick said quietly, his dark coffee voice a gentle rumble. “Mal’s right.”

The man on the exam table was still babbling, “No mercy, no resistance.” Simon brought up the pressure shot and filled it with a strong smoother. The reaver was still babbling and grabbed his arm, “Open up, see what’s inside.” Simon frowned and administered the shot quickly, checking the man’s vitals again as the sedative took hold, his words slurring, “No mercy.”

Riddick took a deep breath and nodded, “River an’ me’ll empty the infirmary.” He said quietly, “You’ll hafta explain to the rest of ’em why we’re lockin’ him in.”

River nodded solemnly and Mal took a deep breath, “Won’t this be a gorram hoot an’ a holler.” He muttered in annoyance.

River shrugged, “Did not want him. You insisted. Now must take your medicine.”

“Great, thanks loads,” Mal shook his head and steered Simon out of the infirmary. “C’mon Doc, let’s let our Furyans do what they do best.”

Simon rolled his eyes, “You’re going to have them fight?” When Mal looked at him incredulously Simon smirked a bit, River nearly giggled at her ĝe ĝe’s expression. “Apart from driving each other crazy that is what they do best,” Simon elaborated.

“Today you grow a sense of humor? Really?” Mal shook his head.

“No, today I am feeling sufficiently overwhelmed that I’m expressing it,” Simon snarked back.

“Great, c’mon,” Mal exited the infirmary exhorting the rest of his crew to head on up to the galley. As they all trooped out before him he turned and regarded River and Riddick, “River you use that genius brain of yours to lock him in good. An’ then you go and lock the armory and everybody’s bunks the same way. I don’t wanna chance him getting a weapon of any kind.”

River tilted her head, “Be a mercy to kill him now.” She said quietly, “But the captain will squawk if she does.”

“Yeah,” Riddick began systematically removing all surgical tools and anything that could be used as a weapon from the drawers and cabinets. River watched him for a moment and found a bucket in one of the lower cabinet steadily filling it with prepackaged needles, scalpels and other medical implements.

The work went pretty quickly with the two of them so attuned to each other, and it wasn’t much longer than a quarter of an hour before River was locking the bare infirmary and coding it so the man couldn’t leave without breaking through bullet proof glass. Taking the bucket with her she opened
one of the storage closets and shoved it inside Riddick doing the same with the instruments he held. Then they moved up towards the galley.

Riddick nearly laughed at the panicky tone Jayne was using. It was damn funny when the man wasn’t feeling near as scared as he was acting. A bark of laughter did escape him and a giggle from River when Zoe remarked calmly, “Jayne, you’ll scare the women.”

He felt an unfamiliar flush of pride when Simon spoke quietly, resolution in his tone. “I’ll go. I’ve dealt with bodies, they don’t worry me.”

Book nodded, “I’d like to go with him. Maybe see what I can do about putting those folks to rest.”

Riddick tugged River in front of him and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her head gently as they stood and listened. Mal was going somewhere with this and he had a pretty good idea where. The surest way to get someone to do something was to argue against it.

“Those folks already resting pretty good, Shepherd. Reavers saw to that,” Mal remarked sipping his drink.

“How we treat our dead is part of what makes us different than those that did the slaughtering,” Book argued.

Mal seemed to give in, his body language resigned even as his scent quickened with triumph, leather and sandalwood. “All right, you go say your words. Jayne, you’ll help the doc and Shepherd Book cut down those people, then you’ll load up the cargo.”

“I don’t believe this,” Jayne argued, his blue eyes flickering over Riddick and River before fixing on Mal. “We’re sitting put for a funeral?”

“Yes, Jayne, that is exactly what we’re going to do,” Mal’s voice wasn’t hard but it wasn’t easy either. “Not going to have these people looking over my shoulder once we’re gone. I’m not saying there’s any peace to be had, but on the off chance there is, those folks deserve a little of it.”

Inara blinked at him and shook her head as she rose to exit the galley, “Just when I think I’ve got you figured out.” She took the arm Simon offered her graciously and followed Jayne and Book out of the room.

River’s scent was threaded with the tequila of amusement and he knew it was because she was going to be proven right. Kaylee was beaming at her captain, “That was real pretty Captain, what you just said.”

Wash shook his head, “I didn’t think you were one for rituals and such.”

Mal shook his head, “I’m not, but it’ll keep the others busy for a while. No reason to concern them with what’s to be done.” He turned and regarded River, “I could do with a little less of you being right you know.”

“Sir?” Zoe’s voice was confused and Wash just sighed.

Riddick looked down at his woman and shrugged, “May’s well program the locks along the way.” He suggested. “Ain’t like it’ll take you more’n a minute anyhow.”
River grinned at him and stopped at the control panel on the wall, expertly typing and keying in sequences before assigning passwords. “Jayne’s is Ciara, Kaylee’s is Sunshine, Richard and River’s is Furyan. Mal’s is Serenity. Zoe and Wash, have Warrior.” She closed the panel and began to tug him towards the bridge.

Riddick chuckled as they arrived just in time to see Kaylee, Wash, Mal and Zoe looking at the camera feed from the bottom of the ship, cables latching onto Serenity.

Mal sighed, “It’s a real burden being right so often.”

Wash looked at River and rolled his eyes towards his captain before asking Mal, “What is that?”

“Booby trap,” Mal said shortly turning to regard River with a thoughtful gaze. “Reavers sometimes leave them for the rescue ships. Triggered it when we latched on.”

“Tried to say don’t,” River shrugged at the captain. “You don’t listen to the girl. Think she’s chī xiàn, so she need not be heeded. Told you snakes would sink in their fangs.”

Wash looked at the snakelike cables and then at Mal and asked the practical question, “And when we detach?”

“It blows,” Mal said shortly.

River spoke at the same time, “Boom boom, bye bye.”

“Okay, so we don’t detach, we just, I don’t know, sit tight until...” Wash stopped defeated as he realized where that line of reasoning would take him. River shrugged sympathetically.

“What, Reavers come back?” Zoe shook her head.

River moved out of the doorway with Riddick and he watched her with an appreciative gleam as she moved next to Kaylee who was regarding the feed with an analytical gaze. The engineer tilted her head as River pointed to something on the screen, “Very sloppy work.” The diminutive girl said softly, “Made do with the materials at hand.”

Kaylee nodded and explained to her captain, “Looks like they’ve jerry-rigged it with a pressure catch. It’s the only thing that’d work with all these spare parts. We could probably bypass that easy, we get to the DC line.”

River agreed, her voice soft, “Pull the teeth of the snakes, no power, no way to bite us.” She gestured to the screen again, “Initial power from the derelict. Now the strength of their jaws feeds off of Serenity, like a vampire, her blood strengthens them.”

Mal blinked at River and turned to his engineer, “You tell me right now, little Kaylee, you really think you can do this?”

Kaylee looked at River, “Not sure I could do it without River, second set of knowing hands an’ all.”

Riddick growled loudly in the dim room, catching the scent of River’s worry, a mild burnt cinnamon that meant she was concerned but not afraid. “Not havin’ it,” He looked at Mal. “You don’t get to ignore my woman’s warnings and then when it suits you, use her to fix the mess you got into because you didn’t heed her.” He looked at River, “Qīng Xiāng no.”

“Must prove herself,” River said softly. “Kaylee and I could do it.” She looked at Riddick and he slammed his fist into the storage locker next to him he was so damned angry all of the sudden.
“Then River gets a share of the haul,” Riddick scowled at Mal. “If you use her to get out of this, then she’s crew on this job and she gets a share of this job or the next one.”

“Are you two sure you can do this?” Mal regarded the girls with a frown.

“Sure,” Kaylee nodded slanting a glance at River, “Yeah. I think so. ‘Sides, if I mess up,” River’s voice chimed in with Kaylee’s, as the engineer finished, “Not like you’ll be able to yell at me.” River giggled and launched herself at Riddick.

Without even thinking about it he caught her and wrapped her up in his arms, greedily taking the kiss she gave him and devouring her mouth. He was vaguely aware of Mal clearing his throat, of desire blooming off Kaylee, amusement from Wash and Zoe and discomfort from the captain. “River, you get yourself killed doin’ this tā mà de sōu zhū yì I’ll hunt you through the afterlife just so I can spank you.” He warned her, kissing her again.

“She understands zhàng fu,” River nodded solemnly and Riddick was so pleased to be called her husband he kissed her once more. “But her equilibrium is much disturbed by his mouth and she must have steady hands.”

“Yeah,” Riddick looked at Kaylee, “Can you do with a third set?”

“To hand us tools an such? That’d be good,” Kaylee nodded. “Wouldn’t a thought you’d want to be anywhere near this though Rick.”

“If River’s puttin’ herself in harms way I’m always gonna be with her,” Riddick said flatly. “Somethin’ happens to her I’d survive but…”

River kissed his cheek gently, “Kaylee is a genius engineer. Machines speak to her. We will all be fine.” She said softly ignoring the look from Mal, the captain surprised by the look on Riddick’s face, the determination in her man’s voice. “Riddick will not become a mindless brute, will not lose his mate.” She pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek, “He will not be only the animal ever again.” She slid down his body, his relaxed arms letting her feet touch the ground again, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth; then took the other, as just as fair, and having perhaps the better claim, because it was grassy and wanted wear; though as for that the passing there had worn them really about the same.”

Riddick couldn’t help smiling down at her as she looked up at him so earnestly, letting the words of the Earth That Was poet say what she couldn’t, and unable to resist confounding Mal a bit, continued the verses, “And both that morning equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.” He bent so his forehead touched hers, “I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

He was aware of Mal staring at him like he’d grown a second head and Kaylee smiling happily at he and River. The girl had such a romantic heart and sunny nature she was impossible to be annoyed with for long. The captain of course had to say something, “Much fun as it is to hear ya’ll talkin’ poetical, think maybe we can skip to the workin’ portion of the program?”

River rolled her eyes and pressed one last kiss to Riddick’s cheek before she turned to regard her captain, “Since the Captain is so eager to remedy his mistake perhaps he will in the future listen to the girl even when she seems to be talking nonsense?” She slipped her hand into Riddick’s and aimed her eyes at Kaylee, “We must do our work, then we will have other worries to consume us.”
“I don’t like the sound of that,” Mal frowned.

Wash shrugged, “She means the Feds.” He remarked as he began to do another scan of Serenity to see if the Reavers had left any other surprises.

“Feds?” Zoe echoed.

Mal just groaned, “This day just gets better an’ better.” He motioned for Kaylee to go with River and Riddick. “Hustle yourselves along then, if we’re gonna have purple bellies joinin’ us we’ll have to find a place to hide ya’ll.”

River grinned, “Everything will be shiny fine Cap’n.” She chirped in a cheerful imitation of Kaylee. Big brown eyes turned to the engineer, “This will be fun.”

Kaylee gave a little chuckle, “River you an’ me gotta talk about your definition of fun.”

Riddick frowned as he hung down into the crawlspace under the hold, River and Kaylee had wormed their way down into the slender engineering tunnels beneath the ship and were chattering back and forth in engineering speak he wouldn’t understand until he’d read a book or two on the subject. Mal was standing next to him waiting to hand him anything needful, tension emanating from every pore. “Mal, if you can’t calm down you’re gonna drive me nuts,” Riddick told the captain finally. “The girls don’t sound worried. River’s gigglin’.”

“I can hear ‘em,” Mal’s voice was tight. “An’ I gotta say that don’t reassure me as to River’s tenuous grasp on sanity.”

“She an’ Kaylee are talkin’ ‘bout boys in between engineerin’ speak,” Riddick told him. “My woman ain’t ever had a girlfriend her own age before. Gotta feelin’ she an’ Kaylee an’ Inara are gonna have some fun chats.” He shrugged and handed Kaylee a tool from the box next to him, “River’s real good at compartmentalizing her worries. She ain’t scared right now, Kaylee ain’t even scared, River’s got her nice an’ relaxed. Though I could use a little less time hearin’ ‘bout how handsome Simon is.”

“I’m almost sorry for you,” Mal’s voice held a thread of humor. “I’m still a bit confused about the poetry quotin’ from one of the ‘Verse’s most wanted men.”

“Well you an’ me, we ain’t friends, an’ as long as you’re treatin’ my woman like she’s feeble minded when she’s the furthest thing from it we ain’t gonna be,” Riddick retorted. “You stop actin’ like a chún lú around River an’ maybe you’ll learn a thing or two ‘bout me.”

“You really—” Mal’s voice cut off as Kaylee’s whoop of victory echoed up to them and soon the engineers pretty grease smeared face popped out of the crawlspace.

“We’re good to go Cap’n,” She beamed up at them and River’s head appeared beside hers wearing a similar smile.

“Kaylee has said she’ll teach me about the engines,” River told Riddick happily as they climbed up to the hold.

They had just replaced the grating when Jayne entered hauling the gen-seed containers, “What’s going on?”
Mal shook his head, “Well, I’d have to say, right at this particular moment, not a thing. Right?”

Kaylee shook her head in agreement not seeing River’s wink at Jayne nor Mal Riddick’s hand signal that he’d tell his friend later. “Not a gorram thing,” Kaylee chirped.

Jayne frowned, “Looked like a thing to me.”

Book and Simon entered the cargo bay and shut the airlock behind them as Mal spoke, “Thought we might have had a situation, but it looks to be taken care of. Let’s get that merchandise put away.”

He moved towards the com and called into it, “Everyone’s home Wash, let’s go.”

Riddick had barely gotten two steps to help Jayne when the proximity alarm started blaring again, Jayne cursed and started muttering, “Oh no, nonono, don’t you say that. It’s the Reavers. It’s the gorram Reavers come back!”

Mal’s voice held a bite as he headed up to the bridge, “Get that stuff stored.”

Jayne shouted back at him, “Like it’s going to matter!”

The captain didn’t bother waiting to finish the argument, Zoe and he racing towards the bridge, “Just do it!”

Riddick grinned at Jayne, “Take one crate, put it in our bunk, password is Furyan.” He spelled it out for the merc before he began muscling the other crates towards the obvious smuggling hidey hole. “I’ll get the rest. Bring me three suits when you come back down.”

“You got it Rick,” Jayne nodded and hefted a crate up over his shoulder before he headed up the steps at a jog. River unhooked the panel from the front of the smuggling compartment and watched as Riddick muscled the crates in.

“Feds are here,” River said softly and looked over at Simon who looked absolutely horrified. “Don’t worry Simon, Richard has a plan and the captain is even now formulating the same plan.” She tilted her head and her voice sounded eerily like Mal’s, “Looks like civilization has caught up to us.”

“Screw civilization,” Simon’s handsome face held a sneer now that Kaylee wasn’t in the hold. “I’m not giving you back to them.”

Riddick straightened up and sent the doc a grin, “Wasn’t exactly plannin’ on that.” He turned and regarded Mal who was walking back into the cargo bay along the catwalk just as Jayne entered from the lounge.

“So what was it?” Jayne looked up at Mal with a frown.

“Open the stash, pull out the goods,” Mal told his gunhand.

“What?” Jayne shook his head as he joined Rick by the hidey hole, arguing even as he obeyed, “Just got done putting it in.”

Mal wasn’t putting up with even a token argument, “Yeah, and I’m telling you to take it all out again.”

“Why for?” Jayne began hauling the crates out.

Mal’s exasperation was like sage to Riddick’s nose, “I got no notion to argue this. In about two minutes time this boat’s going to be crawling with Alliance.” Jayne and Riddick pulled the crates out,
Riddick looked at where Jayne had tossed the suits and nodded in satisfaction.

Simon took a deep breath and tried to control the panic that threatened to consume him. Riddick wished he had the time to appreciate the man’s discipline, “Wouldn’t we be better off running?”

“Can’t run,” Mal said shortly, “They’re pulling us in.”

Simon shook his head, his expression horrified as he looked from Riddick hauling crates to River who was sitting on a crate near the suits. “If they find us, they’ll send River and Rick back to that place. To be tortured,” He took a gulping breath of air, visibly trying to calm himself down. “I’d never see her again.”

Mal ignored the doctor for a moment and frowned at the crates, “Stack everything here, in plain sight. Wouldn’t want it to seem like we got anything to hide.” He aimed a glare at Riddick astute enough to know why there were only three crates instead of four stacked up next to him. “It might give them Alliance boys the wrong impression.”

“Or the right one,” Wash remarked sardonically.

“That too,” Mal agreed and looked at Simon, “Now you an’ Rick an’ River…”

“What?” Simon’s face was thunderous, “Would you like to line us up in plain sight too?”

“Don’t get tetchy,” Mal remonstrated even as River jumped lightly off her crate and began to examine the suits. Riddick put a hand on Simon’s shoulder and nearly grinned. Simon was putting on his confused core boy act again. “Just do as I say.”

“Is that why you let us stay? So you could use us as bargaining chips?” Simon sneered.

Jayne brightened, “I knew there was a reason.”

Riddick sighed and when Simon seemed ready to yell put a hand gently over the smaller man’s mouth. “Mmmf!”

“Don’t be a fool son. Do as the man says,” Book advised calmly even as Riddick began to guide Simon over to the suits.

“Jayne, come gimme a hand with these,” Riddick called sharply. He looked at Simon, “You won’t like this but it’s the only way. We can’t be on the ship when the purple bellies board us. We’re going to hide on her back.” He helped Simon into the suit and turned to do the same for River. “Jayne, help my brother.” He commanded lightly.

River was getting into her suit with more enthusiasm than Simon was displaying and Riddick couldn’t help but grin as he spoke to her, “Gonna need you to keep an eye on Simon for me, don’t think he’s gonna like the Black as much as you.”

“She will monitor Simon’s well-being,” River promised solemnly. She tilted her head as Riddick tightened the suit around her and began to check her seals, watching as Jayne expertly did the same for Simon. Riddick smiled as he began to get his own suit on, Simon seemed more than a little confused by Jayne’s businesslike attitude regarding Simon and his suit. The merc was giving Simon the standard safety talk as he helped the doc get suited up properly and attached Simon’s helmet with a firm twist and a pull to make sure it held.

“Okay doc,” Jayne nodded, “You’re good to go. Start for the airlock on the top of the ship, River an’ Rick’ll be right behind you. I ’spect River’ll know when you’ll need to pop the lock.” He gave the
core man a pat on the back to get him going and turned to help Rick.

“Double check my work on River,” Riddick told him, “I can get in one a these ‘thout help.”

Jayne nodded soberly and began to go over River’s suit, running impersonal hands over her seals and frowning at her hair. Pulling a strip of plasti from his pocket he wrapped her hair in a quick messy chignon and bound it up with the plasti. “You’re in zero g last thing you’ll need is hair in your face méi mei,” He told her with a half smile, “Lets get your helm on an’ I’ll check your man.” River nodded smiling up at him and took the helmet setting it firmly in place and twisting it so it locked. Jayne gave it a good tug and gave her a thumbs up. River regarded Riddick for a moment and he felt a pang as he realized her scent was cut off from him now.

“My lâng knows more of his mate than simply scent,” River reassured him obliquely as he turned and made her way towards the airlock.

Riddick nodded and took a deep breath, he didn’t mind the black, didn’t mind the suits, didn’t even mind Jayne’s hands checking his seals and touching him. Not even his first stint in lock up did anyone try to get with him, he’d been a very strong dangerous nineteen when the war had ended and the feds had caught up with him. His natural abilities and nature had kept him from being prey and he had no interest in becoming that type of predator. But he’d gone from the easy camaraderie with Cobh and his unit with their casual affection to a place where he’d put a stranglehold on the animal’s need for touch. Until River he’d never relaxed that leash and it was hard to go back to it. “River’ll be listenin’ to how things go with the Feds,” Riddick told Jayne softly. “But that thing in the infirmary is awake. Don’t let Kaylee see it. Inara too. An’ keep Wash away as well. Three most innocent on the boat. Let’s keep ‘em that way if we can.”

Jayne nodded and grabbed Riddick in a hard affectionate hug before he put the Furyan’s helmet on and locked the seals in place. Riddick felt his old grin tug at his lips for his friend before he loped away towards the airlock. Every minute would count now.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

tā mā de - fucking

ān ān - honey, an endearment for a little girl

Shì - yes

nǚ ren - wife

gē ge’s - big brother’s

chī xiàn - crazy/insane

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
tā mā de sōu zhǔ yì - fucking rotten idea
zhàng fu - husband
chūn lǚ - silly ass
mèi mei - little sister
láng - wolf

Script Translations:
Jen dao mei - just our luck

Quote Sources:
Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day - MacBeth - William Shakespeare

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth; then took the other, as just as fair, and having perhaps the better claim, because it was grassy and wanted wear; though as for that the passing there had worn them really about the same. - The Road Not Taken - Robert Frost

And both that morning equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back. - The Road Not Taken - Robert Frost

I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference. - The Road Not Taken - Robert Frost
River looked up at the stars and entertained her brother and mate with repeating the conversations their crewmates were having with Commander Harken. Now and then her giggles filled their ears, especially when Wash was talking to the commander and waxing rhapsodic over his wife’s body.

She could hear Riddick’s amusement as she repeated Kaylee’s rant and felt a tendril of it from Simon. Below them she could hear the Alliance crew searching the boat and their frustration when they couldn’t enter the crew quarters.

Harken was interviewing Mal now and she was glad she’d taken a moment to tell the captain all the passwords but for hers and Richards. The commander was asking why the crew quarters were locked and Mal tilted his head, “Private quarters; had a fella come aboard and reprogram the locks for my crew. Paid him to get the last one open, gorram thing’s been locked tight since I bought the ship. Cain’t get it open come hell or high water. The man managed everything but that last. I got a list of the passwords if you need to check them.”

“You allow locked doors on your ship,” Harken sounded as if he didn’t believe it.

“Long’s I can get in, saw no reason crew couldn’t have privacy from each other at least,” Mal shrugged. “Got a girl like Kaylee, an’ a man like Cobb, want my crew to feel safe in their bunks.” He recited the list of passwords and tilted his head, “So by now I figure you’ve been over to the derelict. Seen it for yourself.”

“Yes,” River spoke in Harken’s chillingly correct tones, “Terrible thing.” She tilted her head and broke off her recital. “The Reaver beat himself against the counters and tore at his own flesh with his hands,” She said quietly. “They have him in their medical bay and are attempting to treat him for shock.” She flinched minutely before looking up at the stars for comfort. “The reaver has a scalpel and has attacked the medical staff.” She reached for Riddick’s hand and gratitude flooded her as he wrapped her in his arms without her needing to ask anything more. “He has killed now; there will be no saving him.” She took a deep breath, “He returns to Serenity. We must not go aboard until Mal and the commander kill him.”

“You want us to stay out here durin’ a fight,” Riddick wasn’t thrilled with the idea. “When we could go in and kill the fēiwúzhū?”

“Could, but then Mal would have no explanation for how the Reaver throttled himself to death or stabbed himself in the heart,” River said reasonably and felt more than heard her mate’s growl of irritation at the thought of sitting on the hull while a reaver scuttled around his territory. “Do not worry, Mal must save Harken’s life and then Harken will take the gen-seed and go. He will take Mal’s advice and destroy the derelict.”

Simon took a deep breath, audible through the coms, “Should we be talking?” He asked finally. “It was so good to hear about the crew, I didn’t think of it earlier. But is it possible for them to hear us?”

“Nah,” Riddick rubbed his hand over River’s shoulder, the warmth of his mind comforting even if she couldn’t feel his skin on hers. “With their engines, no way they could hear anything in the black little as our voices.”
River nodded her agreement, “The reaver is on Serenity now. He sits in the galley, lies in wait for victims. Killed the purple bellies who stood guard at the ship.” She sighed slightly, “Commander Harken has agreed to take Mal with to search for the man.”

Riddick shook his head and River giggled as she felt him roll his eyes, “This has fiasco written all over it.” Her partner quipped dryly.

River shrugged, “Mal is a soldier, capable of dealing with Harken. Capable of dealing with the reaver. He does not need the distraction of our arrival along with the reaver.”

Simon sighed, “Are we at least close to being able to go back on?” River patted him sympathetically on the back and felt him shudder even through his suit. Her brother did not like this at all, did not appreciate the view of the stars the way she and Riddick did. Her mate’s eyes were unveiled and shining like starlight in the darkness. She could see herself through his eyes and saw the faint glow of silver within their brown depths.

Frowning she looked at Simon, “Gē ge do my eyes glow?”

Simon looked at her, forcing his gaze away from Serenity’s hull and she could see his shock on his face, “Yes, not nearly as strongly as Rick’s but yes.” He tilted his head thoughtfully, “Do you find you have increased acuity in the darkness?”

“Somewhat,” River nodded, “Nothing like my Richard’s but I see better at night than I did before the academy.” She shrugged, “I don’t remember them doing anything to my eyes.”

“Do you remember much about your surgeries?” Simon asked carefully. “I only ask because now seems the likeliest time that we won’t be overheard by the crew.”

“I remember everything Simon,” River sighed. “I was unconscious for the surgeries so I can’t remember what they did. But after each surgery it took more time for me to become accustomed to everything I saw and heard.” She shook her head, “I know they wanted me to hear everything. And then I heard more than I ever wanted. And I was truly mad for a time.”

“Scariest two days of my life, watching River claw her way back from that,” Riddick said quietly. “She went an’ had to read cards for some folks apparently. Saw something that she didn’t wanna see. Had her curled in a ball and begging me to stop the screaming.” He shook his head. “She ain’t ever told me what it was, only way for us to deal with it was for me to remind her she didn’t have to look. That she could bury it and not see it all the time.”

“The guards and staff didn’t object to your taking care of River like that,” Simon wondered looking at Riddick.

“Doctor Mathias was the one in charge, an’ he didn’t mind anything I taught River, long’s we didn’t ‘fraternize’, ‘cause once I taught her things ‘bout her animal, River functioned better,” Riddick shook his head.

River nodded slowly her head tilted in a way that indicated to Riddick that she was listening to what went on below them in Serenity. “Mal and Harken are in the galley now...” She took a deep breath and shut her eyes, pulling her mind away from Mal’s. “I will listen more later, no desire to be in the captain’s mind when he kills with his bare hands.”

Riddick rubbed her shoulder soothingly, “Ain’t sayin’ you oughta.” He tucked her closer into his body, reaching a hand out to Simon to pat him on the back. “Don’ worry doc, it’ll be done an’ we’ll be back on the boat soon enough.”
River shuddered convulsively in his arms and couldn’t help the tears that swelled in her eyes as the reaver and Mal’s emotions reached out and wrapped around her mind. “Tòng bù yù shēng,” She groaned her misery, “Gāo gāo shǒu.”

She could feel Riddick’s worry, knew he hadn’t anticipated anything like this, that she’d need his touch while they were unable to touch each other, “River look at me, look in me Qīng Xiāng.” He coaxed her to turn and stare up into his eyes, “See me tiān shǐ.”

Riddick waited a long heartbeat until River shuddered under his hands and stared up into his eyes, “Breathe with me River, remember? It’s you an’ me, hǎi kū shí làn.”

River nodded and her tears were spilling over and down her cheeks but she concentrated on her breathing and matching her heartbeat to his. It took another twenty minutes before she was completely calm and an additional ten after that before she listened to the minds around them and nodded, “Safe to go inside now, the purple bellies have vacated. Captain is no longer chained.”

Riddick nodded and slowly eased upwards helping Simon to stand and move over to the airlock hatch, “Easy Simon,” He helped the doctor climb down into the hatch and sent River after him before yanking his own off and wrapping River up in his arms to kiss her. He was aware his mouth was hard and demanding, crushing her lips under his, but she was soft and sweet and opening for his lips and tongue to take hers. Panting he set her down again and rested his forehead against hers, “Sorry, just didn’t realize what it would do to me, bein’ blocked away from your scent like that bǎo bǎo.”

“How are you feeling?” Simon had regained some of his composure now that he was breathing ship air again. “River? You?”

“Better now that Richard’s skin can touch mine,” River said softly. “Loved the stars, so close and so far away, like Richards eyes, gleaming down at me. But to be denied the touch of my mate... to not feel his hands or his lips on mine. Only his mind to steady me,” She shuddered and began to pull off the suit, helping Simon do the same until Riddick took over that chore.

“You doc?” Riddick grinned at the expression of relief on Simon’s face as he got out of the suit.

“Better now that its not just glass and mylar between me and the black,” Simon said firmly and held out his hand for Riddick’s helmet, setting it with the other two.

Riddick climbed out of his suit and listened for a moment, the only thing he heard was the rhythm of the ships engines. “Let’s get to our bunk and we’ll hole up there until its time to leave,” He suggested quietly. “You ain’t seen how River’s fixed it up yet Simon.”

River tilted her head and a half grin split her face, “Man called Jayne comes to let us know all is well.” She said quietly.

Riddick chuckled and nodded, he could hear the soft walk of Jayne’s feet as they climbed upwards to the airlock. Putting the suits away he looked up just as Jayne opened the door to the airlock, “All clear?”

“Yeah, Cap’n’s getting the rest of ‘em back aboard now,” Jayne nodded. “Purple bellies have all taken off, took the cargo though.”

“Figured they would,” Riddick sighed. “Leastways we’ve got one crate of it.”
“Yeah,” Jayne shrugged. “We’re gonna need to straighten up the galley ‘fore we can have anythin’
to eat. Purple bellies made a mess of it.”

Riddick looked at River and she nodded and put her hand in his, “She will be happy to help
straighten the galley.”

Riddick watched as River put the last pot back where it belonged and turned to regard him with
warm chocolate eyes. Simon had gone down to the infirmary to do the same thing muttering about
sterilization and the damage ignorance could do. Riddick had busied himself with first hauling the
crate of gen-seed out of their bunk and then righting the furniture before helping River.

Mal strode into the galley and blinked in surprise to find it clean, “Well, looks like you two are none
the worse for wear.” He remarked and moved towards the kettle putting it on for tea.

“The Black is surprisingly soothing, but with unexpected stimuli, the touch of her mate is needful
and was denied,” River shook her head. “Captain finally understood what the girl meant when she
called the man a reaver.”

“Yeah, Harken weren’t too inclined to believe until he saw what the man’d done to himself minute
he got hold of a sharp knife,” Mal nodded and his eyes fell on the crate of gen-seed. “I ’spect that’ll
bring a tidy bundle.”

“Made you promise to give River a share,” Riddick said flatly. “I just made sure there was somethin’
to have a share of.”

Wash came into the galley with Zoe and moved over to kiss River’s forehead, “How are you doin’
with all this little one?”

Riddick watched as his woman smiled up at Wash, affection in her scent, “She is well enough.
Requires time alone with her mate to soothe the remains of the day out of her mind. Not comfortable
to have a reaver aboard Serenity.”

Zoe shook her head and went into the pantry coming out with the makings for dinner, “Nice to have
a galley to cook in.”

Riddick nodded, “Given that Harken was on the verge of arresting alla you folks, I imagine it is.” He
looked at Jayne, “Cobh gimme a hand haulin’ this down to the hold will ya?”

“First you have me haul it up here, now you want help haulin’ it back down,” Jayne groused with
good humor. “Gorram Rick, make up your gāi sī mind.”

“Geez Cobh, you whine like a mule,” Riddick retorted with a smirk. “Sit and put up your feet, didn’
mean ta make ya work or anythin’. ” He picked up the chest and balanced it on one shoulder before
walking out of the galley. The scent of honey drifted towards him and he grinned. His woman made
no secret of liking his body. Once he and River had eaten maybe they’d get to try out her new toy.

When he returned to the galley Inara met him at the door, “Riddick, may I speak with you a
moment?”

“Yeah Miss Inara, just, uh,” Riddick shrugged and led her back down the hall towards the engine
room. “What can I do for you?”
“How are you holding up?” Inara regarded him with a thoughtful look. “You were unable to touch or breathe in River’s scent for a good long while today.” She elaborated when Riddick looked at her quizzically. “Are you all right?”

“Gotta admit plannin’ on spendin’ a lotta time tonight in our bunk, soakin’ in her scent an’ feelin’ her skin,” Riddick admitted. “Animal got a little starved for skin privileges but we dealt with that when we were stuck in cryo. Weren’t that much different ‘cept in a vacuum there’s no scent.”

“Will that be enough?” Inara’s dark eyes were entirely too knowledgeable, “Given that from what Wash told me Mal didn’t believe River to begin with?”

Riddick shrugged slightly, “Weren’t plannin’ on leavin’ the bunk ‘til me an’ River were feelin’ better.” He looked back over his shoulder at the galley. “Made sure River gets a cut at this job, an’ that’ll help her some. She helped Kaylee earlier an’ that’s all to the good. Kaylee’s gonna teach her ‘bout Serenity’s engines.”

Inara nodded her understanding, “I suggest the two of you make up a couple of plates and have dinner alone. The press of others upon the two of you, upon your...animals, cannot help at this juncture.”

“Don’t think Mal’d go for it,” Riddick admitted. “He’s pretty ornery ‘bout havin’ one meal together, an’ sometimes that’s good for River.”

“See how the two of you are doing then,” Inara conceded. “I’ve seen that it does help her to feel included, part of the crew.”

“Hey! You two comin’ to eat or what?” Jayne hollered down the hall and Riddick rolled his eyes. “Jayne does have an interesting sense of timing,” Inara smiled and Riddick couldn’t help grinning back, offering her his arm politely. When he escorted her into the galley the surprised looks he got weren’t at all flattering, River and Jayne being the only ones who didn’t find his behavior a shock.

For fun he seated Inara in her place at the table and crossed over to River, bowing slightly and grinning as she returned the courtesy gravely with a curtsey before he offered her his arm and escorted her to her seat by Inara. Wash whistled his amazement and Mal nodded, “Yeah what he said.”

Riddick shrugged as he took River’s hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it, “B’tween River an’ me, there ain’t much we haven’t talked on. She got bored once, taught me all the protocols of core society, includin’ the fancy manners. Weren’t for my eyes can pass for core pretty well in the right clothes.”

“Guess the way you talk’d be a dead give away that you’re rim,” Mal nodded as he took the kettle off the stove and began pouring everyone tea. Zoe went to the com and spoke into it, alerting the absentee crew that dinner was nearly ready.

“I’m certain that I don’t know what you could mean,” Riddick amused himself by speaking in Simon’s cool elegant accent. “For my purposes I speak as well as any other,” He shot River a grin as she giggled and Kaylee stopped dead in the doorway when she heard his voice.

“Shiny,” Was all she said, her grin taking over her startled face.

“Rick’s all sortsa talented,” Jayne chuckled as he took the crock Zoe indicated from the stove and put it at the center of the table. “Man use ta drive me nuts, first met he used ta imitate my accent.”
“When was that exactly Jayne?” Mal asked mildly but the change in his scent had Riddick narrowing his eyes at the man.

“Met when we were what...” Jayne scratched his chin, as if thinking and Riddick nearly chuckled at the dimwitted act. “Think I were fourteen?”

“I was fifteen Cobb, you were thirteen,” Riddick shook his head as he grabbed plates from the cabinet and set them on the table before taking his seat next to River and passing the plates around. “How you can forget your own gorram age is beyond me,” He teased the bigger man.

“Ain’t alla us got weird ass brains like you Rick,” Jayne retorted.

“Eh, Jayne’s old enough thirteen would have to be the better part a two decades back,” Mal dismissed his gun hand’s absentmindedness.

Riddick folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, regarding Mal thoughtfully, “Why don’t you just ask what you want to know Mal.” He invited quietly, “Ain’t sayin’ I’ll tell ya but at least you’ll have the question out there.”

River stiffened and regarded Mal with dark eyes as the captain shrugged, “Maybe I’m just tryin’ to figure how old you are Rick, seems you’re near twice the nǐ zǐ’s age. By your own account you’ve been bound by law for murder more’n once.”

Jayne laughed outright and shook his head, “Mal you talk ‘bout me runnin’ my mouth? You got any idea a what you’re sayin’?” He pulled out a chair for Kaylee as the mechanic brought chopsticks and spoons to the table and sat down. Simon and Book entered the galley and Simon’s eyes flew to Riddick’s worriedly as the tension in the room hit him. As everyone took their seats Riddick unfolded his arms and let his hand glide gently over River’s hair and shoulder. She was stiff with worry singed cinnamon in her scent and her muscles were knotted with the tension of it.

“Don’ worry tiān shǐ,” Riddick murmured. He slid one finger gently over her cheek and offered her a smile. “Ain’ gonna kill him.”

“Maybe I’m just tryin’ to understand what River sees in you,” Mal pointed out, a hard tone in his voice. “Seems as if she’s a little too young to know her own mind very well an’ you’re not the most reassurin’ sight in the world.” The words were a smoke screen even if Mal’s attitude wasn’t, Riddick frowned trying to figure out what the captain was getting at.

Jayne’s bark of laughter was sharp in the air, ‘Mal you’re actin’ like a sāo lǘ, an’ from me that’s sayin’ somethin’.’ He shook his head, “The man don’t do anythin’ he don’ wanna. In the years we worked together that ain’t changed an’ I don’t guess it would change when we parted ways. Now he’s taken the prissy core doc under his wing ‘cause Simon is brother to his woman. He ain’t slit your throat for ya, an’ believe me sometimes that’s a real temptation. An’ he made sure that we got some profit outa this unscheduled stop.”

“Cobh,” Riddick spoke quietly catching Jayne’s eye and shook his head slightly. Jayne subsided, grumbling, but he picked up his chopsticks and began to moodily eat his meal.

“See that’s just what’s botherin’ me,” Mal exclaimed. “Jayne don’t stop runnin’ his mouth for me even an’ I’m the one pays him. But you an’ he are thick as thieves in spite a him callin’ River crazy an’ doin’ his best to drive the doc to drink.”

Jayne opened his mouth again but Riddick sent him a hard look and the bigger man subsided. Riddick pushed his goggles back and regarded Mal coldly, “Don’t recall an explanation a my history
“bein’ part a the price a joinin’ your crew.” When Mal opened his mouth Riddick snarled, “Bì zǔǐ! You pay me but you don’t own me Cap’n. Jayne listens to me ’cause I know him, know him like you know Zoe. We’re bǎ xiōng dì, Simon is my dì dì and River is my woman, my zhī yīn, my nǚ ren even if we never get the words spoke over us, even if...” He looked at River. “It don’t matter if we, it don’t matter how long...” Riddick tried to tell her gently, he didn’t care how long it took for them to get to sex, he wanted her, her in his arms. “Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love.”

River took his hand and held it to her cheek, “My love was warm; for that I crossed the mountains and the sea, nor counted that endeavour lost that gave my love to me. If that indeed were love at all, as still, my love, I trow, by what dear name am I to call the bond that holds me now?” She turned her face and pressed a kiss to his palm before looking at the captain cinnamon hot in her scent, “You wish to assert dominance. You poke and prod when you are uneasy with what you see. You try to gain understanding but only serve to drive those you wish to understand away. Not all you survey is within your domain. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Wash took a deep breath, Riddick could practically hear him steeling himself to speak out against the captain and potentially his wife, “Mal, we all have things we don’t talk about except to those closest to us.” He said quietly. “Maybe if you want to know about Rick’s past, the dinner table isn’t the best place for it?”

Simon nodded and the pilot sent the doctor a look of gratitude, “I admittedly know little of Riddick, beyond what he’s told me.” He began in his slow, deliberate way, “But if I thought he was a danger to River, that he was the type of man who would do any sort of harm to the people River cares for, I would not hesitate to dope him and enlist the aid of every man here to throw him out the airlock as you once threatened to do to me.” He offered Riddick a half grin, a wry look of appreciation. “I don’t know if I would survive the attempt but I’d try.” He shrugged, “Intellectually he and River are near equals. Physically they are compatible as their sparring proves...” He paused clearly uncomfortable with what he was about to say.

“Simon, it’s all right,” River told him gently. “You don’t need to say anymore.” She looked at Mal and then around the table to the people she hadn’t become close to yet, Mal, Zoe, Book and Kaylee. “My eyes glow in the dark like my láng’s, we learned that today. We don’t know everything the Academy did to me, but that was certainly part of it.” She tilted her head, “Richard has never harmed me, not even when they tortured him, to try and make him fight me, did he harm me.”

“So exactly what did they do to you there,” Mal pressed and Riddick’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Mal wanted, needed, answers and if he couldn’t get them about Riddick he’d try for River. The man’s scent was an odd combination of protectiveness and anger, but he couldn’t figure out where the Captain was aiming the emotions. “For such a little thing you’ve got a powerful lot a knowledge about things you couldn’t possibly have learned in the core.”

River took her eyes off the captain and turned to look at Riddick, who frowned and thought very clearly that they owed the captain no explanations. A faint smile touched her lips and she looked back at Mal, “You don’t know me Captain Reynolds,” She said formally. “Until now you’ve rarely spoken to me directly. You’ve avoided dealing with me and you’ve wanted me out of the way. Now you want me to take a knife and bleed the truth out for you.” She had been quietly eating and now pushed the remainder of her dinner away. Riddick did the same and stood with her as she rose from her chair still looking at the captain, “Your wish to be protective is appreciated but you are angry with the wrong people. You haven’t earned my story. You haven’t even earned my trust. And demanding knowledge like a xiǎo huáng dì demands a sweet will gain you nothing.”
She left the kitchen, her hands drifting over Riddick’s arms and back, patting Jayne on the head as she passed him, ignoring the big man’s growl of irritation. Riddick shook his head at the captain, “Trust goes both ways.” He reminded the man. “But since I know every now and again you think a putting us all off on the next planet or locking up my woman when she makes you uncomfortable you haven’t earned our trust yet.” He left the galley and swung down into his bunk where River waited for him.

Riddick gathered River into his arms and buried his face in her hair, “Feel like I’ve been waitin’ to do this all gāi sī day.” He groaned the words and let his hands wander over her body, her slender form pressed to his. Part of him, the animal, wanted nothing more than to mount her and plow her until every part of her was covered with his scent. River moaned in his arms and he knew she’d read him, knew that part of her wanted that too. And the other parts, the human parts, knew that giving into the animals would lead to nothing but grief in the long run, but it was so blasted tempting.

“Gonna strip down, all right River?” He said quietly. “Lock the door an’ have nothin’ between us,” He suited action to words, dimming the lights until the bunk was dark enough that his eyes didn’t hurt without the goggles but it was light enough that River could see him.

River began to methodically strip off her clothing, her motions slightly less graceful with weariness of the day, Riddick couldn’t help but watch her as he pulled off his own clothing, every inch of skin exposed was something he wanted to kiss. It was clear in his mind and hers just how close they’d come to losing each other today, how easy it would have been for one of the crew to speak their names, give them up in exchange for their own freedom. But they hadn’t, and that was largely due to Malcolm Reynolds. Riddick sighed slightly as he pulled off his boots and pants throwing them with River’s in the pile for laundry. “Wanna wrap you in my arms River, and promise that we won’t ever end up back there,” He said finally. “But I don’t know what will happen. All I know is I’ll never stop fighting to keep it from happening.”

“Won’t ever give up,” River pulled the plastic tie out of her hair and moved towards him, her eyes glowing faintly in the dim light, roaming over his body. “If I end up back there I’ll never stop fighting to get out.”

“I love you,” Riddick told her, the words tumbling out with all the grace and subtlety of an avalanche. He didn’t say it often, called her by names that spoke of it for him, called her his wife, and love and soul mate but he rarely said that he loved her with that little three word phrase. “I probably don’t say it often enough,” He admitted. “That don’ mean I don’t feel it, zhī yīn.” He sat down on the bed like it was a couch and looked at her hungrily. His eyes painted her in onyx and alabaster, a glory in contrasts with dark lips, midnight eyes and elegant porcelain skin in the shadows of the room.

“I know,” River moved towards him and straddled his legs, pressing her breasts to his chest and smoothing her fingers over his shaved head. “I knew it when we were in cryo. I knew it when we fought Reavers. I knew it when you were tortured at the Academy. I know your heart Richard B. Riddick, better than I know my own mind. I love you as I’ve never loved anyone in the ‘Verse. You are my zhī yīn, my zhēn ‘ài, my husband, my wolf, my partner, best friend... I could talk for days and never touch on all that you are to me Richard.” She pressed kisses to his forehead, his cheeks and his lips, gentle tingling kisses that stung him with desire. “The captain isn’t a bad man, by our standards at least, but he is badly confused. We’ll need to be helpful in the next month or so. Maybe he’ll relax a bit.”

“Don’t like how he treats you,” Riddick told her with a tiny growl under his words. “You ain’t
feebleminded, ain’t sick or foolish or mad. He don’t see all that you are...too wound up in how you look, how I act, to see what we are.”

“He’ll see eventually,” River shrugged. “It’s not time for him to know yet.” She slid her hand down between their bodies, “I think you had some thought about covering me with your scent?”

“Hmm... I did,” Riddick chuckled and he could smell her honey quickening when he spoke. His woman loved how his voice sounded even talking like he was from the Rim half the time she loved his voice. “I’m thinkin’ I’m gonna tease my woman with pleasure until she gets that toy Inara gave her out and uses it on herself.”

“Rather have your fingers,” River pouted at him and he kissed her gently and with increasing passion until she was moaning into his mouth.

“I’ll put my fingers in you to start, but you’re not gonna fall on ‘em,” Riddick told her, tumbling her back so she was lying on the bed. “I’m gonna love watchin’ you moan baby.” He grinned and rose to fetch the box from where she’d placed it on the bureau. “Gonna keep this right by the bed, maybe tease you out of sleep, seduce you in your dreams and use it on you, make you fall before you even wake up.”

“Still not sure about the toy,” River was blushing, he could smell the blood flooding her cheeks and the sugar of her embarrassment. “Want my Richard, my Riddick, not plasti between my thighs.”

“You heard what Inara said,” Riddick reminded her as he lay beside her and groaned slightly, her hand finding his jī ba and stroked expertly.

“Make a deal with you,” River said suddenly, her voice breathless as Riddick’s mouth found her neck and began to trail his lips down to her breasts. Riddick smirked against her skin and made an affirmative noise as he wrapped his lips around one pert nipple. “I’ll use the toy while you watch me, even have you use it on me, if you let me perform kǒu yín on you. Want your diǎo in my mouth.”

“You gonna let me drink that honey a yours right from your thighs?” Riddick asked. “I been aching to bury my face in your sweet táo huā yuán.”

River nodded breathlessly, “Yes, she will let Richard reciprocate.” His mouth began slow steady pulls on her breasts, languorous yet driving her heart wild. “Please,” She shuddered under his mouth and Riddick smiled his pleasure against her skin.

“Love that you let me do this,” Riddick confessed. “Never expected it, my little là mèi, never thought you’d ever look at me like this.” He loved how her heartbeat sped up when his mouth touched her skin, how her hands clutched at him and her voice went hot and breathless. Everything she did was unpracticed and sincere, genuine in her desires and she made him want her more than any companion with all the practiced arts in the ‘verse could. He was always amazed, she wanted him, wanted the convict to pleasure her, wanted to please him. “Your shuāng rǔ are so pretty River, could look and pet ‘em all day.”

“Riddick, please,” River shivered under his mouth, “It has been quite some time since, since we were in Inara’s shuttle, I need, please.”

Riddick grinned against her skin and feathered his fingers over her mound, feeling her nether lips hot and damp for him, trembling under his fingertips, “What is it you need zhēn ‘ài?”

“Need to fall,” River moaned. “Need Richard’s hand on her, fingers inside her, fucking her, making her fall.”
“Hmm...” Riddick cupped her in his hand and rubbed the heel of his palm over her yīn dì feeling how her body reacted to his touch. “What if I wanna watch you push that sparkly toy inside a your body River?” He teased her, “What if I wanna see you fall like that, something nice an’ deep, deeper than my fingers can go, vibratin’ in you?”

“Richard can do whatever he likes, so long as he makes her fall,” River moaned and Riddick chuckled wickedly.

“Gonna hold you to that,” He told her and brought his mouth down on hers, lust shot through him as she arched up to his body, her fingers tightening on his cock as his lips plundered her mouth. She was sweet and hot and tasted so good, she always tasted so good to him. “Dreamt a doin’ this to you while we were locked up,” He told her as he kissed his way down to her belly and found her yīn dì with his tongue. “I’d wake up with you in my arms, couldn’t even jack off with them hún dàn waxhin’ us. Wanted you so bad River.” He groaned into her nether lips as she shuddered under his mouth and screamed his name as his tongue licked her to orgasm.

“Please, Richard, Riddick, please,” River cried brokenly her thighs draped over his shoulders as he lapped at her, drinking in her honey.

He wondered for a half a moment if he could get drunk on the taste of her, she went to his head faster than any wine or whiskey. His hips were moving restlessly, rubbing his diăo against the bedding, desperate for any friction now that her hands were out of reach, and he moaned against her flesh as another wave of her scent washed over him. He felt like he could fall just from tasting her like this. Lifting his mouth from her body Riddick reached for her toy and put it into her hand. “You gotta do it liàn rén, can’t be me, not the first time,” He reminded her before he rubbed his tongue over her clit again.

“Love your mouth,” River moaned, “Can’t do as Richard says, his body blocks her, and she wants his mouth too much for him to leave her.”

“Can still make a meal of my woman ‘thout bein’ ‘tween her thighs,” Riddick growled the words out and shifted so he was lying beside her, curling his body so he could still surround her yīn dì with his mouth. Her moan was like music and he groaned as her thigh shifted and rubbed against his diăo, her silky thigh feeling a thousand times better than the bedding on his skin. “Wanna watch you fuck yourself with it River,” He growled the words against her clit and she shivered, “Gonna let me?”

“Yes,” River was shuddering with the need to be filled and fumbled with the toy, “Riddick, I...” She shivered and her other hand was trembling as it rested on his skull and suddenly he could smell tendrils of burnt cinnamon mixed with her honey.

Riddick slid his tongue through her folds one last time before he climbed over her body, ignoring the toy to cradle his body between her thighs, his diăo rubbing against her body hungrily as he wrapped her upper body in his arms and began to kiss her mouth. “Maybe I just need to remind you a somethin’ Qing Xiāng,” He muttered lazily against her lips, loving how she kissed and sucked at his tongue, tasting her honey on his mouth and skin. “My woman doesn’t do anythin’ she don’t want. My mate, she takes her pleasure when she chooses,” He reminded her with a slow roll of his hips, rubbing his jī ba against her mound, feeling her honey on the most sensitive part of him. “You’re mine River, belong to me, surely as I belong to you. Won’t let you be afraid a takin’ what you want, what you need an’ deserve.”

“Just needed Riddick’s arms around her,” River murmured between kisses, “Felt so alone without his flesh surrounding her, without his body against hers.” She shivered pleasurably as his mouth drifted to nip and suck at her white neck as she spoke. “Loved your mouth on me, want to put mine to you.” She confessed breathlessly, “Love my man, my mate so much, wish I was ready for you, want you
inside me so badly.”

“Well let’s try with the toy first,” Riddick kissed the tender flesh over her pulse and groaned as he felt her blood throbbing under his mouth. “I’m gonna roll offa you now zhēn ‘ài, so you got room to use your toy, but I’mma stay pressed against you, suck on those pretty tits a yours,” He moved so his body still pressed to hers but allowed him to stroke and play with her breasts and clit. “You know I gotcha River, won’t let anythin’ hurt you zhì ‘ài,” He slid one big hand down to tease and stroke her yīn dì with his fingers, sending renewed waves of honey to his nose, “That’s it River,” Riddick murmured. “Someday wanna sit in the chair an’ watch you play with yourself, gimme a show. Wanna see you an’ know you’re readin’ every sex thought in my head when it comes to you love.”

River shuddered, fear no longer ruling her, and fumbled with the toy again, moving it so the head of the plastic diǎo was poised to enter her, and moaned at the feeling of pressure building within her body again, “Need to be filled.” She panted the words out, “Need you to help her, make it go inside,” She moaned, trying to push the toy into her body and not quite getting the angle right.

“’S’all right River,” Riddick put his hand over hers on the toy and adjusted her grip. “There you go angel,” He whispered in her ear. ‘That’s what you need right now, slow and easy, pressing it up an’ in you,” He could hear River’s breath catch as the head of the toy slipped inside her, her trembling intensified as the new sensations invaded her senses.

“So different,” River moaned, “Cool, but warming, not hot like Riddick’s fingers, doesn’t move in her.” She pushed it further inside as his fingers teased her sensitive flesh, plucking at her clit gently. “Ohhh...” Her body shuddered deeply her inner muscles clenching around the thick toy. “Feel so very...”

Riddick nearly moaned as River’s body seemed to flood with honey as the toy filled her up, giving her more inside than his two fingers, “So beautiful.” He was practically humping her leg he was so damn horny, but she was absolutely gorgeous pushing that toy inside her body, taking what she needed for her pleasure. “Do you want it turned on tiān shǐ?”

“Not, ughhh...” River’s gutteral moan was almost enough to have his balls tighten. “Just need more... need it to move.” She arched her body up to his, her thighs splayed wide and Riddick let his fingers find hers at the base of the toy. She’d managed to push it fully inside her, he imagined she was feeling a little stuffed, filled but needing more.

“Just push with your fingers a little bit,” Riddick moved his fingers on the base of the toy so it rotated minutely inside her, pulling a wailing cry of need from her lips. “Like that,” He told her, “Tight as you are right now you don’ need a lot.” He watched as River imitated him and shuddered, tremors beginning deep inside and bursting outward over her skin. “That feels good don’ it baby,” He began to tease her clit again, stroking carefully as he bent his head to suck on her breasts.

“Oh, ohhh...Riddick,” River moaned, her voice harsh with need, “Please, please my Richard, need it, please.” Her movements were still hesitant as she pushed the toy inside her pussy and her frustration was mounting. Riddick groaned, he could feel how close she was, how desperate she was.

“I’ll help you,” Riddick agreed, putting his fingers on the toy and his thumb on her yīn dì. Deftly he began to press the toy in a slow rotating motion, as tight as she was anything too rough might hurt her. He could hear her heart triple its beat with the unfamiliar yet wonderful sensations and began to kiss her mouth again, “Wanna hear your scream echoin’ in my skull angel.” He demanded. ‘Wanna feel you comin’ for me, fallin’ for me River. Animal needs its mate to find pleasure, needs your honey soakin’ my fingers.”

As if his demand was all she’d needed, River stiffened and shuddered, her body bucking up to his in
a sudden, fierce storm of bliss, her cry of passion filling his mouth as she fell hard under his
ministrations. Curious, Riddick kept moving the toy and felt her body gathering, tightening and
breaking apart in pleasure again as he pushed her over, her fall filling his nose with honey and
caramel and allspice. “Richard, please,” River whispered weakly when he thought to see if she could
fall a third time. “Wish to please you now.”

Riddick was suddenly and vividly aware of his rock hard diǎo and groaned as River’s hand wrapped
around it. “So ready from watchin’ you River, it ain’t gonna take much,” He warned her. “You
touch like that an’ I won’t last for your mouth baby.”

River shivered and turned, pulling the toy from her body with a moan and sitting up. “She will
perform kǒu yín upon Richard,” She said with a determination that just put Riddick further on edge.
“Richard will sit up and she will kneel before him,” River insisted tugging at him.

“Don’ need my woman to kneel in front a me like she’s some tā mā de slave,” Riddick refused to
move. “My woman is my equal River,” He sat up and grabbed her, putting her between his thighs on
the bed. “Or else you wouldn’t be mine.” He glared at her until she smiled shyly and nodded.

“She would like to kneel before him, sometime,” River admitted softly. “Play the Companion for
him, let him be dominant with her.” One slender hand reached out and trailed down his chest, tracing
his scars affectionately, “Doesn’t mean she’s submissive. Just means she feels safe with her Riddick.
Knows she can play with him and he will not keep her in the box forever.”

“I gotcha zhì ’ài,” Riddick nodded his understanding, “Just was thinkin’ might be we wait on that
until we’re both comfortable with regular sexin’?”

“Richard is worried he will warp her,” River grinned at him playfully, “Worried his desires to thrust
and take will twist her own desires.” She pushed him back so he was lying flat on the bed and
straddled his thighs, “Richard B. Riddick should know that his desire to thrust into her mouth does
not frighten or disturb her. She finds it perfect that he sees her as strong enough to take him this
way.” She wiggled down, her breasts rubbing against his thighs until she was kneeling between his
spread legs. “But we will do this the way Richard wants,” She lifted an eyebrow at him, “For now.”
She added darkly.

“Never seen anythin’ more beautiful than you River,” Riddick didn’t know how to say how erotic he
found her at this moment, determined to do as she wanted with him. Her hair was falling in a tangled
mess over one shoulder, and he ached to fist his hand in it, while her hands rested on his thighs. She
was flushed and messy from her own fall and he could still smell her honey, and she was licking her
lips as she looked at his jī ba.

Her smile was wide as she read his thoughts and he was grateful for that ability for the thousandth
time, that she could read him when he didn’t have the words. “Riddick will think she is more
beautiful in a moment,” She told him smugly and dipped her mouth down.

She was right, God help him she was always right, he’d never seen anything as erotic in his life as
River Tam’s gorgeous mouth sucking on his diǎo. The sensations were overwhelming, her tongue
flicking over him, her mouth sucking her way down until he felt the head hit the back of her mouth
and he couldn’t help the groan that burst from his lips. His first blowjob in almost four years and he
wasn’t going too last long she was so gorram good at it. “Cào dàn River, I ain’t...” He groaned as
her mouth tightened on him and she sucked hard on the tip before working her way back down.
“River, iffen ya wanna stop,” He groaned the words out, “I’m...you got me so... tā mā de worked
up... I’m gonna...”

River’s look as she met his gaze was smug, a woman who knew her power and she deliberately ran
her tongue along the underside of his shaft, her mouth flexing and tightening until he couldn’t help but shout her name, a strangled groaning cry as his seed erupted in a burst of pleasurable fire, his fall completely out of his control. He could see her swallowing, her throat working to consume his seed and groaned again.

And then god help him she began again, her mouth and tongue relentless on his flesh until he was shuddering and groaning. His hand fist in her hair, desperate to finish, shuddering as she expertly read his reactions, read what he needed, what he wanted, until she knew just what to do to make him fall again. “God River, tài mà de dì yù, River...” Her name was a shout on his lips, his hips lifting involuntarily as he fell violently in her mouth.

Riddick shuddered as she released his diǎo and climbed up his body to pet his face and skull before climbing from the bed. Bemused he watched as she began to brush her teeth, gargling with mouthwash and water before returning to the bed and delicately kissing him. “She no longer tastes of her bàng jiār’s seed?”

“No,” Riddick was amazed she’d remembered he didn’t care for the smell or taste of a man, even himself, on a woman. “C’mere an’ lie down some,” He sighed as she relaxed into his arms. “Baby what’re we gonna do ‘bout Mal?”

“Cap’n needs time to come to terms with us,” River murmured lazily. “Persephone in our future, visit with Shazza, see how things go. Possibility of change in perspective regarding us for Mal. Depends on our actions, his reactions, what occurs. All very vague right now.”

“Hmmm...” Riddick thought a moment. “Well we’ll see then I guess,” He got up reluctantly and grabbed River’s toy to clean off. Bringing it back so she could put it in the box he chuckled as she wrinkled her nose and grabbed a cloth, wetting it in the sink and running the cool cloth over her skin and between her thighs. “How’re you feelin’? Now that you’ve had somethin’ ‘sides my fingers?”

“A little stretched but not much,” River took the cloth and began to deftly return the favor. “Not sore.” She frowned slightly, “Not sure I’ll ever like the toy, Richard’s hands feel so good, real. Toy doesn’t love me, doesn’t care if I fall or not.”

“Yeah, know what you mean,” Riddick took the cloth away and tossed it towards the laundry pile. “Let’s get some sleep zhī yīn,” He suggested with a caress of her shoulder. Her tired nod of agreement brought a smile to his face and he scooped her up into his arms. “Most beautiful, deadly, brilliant woman in the ‘verse an’ she loves me,” He marveled as he kissed her cheek and pulled the bedding back so she could slip between the sheets. “How’d I get so tài mà de lucky?”

River giggled sleepily as he slid in beside her and wrapped her up in his arms, the quilts tuck around them both. “She is the more fortunate, that her mate finds her so attractive, that he keeps her from going mad.” Her soft hands petted the skin of his neck as she nestled closer to him, “My wonderful dangerous handsome man, loves me, takes care of me, would be lost without him.”

“Guess you an’ me’re perfect for each other then,” Riddick rumbled feeling exhaustion catching up with him even as River began to go limp in his arms. “Never gonna let you go Qīng Xiāng, you’re stuck with me.”


“Love you River,” He was barely conscious of speaking, only of River’s scent blooming with caramel, joy filling her every time he said the words.
Chinese Translations:

fèi wù zhū - good for nothing swine/pig
Tòng bù yù shēng - to be so in pain as to not want to live
Gāo gāo shǒu - Please do not be too severe on me
gē ge’s - big brother’s
tiān shǐ - angel
hǎi kū shī làn - when the seas run dry and the stones go soft / forever / ‘till the end of time
bǎo bāo - darling/baby
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
gāi sǐ - damned
sāo lǔ - jackass
Bì zuǐ! - Shut up!
bǎ xiōng dì - sworn brothers
dì di - younger brother
zhī yīn - soul mate
nǚ ren - wife
láng’s - wolf’s
xiǎo huáng dì - lit. little emperor / fig. spoiled child / spoiled boy / pampered only child
zhēn ‘ài - true love
jī ba - dick/penis
kǒu yín - oral sex/fellatio
diǎo - cock
táo huā yuán - vagina/ lit. garden of peach blossoms
là mèi - hot/sexy girl
shuāng rǔ - breasts
yīn dì - clitoris
hún dàn - bastards
liàn rén - lover/sweetheart
tā mā de - fucking
Cào dàn - damn it/fuck
tā mā de dì yù - fucking hell
bàng jiār's - lover’s/partner’s

Quote Sources:

Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love. - Hamlet - William Shakespeare

My love was warm; for that I crossed the mountains and the sea, nor counted that endeavour lost that gave my love to me. If that indeed were love at all, as still, my love, I trow, by what dear name am I to call the bond that holds me now? - My Love Was Warm - Robert Louis Stevenson
River wandered through the halls of Serenity humming to herself, she’d had a good night. Richard and Jayne were sparring and her mate was in a good mood. Simon had spoken with her a little bit about some of the things she saw or heard and why she reacted the way she did. They’d talked about her triggers and what they could do to break them down. That had been enlightening, the realization that she knew what her triggers were and that they could be combated.

Heya River,” Kaylee greeted her with a smile, “Whatcha doin’?”

“She is wandering and enjoying the sounds,” River smiled, “Her man spars with Jayne-man. She was about to go and enjoy the sights.” She tilted her head, “Richard will strip off clothing in order to fight unencumbered.”

“Sounds like the place for us girls to be is up on the catwalks over the cargo bay,” Kaylee’s smile grew to a grin. “Rick won’ mind an audience?”

“No more than Jayne would,” River shrugged. “My mate is used to eyes on him.” When Kaylee gave her a quizzical look River elaborated, “Many women find him attractive, like moths wish to fly close to the flame.” She looked down at her own very slender form and than at Kaylee’s curvy one, “Rick is far more experienced than she.”

“Ain’t any a them the one he watches though,” Kaylee told her with a staunch air. “Man talks pretty to you and he don’ like you outa his sight that’s for certain. He acts like he don’ even notice Inara or Zoe or me that we’re girls.”

“She feels the same about him,” River murmured. “But he is...” She sighed as they emerged from the hall onto the catwalk and sat tailor style to regard the two men circling each other in the cargo bay. “He is her world.”

“It’s the same for him River, don’ matter that you only been with him,” Kaylee patted her back. “It’s plain to see for everyone...well, everyone but the captain. Sun’s hurtful to Riddick, but you’re his moon.”

“It’s so hard to explain Kaylee,” River’s hands fiddled with the hems of her cargo pants. ‘There was a book, one of the classics, and in it the man said to a woman, ‘I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you--especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I’ve a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly’.” She couldn’t take her eyes off of Riddick even to speak with Kaylee, “I feel that way about him, as if I should ever be taken away from him...”

’Won’t happen,’ Riddick’s mental voice was warm and velvety in her mind. ‘You won’t ever be taken from me. I’ll never let you go River. Never.’ He cast a sharp look up at her, his smoked glass goggles no deterrent to his gaze upon her.

River smiled slightly at Kaylee, “Sometimes too conscious of how... precarious her situation is.” She explained quietly, “Captain is not pleased with her much. Doesn’t like Simon or Richard either.”
“Well Captain ain’t ever pleased with anyone when he has to deal with Alliance,” Kaylee remarked with a reasonable air. “We’re makin’ a little stop on Santo an’ Cap’n’ll cheer right up after that.” Her breath caught as Jayne and Riddick began sparring again and Simon entered the bay, folding his arms and shaking his head at the two bigger men.

River looked at Kaylee thoughtfully, “Kaylee finds Jayne and Rick attractive but it is Simon upon whom her gaze rests.”

“Your brother ain’t gonna see me as anythin’ but a grease monkey ever,” Kaylee shook her head. “Just ain’t ever had anyone be so nice to me as Simon.”

“He knows you’re a pretty girl,” River grinned at her new friend. “Finds you very attractive. Moves slowly out of respect for you. Does not wish you to think that he would dishonor you,” She waved at her brother and nudged Kaylee until the mechanic did the same. “See? No other woman could make Simon duck his head, almost blush, just by waving and smiling at him. He is bound by the customs of Osiris, respect for you, to honor you, even as he wishes to be with you.” She sighed, “But he is my gē ge and he is sometimes very...bad at expressing himself. So he will do foolish things, and he will say things that he does not mean as hurtful, because he is a man and men are...deeply stupid.”

Kaylee giggled, “You’re right, no matter how hard they try,” She shook her head, “Men are stupid.”

“I think they’re laughin’ at us Jayne,” Riddick’s voice was a darkly amused drawl as he and Jayne stared up at the two women. “Your mèi mei and my woman think we’re chūn bèn men. Like I cain’t hear every word they’re sayin’ up there.”

River grinned down at him, “Was not referring to her mate,” She teased. “Though he is...definitely a male of his species.”

Kaylee tilted her head at Jayne, “I dunno Jayne, cain’t really call ya stupid can I? Even if men are stupid in general.”

“That ain’t kosherized, lumpin’ me in with all men,” Jayne objected, “What’ve we done that’s stupid lately?”

“Cap’n’s talk at dinner after the purple bellies left ring any bells with ya Jayne?” Kaylee drawled the question out with an air of a woman about to make her point.

“Well hell Kaylee, iffen you’re gonna throw Mal’s sāo lǔ behavior up like I got somethin’ to do with it don’t see how I’mma win this one,” Jayne muttered. “What about Wash? He don’t act dumb. Smart ‘nuff to figure Rick an’ River’s right sometimes.”

“Wash is married.” Kaylee was giggling now and River shrugged down at Rick.

“Marriage implies he is intelligent enough to know he needs a woman on his side,” River added with a smile. “Therefore he is not as stupid as most men.”

“Do I gotta get Book to come an’ read words over us?” Riddick still had his gaze fixed on River. “Know that I ain’t near as good without you as I am with you. I’m just mō zhē shì tou guō hé with you tiān shī.”

“Does not need Richard to get the shadow man to read words over them when neither of them follow his truths and symbol,” River shook her head. “Would rather Richard give her the blood bond, as he has done with another, and be sworn his, once they are both ready.”

His growl was loud enough to reach even Kaylee’s ears and Jayne looked slightly alarmed, “I’m
gonna hunt every last one a them fei wù hún dàn what hurt you an’ I’m gonna make Niska look like a sweetheart by the time I’m done with them.” Riddick’s fury washed over River like a tidal wave, “River, need ya down here now,” He demanded.

River patted Kaylee’s hand and smiled at the girl, “Don’t worry, Richard just needs his partner to spar with him. He is too angry and does not wish to seriously harm Jayne.” Her smile widened after a moment, “Will not take long, she will come find Kaylee and explain her meaning.”

“Can I watch ya?” Kaylee whispered as if that would keep her voice from Riddick’s ears.

“If you like,” River smiled. “Jayne probably will. Sit with him on the steps,” She suggested as she danced lightly down the stairs to the lower deck and without waiting for any introduction, attacked Riddick with a brutal kick to his solar plexus. What followed was another of their no holds barred, vicious matches that ended only when Riddick’s lust washed over River and ignited her own desire. The thread of honey through the blood, steel, and silk was enough to break through his rage and the match ended as abruptly as it had begun, with Riddick grabbing River and jerking her into his arms. His mouth came down on hers in a kiss that might have been brutal had it been bestowed on anyone else. River’s response was just as animalistic, her sharp little teeth nipping at his lower lip before she sucked on it hard.

“You know I’d give you the bond if I could,” Riddick told her, his voice raw with need. “If I could control--”

River put her fingers over his lips and nodded, “Don’t need words or papers or any promises other than the ones he’s made her.” She reminded him, “Only want you. Only need you. Blood will bind us when she is able to take the final step. Nothing else holds her back.”

“That’s the only thing that stops me River,” Riddick pressed her body close to him, his powerful arms wrapped around her as he pressed incrementally gentle kisses to her lips. “Nothin’ else could zhì ‘ài, đồng ma?”

“She understands,” River nodded. “Kaylee says we are scheduled to stop on Santo. He will go out with her and make purchases? Inara will wish to avail herself of the strong man’s arm Richard has offered.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Riddick nodded, letting her distract him. “Whyn’t you go and have that chat with Kaylee now,” He smiled slightly. “I’ll go back to sparrin’ with Cobh.”

“She will fix him lunch,” River smiled over her shoulder as she began to walk towards Kaylee.

Riddick watched her go and shook his head, sometimes he was still amazed by how graceful River was, how beautiful she was to him. The little mechanic was earthier, Zoe had more curves, Inara was more classically beautiful but they all paled beside River to his eyes. Her smile tilted and she laughed aloud as Kaylee stood and he knew she found his thoughts amusing, the tequila of her scent teasing his nose.

“We gonna actually spar this time Rick,” Jayne stood up when Kaylee did and rolled his eyes. “Gonna hafta stretch out all over again.”

“You whine an awful lot Cobh,” Riddick shook his head before Jayne rushed him.

River turned and grinned as she saw her mate and his friend sparring again, “Must fix a good lunch
for Richard.” She said softly, “Worry he is not eating enough. Consumes more protein than a normal human male.”

“noticed he seemed hungrier’n Jayne an’ that ain’t normal,” Kaylee remarked with a nod as they made their way up to the galley.

“Furyan’s need a higher caloric intake due to their increased metabolisms and higher functioning senses,” River explained. “Richard functions...” She tilted her head, “Think of him like Serenity and other men like... a Knorr.” She shrugged, “Richard can do many things a fully human male cannot, but he requires more fuel to do it.”

“He sure does kiss you like you’re the treasure of the ‘verse to him,” Kaylee smiled. “I’m surprised I ain’t heard you two through the walls.” Her smile tilted teasingly as she began to get out cans of protein, “The man looks as if he could give you a good pounding, make you fall an’ have energy left to spare.”

River nodded slowly and then shook her head, “Kaylee is not incorrect in her assessment of Richards skills and abilities,” She murmured. “But she is incorrect in her belief that the girl has been the recipient of them.”

“Sweetie, what are you talkin’ about,” Kaylee laughed. “The man don’t act like he’s starvin’ for anythin’. Don’t seem like he’d tolerate any type a hunger.” She pulled down a wok and a deep pot filling it with water and dumped what seemed like quite a bit of rice in it.

“He is though,” River wrapped her arms around her body and leaned back against the counter, “Richard has never...had xìng’ ài with the girl.” She met Kaylee’s wide eyed and slightly disbelieving stare with her own dark gaze and shrugged, “Richard knows that she was tortured. Knows what they did to her. Waits for her to be ready to accept his entire body.”

“Oh honey,” Kaylee didn’t even seem to think, she just wrapped her arms around River and kissed the slender girl’s cheek. “I’m so sorry. That’s such a horrible thing they did. And before you even got to know that sex should be fun and feel good. That just makes me so...gorram mad,” She finished with a harsh frown.

River smiled slightly, “I’m...working on my difficulties...Richard is... very helpful.” She admitted with a half smile as Kaylee pulled back to look at her. The mechanic’s eyebrows went up speculatively and River nodded, “Richard is very talented with his hands, proved that he can make his woman fall over and over, that his fingers feel much better than metal inside her.” She smiled and leaned forward, “Kaylee must not let on she knows, but Richard recently showed his mate that his tongue can please her as well.”

Kaylee’s smile was pleased and a little wicked, “Well I did wonder,” She admitted slyly. “Considerin’ the man near worships you. Thought you must be doin’ somethin’ right since he don’t act starved for it. He don’t even talk about it.” She grinned, “That were a change, when I heard he was Jayne’s friend I kep’ waitin’ on the remarks an’ the talk about sex. Ain’t that I mind, just surprisin’ when it didn’t happen.”

River shrugged slightly and began to pull down plates for the meal, “He has taught me what pleases him, what I may do that will bring him to his fall. Swears that she has made him lose control far too easily,” She giggled and looked over at Kaylee, “Calls her his little witch sometimes when he thinks she is too tired to hear him.”

“’Cause you done a spell on him?” Kaylee grinned, “Kinda a confidence booster I bet, that Rick’s so taken with you an’ you not really having much experience.”
“Grateful that affection makes him susceptible to her touch, given her lack of expertise,” River smiled. “Been researching on the cortex, hoping to learn new tricks.” She fetched chopsticks and laid them on the plates, watching with interest as Kaylee began to put the protein into the wok along with the rice and some sort of spicy smelling sauce. “Will Kaylee teach her to cook?”

“Oh sweetie, this ain’t cookin’,” Kaylee grinned. “It’s openin’ cans and dumpin’ rice in water. For real cookin’ we’d need some foodstuffs, like what Book brought on board. But I can show you what I’m doin’ an’ you’ll be able to do the same.”

“I’d like to learn,” River nodded slowly, “I’d like to have a skill that makes me useful to the captain.” She shrugged, “Mal does not believe I can be crew.”

“Well Cap’n don’ like change much, an’ it takes time for him to get used to it,” Kaylee explained kindly. “I hear you can just about make a cortex dance though.”

River smiled, and nodded, “Cannot take much credit for genius, born this way. But skills developed...she takes great pride in these.” She tilted her head, “Academy didn’t teach me husking. Self taught, more enjoyable.”

Riddick let his eyes and ears follow River even as he gave Jayne his attention, “Your feelin’s gonna be hurt iffen I keep parta my brain on my girl?” He sneered lightly as the bigger man stretched slightly so he didn’t injure himself.

“Shěniào Rick, ain’t like I could stop ya iffen they were,” Jayne gave a half laugh and came at him without warning.

Riddick slid the attack off to the side with a chuckle of his own as he listened to River’s sweet voice confiding in Kaylee. She smelt a little of sugar and apples, her curiosity and embarrassment mixing with her normal scent of blood, silk and steel. Threads of citrus and he knew it was because the memories of torture still pained her, but it was good that she could confide in Kaylee. Inara was wonderful, and genuinely helpful, but Kaylee was close to River’s age, someone with whom she could giggle over sex.

Sure enough Kaylee was giggling with River over boys and how all the men on the boat were shiny in their way. River smelt of tequila, she found Kaylee’s honest evaluations of the men amusing and accurate apparently.

“What does Kaylee think of my Richard?” River asked softly, “She does not allow her captain’s opinion to influence her?”

“Well you know I like how Wash is funny, and Mal’s all protective an’ Jayne’s all muscles and honesty, and your brother’s real handsome an’ so polite an’ all,” Kaylee smiled. She handed River the spoon and showed her how to keep moving the ingredients around in the wok before she continued. “Your Rick...he ain’t tall like Jayne, but he’s got muscles make me think not many could stand against him.”

River nodded her understanding, “When Richard was younger, he was not as strong, but he has always been very fast. Almost as quick as she is in his reaction times,” She smiled slightly. “Built up muscle as he learned what to eat for optimal weight gain and exercise to increase his muscle mass.”
“I seen ya watchin’ him sometimes, you look like you want to lick him all over,” Kaylee teased. “But your man has a voice like... like a fallen angel should sound, low and growling but the sound of him, reminds me of how moonshine feels when it hits your throat. Got a voice like coffee and whiskey together.”

“The girl loves her Riddick’s voice,” River confessed. “First time she saw him, muscles bulging, angering his watchers as he exercised. When they met, his strength was obvious, but his voice... his voice soothed, warmth like being wrapped up and safe.” She shook her head, “I don’t know how to describe it, I could tell he wasn’t angry with me, not even when I had to fight him. He...”

“Not that I don’t believe ya,” Kaylee tilted her head, “But Rick sounds pissed off more’n half the time he talks, how could you tell he weren’t mad at you?”

“His voice, his eyes...body language,” River shrugged slightly, “He attacked the man who’d been trying to rape and kill her. He put her behind him when the scientists came in.” She stirred the food a bit more, “He had to tackle me, and I could feel... he wanted me. But he did nothing.”

“Rick don’t strike me as the waitin’ around type a guy,” Kaylee shook her head. “How old were ya?”

“Six months shy of sixteen then,” River smiled, “Richard thought I was much younger. Relieved to find that he hadn’t been lustin’ after a child, but still disturbed by the way his animal saw me as a woman when the man thought I was far too young.”

“I don’t always understand what you mean by ‘animal’,” Kaylee admitted. “Seems like its somethin’ different every time you say it.”

“You were in the infirmary when we spoke of it,” River remembered. “The animal is...” She shook her head, “Richard’s words are better than mine to explain it, ‘they say most of your brain shuts down in cryo-sleep. All but the primitive side...the animal side. No wonder I’m still awake’.” She shrugged, “The animal is the part of the mind that keeps you alive, keeps your heart beating, your lungs move, the part of you that says run or freeze when you see a gun. Fight or flight response.”

“So the animal is...what the body wants?” Kaylee was obviously trying to understand and River shook her head in frustration.

“Richard is... Furyan, guards called him an animal, all his life he was treated as less because his instincts, all that have kept him alive for all his life, are so finely tuned,” River tried to explain and looked towards the doorway in relief.

Riddick chuckled as he listened to River, her words failing her in the way they always did when she tried to explain him, “Tiān shǐ you tryin’ to explain me an’ the animal again?” He shook his head and moved to wrap his arms around her, resting his chin on her shoulder to see what she was stirring in the wok. “Ya wanna call Simon an’ anyone else wants to eat right now?” Riddick tossed the words over his shoulder at Jayne.

“Nah,” Jayne shook his head, “Don’ wanna be the merc for a little while Rick. Ain’t ever pretended as much in fronta lil Kaylee as I do the others.” He began pulling down plates and chopsticks grabbing a bottle from the cupboard and holding it out so Rick and Kaylee could see.

Riddick rolled his eyes, “Ya know the animal don’t care for wēi shì jī Cobh.” He kissed River’s cheek and took the wok from the stove to the table. “Get a plate an’ fix it for Simon,” He suggested to Kaylee. “Doc’s workin’, didn’t like how short a breath Book got climbin’ the stairs.”
“Will Shepherd be all right?” Kaylee began to scoop out a healthy amount of food and put it on a hot plate for Simon. Taking her seat next to Jayne she frowned her worry at Riddick.

“Far’s I can tell yeah, Book just ain’t used to bein’ in space as yet,” Riddick shrugged. “An’ I don’t guess Southdown Abbey had an abundance a stairs neither.”

River smiled at her friend and shook her head, “He will be fine, Simon merely wishes to help, will make Book take vitamins to augment the protein diet.” She looked at Riddick and tilted her head. “Her mate could explain to Kaylee about the animal,” She coaxed.

Riddick looked at her and pushed his goggles back so his eyes gleamed silver out of the shadows from where he sat. He didn’t always need them on the ship, the lights being dim enough that they were better than shade on Planet, but it was habit to keep them with him. “Why’s it important that she know ‘bout the animal bàng jiār,” He teased.

“Kaylee is the only one who hasn’t heard,” River finished her meal and moved so she was sitting in Riddick’s lap as her mate finished his meal.

Jayne’s chuckle was filled with amusement, “You may as well do what she wants Rick.” He advised, “Ain’t no point in goin’ against your woman. Even if you ain’t married or bonded or whatever, she’s still your woman.”

Kaylee giggled her agreement, “See Jayne, told ya I couldn’t call ya dumb.” She scooped out another portion of the meal for the big gun hand and held out the wok towards Riddick, “You two may’s well finish it up, know I won’t eat no more.”

Riddick nodded and took another good sized portion before kissing River’s cheek, “River’s right for all that I love teasin’ her.” He admitted quietly, “Jayne’s known me since we were kids, knows more ‘bout how the animal reacts than anyone sides River.”

“Iffen you think a Rick as a real big an’ nasty junkyard dog, ya really cain’t go wrong,” Jayne advised with a grin at his old friend. “For all that the dog is yours, ya still don’ wanna get on his bad side. Ya don’t take his food, ya don’t beat on him an’ ya for sure don’ take away his toys.”

“But,” Kaylee looked at River, “Ya don’t think a Rick as a dog do ya?”

River giggled, “Jayne’s comparison is overly simplistic, though correct at its heart.” She layed her head against Riddick’s shaved skull, her lips brushing over his temple. “Think of Richard as my láng, loyal unto death to his mate, mated for life,” She smiled as her man’s hand slid up her back to rub the tense muscles between her shoulder blades.

“They’re both right in a way,” Riddick finished his meal and shoved the wok back at Jayne so the bigger man could eat what was left. “My senses, ability to hear and smell, to know when I’m in danger, they’re closer to an animal’s reactions than a man’s.” He shook his head. “But I got a man’s ability to think an’ reason, so’s I react...better in some situations, worse in others.” Riddick let his hand slide into River’s hair, “A wolf, somethin’ threatens its mate, it’ll run, take her an’ run. My reaction... I wanna kill anythin’ wants to hurt her, wants to take her from me.”

“What if...” Kaylee paused, “Just sayin’ a what if, not that it’d happen or that I go that way,” She clarified and Riddick could smell the scent of her nerves, like oil burning, an engine straining amidst the sunshine and strawberry of her usual scent. Kaylee was a funny mix of strawberries, sun warmed grass and engine grease, the warmth of metal. A burnt oil smell wasn’t good, meant she was nervous or afraid.”
“Kaylee, I know you ain’t aimin’ to take River from me,” Riddick flashed her a grin and was rewarded with a slightly nervous smile but an easing of the burnt smell.

“Right,” Kaylee nodded slowly. “Iffen I was sly an’ was makin’ moves on River, what’d your first...inclination be ta do?” Her pretty face was curious and a bit worried but not overly much.

Riddick chuckled and shook his head, “A helluva lot less’n I would if ya was a man Kaylee.” He pressed a kiss to River’s pulse point. “Course I still wouldn’t like it much. Prolly make sure River weren’t uncomfortable, an warn ya off. A woman ain’t a threat to River the way a man is, not less she smells wrong to me. Then all bets are off.” He frowned forbiddingly, “There’s women out there just as bad as any man out there for bein’ predators.” River’s hand stroked the soft skin on the back of his neck and he sighed, “Iffen you didn’t back off an’ River weren’t inclined to do it herself, I’d make sure you knew who River belonged to. An’ iffen you still went after her, made her unhappy, I’d kill ya. Or River would.” He shrugged, “Same’s if anyone on the boat had tried to put Simon outa the airlock if you’d died of your gutshot. Simon’s my Omega, he’s my opposite in a lotta ways.”

“Richard is the Alpha,” River explained, “The head of our pack, I his mate, Simon is opposite, gentle soul, must steal himself to harm others, to do violence.” She shook her head. “As in your pack, Jayne is the Beta, he and Zoe, Mal the alpha. You and Wash, the Omegas, Inara...she is undecided. Capable of great violence but also inclined to heal. Mal’s equal but uncertain if she wishes to be part of a pack. Used to being alone.”

Kaylee looked at Jayne, “An’ you’ve known, that iffen someone tried to hurt River or Simon that Rick would go nuts?” She tilted her head at Jayne, “You ain’t ever acted worried ‘bout him. An’ you don’t even like Simon.”

Jayne sighed and Riddick caught the scent of his old friends worry, the dark tobacco smell that meant Jayne was tryin’ hard to figure a way out of this without lyin’ too much or givin’ too much away. “Gotta un’erstan’ Kaylee, don’ much care for anyone bargain’s over my mùi mùi’s belly wound. Know why he did it, even understand why, but it’s gonna be a while ‘fore I like the man put you in harms way.” He looked at Rick, “Might be pretty chàng quáng with you too iffen you hadn’t put yourself ‘tween Kaylee an’ a bullet, tryin’ to save her.” He scowled furiously, “My job is to keep alla my crew alive Kaylee. Rick tried ta save you. An’ River’s done stuff helped me keep Mal an’ Zoe alive.”

“Then why do you act like you don’ want River around?” Kaylee had hit on the flaw in Jayne’s reasoning and River reached out and laid a hand over Kaylee’s still slightly greasy knuckles.

“Jayne is a merc, is the hired gun,” She told the mechanic gently. “Mal doesn’t like change, wouldn’t ever accept that Jayne is more than he appears to be. That his merc thinks of something more than coin.”

Kaylee looked at River and then at Riddick, and finally at Jayne, “You been hidin’, who you are then.” She guessed, “Hidin’ that you do more’n go to whorehouses an’ bars when we get leave.”

Jayne shrugged, “I’m a merc Kaylee. Ain’t ever claimed that was all I was. Ain’t ever talked on my past. Probably won’t ever. But I got reasons to be here Kaylee, an’ I won’t turn on my crew.”

“Then why does the cap’n keep goin’ on ‘bout how someday the money’ll be too good an’ you’ll kill us all?” Kaylee asked in confusion, “He wouldn’t say it if he didn’t believe it.”

River giggled, “Much of what the captain says is not what he believes.” She shook her head and leaned back against Richard. “Do you understand what we mean about the animal now?”
“Don’t guess I ever will completely,” Kaylee admitted. “Just not sure how it applies to River. See that Rick’s different, but River ain’t really.”

“Sure she is,” Jayne chuckled. “Girl knows things just like Rick does. Got extra senses like him,” He patted Kaylee’s hand and began to clear the table of the dishes.

River nodded, “The Academy tortured me, did surgeries on me, until I became like my Riddick. Was already a little like him, but they made me more so.” She sighed slightly, “It’s good that no woman here has an interest in my mate.”

Her mate chuckled and stood, sliding his arm under her legs so he was carrying her, “C’mon gorgeous. Let Jayne give Kaylee the news ‘bout what’d happen to any woman puts hands on me.” He carried her off to the bridge and sat down across from Wash and Zoe.

Kaylee’s confused words drifted down to his ears, “What’d he mean by that?”

“Just that if any woman was dumb enough to lay hands on Rick with intent to give him...” Jayne was almost blushing, Riddick could smell the man’s embarrassment. “Well, what River cain’t right now. She’d end up meetin’ what ya might call a violent end.”

“Glad I don’ see Rick that way,” Kaylee was sighing. “Still think Rick an’ River’s good people though.”

“Never said they wasn’t,” Jayne was chuckling. “Little on the bloody side but that ain’t anythin’ I mind. They done a good job a keepin’ alla us alive so far.”

Riddick grinned down at River and kissed her gently, “You know I would zhī yīn.” He murmured, “If I could, I’d figure a way to do it without...”

River nodded, “I know.” She brushed her lips over his, “But it wouldn’t be right. Has to be body and blood.”

“Yeah,” Riddick sighed and caught Wash’s eye. The pilot and his wife were regarding the two of them quizzically. “Wash, Zoe,” He greeted them calmly.

River giggled, “Married couple confused by the conversation.” She shook her head.

Riddick nodded his agreement with her and cuddled her closer, “That happens ya come in at the end or the middle.”

“Are you two all right?” Zoe asked with a slight frown, “Seem a little...”

“Off,” Wash finished quietly. “Feelin’ all right?”

River shrugged and leaned against Riddick tiredly, “Cannot marry as Wash and Zoe did.” She told them letting him cuddle her close. “Don’t believe as Book does,” She added with a sigh.

“Yeah, we’re figurin’ there’s ‘bout one way for me an’ River an’ it ain’t a option for us just yet,” Riddick finished. “It’s all right bāo bāo, we’ll get there,” He soothed her affectionately and felt the tendrils of citrus and pecans begin to fade finally. It felt like a shiv to the heart to catch that scent, to know she was hurt and uncertain of where they stood with one another even as he knew she trusted him with everything. “Have I ever lied ta you River? Ever broke my word to you,” He let his hand rest over her heart, “Ain’t ever gonna risk this baby. Never.”

River’s scent melted into caramel and honey and allspice blending with the silk and blood and steel
and she kissed him, her lips tender and sweet, dwelling over his, that peculiar note in her scent that he could never define that meant she was feeling so much for him she was going to burst with it. Tears on her cheeks, in her voice and she was petting his face and still kissing him, “I love you.” She breathed the words so only he could hear. “I promise you, by blood and seed, I’ll be yours Richard B. Riddick. I promise you.”

There were times when Riddick would freely admit that he hated how much he felt for this slender, deceptively fragile looking girl. When he cursed the day they’d met, when he wanted to kill everything around him except her, because he was consumed by need for her and the strength of those emotions were driving him mad. There were days when the animal drove him and he had to keep her at his side, covering her in his scent however he could or he’d truly run amuck. There were days when he hated that he loved her so much, that his sanity and contentment was so bound up with this girl.

But this wasn’t one of those days. It wasn’t a day where River had to soothe his animal, where she would spar with him and remind him that they were equals. This wasn’t a day when he wanted to kill everyone around him, or when he couldn’t stand that she could see every weakness inside him. And even on all those days, when River was the only thing that stood between him and insanity, when he hated himself, hated the animal, he still couldn’t hate her.

This wasn’t one of those days. He’d had less and less of them, and since they’d escaped the Academy, he hadn’t had any, making him wonder if it had been his feelings for her that he’d hated so much or if it had been the cage driving him out of his mind. In the cage, his love for her had kept him chained as surely as the walls, unable to kill everyone for fear that they would take her from him. Before they’d escaped, before Simon had forever earned his loyalty by coming for his sister and accepting her partner as well, he’d been having more and more of those days as the animal had slowly gone feral. River had been the only one capable of soothing him.

Riddick looked down at the slender girl in his arms and marveled at her strength, at the sheer heart of her, and how much beauty she had in her. “You’re already mine River,” He promised gently. “That ain’t ever gonna change. I promise baby.”

There were times he could almost feel what River felt, as if her abilities and his had already joined in some way with all they’d been through. He pressed a kiss to her lips and stroked his hand over that long fall of midnight dark silk on her head. Her soft fingers, calluses from holding knives and swords and guns across her palms and fingers but still soft as velvet against his skin, wrapped around his neck and petted him as if he were the wolf she called him. “Always,” Her voice was a whisper only for his ears. “She will always be his.”

“What do you mean ‘by body and blood’,” Wash’s sardonic and yet strangely gentle voice asked before Zoe could hush him.

Riddick dragged his attention off of River and regarded the pilot with a thoughtful gaze. Wash seemed more willing than Zoe to accept River as a real person and not just a bundle of neurosis. Though since the train job Zoe acted more willing to look past the surface symptoms River chose to display. “It’s a Furyan thing.” He said finally choosing to answer. “It’s like a marriage vow, it’s a bond. It can be done with only blood, but that...” He shrugged.

“Richard swore a blood oath with a man once,” River said softly. “Sworn brothers through blood shed, blood shared.” She explained tracing the scar on his palm. “It makes them family. For he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother, be he ne’er so vile this day shall gentle his condition. He does not wish me to be his sister, so our bond...”

“Our bond’s gotta be sealed different,” Riddick said shortly. “If it could be done another way, I’d do
“So your wedding ceremony is actually the consummation?” Wash sounded a little incredulous and more than a little amused but he nodded his understanding just the same.

River’s laughter trickled through the bridge and Riddick smiled slightly, “That’s one way to put it, but as I comprehend, consummation is what makes the marriage true.” He shrugged, “River an’ me been researchin’, an’ goin’ with my instincts mostly.”

“So what’s the problem?” Zoe’s voice was even, neutral, as if the answer wasn’t of very great importance. “You two share a bunk, no reason you can’t do your bond thing.”

“Erroneous conclusion based upon supposed facts and assumptions,” River shook her head. “Sharing quarters does not mean sharing bodies, not when all the crew heard that Riddick wished to court the girl.”

“We did plenty of courting that involved the bedroom,” Wash grinned. “Or is this related to the PTSD that you and I discussed River?”

“It is related, somewhat,” River nodded. “Circumstances make completely the bond problematic at this juncture.” She shrugged and Riddick was pleased there wasn’t any citrus or pecan in her scent.

“Yes,” Riddick nodded his agreement. “You two wanna eat somethin’ me an’ River can handle things here.”

“Food would be a good thing,” Wash agreed. “Shall we lamby toes?”

“Absolutely.” The warmth in Zoe’s voice was almost a tangible thing. Riddick watched them go and smiled slightly. Their appointment with Inara wasn’t until later afternoon, well after his shift on the bridge was up, they’d have time to talk all of this over and get Inara’s take on the subject.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

gē ge - big brother
mèi mei - little sister
chǔn bèn - stupid
sāo lǔ - jackass
mō zhe shí tou guò hé - wade the river by groping for stones idiom / to advance step by step / to feel one’s way around
tiān shǐ - angel
fèi wù hún dàn - good for nothing bastards
zhì ’ài - most beloved
dǒng ma? - understand/got it
xing’ ài - sex/lovemaking
Shǐ niào - shit and piss
wēi shī jī - whiskey
bàng jiār - lover/partner
láng - wolf
chāng kuáng - savage/furious
zhī yīn - soul mate
bǎo bǎo - darling/baby

Quote Sources:
I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you--especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I’ve a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly’ - Jane Eyre - Charlotte Brontë

For he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother, be he ne’er so vile this day shall gentle his condition. - Henry V - William Shakespear
Riddick tilted his head and looked at River who was pulling on a dress that hung on her slender frame, making her look even more waiflike. Her boots were a little too large and the only things that fit well were the knife sheaths and gun harness. Her cargo pants and teeshirt had long succumbed to the rigors of the engine room and the conduits beneath Serenity. “I’m thinkin’ we use this stop to get you some clothes that fit better tiān shǐ. Inara should know at least one or two places; pretty sure she’d help you spend your money,” He grinned as he thought of the small fortune River had stolen from Niska.

“Our money,” River smiled her correction. “And you are right, Simon did his best but he erred on the side of caution and these clothes are not job appropriate.” She tilted her head, “Richard should put clothing on, she is certain his current attire would be favored by any woman wishing death to come swiftly and bloodily but she is aware he does not wish to draw attention.

Riddick chuckled as he pulled his pants on over his shorts and jerked a shirt over his head. He’d been in a hurry when he’d bought his clothes so the shirt was a little snug but it kept any excess fabric from wrinkling and chafing under his gun harness. His shivs were secreted about his body, with River smiling the entire time. He wasn’t sure why she his process of weaponing up so fascinating, but he could freely admit he loved watching her strap on her guns and knives. “Think the jacket is a good idea bāo bāo or too warm?”

River tilted her head and listened for a moment, “Wash thinks it is very bright, but the cortex says the winds are strong.” She offered after a moment. “Richard will want his goggles but not his coat, will not like having the extra fabric. Would rather take a chill.” She frowned at him, “Her mate will not become ill.” She commanded mildly.

His chuckle was more of an acknowledgement than it was meant to mock, “Pretty sure that ain’t under my purview darlin’, but I’ll do my best.” Riddick regarded her thoughtfully, “You got your leggin’s on under that dress? Iffen winds are strong don’t want you takin’ a chill or any pì yǎnr lookin’ on your legs.”

“Skin is concealed,” River nodded solemnly. “Kaylee has lent her a jacket which will not fit properly but will keep the girl’s arms from developing cutis anserina.”

“Goosebumps,” Riddick confirmed with a lifted eyebrow. “An’ you can still get to your shivs and guns all right with it on?”

River pulled on the jacket and demonstrated, “Perfectly well.” Aware of her mate’s gaze upon her she lifted the hem of the baggy dress so it rose above her knees and showed him the leggings and the daggers stuck in the tops of her boots. She also had a gun strapped to her thigh.

“You are the sexiest woman alive,” Riddick grinned at her thinking really hard that the only thing sexier would be her wearing nothing but her weapons. Her giggle and the wave of honey that hit his nose told him that she’d definitely read that thought.

“She will draw Richard a picture of what he desires,” River grinned at him playfully. “But he will have to pose her.”
“Not ‘xactly a hardship, bǎo bǎo,” Riddick grinned. “C’mon, I’m catchin’ Inara’s scent in the galley, guessin’ she’s ready to go.”

Riddick looked at Inara a little dubiously, “This is the place you wanna get a drink at?”

River giggled, “Inara has heard that Jayne and Mal will play billiards here and wishes to watch the game.” She tilted her head, “Richard will enjoy himself if we go in.”

He looked at his newly outfitted woman in her tight denim pants and matching mandarin jacket, her guns and knives out on display along with her cute pì gu and mouthwatering legs. Her scent had tendrils of tequila and honey and when he met her eyes River winked. Riddick grinned, his girl knew there was only so long he could go before sparring didn’t cut it anymore. He needed to fight someone who deserved a beating, someone River wouldn’t weep over if they died. “Well did ya’ll wanna drop the packages at the ship first? Don’ wanna be loaded down an’ if Mal an’ Jayne are inside chances are there’s none too honest folk around as well.”

Inara looked at the packages and bags Riddick was carrying and he could tell she was debating the idea but finally nodded her agreement, “You’re probably right, and it’s not as if Serenity isn’t close by.”

Riddick inclined his head in as polite a gesture as he could manage and they continued on towards the ship.

River smiled happily as her Riddick crooked his arm so she could slip her hand in his elbow. It wouldn’t do for him to bow and simper as so many core men did, but the polite gesture and invitation to touch him was far more comforting than a surplus of manners. Inara was on his other side, an elegant presence that drew as many eyes as the man between the two women. Mal looked up as they entered but apart from a brief frown didn’t indicate he knew them in any way. Jayne on the other hand gave them a grin that River returned happily and she could feel the warmth in Riddick, pleasure that his old friend was pleased to see them however mild Jayne’s reaction.

Inara turned so that she could see both of them and smiled, “Thank you both so much for the escort.” She bent slightly and kissed River’s cheek, “I especially enjoyed shopping with you mèi mei. We’ll have to visit the skyplex and bring Kaylee with us. Maybe you and Zoe could be the muscle.”

River grinned, “Let our men have manly times with billiards and tall card.” She agreed and gave Inara the slight bow of gratitude her mother had taught her, “Your help was invaluable today. Thank you so much.”

“It was a pleasure as your company always is,” Inara’s smile was almost too warm for a Companions. “I’m going to say hello to Mal and sit at the bar. You two have fun and don’t worry about me.”

River grinned wickedly and felt Riddick’s animal rising to meet hers, “Inara may wish to be certain she is aware of all exits and entrances.”


“Always am,” Riddick chuckled low and evil and Inara blinked and then nodded her understanding.
River watched as she drifted over towards their captain and murmured something before taking a seat at the bar.

River slanted a glance up at her partner and grinned to see he was already looking down at her, “Shall we commence our fun?”

“Yeah, why don’t we play with Cobh a little bit.” Riddick let his arm wrap around her shoulders and guided her over to the pool table Mal and Jayne were using along with a couple of other fellas.

“Rick,” Jayne grinned at him. “You an’ Moonbrain here have fun with Inara?” His lascivious tone wasn’t lost on his captain who glared at him.

“She is his Moon, but she is not moonbrained, nor buggy nor un-right in the head,” River told Jayne with a solemn air belied by her dancing eyes. “Is Jayne enjoying the game?”

Riddick chuckled and shook his head at Mal, “Ain’t no use being pissy ‘bout a tiger’s stripes Cap’n.”

“Cap’n huh,” One of the men at the table said with a chuckle, “You’ll like hearin’ bout our last job, maybe like to borrow it, make some money a yourn.”

“Always like to earn ready cash,” Mal had sent a cautious look over at Inara giving her a nod but turned his attention to the men.

“May she play?” River held out her hand for the pool cue, looking up at Jayne winsomely.

“Aww, c’mon, I ain’t done nothin’ to you,” Jayne held onto the stick with a stubborn look in his eye.

“May she play the next one?” River’s eyes darted from Jayne to her captain to her partner, “Please, if she is good and does not cause trouble?”

Riddick’s low evil laugh at the last word was what clued Jayne into the possibilities, “Yeah, sure, uh, River, next game.”

“She will watch closely then,” River grinned and looked at the other two men. “They will not mind the girl watching from different angles? Wishes to have a full and all-encompassing view of the game.”

“What?” One of the men blinked in confusion while the other one looked at the men who apparently knew the little girl, “What’d she say?”

“She wants to be able to move around the table and study how ya’ll hold the cue an’ take your shots, she’s tryin’ to learn to play better.” Riddick supplied the explanation with a dark grin. “Just wants ta make sure that don’t bother ya none.”

“Oh,” The man who’d been about to brag on his coin earning abilities nodded, “Don’t guess we’ll mind none. Pretty little thing, long’s she don’t mess up a shot or nothin’.”

River held up her hand as if to swear in court, “Promise to not impede the play.” That just got two sets of eyes going to Riddick again, three if you included Jayne’s imitation of the men’s stupidity.

“She swears she won’t get in your way,” Riddick shook his head with a chuckle, “Darlin’, you just watch that the cue don’t hit you in the stomach or nothin’ when they’re takin’ their shots.”

“She will abide,” River nodded in the absent way that made Mal nervous and Jayne chuckle deep in his chest. Her big man was leaning against the wall near Jayne, waiting for her to start their own little
game. Mal had no clue and Jayne had leaned back and muttered something to Riddick, to which her man had given a reply that made Jayne grin in a manner entirely too similar to the Furyan. But then this was Richard’s sworn brother, he had some of Riddick’s blood in him, had a touch of the animal.

Barely listening to the conversation she circled the table again, and then again, the second time her hand brushed past one of the men speaking, startling him. “Apologies,” She looked up at him with a smile, “Did not mean to.” She leaned in and tilted her head, “Will he hit two or three?”

“Just two I think, cain’t be sure a the shot for the third,” The rather grimy man replied with a grin showing off yellowing teeth.

“Show me please?” River tilted her head invitingly and was given a nod. A quick glance at Riddick to be certain he wouldn’t object and the man’s hands were holding hers to the cue, showing her how he lined up the shot. “Needs much skill,” She declared wrinkling her nose as she fumbled the cue. Handing it back to him she shook her head, “She cannot compete as yet.” One hand patted his shoulder and the other moved soft as a cat’s paw.

“Aw you’ll get it eventually cutie,” The man chuckled, “You just keep watchin’ us. I’m Wright by the way.”

“She is grateful for the opportunity, name is River,” River smiled and bumped her captain deliberately. When he reached out to steady her, River smiled. “Cap’n is kind to her.” She looked over the table, “She will bring more beverages as payment for allowing her to watch.”

“Now that’s a right girl,” The one who’d tried to show her the shot proclaimed and River grinned at Inara as she neared the Companion.

“What are you up to River?” Inara murmured out of the corner of her mouth.

“Stealing from slavers,” River grinned and took the tray of beers from the bar tender. Returning to the table she slipped several bills into Mal’s pocket, “The captain must get the next round.” She insisted as she passed out the bottles, handing one to Riddick and Jayne with a wink. “Jayne,” She tilted her head, “We have approximately two more games before they’ll notice I stole their entire payday.” Her eyes met Riddick’s, “Do the two of you think it will be better for them to blame me or Mal?” With her back to the other men she divided the bills up and secreted part of them under her shirt, putting the rest in Riddick’s front pocket.

“Way you’ve been slippin’ round ‘em they’re gonna blame you River,” Jayne muttered. “Ain’t any gettin’ round that.”

“No, because Mal is going to do the same thing, only he’ll take the man’s entire wallet.” River shook her head, “He’s not very subtle is he?”

“No,” Jayne chuckled into his beer.

Riddick’s eyes sharpened as Wright expounded on his genius money making scheme, “Didn’t hardly have to convert the ship even. Six in the corner. Stronger locks, thicker doors, keep everybody where they’re supposed to be. Don’t even need more rations.”

River leaned into Riddick’s side as Mal bumped Wright and the table, doing as she’d done earlier and coming away with Wright’s wallet. The pool balls on the table wavered and disappeared, and the shout of anger at Wright almost drowned out the growl of Riddick’s anger. The bar tender pointed at the sign on the wall, “MANAGEMENT NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR BALL FAILURE.” Wright grumbled but in resignation gestured for the table to reset itself.
River looked up at Jayne and then at Wright pleadingly, “May she play Jayne? Please? She has bought you a tasty beverage that smells repugnant. Please?”

Jayne looked at his beer and looked at River and then Riddick, “All right fine, but next game is mine.” He looked at Mal, “That’s okay with you Cap’n?”

Mal spread his hands in agreement and River bounced happily as she took the pool cue from Jayne, “She is very pleased, this is a delightful application of geometry and three dimensional mathematics.” She told Wright and his partner with the air of one imparting important knowledge.

Like clockwork, four sets of eyes shot to Riddick for a translation, Mal and Jayne among them this time and Riddick’s chuckle drifted through the air, “She’s talkin’ bout the way ya figure a shot, girl’s a math genius, wants to see if she can use it to figure the angles.” He shook his head when four sets of eyes remained blank. “She’s gonna use math to figure out what ball to hit to get more balls in the pockets. Đồng ma?”

“Yes, no but that’s okay,” Wright shook his head and took the breaking shot.

Jayne shot Riddick a look and River grinned, the big man was going to induce Wright to talk more, and that would make her partner even more angry. “You made money, huh?”

Wright nodded, “Hand over fist, my friend. Water planets need labor, terraforming crews got a prodigious death rate.”

“Labor, you mean, uh…slaves,” Mal wasn’t pleased but nobody would have known it unless they were River, Riddick or Jayne.

River watched as Wright took another shot, “Well it wasn’t volunteers, for damn sure.”

“That why you didn’t have to lay in more rations?” Mal was quietly fuming and River sent Riddick a mischievous look.

“I didn’t hear no complaints,” The slaver chuckled some as he lined up another shot.

“How much money, lots?” Jayne was pretending eagerness to cover Riddick’s growl of fury beside him while Mal walked over to speak with Inara. River nodded to Riddick as she heard his mental question. Mal was warning Inara that she might want to leave the bar.

“Captain, must buy the next round while he is at the bar,” River called over to Mal with a grin. “Her rent is in your pocket.”

“So it is,” Mal nodded, an amiable smile replacing the frown that had pulled at his lips when she’d spoken. He returned to the table with another round though Riddick had barely touched his first. “Little River, you gonna play ever?”

“Mr. Wright will miss his next shot, as it is highly ambitious, and then my time will come,” River spoke absently as she watched the slaver. “Is Inara going home?”

“I think in a moment or two, she’s enjoyin’ watching you play,” Mal nodded sipping his beer.

Wright cursed as he missed his shot and picked up his tankard with a resigned air, “Well, let ‘er rip.” He gestured for River to begin.

The wicked grin that pulled at her lips was a twin to Riddick’s as River began to run the table, “Most enjoyable,” She grinned at him as the final ball sank. “Thank you.”
“Well if you’ll gimme another game, or maybe your man’ll wanna play, lemme buy another round,” Wright offered. Reaching for his wallet he found nothing but empty air, “Hēi! my—” He stared at her, “You steal my cash little girl?”

River blinked up at him, “Clothing she wears is not designed to conceal stolen objects.” Wright’s gaze slammed into Riddick who was no longer leaning against the wall but standing upright and angry next to the very large Jayne.

“She’s sayin’ there ain’t a spare inch in her clothes to hide your wallet,” Riddick growled. “An’ I don’t take kindly to you callin’ my woman a thief after she bought your beer.”

River shook her head, “See?” She unbuttoned the cord frogs of her jacket and shrugged it off, revealing the skin tight camisole underneath. Shaking the jacket out to dislodge anything inside it she turned to show off the very tight denim pants and boots. “Nothing purloined.” Putting her jacket back on and closing it up again she shook her head at Wright, “Not nice.”

“Someone a you took my wallet,” Wright’s gaze swung to the captain and Mal blinked at him. “You bumped into me before, you lift it then?” He started towards Mal.

River sighed, “Richard, the entertainment is about to begin.”

“Richard?” Wright’s partner giggled at the name, “What are ya? A prissy core fella?”

Riddick’s laugh was low and mean as he started for the man, “No, I’m an escaped convict with a history of violence.” His fist slammed into the man’s jaw so hard River could hear the crack of bone.

Wright’s head snapped around as apparently River wasn’t the only one to hear the ominous sound and River grinned, “Now she will dance.” Throwing the pool cue to Jayne who began laying about with it on what might have been Wright’s crew, she spun and kicked Wright in the face, knocking him back into the bar. “Inara, a hasty exit might not come amiss,” River called to her friend.

Riddick was laughing as he and Jayne brawled back to back and River grinned as she kicked and punched her way over to Mal’s side, “Captain.” She greeted him politely and kicked someone behind him in the scrotum. “Are you enjoying your outing?”

“Well ăn ăn, I surely am, though I’m a touch worried about our exit strategy,” Mal told her, a half grin tugging his lips as his fist hammered into someone’s eye.

“Every good con needs one,” River agreed. “I propose you fetch Inara and get her out. Richard, Jayne and I will cover your escape; we will meet you at the ship. Bugging out promptly might be advisable.” Her hard little fists beat someone’s solar plexis, and finished with a right cross to the jaw.

“Thinkin’ someone may have alerted the authorities,” Mal ducked a chair that was being thrown at him and blinked as River caught it and broke it over another man’s back before tossing the remains of it to Riddick.

“I am certain of it with a ninety nine point six percent surety,” River replied. “Inara is still by the bar. Go now.” She turned slightly and poked her captain in the back, “Now Malcolm.” The poke was enough to get him moving towards Inara, hustling her out.

River grinned as she heard Inara bid the barkeep farewell, “Lovely place, I’ll tell my friends.”

She giggled as another man came at her, “Richard, all non-combatants have left the bar,” She called to her partner. “Now may I start killing people?”
“Hell, you know what a mess that makes bāo bāo,” Riddick called back with a grin. “But iffen you don’t mind blood on your new clothes you go ahead and enjoy yourself.”

“I ain’t doin’ an extra shift in the laundry ‘cause you can’t control your woman Rick,” Jayne warned as he sluggd someone else.

“Ain’t sayin’ you should,” Riddick agreed amiably. “But you know a woman ain’t ever under anyone’s control but her own.”

River’s laughter floated through the air as the last man she’d faced fell to the ground, “Point is moot.” She declared as Riddick and Jayne finished off their opponents. “Let us return home.” She dug a wad of cash out of her cleavage and tossed it to the bartender. “For the damages.” She squeaked as Riddick scooped her up and led Jayne back to the ship at a run, the sound of sirens behind them.

“Gorram,” Jayne cursed as they ran, “That cash was twice what it would a cost to fix up the place.”

“But he won’t give a description to the lawmen now because I paid him,” River shrugged against Riddick as he ran up Serenity’s ramp and Jayne hit the button to close it. “No cameras or cortex feeds in the bar, besides it was less than half of what I stole from Wright.”

“ Couldn’t even catch you makin’ the lift,” Jayne chuckled as he sat down on a crate. “Didn’t even see you pass the rest to Rick an’ I know you must’ve.”

Riddick pressed a warm kiss to River’s neck and sighed with pleasure, “Thank you liàn rén.” His entire body felt relaxed in a way he hadn’t been in a while. It was a bone deep calm not entirely unlike a fall with River. “Oh dì yù baby, thank you.” A long deep kiss later he pulled back to look at River. “You’re fuckin’ amazin’ tiān shǐ. You always fuckin’ know.”

“What’s she know?” Mal’s voice was a little annoyed and a lot curious as he walked down the stairs to. “We’ll be leavin’ in five minutes. Kaylee’s on her way back with some parts.”

Riddick was lazily kissing River again and didn’t answer. Mal with a sigh and a look in his eye Jayne coulda told Riddick wasn’t a good sign stalked over to River and Riddick’s crate and put one hand on the burly man’s shoulder and one on River’s with the full intent of separating them. Before he could open his mouth to repeat his question identical knives were held against vulnerable parts of his body, Riddick’s at his jugular and River’s at his femoral. The truly insulting part of it was that neither of the dangerous kissing people opened their eyes, looked up or stopped kissing each other.

River finally took her lips away from Riddick’s, “Captain is ruining the mood.” She complained and sheathed her knife, “Very loud.”

“Mal, iffen you’d asked, coulda told ya that weren’t a good idea,” Jayne was shaking his head as if Mal had just exceeded Jayne’s greatest stupidity.

Riddick sighed slightly and took the edge of his shiv away from the captain’s neck, flipping the blade in his hand, “Mal, I ever give you any indication that it was all right to lay hands on me? Or my woman?” He smiled at River. “You just get exponentially more impressive don’t you bāo bāo.”

“She is a prodigy and a genius, she must continually evolve,” River shrugged and regarded the captain with a cool gaze. “You are not part of our pack. You are not our family. Given no indication you want us to be part of yours. You don’t have skin privileges.”

“Skin privileges?” Mal blinked down at her, “What in the ruttin’ hell does that even mean?”

“Skin privileges, an old term used on Earth That Was to describe the rights and freedoms of
As River and Rick use the term it means the right between pack members to touch and be touched.” He dried off his hands and threw the towel over his shoulder before dropping down onto a crate near River and Riddick. “As it’s been explained to me, skin privileges are something the animal in all of us desperately needs. Some of us are more attuned to it than others, River and Rick, are very conscious of exactly how much time and contact they need to function.” He shook his head, “Captain you’re dealing with two people who have fully embraced their animal, or primal, selves in order to survive. In their world, touch is very important, as is the right to refuse it from someone not trusted.”

“How in the hell do you know so much about this?” Mal blustered. Riddick could tell the captain was more upset about Simon being so calm in the face of violence than Mal was about the knives he’d been facing moments ago.

“You don’t think I just watched River move into a bunk with a very dangerous, violent and disturbingly intelligent man without at least talking to her now and then do you?” Simon shook his head, “Apart from meal times, River and I play chess, well she plays and I humiliate myself. We talk, we play when Rick is working out with Jayne. We even do our own little version of working out.” He shrugged, “And believe it or not I’ve come to enjoy Riddick’s company. He’s intelligent, well read, and plays a very good game of chess, I’m more his level than River’s.”

“Doc still cain’t do much more’n the little weights but he’s coming along with guns at least,” Jayne nodded at the doctor coolly. “Dunno if we’ll ever be friends but he don’t use my things ‘thout askin’. Him an’ Shepherd, Rick an’ River an’ me we get good workout’s goin’ in the mornin’, long’s we get up early enough.”

Riddick shook his head and looked up at Mal, “Why don’t you sit down and just ask your question an’ listen to the answer for a change?” He suggested, still feeling relaxed from the fight.

“Well the original question stands,” Mal didn’t sit but he did lean against the wall enough of a distance away that the knife would have to be thrown to hit him. “What’s she know?”

Riddick chuckled and kissed River gently, answering the question but looking at his woman, “She knows when the animal needs a fight. Knows when it needs love, or food, or quiet, or just a good sweaty workout. My woman knows me.”

“See that’s what I’m not gettin’, what do you mean she knows when you need a fight,” Mal shook his head. “You ain’t been grouchy or mean, ain’t even snapped at anyone.”

River tilted her head and looked at her man and smiled before she turned her gaze to Mal, “My mate, his animal, requires violence now and then. Requires more than sparring. He is a wolf, a warrior and trained to the hunt and battle.”

Mal shook his head at her, a gleam of an inkling in his brain but he still wasn’t grasping it, “Not quite there yet nǐ zì.”

“Not a little girl, nearly eighteen. A woman,” River narrowed her eyes at him. “Captain was a soldier; what happens when a soldier trains too much, doesn’t go into battle, has nothing to do but sit and train some more?” She watched as enlightenment lit Mal’s face, “So it is with my Riddick. He cannot only spar, cannot only train. He must have battle or he will...” She turned her face back to Riddick’s her smile gentle, “Or the animal will feel it is in a cage again.”

“A cage again?” Mal asked carefully.
“The Academy caged him, tried to tame him, tried to beat him into submission, even tried to give him a cub to protect in the hopes of gentling his nature, and then tried to turn him against the cub who wasn’t a cub, was a woman, and the woman against him, tried everything to control the animal,” River shook her head. “They never understood the nature of the beast.”

“Animals run wild, they’re free, lessen they’re raised in captivity,” Mal realized. “They tried to take a wild animal and tame it to a cage.”

“And they took a purebred bitch from a comfortable home and put her in with him, hoping she would tame him, but he made her as wild as he,” River continued the analogy. “Some animals can be caged, but they can never be tamed.”

“So every now an’ then, I need a real fight,” Riddick shrugged. “River knows better’n me when I need it instead of sparrin’.” He leaned forward and nuzzled her lips with his, “My woman always knows what I need. There’s times I cain’t figure out what the animal wants. River always knows.”

“How?” Mal asked bluntly. “See, it ain’t passed my notice that there’s a lotta things that River knows an’ not all of ‘em are explainable.”

“Nunya,” Riddick returned with a smirk.

“Nunya?” Mal shook his head, “Nunya...what’re you...Nunya?”

“Nunya bizness,” River finished the joke a hard glint in her eye.

“My boat, my crew, my business,” Mal frowned at her.

“But I am not your crew,” River shook her head. “I pay my way on your boat. And you have made it abundantly clear that I am not part of your business.” She rested her head against Riddick’s shoulder, “You set me apart. Never trust me or look me in the eye. Call me a child.” Riddick could feel a sleepy little purr in her chest as he wrapped her in his arms and cuddled her back against his chest and reached up to pull the pins out of her chignon, letting her hair spill down over her shoulder. “Why should I tell you anything?”

Jayne chuckled, “Gotta say it’s a pleasure to see somebody else throw your sāo lǜ behavior back in your face Mal.”

“Jayne your mouth is talkin’ again,” Mal said shortly. “Now you two just pulled knives on me, got me an’ Inara in a brawl an’ got me buggin’ outa Santo in an all fired hurry.” He folded his arms, “Someone is gonna start explainin’ somethin’ or when we hit Persephone ya’ll are gettin’ off.”

Riddick chuckled lazily, “You ain’t been listenin’.” He shook his head. “Simon done explained it to you. Hell I’ve said it. River told you just now. But you just don’ hear us.”

“Then say it again, slowly, in Captain dummy talk,” Mal retorted. “Say it so’s I can understand.”

“They made River like me,” Riddick spoke slowly as if to a very small learning impaired child. “I grew up, never understanding how I knew things. I could understand what people were gonna do before they did it. I had an animal’s instinct for what I could survive. I’m damn smart, remember everything, ain’t like River, but I grew up with violence.”

“I was sheltered, and given everything,” River said softly. “I understood everything, knew things. I was privileged. And then all of the sudden I wasn’t. They put me in a cage with a wild wolf. I loved how he was, couldn’t tame him, didn’t want to tame him. So I became wild, like him.” She looked at Mal, her dark eyes cold, “They cut into me, made me see everything, hear everything, took pieces
away, put others in, a puzzle with all the pieces mixed up until they made a new picture. And the only way for me to survive, to still be me, was to not. The animal sees and hears everything, the animal made it possible for me to live with what they did."

“They couldn’t take away her intelligence,” Simon said slowly. “But whatever they did to her, increased her senses, they made her so she was like Riddick in some ways so she had no choice but to become like him in every way.” He looked at Mal, “The short version is that River knows what Riddick needs intuitively because she needs the same things, but in lower dosages. She’s had no choice but to become painfully self-aware in order to survive.”

Riddick tilted his head at Simon and smiled slowly, wickedly and nodded his acknowledgment of what Simon had just done. He gave Mal an explanation for River’s knowledge with a truth, but not the truth, the doctor didn’t even smell of lies because he had told the truth. “That satisfy you Mal?”

“Don’t explain how she knew about the Alliance back at that derelict, nor ‘bout the new made Reaver,” Mal countered.

River shrugged, “Just knew. Boy was like a sick animal. Alliance was a matter of odds, your bad luck and known shipping lanes coincided.” She pressed a kiss to the side of Riddick’s neck, “I’ve always known things. Don’t know what the Alliance was trying to do with me, with the others, but I know what I am.”

“Dangerous,” Mal’s voice held a question and a statement.

“I’m Riddick’s,” River shifted and lifted herself out of Riddick’s lap to grip the railing of the stairs. Riddick nodded and moved to open the airlock so Kaylee could come inside.

“See? That. How’d she know Kaylee was here,” The captain was flabbergasted and annoyed with it. Confusion was a state that did not suit him for all that it happened so often.

“Heard her,” River shrugged. “So did my Riddick.” She moved towards Simon’s bunk, “Wait here. Call the others to come and see.” She tossed the words back over her shoulder nonchalantly.

“See what?” Mal called after her. “What’re they gonna see?”

Kaylee smiled up at Rick and handed him a bag she’d been lugging around, “Can you or Jayne put this somewhere we won’t trip over it? Got supplies to make crybabies.”

“Can do,” Riddick nodded and shut the door tight. Hitting the intercom he spoke into it, “Wash, we got a full house.”

“Leaving atmo in five minutes,” Wash’s voice came over the loudspeaker.

“Roger that,” Riddick clicked off and returned to his crate, “Kaylee, River’s got somethin’ to show us if you’ll hang around for a bit.” The mechanic nodded and picked a crate in between Simon and Jayne drawing her knees up to her chin and wrapping her arms around them with a smile.

“I still ain’t gettin’ what River wants us to see,” Mal grumbled a little bit as he moved over to the com set. Hitting the button he spoke into it, “Wash once you got a course set for Persephone gather up Zoe, Inara and the Shepherd, come on down to the bay.”

“As your will commands O fearless leader,” Wash’s sardonic voice crackled back through the com and Riddick chuckled. He could catch the scent of the pilot’s humor even down in the bay now that he knew what to look for. Wash liked Mal well enough but the pilot didn’t care for how seriously the captain took everything. Sometimes the scent of Wash’s humor was enough to make Riddick
chuckle even if he didn’t know the joke. There was a reason River loved to spend time on the bridge.

“If River has something to show us, then I am going to sit and wait until she comes back,” Simon was gazing at Kaylee as if she was every world in the ‘verse. “So what sort of parts make a crybaby,” He asked the mechanic curiously. “Is there anything I can help with?”

“Oh there’s some fiddly bits that always can use an extra hand,” Kaylee told him cheerfully. “Jayne usually does the weldin’ for me an’ Wash an’ me work the circuitry. If you’re willin’ to lend a hand, bet ’tween River an’ Rick, ’long with Wash an’ Jayne bet we could get a couple done in a day.”

Rick smiled slightly, Kaylee’s desire for Simon smelled of warm summer grass, the kind of scent that came from a fresh mowed field wet with dew and slowly warming under the rising sun. It was a nice scent not overpowering. Simon still smelled like a doctor, probably always would, but under the scent of surgical steel and antiseptic Riddick could catch the scent of sandalwood, exotic but increasing as his heart beat rose along with his blood. The shuddering of the ship as they left atmo caught his attention and he tilted his head, “Feel a little rough to you Kaylee?” He murmured the question glancing at Mal for confirmation.

The captain nodded and looked at Kaylee, “Thinkin’ when we set down again check out some a the paneling on the nose. Buffer panel shakes lose an’ our landin’s won’t be near as comfortable.”

“I could put on a suit an’ take a look,” Riddick said quietly. “Between Jayne an’ me, ain’t a lotta work we ain’t done in the black. Weldin’d be nothin’.”

“Keep it in mind if need be,” Mal nodded and blinked as River emerged from the passenger bunks where Simon’s trunk was still kept. The girl looked very different, a skirt with a crinoline under it standing stiffly out from her legs above her knees and toe shoes on her feet. Her upper body was barely covered by the pale green camisole she’d worn under her jacket. “What in the name a the dear an’ fluffy lord…”

Riddick chuckled and rose to take the portable music player from River’s hand, “Somethin’ to show us gorgeous?”

“Yes,” River nodded decisively. “Richard will aid her by placing a crate in the middle of the cargo bay?”

“Just point me to the spot,” He picked up the crate next to the one they’d been sitting on and moved it to the area she indicated as Inara and Book arrived on the catwalks. “You all stretched out?”

“She will use the stair rail to ensure full elasticity,” River smiled at him. Her hair had been wound into a knot on the top of her head, and she’d wrapped a stiff piece of gold foil paper around the bun like a little crown.

“You just nod at me you want any a my help,” Riddick retreated to his crate as Inara and Book made their way down the stairs. It took another ten minutes, Simon smiling at the idea of River dancing and explaining to Kaylee that his sister was wearing a traditional ballerina’s costume, if a little improvised while elaborating whenever Kaylee or Jayne showed confusion about his words on their faces. Doc was getting good at figuring out when folks needed to absorb something and when he actually needed to explain it.

Wash and Zoe emerged onto the catwalk finally and the pilot blinked when he saw River, “You look like you popped outa my mother’s old jewelry box River.” He called as he and Zoe walked down the stairs. “Do we finally get to see the dancing you told us about?”
“Something to show you,” River nodded. “Must pay attention.”

Wash looked at the impromptu seating area and grinned, “Well you’ve got quite the audience here, where do the irreverent and plain-speaking folks fit in?”

“Beside the brilliant engineer and the girl’s bigger half,” River giggled as Riddick pushed his crate back so it was near Kaylee’s making a bench of four crates so they could all sit in a row.

“We’re all set,” Riddick chuckled. “Just gimme a nod when you want the music to start.”

River grinned at him and nimble climbed up onto the crate he’d placed for her, one arm arched gracefully over her head and the other in front of her, sinuous curves made stiff as plasti. “Now please,” River said quietly and Riddick mashed down the button.

Tinkling music seemed to plink through the air, the notes almost tinny as if from an old machine. And River began to move, like a wind-up toy, slowly turning in circles. How she contrived to look like a toy was beyond Riddick’s comprehension, and then the music grew louder and words emerged.

“What do you see?
You people gazing at me
You see a doll on a music box
That’s wound by a key.”

River’s movements were jerky and in time with the music and the funny scritching noise that sounded like old machinery moving. One arm moved down to match the other, in halting gestures, a doll speaking of how no one saw her as real.

“How can you tell
I’m under a spell
I’m waiting for love’s first kiss…”

One hand rose to her mouth even as her head turned slightly and then gazed forward again. She was rotating, turning on first one toe then the other, and even her legs seemed stiff and mechanical as the song continued.

“You cannot see
How much I long to be free
Turning around on this music box
That’s wound by a key,”

She bent forward at the waist as if longing for someone, her arms extending mechanically and then rising from the waist again, her hands moving inward,

“Yes yearning
Yearning
While
I’m turning around and around…”

When the words ended River was back in her original position, stiff and motionless, the tinkling music winding down. For one long moment she stayed that way, stiff and cold and then music crashed through the player, echoing off the hull and she came to life.

Still on top of the crate River became the Valkyrie, a queen of the skies, before she leapt down, her toes pointed in the grand jeté, landing lightly as a bird. Her body spun and twisted violently, the
mechanical dance of a moment ago a terrible parody of what she performed now, passion and beauty set free.

The music was fading, dying and River somehow contrived to return to her crate, one strong dancers leg pushing upwards. She balanced there, on one foot, en pointe in an arabesque, graceful and strong as the music finally faded away completely. Riddick frowned, now that the wonder of the dance was over, he could smell the blood.

River waited until the last note died, waited until they realized the dance was over, and then broke her pose. Simon was awed and grinning with pleasure, clapping his hands enthusiastically, nothing like the polite applause he would bestow in a theatre. Kaylee, and the others were applauding their appreciation, Jayne going so far as to give several ear splitting whistles. Mal was clapping slowly, Inara was more polite in her applause but the tears in her eyes were worth more than bruised palms. Riddick was applauding but his eyes were hot and filled with more emotion than his hands could convey without touching her.

“You,” River looked at Mal, “You see me as the doll on the music box. Shiny toy that someone broke.” Mal froze in place as she stared at him coolly. “Most of you see me as a combination of the first and the second dance, a broken girl who was beautiful once. Some of you are starting to see more, like Simon and Jayne do, as Riddick always has.”

Riddick stood and walked towards her, extending his hand in invitation and she smiled, “Thank you my Riddick.” She leapt into his arms and felt more than heard his chuckle of delight as her body collided with his. Bringing her back to another crate to sit her mate held her in his lap as she removed her toe shoes and the wrappings on her feet to expose her bloodied skin, her toes were bleeding, blisters on her heels broken and seeping. There were gasps of dismay, Kaylee’s cry of sympathy and Jayne’s breath hissed inward. Inara wasn’t shocked but she was surprised that River could dance and never show the pain of her feet once. Even Book’s stoic mask cracked slightly.

River never took her eyes off Mal’s face, “Simon and Richard are the only ones who aren’t surprised by my feet. You pay lip service to me someday being part of the crew, but you think I’m broken, weak, clinging to Richard and Simon like space trash that gets stuck to a ship out in the Black. I’ve been dancing since I was four years old. I’ve been en pointe since I was twelve. My feet bleed every time I dance. Every time. No one but Richard has ever been able to tell, and he only because he can smell my blood. I’m much, much stronger than you will ever give me credit for Malcolm Reynolds. Open your eyes. You are willfully blind.”

“Now just a gorram minute,” Mal opened his mouth to begin blustering.

Riddick forestalled him by standing up. Easily holding River in one arm he dug the rest of the cash River had passed him out of his pocket. “There’s River’s rent for the next two months. She took it offa that slaver. Made a better lift than you did an’ you didn’t even notice when she stuck money in your own pocket.”

River leaned her head against Riddick’s neck and sighed, “He requires more time before he will open his eyes.” She said quietly. “Let us go rest before your shift on the bridge. Plans to make.” She remained quietly in his arms until they reached their bunk and only then did Riddick release her. She slid down the ladder and sat quickly on the bed, Riddick's mind awash with awe at finally seeing her dance and irritation that it caused her to bleed. Her big man jumped down and shut the hatch behind him, and then she spoke her voice as soothing to the animal as she could make it. "I barely feel the pain anymore, I'm so accustomed to worse," She offered softly. "Dancers never have pretty feet my
"Well I know you ain't lyin' to me," Riddick sighed as he sat down beside her. "Still don't much like it baby."

"But you liked the dancing until you smelt my blood?" River knew she sounded pleading and hoped her big man wouldn't take it as worry over his reaction.

"It was beautiful River," Riddick gathered her into his arms as he always did when they were alone. "I've never seen anything more beautiful than you dancin'. Wish I could see that every day, but knowin' it makes you bleed..."

"It's the price I pay," River kissed him gently. "When I dance I don't feel it. I barely felt it before the Academy. Now I could lose a toe and still dance." She pressed her lips to his cheek, "When do you feel most free my Riddick? When are you most alive?"

"When I'm with you, or when I'm fightin'," Riddick admitted with a dark grin. "Put a shiv in my hand and set me loose, ain't a thing in the 'verse gonna stop me."

"My dancing is like that," River stroked his face with her hands, "When you fight you get bruises, fractures, abrasions. When I dance my feet bleed. But we don't stop because that's when we're alive. When our blood leaves us, that's when we're the most alive unless we're together...but even then, our hearts are pounding, our blood pumps...we're free."

"Yeah, I can see that," Riddick nodded a sigh escaping him. "It doesn't make a lotta sense I guess, that I want to take care of you and still want you to be able to take care of yourself."

"Makes sense to me," River told him with a smile. "Know I can take care of myself. Know you're a capable male, my man. Still want to be at your side, help you, fight at your back."

"That's where I always want you bǎo bǎo," Riddick pressed his lips to hers and tugged her back against him so they were reclining on the bed.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: We have officially begun the Shindig episode. This is just a little warning, in this episode Mal’s going to act like a sort of ass for a bit…he’ll come around don’t worry. We’re staying in the semi confines of the episode for a while I’m working towards a slow change of how things will be and I think with a little mini episode of my own by Our Mrs. Reynolds we’ll be seeing some changes to the episode endings. It’s not easy to write these and change them without changing everything so be patient with me. I’m also doing my level best to not plagiarize anyone else on the site because I’ve read a lot of this crossover fic and Firefly fics and man there are some great writers on here.

Chinese Translations:

tiān shī - angel
bǎo bǎo - darling/baby
pì yǎnr - bastard/slob/asshole
pì gu - butt
mèi mei - little sister
Dǒng ma? - Understand/Get it
Hēi! - hey
ān ān - honey – an endearment for addressing a little girl
liàn rén - lover/sweetheart
dì yù - hell
nī zi - little girl
sāo lú - jackass
shuài gē - handsome guy/ladykiller

Quote Sources:
Rather than repeat them I’ll simply tell you that the lyrics and music for River’s dance are from the movie Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.
Riddick gave a one shouldered shrug in answer to Inara’s question and shook his head, “What do you want me to say Inara?” He asked bluntly. “Do I like the idea of River’s feet bleedin’? No. Do I get the urge to wrap her up in cotton wool and protect her from everything in the ‘verse that’s bad, includin’ me? Now and then but it goes away.”

“How do you make it go away?” Inara asked gently.

Riddick frowned, there was a strange scent coming from Inara. It was nothing like her usual scent of incense, tea or perfume, almost astringent to his nose. He endeavored to put it out of his mind after he sent River a glance and received a minute nod in return, “That’s mostly the man has the urge.” He spoke slowly, “The animal, the part that recognized her as mine the minute I saw her, that part of me won’t tolerate its mate being anything less than equal. Can’t stand to see her in pain, hate when she cries, when she’s afraid, but I been figurin’ out, that urge to protect her, do whatever she wants so’s she’s not afraid when we’re doin’ our therapy…that’s the man. I thought it was the animal for the longest. But it ain’t. The animal needs a strong mate. It’s the man that’s weak, wants to put my wants before what’s best for her.”

“It’s not a weakness, the urge to protect the woman you love,” Inara’s objection was mild. “But I agree it is a very human thing to do. As I understand it, animals don’t tolerate sickness or weakness well.”

“No,” River shook her head. “Is that why you took an extra dose of medicine today?”

Inara’s composed mask cracked just a bit, a tightening around her mouth and eyes, “I don’t believe that’s any of your business River.”

“It is when my friend is in pain and will not let me help,” River eyed the older woman stubbornly. “You haven’t even told Simon yet and Simon could help you.”

“I won’t discuss this with you now River,” Inara’s voice held the firmness of iron in it. “At some other time perhaps, but now is not the time.”

River subsided but not without a look at Riddick who nodded calmly in return, like it or not, they owed Inara a debt. And that debt would be repaid.

When they exited Inara’s shuttle River felt hyper-sensitized, as if she’d borrowed all five of Riddick’s senses and added her own extra one in. Words drifted towards her, down the hall from the bridge as she fixed tea for she and Riddick in the galley.

“For folks who’re so wound up in each other, those two spend a lotta time in Inara’s shuttle,” Zoe’s voice was speculative though not overly curious.

“Maybe they like Inara’s tea and conversation,” Wash suggested. River smiled to herself, the pilot liked she and her man, didn’t want anyone prying into their business.
“Riddick don’t strike me as a man overly patient with rituals an’ suchlike,” Zoe retorted her voice still mild. “You heard what he considers a marriage ceremony.”

“Don’t mean he can’t enjoy River and Inara talking,” Wash’s voice was just as mild. “He isn’t Jayne you know…these days Jayne isn’t even Jayne.”

“Hmm? How do you mean,” Zoe must be sitting in her husband lap again, River decided, that was the only time she sounded so relaxed.

“Just that for all that Jayne mutters and grumbles about Simon and River he don’t do much about ‘em. I mean he played that prank on Simon but he doesn’t do much more than sneer in the doc’s direction and even that’s halfhearted,” Wash had a shrug in his voice. “I hafta spend quite a bit of time with Rick you know, an’ River comes up here to use the cortex. Rick might be the stone cold killer he makes himself out to be but he’s a lot more than that.”

“I just think its odd is all; Cap’n ain’t said word one about it, and normally he’d be talkin’ about Inara and crew and all that lè sè,” Zoe pressed slightly and River could hear Wash’s sigh.

“Lamby toes, fun as it is to speculate on how oblivious Simon is to Kaylee’s crush and whether or not Jayne was hatched from an egg or born live, I really…and I mean really, don’t feel comfortable talking about River and Rick like this,” Wash’s voice was affectionate but with a thread of steel in it.

“Are either of them making you uncomfortable,” Zoe’s voice sharpened slightly, alert to any threat to the man around which her life revolved.

“Right now sweetheart the only thing making me uncomfortable is the topic of conversation,” Wash said finally. River got the sense that there had a been a long heavily weighted look between the married couple. “Fine, no, I’ve never gotten the sense that Rick or River would hurt me, unless I did something to one of them. Which I wouldn’t, liking my fingers and eyes where they are. I like both of them believe it or not.” Zoe must have given Wash a disbelieving look because the pilot nearly squawked, “What, I do like them. Rick is a damn good pilot, River’s a cortex genius and they’re both gorram smart, funny as hell too when they’re jabbering back and forth at each other.”

“Then what’s the problem? If they’re so good humored they won’t take a little gossip as a deathly insult,” Zoe sounded a little hurt and confused.

“Honey, I adore you, but you fought your way through the war,” Wash told her quietly. “You weren’t ever captured. You weren’t held by the enemy. And if you were ever tortured…you’ve never made mention of it to me and I’ve never seen that part of you. And I thought you had shown me all of your parts.”

“I have,” Zoe’s voice was low, intimate. “You know I have.”

“That’s what I thought,” Wash’s voice was warm with affection for his wife. “From the story of how they met and escaped with Simon and things they’ve let drop…I don’t think Rick or River had it as easy.” He spoke quickly as if to forestall a protest, “Not that the war was easy lamby toes, but…it might have been in comparison to what was done to the two of them.”

“After the Alliance boat left us, Mal was pokin’ at River and Riddick,” Zoe said slowly. “An’ there was mention of torture when Riddick wouldn’t fight River.”

“I told River once I didn’t think she was crazy,” Wash said quietly. “I did say I thought she had a touch of post traumatic stress disorder, but who on the boat didn’t really. She…didn’t agree or disagree, just smiled in that way she has…which is an answer all by itself.”
"You think she was raped," Zoe said softly as if saying the word would make it happen again. "And you didn’t speak up to keep her from moving in with Riddick?"

"Have you watched those two together," Wash asked his wife, incredulity in his tone. "Really watched them? The girl fell asleep in his arms the other day. She purrs like a kitten when he touches her. I walked into the mess a week ago and he was brushing her hair while she read him a story. And Jayne was sitting there smiling and cleaning his girls like he was happier than a clam. I’d say there are only a few men on this boat she doesn’t feel safe with. One of them’s the captain and the other one’s the Shepherd.” He shook his head, “With Mal I think it’s mostly that he don’t trust her and hey who’d wanna be around that attitude. Not sure what’s up with Book.” Wash’s sigh was almost audible in the galley, “If I thought Riddick was harming that girl I’d move worlds to keep it from happening. As it stands, River is the one person in the world I think Rick would never harm. He was tortured because he wouldn’t do it and he doesn’t strike me as a man to tolerate that over someone he don’t care about.”

“So this time with Inara,” Zoe said slowly, “You think it’s therapy or something like that?”

“I think Companions are more than the whores Mal calls them,” Wash said quietly. “We had a neighbor, a woman who got caught walking alone, she was brutalized. She couldn’t leave her house, couldn’t stand to have the lights off. My mother sent me to the local guild House. When I left one of the Companions came with me and walked right up to that woman’s house. She came every day for six months and every week for two years after that. And eventually the woman’s life…returned to an approximation of what it was.”

River looked at Riddick and smiled, “Pilot is a good man.”

“He is that,” Riddick agreed. “Guess we’re comin’ up on Persephone pretty soon here.”

“Looking forward to visiting,” River smiled happily at the thought of seeing Shazza again.

“Well better go give Wash a hand with the landing,” Riddick finished his tea and put his mug and River’s in the cleaner. Scooping her up he threw River over his shoulder making her shriek with laughter and playfully call him a Neanderthal as he carted her down the hall towards the bridge. “Yeah but I’m your Neanderthal,” Riddick laughed as he pulled her back into his arms and sank down into the co-pilot’s chair.

"He is much more evolved than he behaves," River giggled and began to bring up the cortex screens on Riddick’s side of the controls. "Wash and Zoe have been enjoying alone time on the bridge," She slanted a teasing glance at the pilot. "Should she tell the captain his ship has been besmirched?"

"Not unless you wanna hear him squawkin' for days afterward," Wash retorted as he flipped a few switches to give Riddick partial control. Zoe had gotten out of his lap when Riddick entered the bridge and was looking out the front port as her husband worked. Wash slanted a wicked glance over at Riddick and remarked to his wife, "Seem to you we cleared out of Santo in a hurry?"

Zoe chuckled slightly, "Seems we do that a lot." She looked over at River, "Someone mentioned you made a nice soft lift and then you took part in a brawl?"

River smiled slightly, "No liking for slavers. As one sold, felt justified in taking their money." She shrugged, "Brawl was just for fun and so my Richard could have a good fight."

"You got in a brawl so Rick could have some fun?" Wash shook his head, "River you're supposed to be the sane one in the relationship, that's the female's job. The men are supposed to be the idiots."
"Take that real serious do you Wash?" Riddick asked slyly.

"I'm surrounded by jesters," Wash rolled his eyes. "And you, big strong he man type, you didn't mind your girl getting in a brawl?"

"Wasn't anyone there besides me who had a chance against her," The escaped convict shrugged and flicked a switch up and then down with a frown. "This damn switch is tetchy again."

"Hit it hard on the right side," Wash advised. "We'll have to have Kaylee look at it." Riddick did as the pilot suggested and nodded when the switch came on correctly. "You mean you'd put River up against any man in that bar and back her to win?"

"Well yeah," Riddick shrugged again. "My woman's the most dangerous person on this boat 'sides me. Jayne's a close second." He looked at Zoe, "I know you're Mal's right hand an' all, an' that's fine. But you're a soldier Zoe. You ain't like us."

"First time I've ever heard someone apologize for not calling me a stone cold killer," Zoe said mildly. "I'm not sure if I'm insulted or not."

River shook her head, a smile teasing at her lips, "Jayne and Rick, like the sun and moon, night and day, they hunt and track and kill across worlds. I am trained... to exceed my mate. He has me beat at brute strength, as does Jayne. But I am faster than Jayne and more graceful that Richard. My training is more...all-encompassing. Richard could beat me, but he'd have to kill me to do it because I don't stop until I'm done. Same with Jayne; he couldn't beat me unless I was already injured and even then the odds are against him."

"Bein' a soldier ain't the same as bein' trained killers Zoe. Me an' Jayne...an' River...you don' wanna be what we are. Bein' a soldier suits you."

"Well I suppose I'll have to live with that," Zoe shook her head. "Hope you two don't mind a little boredom though. Heard tell, we're going to stay a while on Persephone."

"Shiny," Wash grinned and looked over at River and Riddick. Riddick flashed a smile at the pilot and River was grinning ear to ear.

"Must find goods only available on the border or core," River nodded. "Work to do." She kissed Riddick's cheek, "Simon will be pleased too." She looked at Wash thoughtfully, "Dirt won't bother you?"

Zoe chuckled her agreement, "Yeah. Thought you'd get land crazy that long in port."

"Probably," Wash agreed with a whimsical smile, "but I've been sane a long while now, and change is good."

River looked over her shoulder as Mal entered the bridge and returned her gaze to the window, the sun rising over Persephone. "Apollo bids the goddess of Spring good night," She murmured softly.

"Gotta love a sunset," Wash agreed as he began the preparations for their final approach.

"Starting to get familiar too," Zoe commented, "Like a second home."

River giggled into Riddick's ear and whispered something unintelligible to the rest of the crew while Mal took exception to Zoe's words, "Persephone ain't home. Too many people we got to avoid. Re-
supply, look for work, move along. Sniff the air, we don't kiss the dirt."

Zoe's voice was mildly amused at her captain's histrionics, "Wasn't planning on the dirt-kissing, sir."

"Besides, I wouldn't stand for it anyway," Wash interjected, "Captain, jealous man like me." He looked down slightly as something on the console sounded the alarm. "Closing in."

River smiled as Zoe's voice never even registered alarm, "Planet's coming up a mite fast."

"That's just cause, I'm going down too quick," Wash shook his head. "Rick, a little help balancing her out? Likely crash and kill us all."

Mal shook his head as he left the bridge, "Well, that happens, let me know."

Wash nodded and held the controls mostly steady, "Okay. Whoa," He muttered as if to a horse. "No, we're good, we're good. It's okay."

Riddick chuckled as he held his side of the controls easily, "Who're you tryin' to convince Wash? Me or you? I don't see anyone here worried. Cap'n sure wasn't."

River nodded her agreement, "No smell of worry from Mal, amusement from him, trust in his pilot." She shrugged as the planet came up at them, "Persephone is eager to see us."

"A mite too eager to suit me," Wash shook his head, "Rick can you hit the button to your left there."

"Does it do anything?" Riddick obligingly hit the button. "Other than turn green?"

"Let's Kaylee know that a little extra power would be helpful," Wash muttered as he argued with his ship. "River I don't suppose you'd like to run back and give Kaylee a hand?"

"Jayne's in the mess River, take him with you for the heavy lifting," Riddick told her what she already knew.

"She is aware of the big man's whereabouts Richard, thank you," River patted his shoulder absently as she climbed out of his lap. "Zoe should sit down," She advised as she left the bridge.

One thankfully uneventful landing later River stood with her brother and mate watching the crew leave. "You told them we had business right?" Simon asked quietly, "They know we're leaving too?"

"I told 'em we weren't hangin' around," Riddick nodded. "We ain't needed to guard the ship. An' if Serenity needs a babysitter Book's here."

"I imagine you'll enjoy stretching your legs," Book nodded at them from where he was sitting on Jayne's weight bench. "I'll stay with Serenity."

"Doc, get your hat on," Riddick murmured. "River's done her work an' we both know how good she is but there's no point temptin' purple bellies." He watched as Simon donned a wide brimmed hat and a rough jacket, covering up the dress shirt. The doctor had already borrowed back his smoked glass spectacles and wore them. Simon's work boots didn't clash too terribly with his pants and he wasn't wearing a vest so he wouldn't look too out of place. He could even use the gun he wore on a belt around his hips.
River pointed her toes one at a time as if limbering up for a performance before she wrapped a gauzy scarf around her hair and face as if to keep out the dust and wind. She pulled a ladies version of Simon's hat on over the scarf holding it in place. Her denim jacket and pants covered her arms and legs so she was protected from the sun as well. "Richard should cover his head as well," She looked up at her big man expectantly.

"Yeah, I'm figuring a cap an' my goggles along with my coat should keep anyone from lookin' too hard," Riddick agreed as he pulled the articles of clothing on. "You got your cash tucked away safe an' your databook too," He checked with her.

"Yes," River agreed. "Simon, must consider what you would like for the infirmary." She suggested, "Shazza will know where to get it."

"Well she has been here a couple of months so I suppose she would have the lay of the land," Simon nodded. "I'll put some thought into it," He turned and regarded the Shepherd, "I don't think we'll be gone much past nightfall. Coming back at dusk will be easier on Riddick's eyes and we'll be harder to see."

"Won't expect you 'til then," Book nodded. River could feel his gaze on their backs as they walked off the ship and shivered slightly.

"River," Simon's voice held a question a slight trace of nerves.

"Shadow man's gaze upon us, speculating, believes we will bring violence down upon the ship," River murmured. "Too much experience with lies and strife for him to easily accept that they mean no harm to Serenity."

"Yeah, the man reeks of lies and old sins," Riddick agreed. "My guess is he's had a full life of crime and other things make it easy for him to see that I'm trouble. An' I don't like how his gaze rests on River much either." He looked at Simon as they made their way through Eavesdown docks, "You don't seem to bug him much, maybe because he thinks he understands you."

"He doesn't pay much attention then," Simon shrugged his tone grim, "Kaylee's wasn't the first wound I bargained over. And you'd be amazed at how much information you can get if you withhold a little pain medication." When River looked at him sadly he shook his head, "It didn't interfere with my oath to do no harm, the pain wasn't debilitating, and they weren't done any further injury. Just a little discomfort that was quickly relieved once I had what I needed."

"You're comin' along pretty well with a gun too," Riddick observed quietly. "That Slugger's settin' nice on your hip. You gonna be able to use it in a pinch?"

"To protect my family?" Simon's gaze flickered over both of them, "You might be surprised at what I can do Rick."

"No Doc, I doubt that I would," Riddick's smile colored his voice and River's lips tilted humorously in reaction. Simon had no idea how much Riddick valued her brother, not only for his medical expertise but for his strong sense of right and wrong.

"Shazza is near," River whispered happily and her hand slipped into Riddick's elbow while Simon looked around, eager to see their friend.

"Well in the wave she said to meet her where you dropped her off," Simon recalled. "Is this close by?" He looked around, "These buildings are a regular warren."

"We like it that way," Shazza's distinctive voice called. River found her first, her eyes going
unerringly to Shazza's location as her reader abilities found Shazza's mind. Riddick had caught Shazza's distinctive scent while Simon simply followed the gaze of the other two. Shazza was leaning in a doorway halfway down the alley a huge grin on her face as she beckoned them forward.

River laughed and ran for her friend, the men trailing behind her as Shazza's arms closed around the girl in a warm hug. "You're lookin' good, no limp or nothin'," Shazza exclaimed drawing back to look River over. "How're you doin'?"

"Well," River said simply and laughed as Riddick's arms wrapped around both women in a solid hug before withdrawing again wordlessly.

Simon smiled slightly as he reached their friend and looked at her eyes, finally reaching for her hand and kissing it in the manner he'd been taught. "I'm so pleased to see you're doing well Shazza," He said quietly. "We've missed you. Waves haven't been enough," He chuckled when Shazza grabbed him and pulled him into a hug.

"Simon all the nights we spent wrapped up in quilts and you just held me, and now you go and get polite?" Shazza laughed, "C'mon in, don' wanna get ya'll in trouble talkin' in the alley." She led them down a hallway familiar to Riddick and down into a lower level room with sunlight streaming in but enough shadows to make Riddick comfortable. "Hey Badger, they're here."

"Oi, be right there Shazz," A masculine voice with the same Dyton colony accent called from a room further in. "Wanna meet these folks what kept you alive."

Shazza grinned at the look on Simon's face, "My cousin, the one as keeps me in work," She explained. "Told 'im 'bout our time on planet," Her voice lowered cautiously, "Not about River's...ability, but everythin' else. He's been dyin' to meet alla you. Only met Riddick the once an' that was in a hurry."

"Did they bring the woman?" Badger was asking as he came closer to the door, "Gotta real int'rest in meetin' the skirt what got the most dangerous man in the 'verse tangled up."

River giggled at Shazza's resigned expression, "Men are notorious for foot in mouth disease," She whispered to Shazza and got an amused look in return. The little man who entered the room without knocking matched Shazza's warm mental picture of him and River grinned, "Riddick did bring the woman, and her brother. All survivors of the world with three suns are present and accounted for Mr. Badger." She began to unwind her scarf and removed her hat to expose her face. Simon had removed his hat upon entered the building and now took off his spectacles, hooking them to his shirt pocket while Riddick pushed up his goggles and shoved back his hood.

"Folks, this is my cousin Badger," Shazza grinned. "He's a bit of a big wig in these parts, got ties in the community an' all so if you want a line on crime he's the man to see." River grinned at the idea and nodded pleasantly at Badger drawing a smile from the little man. "Badger, you've met him but you ain't been introduced," Shazza started with Riddick, indicating him with one hand, "This is Richard B. Riddick."

"It's a pleasure," Badger nodded and cautiously kept his hand where it was showing an uncommon amount of good sense.

"This is Simon, he's a doc, made sure all of us kept our limbs an' all," Shazza patted Simon's shoulder. "Also kept me from goin' mad with grief on our way back. Knows a thing or two other than doctorin' too."

"Doc," Badger nodded and was surprised when Simon extended his hand, his smile of pleasure
stretched his slightly grimy face as he shook the doctor's hand.

"Mr. Badger," Simon returned gravely. "As you are Shazza's relation and we have a vested interest in her well-being, I hope you'll come to me if you have any medical concerns. As you might have guessed I'm not exactly free to practice publicly but when I'm on Persephone I'll be happy to extend my expertise. For a fee." He added with a grin that made him look positively saturnine.

River giggled, "Gē ge learns fast." She moved forward slightly and her smile widened as Badger gave her a little bow.

"And this is Simon's younger sister, River," Shazza smiled affectionately. "She's Rick's woman Badger, so don't get too attached."

"Like all my body parts where they are," Badger chuckled. "But that don't mean I can't appreciate his fine taste." He tilted his head slightly, "Not quite what I was expectin', just from havin' met your man the once't."

"Big man, slender woman," River agreed. "Contrasts can be appealing but surprising." She leaned into Riddick's side and his arm wrapped around her affectionately. "Deceitful appearances can be most helpful when planning and accomplishing crime," She added with a little nod at Badger.

"You mean this really is the deadly woman you said was his equal," Badger looked at his cousin in surprise. "I wasn't sure if you were jokin' or not Shazz." He shook his head, "Of course with the alert that went out to every purple belly around before you arrived with the big man, maybe I shouldn't be surprised." His eyes were shrewd but somehow without malice as he regarded the three people standing with his cousin, "Simon and River Tam, brother and sister fugitives. Richard B. Riddick, escaped convict, wanted for multiple murders."

Simon's back went poker straight, Shazza stiffened slightly but River and Riddick's posture didn't change as their eyes remained on Badger, "Might want to rethink whether or not you saw those alerts." Riddick said slowly, "Among other things, my woman is a genius with a cortex."

"I 'spect you could stroll down the street in the Core and you wouldn't get picked up," Badger nodded agreeably. "I told Shazza once that I 'ad no intent to collect on any bounty placed on your 'ead," He looked at Riddick and then at the siblings. "That still applies. Weren't for you my cuz'd be dead. She's sworn that to me a 'undred times over an' from what she told a that planet, its a gorram miracle you're alive." He took off his derby and ran a hand over his head thoughtfully, "If ya'll need it, you got a place to run whilst you're on Persephone. For a price." He added with a wink.

Riddick chuckled and nodded, "Comes to that I'm guessin' we'll be glad of the bolt hole."

Badger grinned, "I'll leave ya'll to your visit, I got some business." He looked concerned for a moment, "I gotta bring these fellas back here, so shut the door an' if you hear me talkin' an' keep your voices low."

"Problem Badge?" Shazza had a hand on her sidearm and was frowning.

"Not as such," Her shorter cousin shook his head. "One of 'em's pretty straightforward. It's his boss I don' like. Think's he's better'n everybody 'round 'im."

"This the one tried to offload them marked goods on you?" Shazza asked curiously.

"The very same," Badger shrugged. "He's always 'urtin' for coin an' iffen he knew the potential reward we've got under our roof right now...well let's not tempt the man."
"I'll take 'em to my quarters," Shazza suggested and Badger nodded gratefully. "That's far enough away from the meetin' space that we won't be heard or seen."

"Right, then I'll be on my merry," Badger grinned and bowed slightly before he took his leave.

"So what have you three been up to?" Shazza asked as she brought over mugs of tea and handed them around. "You haven't been on Persephone."

"Nah, put River in cryo for a bit, shipped out on a transport vessel," Riddick explained. "An' then got followed by a Fed. Tried to take Simon an' River. Didn' even realize I was on the ruttin' boat."

"Don't guess that went too well for him," Shazza chuckled as she put a plate of sandwiches on the table. "How long'd he last?"

"Well I guess that'd be about two or three days?" Riddick looked at Simon for confirmation and the doctor nodded with a half-smile. "Old buddy a mine sails on the boat, 'tween he an' I...well we figured out the Fed didn't know much, an' really hadn't gotten much chance to talk to the rest of 'em after he'd got on the boat."

River smiled wickedly, "Tried to take me and put me back in the box." She leaned back against Riddick and rubbed her cheek against his neck. "Found out the girl isn't as easy to fold up and take away as a toy."

"Yeah, River had the man at gunpoint when me an' our Cap'n got back to the boat," Riddick chuckled. "Left him for the crows."

Simon shook his head, "We've been in the Black since we left Persephone, except for a few brief stops here and there." He explained quietly. "We're hoping to accomplish a few things while we're here. I need medical supplies, equipment, River needs to find a black box terminal as well as mundane portable dedicated sourceboxes and printers."

"An' what're you lookin' for Rick?" Shazza grinned at the big man cradling his tiny woman.

"Like a few more good blades," Riddick shook his head. "Need more ammunition, an' I wouldn't mind findin' a coupla swords for River an' me. Few more books," He shrugged, "Always lookin' for more to read."

"So medical supplies, cortex equipment, weaponry an' books," Shazza shook her head as she laughed. "Well I cain't ever say ya'll are borin'."

River smiled, "What have you been doing Shazza? Do you like your new job?"

"Keeps me on my toes," Shazza grinned at the girl. "An' it's good to get to know Badger again. Forgot how funny he is...an' he's got some manners too...don't like people yellin' from room to room. An' the man's near paranoid 'bout security."

"Could help some with that," Riddick rubbed a finger over River's cheek. "B'tween the three of us, pretty good at figurin' angles."

"Well if I can get you all a line on the things you need, can you have a look 'round," Shazza suggested, "See if there's anything we can change for the better?"
"Sight lines," River said promptly and was given a bewildered look by Shazza and Simon.

"She means your halls are too straight, narrow's good but you gotta curve or angle 'em," Riddick explained.

"The other thing you can do is have someone do some cortex work, change the records," Simon offered with a half smile. "As I understand it, much of law enforcements work is done by remote cameras, off of facial recognition programs. A good husker can change the way you appear in the records, adjust the height of your ears or the width of your nose so that to human eyes your face is the same but to the cortex, you're a different person."

"That somethin' you had done?" Shazza asked shrewdly, "Seems it'd be right handy for a trio of fugitives."

"Hence the equipment I need," River smiled.

"Well lets see what we can do about that," Their friend smiled.

Their return to the ship was fairly quiet. Even carrying their purchases they weren't delayed too long, Shazza and her cousin's connections had found what they'd needed in short order. Book was waiting for them along with Jayne, both of them using the weight bench as the absent trio walked in.

"Productive trip I see," Book greeted them with a smile.

Jayne pushed his barbell up onto the rack and sat up, "Damn, ya'll buy out the shops?" He shook his head and rose to give them a hand taking one of the cases Riddick carried, "Where'd you want this?"

"Will set up in the lounge for now," River said quietly. "Need Simon's input for some things," She took a package from her brother and moved towards the infirmary. "Where is everyone else?"

"Zoe an' Wash went to their bunk," Jayne told her as he set down the case on the coffee table in the lounge. "An' Mal went an' took Kaylee off somewheres I dunno, dressed all fancy-like." He shook his head at Simon, "Talkin' 'bout a job with contact a ours, gotta make the connection at some big to do."

Riddick chuckled, "So he's gotta go make nice?"

"Yeah," Jayne laughed and put the other case down. "What in the wide world have you got in here?" He watched as Riddick put another case down.

"Stuff River needs to work," His old friend told him as River came out of the infirmary. "But not tonight."

Simon nodded his agreement, "How about a game of tall card?" He suggested with a smile, "River won't play, cards bore her, but we could."

"Usually play for chores around here," Jayne told him with a smirk. "An' I ain't sure if I wanna play 'gainst Rick."

"Damn," Riddick chuckled. "Was hopin' your memory'd developed a few holes."

"What's the problem?" Book asked as he entered the lounge.
River was shaking her head with a smile as she picked up the bag of books and began to walk towards the stairs only to have Riddick scoop her and the books up in his arms and carry her up the stairs. Simon laughed and followed them, Jayne and Book bringing up the rear.

"Well?" Book entered the galley to find River and Riddick standing near the cabinetry while Simon and Jayne grabbed coffee and the cards respectively. "What is the problem with Rick playing?"

"My sister calls him Lù duān," Simon shrugged as he took his seat. "The man can smell a lie. I have no doubt that he'll be able to tell if we're bluffing."

Jayne chuckled his agreement, "Yeah, we all learned, ya don' play cards with Rick less you wanna lose your money fast."

River giggled as she and Riddick sorted through their books, "Still fun to watch the game." She picked up a book and ran her finger down the spine. "Something to eat?" She offered looking at a crate of canned goods.

"Yeah," Riddick watched, keeping half an eye on the game, "Whadda we got?"

River was vaguely aware of Simon dealing, of the tall card being called, of the ante, bets being made, chores thrown in the pot, cards requested. Her eyes were glued to the cans, the labels, and she couldn't help the shudder that crawled across her skin. Jayne was speculating on what Kaylee and Mal were doing, Book was winning the hand and she couldn't stand it. "Richard," She started pulling at the labels on the cans. "Can't..." She shuddered again and Riddick's hands came onto her shoulders. "Simon, Richard...can't let them get him, please..."

"River, 's'all right," Riddick took the cans out of her hand and scooted her away from the Blue Sun labels, "We won't let them get Simon. I promise, we'll keep him safe."

"River," Simon left the game and came to look in her eyes, "I'm right here mèi mei, I'm safe." He looked at the Blue Sun label clutched in her fingers.

"Is she hurt?" Book's voice was concerned and River shuddered again as the Shepherd rose and came to look at what she'd done.

Jayne was blustering as he played with the scraps of paper on the table, River could hear him thinking that he hoped she was all right, that she looked like a ghost had come after her. All that came out of his mouth was what the crew might expect of their merc, "You better see to her. Bad habit for a fugitive. She's going to do that in public and get herself hauled off."

River shuddered "...everywhere... and the hands go everywhere..." She sobbed into Riddick's shoulder, "Two by two, hands of blue, everywhere..."

"I know," Riddick was rubbing her back and surrounding her in his warmth, "I know bǎo bǎo. But we're safe here. Cap'n will never let Alliance on this boat."

River took a deep breath and almost sobbed but got herself under control finally, "God...god I wish I were a stone, tiě shí xīn cháng."

"No zhì 'ài," Riddick whispered. "Just be mine...I won't let them get you. Won't let them hurt you again. I won't let them hurt Simon."

"Well she didn't do much harm," Book looked at the two cans and the labels Simon held. "A mystery meal or two won't hurt us."
Jayne looked over his shoulder and River saw the concerned look he gave her before he winked and made his usual crass remark, "So we gonna play cards, or screw around?"

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

lè sè - garbage
Gē ge - big brother
mèi mei - little sister
bǎo bǎo - darling/baby
tiě shí xīn cháng - to have a heart of stone / hard-hearted / unfeeling safe and cold.
zhì 'ài - most beloved
Lù duān Luduan, mythical Chinese beast able to detect the truth
sāo lǘ - jackass
Quote Sources:
No quotes this chapter… I must be slipping. Maybe next time folks.
Jayne was doing pull-ups on some straps attached to the catwalk while River and Riddick sparred with gloves on. The banging noise on the door only startled Book and Simon, speaking quietly in the lounge. Jayne grumbling dropped down from his straps and muttered as he picked up a rifle and headed towards the door. Riddick watched as his old friend peered through the little window in the airlock door and sighed. "Rick, you an' River, get Simon an' make yersel's scarce'." He turned to look at his old friend and Riddick frowned but began to retreat. "Got someone here I don' want seein' ya."

"All right," Riddick began to move and was surprised when he had to pick up River to move her. His woman was giggling but allowed him to carry her away.

"Silly," River shook her head at him as they got out of sight.

Riddick peered around the corner and rolled his eyes in exasperation, "Why didn't you say that?" He took Simon's shoulder and shoved the doctor forward so Simon could see who was standing in their cargo bay. Simon’s chuckle was so low no one but the two with him could have heard it.

Badger was standing there, Shazza a little behind him, explaining something to the rest of the crew who'd managed to gather around in a fairly quick manner. Riddick's sharp ears had no trouble picking up the conversation and from the amused look on River's face neither did she.

"A duel?" Book sounded incredulous.

Wash was equally skeptical, "With swords?"

Book frowned thoughtfully, "The Captain's a good fighter, right?"

Wash grabbed that idea with both hands, "He must know how to handle a sword."

Zoe shot that idea down like a sniper in a deer blind, "I think he knows which end to hold."

"Well then we need to figure a way to get him out of there," Wash countered.

Book looked at Badger, "We have until the morning, correct? Do you know what lodging he's in?"

River giggled as Badger sighed, "This is embarrassing. Some of you seem to be misapprehending my purpose in being here."

Zoe figured it out quickly, "You're here to make sure that we don't do what these men are keen on doing."

Badger nodded, "Penny for the smart lady. Persephone's my home." He explained spreading his hands, "I got to do business with the people here. I don't want it known I brought someone in caused this kind of ruckus. We'll just settle in, till this blows over, one way or the other."

The sound of a rifle being cocked came from above and River shook her head, "Jayne is attempting to leverage the situation, but his knowledge is incomplete." She tilted her gaze up to the catwalk where Jayne was standing with his gun aimed at Badger.
"Jayne, I wouldn't," Zoe called, her voice still carefully even.

"Why not?" Jayne's tone was disgruntled. It was clear to the reader that the merc really did not care for men coming onto his boat and telling his crew what to do.

River nodded towards the airlock door where Kaylee was now standing. She wore a fluffy layered pink party dress and did not look happy at all. More of Badger's men were standing with her. Kaylee waved half-heartedly, "Hi."

Riddick took a deep breath, "All right, ain't lettin' our crew get pushed around, even if it is Shazza's kin doin' it."

"Well Badger doesn't want any scandal, no fuss, so Mal has to go through with the duel," Simon said quietly. "Really that's all we need. We don't want to rescue Mal. We want to take the place of his second."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded and took a deep breath. Badger didn't like being on unfamiliar ground, his nerves were wound tight. Jayne and the others were discussing potential escape plans, how to distract Badger and his men. "Well, what say we make ourselves known?" River was nodding her agreement.

Simon chuckled and gave Riddick a nod, "I'd say Badger and Shazza will be a little surprised."

"You realize this means Mal is the captain tried to pass off imprinted goods on Badger," River said quietly.

"Yeah, kinda figured when Badger walked in," Riddick chuckled. "Guess that was right before we met him. Cain't do anythin' about that."

"Well we can do something about this," Simon smiled and moved out of the hallway. Riddick took a moment to press a hot kiss to River's mouth and followed Simon, River tucked against his side, his arm slung around her shoulders.

"Heard there was somethin' of a fuss," Riddick called out as they entered the lounge and started down to the cargo bay. "Shazza, you miss us already?"

"Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pì huà," Badger stared at them and Shazza actually turned and looked at the door as if wondering how they'd snuck on the ship.

"Hǎo jiǔ bù jiàn," River greeted them with a grin. Riddick almost laughed at the strength of the tequila in her scent.

"Welcome to Serenity," Simon walked forward casually and smiled at Badger before hugging Shazza. "She's a nice boat."

"You're sailing with Reynolds?" Badger was staring at them and Riddick took a moment to shake his head at Jayne, certain from his friend's scent that the merc was plotting to overthrow Badger the minute he was distracted. "The man who looks down on me took you on?"

"To be fair he looks down on us too," Riddick shrugged. "He thinks River's chī xiàn and that Simon's too fancified, and he thinks I'm more'n half animal. An' he ain't wrong in that."

"An' you tolerate it?" Badger shook his head, "I'd pegged you for guttin' the man the first time he looked at you wrong."
Riddick smiled slightly, "There's a lot I'll tolerate to keep my woman, my brother safe." He stroked one hand down River's hair and nodded towards Simon. "Doc gets to do some work here. I get paid a share of every job. River's got work a her own... Reynolds might act like a sāo lū sometimes, but we had Alliance crawling over the ship and he didn't make a move to turn us in."

Badger nodded his understanding, "So what's your play here Rick?"

Shazza tilted her head in agreement, "Don't see you three coming out for a chat." She looked at River and Riddick, "I know you two don't care for guns bein' held on you. And I know you don't go anywhere unarmed."

"No," River smiled slightly, "No we don't." She looked up at Riddick and he nodded down at her, more than happy to let her explain the plan. "It is our understanding that you don't want the duel to be avoided because it would cause a scandal that could be laid at your door."

"Right," Badger agreed cautiously. "Rescuin' Reynolds just makes me look bad. Gotta follow the societal norms see? Otherwise..."

"Its bad for your reputation," Riddick nodded. "The purest treasure mortal times afford is spotless reputation," He quoted deliberately. "So what if we were to make sure Mal survived but that the duel took place. No loss on your side."

"How would you manage that?" Badger asked turning to look at Simon who had given Shazza a fond kiss on the cheek before taking his place at River's side.

"As I understand it, every duelist has a second," Simon said quietly. "That person fights when the original duelist cannot."

"Yeah, Sir Warrick Harrow's standin' as Reynolds' second," Shazza told them. "So if the cap'n cain't fight, the man whose business we all want is the one goes under the sword."

"Which we don't want either," Riddick nodded his understanding. "So what we need is for Mal and Harrow to come down with something... unpleasant, but normal."

"Really just need Sir Harrow to become ill and unable to fight," River smiled. "Richard must show up before dawn and accuse Mal of dishonoring me. I will stand as witness that the captain has disparaged my name." Her smile grew to a grin, "Richard attacks Mal, leaves him unable to fight. Sir Warrick is also unable to fight."

"Atherton Wing isn't the type to just stand there and let you attack the man he's planning on killing himself," Badger pointed out not unhelpfully. "He's going to want to stop you."

Riddick smiled wickedly, "I'll offer to fight in Mal's stead, but only if I get the right to beat the crap out of Mal."

"Richard is the more powerful figure, with a diminutive woman at his side for whom he will be fighting," River smiled slightly. "Mr. Wing will wish to humiliate Mal. Wishes to humiliate Inara. To see Mal beaten before him, see Inara pleading for him..." Her pretty face hardened and she looked at Riddick. "Atherton Wing is an expert swordsman."

"Expert I ain't," Riddick said after a moment. "Knives I can handle, swords...I can take enough slices to keep going and get under someone's guard."

"I'm better with a sword than you are," River pointed out. "Can we figure a way to get me to fight rather than you?"
"If Mal wounds you," Wash suggested quietly. "You'd have to make it look worse than it is, but if it isn't an actual duel, he would use the knife he carries in his boot."

"If Richard is wounded then it would fall to River to fight in her husbands stead," Zoe looked at River, "Little one, are you sure you can do this?"

"Better than expert with a sword, gun, knife..." River shrugged, "Canned goods stymie me."

Simon smothered a chuckle, "If we're going to have two of the four crew members beaten and bloody I'm coming along. It's standard for both sides to bring a doctor anyway." He looked at Shazza, "Maybe you'd like to come too? Be sure that we're not going to make things worse?"

"Might be a good idea Shazz," Badger nodded. "Know you've got a stake in this, don't want anyone hurt, but I can count on you to look out for my interests as well."

"And I'll get to beat on Mal some," Riddick chuckled. "Been wantin' to do that since he busted up River's box."

"Her box?" Shazza shook her head, "What'd he do?"

"River wasn't supposed to come out of cryo until we reached Boros," Riddick sat down on a crate near Jayne and pulled River into his lap, breathing her scent to calm the animal. "After the fed shot me an' Kaylee, an' Simon fixed Kaylee up--"

"But not you?" Shazza interrupted sharply.

"He used duct tape to stop the bleeding," Simon explained dryly taking a seat near the Shepherd. "He didn't bother to tell me he was wounded until later. But when I was done with Kaylee's surgery, everyone wanted to know what someone like me would be willing to kill for." When Shazza merely blinked at him, Simon shrugged, "I may have refused to treat Kaylee until Mal agreed to run from the Feds."

Badger whistled, "You've got balls of solid steel Doc."

"I was more desperate than courageous," Simon contradicted him. "But it worked; we ran, I did surgery, and then Mal decided he was going to look in the box."

Riddick scowled, "I got as close as I could, but Mal kicked the damn lid off the box, fog's pourin' out an' River's lyin' inside it, naked as the day she's born and Mal's just starin'."


"Yeah," Riddick grinned at the memory, "So I decked Mal to get him away from her, but I ain't been feelin' real satisfied with that punch lately. A course Mal's been sorta an ass."

"When ain't he 'bout you an' River," Jayne muttered. "The man's got a blind spot two miles wide about you two."

"How'd you know each other anyway?" Zoe asked curiously looking from Shazza to Badger to Simon, River and Riddick.

"Shazza an' us are old friends," Riddick shrugged and Shazza winked at him. River giggled and he looked down at her. "We were visitin' this afternoon once ya'll left the ship."
"How could you be old friends," Book asked, "If prior to your meeting Simon you were--"

Riddick looked at the older man hard, "Book I'm sure as Shepherd's go you're a decent one. An' I
know you an' Jayne get along pretty well. But don't mistake me for Jayne. River calls me Lù duān
for a reason. And that means truths and lies, all sorts. You really wanna go down this road with me?
Askin' how I know someone?"

"I didn't intend to pry," Book held up his hands. "At times you are so open about your past, I had no
way of knowing this was not one of those times."

"Well now you know," Riddick nodded. "River, you an' me better go get changed into something
don't look too outa place." He looked at Kaylee thoughtfully, "Gotta say Miss Kaylee, you do look a
right treat for the eyes. You still wearin' that when we get back, might could have a dance or two."
He looked at Simon, "Why don't you put on your core clothes, come back an' do a little two step."
He suggested, "It'll be a little bit before River an' me are situated."

River nodded and wistfully touched the skirt of Kaylee's dress, "Very pretty." She smiled. "Simon,
show Kaylee the waltz, she'll like that."

Simon blushed but stood and bowed to Kaylee, "Miss Frye, will you honor me with a dance?"
Kaylee's giggle rang through the cargo bay as she accepted.

Riddick tilted his head at River as they hurried up to their bunk, "Maybe you'd like a fluffy dress?"
He smiled at the dreamy look on her face. Sometimes it was easy to forget River wasn't even
eighteen and might like things to wear that weren't strictly practical.

"Fluffy would look stupid on me," River shook her head. "I have some silks that will be appropriate,
had them mailed to Shazza." She shrugged, "Couldn't be sure I'd need them but thought they'd be
good to have."

Riddick took a deep breath and tugged her into his arms as he stepped off the ladder, "You all right?
Really?" He would figure out another way to keep Mal alive if River wasn't all right and she knew it.
"I know sometimes things get mixed up, trying to deal with so many variables." That was a secret he,
Simon and River had kept close, how she could become overwhelmed as she'd been on planet. "Do
you need blood?"

River sat on the bed and took a deep steadying breath, "Blood will help. Our kata would help more,
but we have no time for it." She looked at him, "I'll need to anchor myself in your mind to remain
stable throughout the duel and back to the ship. The blood ritual...that will help as well." She looked
down at her forearm, "Your...touch, drawing my blood...it always helps more."

Riddick pulled a shiv off his belt and knelt in front of her, "Won't need much, remember how I
taught you." He bent and licked the skin at the crease of her elbow, sucking lightly on the tender
flesh and drawing a moan to her lips. Blood and desire, his and hers, they'd learned in the past few
months would help clarify her mind, help her differentiate between her own thoughts and the ones of
others when she couldn't meditate or do her kata.

"Kiss...her," River shuddered for an entirely different reason, his mouth on her skin cleared her mind
like nothing else in the world. "Please...your mouth...bite down...give your girl your mark," Her
hand squeezed the back of his neck, her scent filled honey and steel as she tried to clear her mind.

Riddick growled against her skin, "You know I can't mark your arm River." He took his mouth from
her skin and looked up at her. "Too much damage tiān shǐ," He shook his head.
"Duel isn't until dawn," River whispered, "We have time for you to mark me, need my blood on your lips, your mouth on mine..." She shuddered, "My animal needs yours, your hands on me, your seed on my belly, body over mine."

"Still gotta use your toy," Riddick reminded her, "Have you used it today?" He began to pull off his clothes, setting his shiv aside. River's fingers moved more slowly than his until he was completely naked for her. His hands on her clothes were more gentle than he'd been on his own, sliding her trousers off and removing the tiny scraps of cotton she wore under them. Her camisole was pulled over her head leaving her upper body bare and he groaned at the sight of her breasts swollen and tight for his mouth.

"I did," River nodded. "Couldn't fall, Richard wasn't with me. Felt so alone, even hearing your thoughts down in the bay... couldn't fall. Wound so tight, toy moving in me and wanted...wanted so badly."

"That's part a why you're havin' problems," Riddick realized with a groan, "You got all wound up, an' now you're all off balance..." He shook his head and began to arrange her on the bed, "Why didn't you call me baby?" He muttered in her ear loving how her body felt under his as he lay down with her. "I woulda come watched you, you coulda read what I wanted to do with you."

"Inara said I had to do it by myself, remember?" River moaned as his hands slid over her flesh, squeezing and plucking at her breasts. "Had to take responsibility for my body, for my own fall," She shuddered and moaned into his mouth as Riddick couldn't take anymore and began to kiss her.

"Yeah, I remember," Riddick growled into her mouth. "But right now, gotta feel you River. My měi nǚ, falling hard against me." He groaned as her hand slid down and gripped his diāo, stroking him deftly. With one hand he groped for her toy while the other slid down between her thighs, she was hot and wet against his palm and he had to force himself to not slide his fingers up inside her. "You want me to put it in you?" He took his lips from hers, trailing hot kisses down to her breasts until he could lick and suck on her nipples "Wanna hear you moanin' for me River. Gotta hear you cryin' my name as you fall."

"Yes, please my Riddick," River's voice flowed over him like silk, her sweet voice a caress against his skin, "Please, fuck her with it, need you...your..." Riddick nipped at her breast with his teeth and her voice caught with need. "Richard, please," She shuddered under him and he groaned against her skin. Her hand was working his jī ba until he was ready to burst or bury himself in her body.

Riddick shuddered and rolled so that River was laying over him, "My měi nǚ want you to ride me." He balanced her across his thigh and showed her the toy. "Gonna hold your toy an' want you to lower yourself onto it zhì 'ài, then you ride it."

"Yes," River nodded her agreement, "Want to fall with you my Richard." She shivered and he could smell the scent of her need bursting off her skin as his hands gripped her hips and helped her rise over the plasti dildo. Watching her sink onto it was one of the most erotic sights it had ever been his privilege to see. The base of it was braced against his thigh so her honey dripped onto his skin as she ground down onto it. "Oh Riddick, dì yù so...full... please, Richard," She moaned as the position and depth of the toy worked her insides.

Riddick shifted his thigh so the dildo moved inside her and groaned as she shuddered against him, a cry bursting from her throat at the sensation. "That's it River," Riddick coaxed as she lifted her hips minutely and sank back down again. One hand lifted to her breast, palming and pressing the soft flesh, "Want you to ride it baby, use it so you can fall." He put his other hand on her hip and let his thumb slide down to her curls, finding her clit and rubbing it for her. She'd lost her grip on his body when he'd changed their position and now her hands were rubbing over his chest, desire robbing her
He smiled as she moaned again and began to find her rhythm, rocking back and forth on his thigh, riding the dildo. Her breathy little moans were so sweet, she sounded so good, felt incredible in his hands. Riddick groaned and let his hand fall from her breast, fisting his diǎo and roughly stroking upwards. "That's it bǎo bǎo fuck yourself on it," He groaned the words and River's gaze fell to his body to his hand on his diǎo.

"No," River shook her head and her hand moved from his chest to his cock, smacking his hand away, "He belongs to her. Her bèng jiār." Her hand wrapped around his body, stroking upwards, deliberately using her nails on his sensitive skin until he was groaning with the need to fall.

"Wanna hear you River," Riddick shifted his thigh so the dildo pushed deeper into her and River cried out his name. "Wanna hear you fall, ridin' your toy, humpin' my thigh baby," He could remember vividly how her body had felt clutching at his fingers, could only imagine how good she'd feel squeezing around his jī ba. All he wanted in the 'verse was to push his body inside hers, to feel her shuddering with pleasure around him, to spill his seed deep in her womb.

"Richard...ohhh," Her entire body tightened over his, reading his thoughts and feeling the depth of his desire for her. "Ohhh," River's voice was a guttural moan, "My Richard... tā mā de dì yù I..." She stiffened in shock as her body began to tumble over, her fall hitting her like a fist in the belly, shattering through her.

Riddick groaned as River's body exploded with the scent of honey and sat up to pull her down to his chest, his hand surrounded hers and moving her fingers over his diǎo, desperate for his own fall. Her lips found his, kissing, sucking on his tongue and then pulling away the tender skin of her shoulder to his lips. He could feel her writhing against him, the toy still pushed deep inside her and knew she could fall again. Pressing his thigh up between hers made it simple, her lips against the sensitive skin joining neck to shoulder as she convulsed around the dildo, her teeth snapping hard down on his skin as she fell again.

Riddick felt his balls draw up, as her teeth bit into his flesh and groaned as his fall began, "River," He couldn't stop, her skin in his mouth, soft and sweet, biting into her shoulder and drawing blood, marking her as his. His hand left her hip and pulled her mouth to his, forcing her to taste her blood, tasting his own on her lips, as his seed boiled out of his body, his fall uncontrollable.

Panting, blood smearing her lips, River lay over his body, boneless with pleasure, "She loves her Riddick, so much," River's voice was languid. "His blood, hers, bodies together...put her pieces back in their places."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded his understanding. "You do the same for me you know," He stroked a hand down her hair lovingly. "I'd a killed Mal if it weren't for you keepin' me sane." He hissed sympathetically as she shifted and he got a look at the bloody bite mark he'd left on her shoulder. "I'd say sorry but I figure you'd smack me around, an' it ain't like I'm much sorry zhēn 'ài."

"Neither is she," River rubbed her cheek against his chest and licked the bloody wound she'd left on his skin. "My beautiful deadly zhī yīn, takes such good care of me," Riddick shifted and felt her shudder slightly as he kissed her lips once more.

"You're feelin' better then," Riddick rolled her under his body so he was covering her, "Blood did the trick?" His hand slid between her thighs and gently pulled the plasti toy out of her body. She shivered in his arms and he had to fight the urge to slide his fingers up in the toy's place just so he could feel how beautiful and tight she was.
"Hmm..." River nodded against him, her tongue still licking at the wound lazily. "Soon...soon she wants Richard's diăo to take the place of the toy." She pressed a kiss to the bite mark she'd given him and sighed. "Wants to be his."

"You are mine," Riddick told her firmly. "I've told you a million times if I've told you once River. I'm yours an' you're mine. Nobody else is ever gonna have you like this, hold you at night, touch me the way you have. Ain't another woman in the 'verse is equal to me."

"She knows...she understands and comprehends, but still...wishes to complete the bond," River looked up into his eyes and Riddick gave her a half smile. He knew she understood, knew she belonged to him, and at the same time he knew exactly what she meant. The urge to complete the bond with blood and seed only grew stronger.

"Yeah, I know baby," Riddick nodded. "We'd better get cleaned up an' get ready. Iffen I know Simon he'll be gettin' nervous."

"Simon has been dancing with Kaylee," River got that faraway look in her eyes for a moment. "He has gone to change his clothing and will dance more. Found the music player and a waltz. Asked Kaylee to teach him a dance. Jayne was much amused."

Riddick chuckled and shook his head as he rolled off of her and had to clench his jaw to keep from going right back to bed again. "That sounds 'bout right."

"I'm sure they won't be much longer," Simon was saying, his voice an attempt to be reassuring. "They haven't had a lot of time alone today and River probably needed some time to meditate."

"Like that one time?" Shazza tilted her head at Simon and River saw her brother nod slowly.

"Simon is right," River chirped happily as she and her mate descended the stairs to the cargo bay. "Not much time alone with her man, needed quiet, needed to find peace in her thoughts." She walked up to her brother and Kaylee, amused to see that Simon was standing as close as Kaylee's full skirt would allow.

"WÔ de mā," Wash had lifted his head off his knees where he'd been dozing and his eyes widened at the sight of River and her partner.

River grinned up at Riddick, "He does look very shuài does he not?"

Riddick rolled his eyes behind the smoked glass specs River'd bought him, "Yeah River, I'm the one they're starin' at." He automatically felt for his shivs under the elegant mandarin jacket River had found for him. The trousers and shirt weren't of the rough fabric he was used to, they felt more like River's skin against his. River had nodded and unbuttoned the jacket so the collarless silk shirt under it had showed. His boots weren't quite as elegant as his clothes but his woman had shrugged and said some dichotomy must be seen.

But it was River who looked extraordinary. As a ballerina she had been lovely but almost untouchable. Now she was a beautiful woman in silken trousers and tiny half boots, a tight tunic length mandarin coat clinging to her body and outlining every curve. She wore a sword in a decorated sheath on her back and stilettos in her hair, holding the thick dark knot at the top of her head. She shrugged and patted the gun on her hip along with the shivs he'd insisted she strap to her thighs. Slits inside the trouser pockets would let her get to them.
"You really do look lovely River," Simon smiled down at her.

"Very respectable," Badger nodded his appreciation. "Shazz, you an' the crazy trio wanna 'ead out? Duel's bein' held at Sawyers Glen. Should 'ave no problem findin' it."

"Let’s be on our way then," Simon picked up his doctor bag and grinned at Kaylee. "Save the last dance for me Miss Frye," He bowed politely. Riddick tilted his head; Jayne smelled strongly of his anger with Badger and that was never a good thing.

"Jayne. You may talk o' gin and beer When you're quartered safe out 'ere, An' you're sent to penny-fights an' Aldershot it; But when it comes to slaughter You will do your work on water, An' you'll lick the bloomin' boots of 'im that's got it," Riddick looked at his old friend. "Know you don' much care for this. Just gotta wait a while longer. The water's comin'."

"You got it Rick," Jayne nodded and sat down on his weight bench.

"What in the bloomin' gates of hell are you talkin' about?" Badger looked at Riddick and then at Shazza and River and then Simon for an explanation.

"Jayne an' me, we got history," Riddick shrugged. "Just remindin' him to be patient so he don't kill you while I'm gone."

"Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?" But it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll," River quoted dryly.

"Ah huh," Badger shook his head, apparently figuring that he was not going to get the explanation he really wanted. "Well get goin' then alla ya's... let's keep Reynolds an' 'Arrow alive."

River nodded gravely and slipped her arm into Riddick's. "Shall return shortly after dawn."

Inara was standing with Sir Warrick Harrow and Mal and gave the four approaching people an alarmed look as she saw them. Simon and Shazza were walking ahead of River and Riddick. Simon strode farther ahead and clasped Harrow's hand quickly, the pressure syringe he'd palmed hitting the man's wrist with a mild jolt. "Sir, I'm Doctor Simon Ricks, I'll be the physician for you and Captain Reynolds," He greeted the man with a smile. "Shame to meet under such circumstances but..."

He was interrupted by Riddick's shout as if the big man had just caught sight of Mal, "Did you think you could hide from me forever Reynolds?"

"Hide, wha--" Mal was looking around in confusion and it was hard to tell if it was due to Riddick shouting at him or the core accent he was using to shout with.

"You think you can insult my wife and get away with it?" Riddick's face was a study in raw fury.

"Insult your--" Mal didn't get much more than that out before Riddick's fist hit his face.

"My wife," Riddick roared at him. "Or maybe you're unfamiliar with the codes of honor? You cannot speak of so of a lady and expect to escape the consequences Reynolds," He dragged the captain up and hit him again. "She is a lady and you called her a madwoman in the public street! You implied she has no control of her higher functions." His fist slammed into Mal's jaw with a crack, "You said she only married me because she had to."
"I ain't--" Mal's enunciation was marred by the split lip.

"What is the meaning of this," An irate high born voice, presumably belonging to Atherton Wing rang across the field as the second party of the duel arrived. "I am to fight a duel with this man."

Riddick turned, Mal held by his shirt in one hand and regarded Atherton Wing, "You'll have to wait your turn sir, this man has grievously insulted my wife. I am satisfying her honor."

"And how is my honor to be satisfied if you beat him to a pulp?" Atherton sneered.

"Fight his second," Riddick scowled angrily. "Or fight me, I don't care if I have to kill you so long as Reynolds suffers right now." He turned back to Mal and shook him, "How dare you speak to my wife like that. Scum like you shouldn't even be looking at my nǚ ren."

"Sir I must ask that you desist," Sir Harrow spoke finally having gotten past his shock in order to find his voice.

"Desist," Riddick dropped Mal at his feet like he was dirt and folded his arms, regarding Harrow. "For what reason?"

"This is a matter of honor, and unless the captain insulted your wife before he insulted Mr. Wing, I'm afraid that Mr. Wing's claim upon Captain Reynolds comes before yours," Harrow was dignified and polite. At any other time speaking to him might have been a pleasure. Riddick pretended he didn't see Mal drawing the knife out of his boot and bent as if to drag the captain back up. Maybe he'd been hitting Mal too hard, or maybe the captain really did think Riddick was trying to beat him to death, but the knife didn't strike a glancing blow the way Riddick and Simon had hoped it would. The wound wasn't mortal deep but it wasn't shallow either, slicing into his side. He could smell River's anger and fear when she realized what the captain had done. To be fair, Mal wasn't at his best and maybe he might not have been aiming for Riddick's liver but that was how it felt.

"Richard," River rushed forward and kicked the captain solidly in the jewels curling the man up like a cocktail shrimp. Simon hurried forward and shook his head, "Please, you're a doctor," River looked up at her brother. "Please can you... will you help him?"

"Sir," Simon looked at Atherton and his second, "I realize this is unorthodox but if you'll help me to remove him from the field." Atherton snapped his fingers and two of the men with him moved forward to help, "Easy, there, right there is good," Simon nodded. "All right, ma'am," He looked up at Inara, "If you'll do me the kindness of handing me my bag there, I'll do what I can for him."

River stood and looked at Malcolm Reynolds, slowly coming out of his fetal position, one eye swollen shut and his nose broken. He couldn't even stand upright, "You sir, are no gentleman." She turned and bowed politely to Atherton Wing. "My apologies for the interruption sir, my husband has been searching for this man since yesterday afternoon. It was only this morning that we found him."

"Then your husband did have a prior claim," Sir Harrow began to speak and went very pale, "Oh dear...forgive my sudden..."

Simon looked up from the wound he was working on and narrowed his eyes at the older gentleman, "Shortness of breath? Pain in your right arm? Any chest pain?"

"Yes to the first two," Harrow nodded.

"There's a packet in my bag, a yellow bundle. Take two of the tablets and put them under his tongue," Simon ordered Inara. "He may be having a slight cardiac episode. The tablets will help." He finished treating Riddick, "Well, Mrs..."
"Baelfire," River bowed politely, "My zhàng fu is Richard Baelfire, I am River Baelfire."

"Mrs. Baelfire, your husband needs a hospital," Simon told her bluntly. "I've stabilized him; with proper medical care he'll be fine."

"I beg your pardon, but someone must answer for this," Atherton Wing was not so quietly angry. "I am owed a duel with this man." He gestured at the bloodied and hunched Malcolm Reynolds, "Now thanks to Mr. Baelfire he is in no condition to fight. His second is having a seizure of the cardiac muscles and the person of whom I might demand satisfaction has been stabbed."

"Your honor demands fulfillment," River bowed politely. "I am sure no one here would disagree that your honor be unsatisfied."

"That is all well and good to say, but how shall it be put into practice," Atherton sneered.

"Will you accept a substitute?" River inquired with exquisite courtesy. "Someone who will agree to fight in the stead of Captain Reynolds' second?"

"Who would be mad enough to agree to that," Wing shook his head.

"I'm stabbed, not dead," Riddick's voice was deadly cold. "You saw what I did to the last man who called my wife mad."

"I have done no such thing," Atherton Wing protested. "Madam, I meant you no insult I assure you."

"My husband simply knows me well, and knows what I would intend," River smiled her cool acceptance of the apology. "If you will accept, I will fight in Sir Harrow's place. I know of him and he is an honorable man. He would fight you if he were able." She bowed to the stout gentleman deeply. "I would be honored to fight in his stead."

"I am reluctant to wound or injure a woman of honor such as yourself," Atherton couldn't quite hide the gleam of eagerness in his eyes, though his face was a mask of courtesy.

"I assure you, you would do far better to concern yourself with your own skin," River smiled coldly. Atherton could keep his face a veneer but he couldn't hide his thoughts from her. "Do you accept the terms?"

"It is unorthodox," Sir Harrow objected. "For a stranger to protect the honor of another."

"Such outward things dwell not in my desires: But if it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive," River quoted softly. "My husband interfered with this duel in the name of my honor. I would not deny Mr. Wing the chance to satisfy his own."

"The terms are acceptable," Atherton nodded. "Madam, you carry a blade, is it suitable for a duel such as this or is it a dress blade?"

River pulled the gleaming length of curved steel from her back, "I do not carry weapons that are unsuited for use." She said quietly.

"Very well then," Atherton nodded and one of the gentlemen called for the duel to begin.

Riddick had only see River use a sword once before; then as now, it had been amazing, a gracefully deadly dance. River drew blood the way a painter drew red across a canvas, with deliberation and without any effort whatsoever. Soon Atherton Wing was bleeding from a dozen different cuts and it was obvious that River was toying with him.
"You, you're all in this together," Atherton shouted. His dark eyes speared past River at Inara, "You set this up, whore. After I bought and paid for you. I should have uglied you up so much no one else'd want you." He tried to duck River's sword and miscalculated, blood flowing from his sword arm.

River could hear Mal talking to Inara, "See how I'm not punching him? I think I've grown."

Atherton was still shouting at Inara, "Well get ready to starve. I'll see that you never work again."

River forced him to defend again, his sword slowing as he lost more blood. Inara spoke and River retreated slightly so Atherton would have to hear her, "Actually, that's not how it works. You see, you've earned yourself a black mark in the client registry. No Companion is ever going to contract with you, ever again."

"If you live through this, you'll have to rely upon your winning personality to get women," River nearly smirked, the curve of her lips cold. "But you won't," She pressed her attack and in another moment her sword was sliding slowly through Atherton Wing's heart.

She bowed to the corpse a bit mockingly and to Atherton's seconds with exquisite courtesy, "Please convey my condolences to his family." River watched as the seconds removed the body and once they were gone turned and regarded Mal, Inara and Sir Harrow. "Simon, how is he?"

"It's all right zhì ài I'll live," Riddick was pushing himself to his feet as River cleaned her blade, sheathed it and nearly flew to his side. "Simon'll have to do some more work once't we get back to the boat but I'll be fine." He looked at Mal, "I weren't hittin' ya that hard Mal, weren't no call ta try an' stab my liver."

"You were tryin' to kill me Rick," Mal snapped angrily. "Have you lost your gorram mind?"

"When I'm tryin' to kill you Mal, you'll be dead before ya can blink," Riddick snarled. "An' if you live past my fist hittin' ya, ya'd best assume I'm tryin' to keep you alive."

Shazza sighed and looked at Malcolm Reynolds, "This is the infamous Cap'n Reynolds?" She looked at her three friends, "I hope he was worth it."

"Yeah, well at the moment I've got my doubts," Riddick shook his head. "Shazza, this is Malcolm Reynolds, Miss Inara Serra." He nodded at Harrow, "I'm just guessin' but you're Sir Warrick Harrow?"

"I am, and you are..." Sir Harrow had gained his feet and his color.

"Well this is Doctor Simon," Shazza smiled slightly, "His little sister River an' her man Richard. They crew on Cap'n Reynolds's boat Serenity." She nodded slightly, "I'm Shazza, I work with my cousin Badger. You an' he don't get on so Cap'n Reynolds was to facilitate the deal."

"You have an interesting crew Captain Reynolds," Harrow regarded the bloodied man thoughtfully. "They're resourceful, intelligent and capable. It's easy to see that all of you are fighters." He paused, "If you're willing to fight just as hard to protect my property, I'll have it in your hold before midnight."

Mal grinned and winced as his split lip started bleeding again, "Sir." He shook the hand Harrow offered and grinned again as the man walked away. "Mighty fine shindig."

"Yeah," Riddick growled in annoyance, "Why don' I go to the party an' you can get stabbed, we'll see how fine you think it is."
"Come mate," River wormed her way under the arm that didn't have a wound under it, "Let us go home and let the others know we are all well."

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pǐ huà - What shit/the fuck are you saying
Hǎo jiǔ bu jiàn - Long time no see
chī xiàn - crazy/insane
sāo lǚ - jackass
tiān shǐ - angel
měi nǚ - beautiful woman
his diǎo - cock
jī ba - dick/penis
zhì 'ài - most beloved
dì yù - hell
bǎo bǎo - darling/baby
bàng jiār - lover/partner
tā mā de dì yù - fucking hell
zhēn 'ài - true love
zhī yīn - soul mate
Wǒ de mā - My mother/oh my god
shuài - handsome
nǚ ren - wife
zhàng fu - husband

Quote Sources:

The purest treasure mortal times afford is spotless reputation – Richard II – William Shakespeare
You may talk o' gin and beer When you're quartered safe out 'ere, An' you're sent to penny-fights an' Aldershot it; But when it comes to slaughter You will do your work on water, An' you'll lick the bloomin' boots of 'im that's got it. – Gunga Din – Rudyard Kipling

Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?" But it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll. – Tommy – Rudyard Kipling

Such outward things dwell not in my desires: But if it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive. – Henry V – William Shakespeare
"Did ya ever see such a lazy crew?" Mal called as he entered the cargo bay.

"Captain," Kaylee exclaimed happily and then looked past him at a grim faced Riddick.

"Jayne give me a hand here," Simon called for the big merc, "Rick's wounded."

Badger looked at his cousin who made a 'so-so' motion with her hand before he looked at Mal, "You get us a deal then?"

"I got a deal. Now get off my ship," Mal ordered in annoyance.

Badger shrugged and looked at Shazza who nodded and followed Simon and River into the infirmary. "Well Shazz'll be along soon's Rick is settled in. Ta very much for a lovely night, then." He tipped his hat to the ladies present and smiled.

River waved at Badger as he gathered the rest of his crew and left before she looked at Shazza, "Simon just needs to check Richard's innards against the x-rays. Make sure there's no internal bleeding." Shazza wrapped an arm around her shoulders and watched as the big man helped Riddick onto the exam table with all the gentleness of a mother with a newborn.

"This happen often?" Shazza asked curiously.

"On this boat," Jayne rolled his eyes, "Too gāi sǐ much." He slanted a glare past the girls in the doorway towards the cargo bay where the captain stood. Kaylee and Wash were keeping an eye on the infirmary while Zoe seemed to have one eye on the Captain and one on the infirmary.

River sighed, "The Captain...has very bad luck." She watched as Simon removed the field dressing and checked the stitches before he brought the equipment over to check Riddick.

"Yeah, me an' Kaylee were talkin'," Jayne shook his head. "We was wonderin' if we could get the Shepherd to bless the boat or somethin', maybe counteract Mal's bad luck. Way things go it's like he's cursed."

"Sounds like he lacks common sense," Shazza remarked to River sotto voice. "Cain't say I'm predisposed to like the man, lookin' down on you folks like he does."

"Hey Simon," Wash's jovial tones weren't quite as chipper as normal. "How's he doin'?" Kaylee was at Wash's side while Book, Zoe, Mal and Inara hovered in the lounge area.

"Cannot assume in the future that the captain will understand that crew is attempting to save him, more warning must be given until captain learns to trust us," River said quietly.

"The Cap'n did this to him?" Jayne turned angrily towards the door until Riddick's voice called him back.

"Cobh, we planned for this, remember? Don' do anythin' ta get thrown off the boat," Riddick said quietly. "Like havin' ya around."

"Mal did this to ya," Jayne repeated. "Why fer?"
"I was kinda beatin' on him at the time, accordin' to the plan," Riddick reminded his old friend again a tired smile pulling at his lips. "River kicked 'em in the family jewels though, made him fold up like a concertina."

"All right Rick, take a deep breath and hold it for a moment, don't speak," Simon did something to Riddick's side that had the big man stiffening slightly and River taking a gasping breath, grabbing Shazza's hand. Finally whatever it was, was done and Riddick was cursing a blue streak in mandarin while River sagged weakly against Shazza. "Doc, what in the..." Riddick shook his head. "What the hell?"

"Mal's knife wasn't...well let's just say that you make better ones," Simon shook his head, "It wasn't really that bad a wound, but the tip of the blade broke off, he skimmed your rib and chipped it. I got it out and you're no longer in danger of continuing blood loss."

Shazza shook her head and looked down at River, "Well mèi mei now that we know Rick'll be all right, I'll be on my merry." She kissed River's forehead, "Ya'll wave me if you need anything. Wanna hear all about how you're doin'."

"Same goes," Riddick told her tiredly. "Need anythin' you know what boat we're on."

"Ta then for a lovely evenin'," Shazza gave everyone an equally warm or not, when it came to Mal, smile before walking out the door in the airlock.

Without Shazza there River nearly flew to Riddick's side, "Richard..." She buried her face in his shoulder. "No more of your blood on the outside please." She shivered, "Know we planned for this and you don't mind overmuch but...no more blood please."

"Not plannin' on it," Riddick used his free arm to pat her back. "I'm all right angel. I'll be fine," He began to sit up. "Simon fixed me up good an' I heal fast."

"Well we got cargo," Mal called from the lounge, "Anybody who ain't wounded or been in a fight this mornin' get to clearin' out the bay. I'm told it's gonna be good an' full."

"And those who were involved in a fight?" Simon asked as he began to clean everything up.

"Head on up to the galley, start makin' breakfast," Mal said shortly.

"Right," Riddick swung his legs over and slid down from the table. "Simon we'll meet ya up there."

An hour or so later they were all finishing up breakfast, a few folk like Wash enjoying their last cup of coffee and the events of the night and morning hashed over and over again.

"There's one thing I ain't gettin'," Mal said finally. "Only reason Badger even went for your grand plan is 'cause you knew that woman a his."

"Yeah, Shazza's his cousin," Riddick nodded. "We're old friends."

"What I'm not gettin' is how you know her," Mal shook his head. "She ain't been with Badger long 'cause she weren't there before ya'll got on the boat."

"Old friends," River looked at Simon who nodded his agreement.
"By your own tale told to us after River come outa her box ya'll haven't known each other all that long," Mal persisted. "How do you know that woman?" He set his cup down and regarded the his passenger and the two newest members of his crew. "I'd like to know. An' you're gonna tell me."

River sighed and looked at Simon and then Riddick and shrugged, "Disinclined to acquiesce to your request." When Mal simply stared at her blankly River rolled her eyes, "Means 'no'."

"Whadda ya mean no?" Mal scowled.

"She is disinclined to acquiesce to your request," River shook her head and began to clear the table. "Means 'no'," Riddick finished dryly. He leaned back in his chair and didn't wince, just barely.

"Shazza's an old friend. She's the one person in the 'Verse besides Jayne, River an' Simon that I know I can count on 'thout reservation."

Simon nodded his agreement, "No offense meant to any of you, but you haven't been through what we have together."

"And what was that precisely?" Mal's scowl hadn't lightened.

"Never asked what Richard and I had against slavers," River put the plates in the cleaner and kissed Riddick's cheek before she sat down again. "Don't owe you anything Malcolm Reynolds." She shook her head, "You must earn our secrets." She frowned, "Tremble, thou wretch, that has within thee undivulged crimes, unwhipped of justice." Her head tilted thoughtfully as she looked at Mal but her gaze was far away, "Soon. Soon you'll meet Richard B. Riddick. You will have some answers then. Must wait a while longer." She rose from the table in her graceful drifting way and her fingers trailed along the backs of the crew sitting there until she reached the door. "Will add additional rent for the use of the lounge and bridge now and then, must set up my cortex and begin my work." Her eyes twinkled merrily as she looked at the crew and her man, "Will give a discount on services if crew helps her set up."

Jayne chuckled and finished his plate, "Gimme five an' I'll help ya out." He offered, "Don't guess Simon'll want Rick movin' anythin' heavy for a day or so."

Simon nodded his agreement, "That's an accurate assessment." His smile was amused as he forked up another bite of protein. "At the rate Rick heals he'll be fine in about thirty six hours, until then I'd appreciate it if you'd do nothing more strenuous than sitting and holding River." He regarded Riddick thoughtfully, "Your clothes got a fair amount of blood on them. I can clean them if you like. I know something about getting blood out of silk."

"Preciate that," Riddick nodded and River smiled as she drifted out of the room. "Mal we ain't known you that long. Might be you'll wanna wait a spell before you ask River 'bout secrets. That's all the folks in the Academy wanted to know, what she saw, what she heard. You wanna throw us both back into that hellhole, watch us both go more'n a little mad… keep pushin' when neither of us are at our best. Guarantee you'll see more'n you want."

"I'll keep it in mind," Mal lifted his cup to hide the frown, concern and determination in his scent, Riddick could smell just how much Mal wanted to protect his crew, his uncertainty of what the right thing was. The captains next words proved he wasn't as uneducated as he pretended as he responded to River's earlier quote quietly, "I am a man more sinned against than sinning."

"Right thing ain't easy to see," Riddick remarked obliquely as he cleared his plate and took Jayne's as well since the big man was putting down his chopsticks. "It's easier for River an' me, we know ya'll are decent. Could say we got alla the puzzle pieces. But…the picture it ain't clear. An' 'til it is…cain't
exactly show you or explain it well enough."

"So you're sayin' part of why I get no answers is you don't know all of 'em yourself?" Mal frowned
not bothering to hide it this time.

"Some, yeah," Riddick shrugged the wound in his side was pulling in a way that was slightly
uncomfortably. "And some of 'em...answers aren't easy to say. Can't blame River if there're things
she don't wanna talk on." He looked at Simon, "Hell there's things the doc don't like to speak of.
Ain't one of us hasn't been through hell. Shazz was with us...went through it too."

"Rick, are you saying something happened to you, River, Simon and Shazza after the Academy," Wash's voice was kind, his concern a near palpable thing and soothing to the animal in a way that
was a rarity in anyone but River.

Simon was the one who answered, breaking his gaze off of Riddick's silver eyes, "Yes." He
answered Wash looking at the pilot. "It isn't something we speak of. It was...plainly it was
terrifying." He looked at Zoe and Mal, "We," He indicated Riddick, himself and River. "We have
never asked you about the war. About Serenity Valley."

Riddick could smell Mal's pain and raw anger that anyone would bring that up in comparison to their
own problems and cut the captain off before he could spout his temper, "Ain't sayin' it's the same
Mal." He said quietly. "Just sayin' we ain't asked. Maybe give us the same courtesy 'bout what we
went through on planet."

He finished loading the cleaner and walked out of the room, cat-footed even in his boots, conscious
of Jayne following him and Mal's rage strangled and impotent in the face of Riddick's reasoning. He
heard Simon leave the table and bid Kaylee and the others good night before he arrived down in the
passenger lounge where River was opening her cases.

Riddick waited in the galley, River had said Inara would come in to make tea and he wanted to
speak with the Companion on neutral ground. River had gone down to talk with Jayne about her
ever widening search for Ciara. She'd had the idea of sketching what the girl had looked like when
Jayne had last seen her and using cortex programs to age the image.

"Miss Inara," Riddick greeted the Companion as she entered the galley. "How're you doin' after all
the excitement?"

"I could have done without it," Inara said dryly putting the kettle on. "And you? You were stabbed
not more than eight hours ago. Are you sure you should be out of bed?"

Riddick shrugged without a wince, "I know how to suppress pain, how to use it as fuel, or just
endure it. What I didn't learn when I was a kid the Academy taught me pretty well." He regarded
Inara thoughtfully, "River's right," He said quietly. "I can smell it, under the perfume, you're ill."

"No one knows," Inara brought over cups and saucers and spoons. "I'm...older than I look.
Medically my disease makes me look younger even as it kills me. I'll be a beautiful corpse."

"How long?" Riddick tilted his head inquiringly.

"I have a few years," Inara gave a graceful shrug. "I'll go very quickly when the end comes." She
removed the kettle from the stove and began to make tea in the graceful way all Companions had.
Riddick watched her silently until she finished returning to the table with two cups.
"Here's somethin' you might wanna think about," Riddick said slowly. "An' I ain't sayin' you don't got the right to live your life as you choose." He took the cup she gave him with a nod of thanks, "You might wanna do somethin' to prepare the folks around you."

"It's no one's business," Inara's voice wasn't quite sharp but it was more crisp than normal.

"It is in a way," Riddick returned, his low voice an implacable rasp. "You're in their lives, Mal got in a duel over your good name, I got stabbed, Kaylee loves you. Wash depends on you to be another voice of reason. And in a coupla years...it'll only be worse. It'll be worst for Mal. You encourage him to love you. You act to all outward appearances as if you're not interested but he's drawn to you."

"I cannot control how men react to me," Inara's cool voice was a vivid contrast to the lie that stung his nose like black pepper scattered over a caramel tart.

"An' that's a lie," Riddick shook his head. "Apart from that's a Companion's business, controllin' how people react to you, I can smell lies. Remember?"

"What would you have me do?" Inara took a sip of her tea, "Leave without a word to anyone?"

"Mal's the one that worries me," Riddick lifted his cup and took a deep breath of the scent before he sipped. "How much more do you think he can stand to lose before he's completely broken? How much can one man take Inara?"

"What should I do then?" The Companion's voice was slightly exasperated.

"Do what a Companion does; control how you allow him to react," He shrugged as he sipped the tea slowly. "This is your mess Inara, I'm just tryin' to get a pretty clueless man out before more blood is shed."

"He's not a normal man, he's contrary and how he'll reacts is a mystery to me most of the time," Inara shook her head. "I'm never on steady ground with him."

"Then don't be with him," The convict's voice was cool and controlled even as Inara's began to express more emotions. "You know better anyway," He reminded her.

"Yes I do," Inara sighed. "Was that what you wanted to talk about Rick? Or was there something else."

"River's... havin' some trouble with the homework you assigned her," He spoke slowly feeling his way through the words. "See...animals don't... seek pleasure alone." He said finally, looked up at Inara.

"But she's a human girl," Inara shook her head. "To seek pleasure for its own sake is very human."

"It is," Silver eyes were concerned as they met Inara's dark gaze. "But she's not fully human anymore and I never have been. River had a difficult time yesterday, in part because she tried to do her homework when I wasn't around. It didn't work."

"So she didn't fall," Her voice was thoughtful. "And you believe this is due to her more primal nature requiring a partner?"

"Thought I'd try just bein' in the room with her an' seein' if that helped," Riddick said quietly. "I got a feelin' it'll work but it'll be because she'll be able to tell what I'm thinking, feeling. I know that isn't what you want." He shrugged. "Since she and I... Well, I don't have a lotta interest in self-service either. Dunno if it's 'cause the animal found its mate or if it's just one of my quirks."
"See if being in the room helps," Inara agreed. "When she's with you and using the device does she fall?" He was grateful for a moment that their voices were low and Inara was discreet. It was unlikely someone would overhear them since with his hearing it was near impossible for anyone to sneak up on him, but just the idea of it stirred killing instincts. He wouldn't have even spoken of the issue in a public part of the ship but Inara could be very firm when she was on her own ground and it suited his purposes that she be more open to his way of thinking.

"Yes," Riddick nodded decisively. "Even using different positions," He paused, "Part of why I mention it is when River's off balance it's harder for her to deal with the results of the Academy's procedures. Gettin' worked up and not fallin'…that put her off balance. We ain't exactly in a position of strength with Mal, I think my stab wound proves that, so we're tryin' to keep ourselves as…normal as we can. Even after our little chat at dinner…not lookin' to push the man."

"Not an easy feat in itself for you or River," Inara agreed. "Very well, see if what we discussed helps. If it doesn't we'll revisit the idea. I recall River mentioning self exploration being dissatisfactory after a time. I'll try to speak with her regarding it."

"I'd appreciate it," Riddick gave her a half smile. "She an' I, we don't got a choice 'bout talkin' to each other, extra senses make it obvious when one of us ain't up to snuff. Half a the problem Mal's got with her is he thinks River's crazy. Anything I can do to make her seem more stable…"

"Can only help," Inara nodded her understanding. "If you'll let River know I'll speak with her whenever she's ready tomorrow. We're due for another session in a day or so anyway."

"You got it," He agreed and rose. "I'm due on the bridge but you have a good night Inara."

"You two Rick," Inara rose and went back to her shuttle. Riddick nodded slightly in satisfaction, River had mentioned Inara was going to sit with the captain in the cargo bay. River had said Inara was playing with a bottle she thought was whiskey and that when it broke it wouldn't be whisky it would be naphtha and everyone would be harmed. Normally Riddick wouldn't bestir himself to meddle with someone's relationship but he couldn't afford to have Mal completely off his rocker insane when River was fragile herself.

He never thought he'd be cursing the day he helped bring in a paying job, Riddick thought grimly as he lifted himself up on Jayne's pull up straps. The cargo hold was full of cattle, of all the things, cattle. That meant a stench the likes of which his nose found monumentally displeasing and absolutely no large amount of space for he and River to spar. They were only two weeks into the trip to Jiangyin and he and Simon were finding out just how crucial the sparring and katas were to River's mental well-being. She'd gone from being stable to being on the edge of her last nerve. It was evident to he and Simon that she was doing her best but to him she constantly smelled of steel, blood, citrus and silk, her pain was becoming a constant that drove his animal mad.

Jayne had done his best to help, moving all the furniture in the lounge against the walls so they had something of a practice space and hooking up another set of straps for River to use in unison with Riddick. His weight bench and equipment had been pushed back towards the wall under the stairs so it could still be used. But the big man smelled of worry just as Simon did.

Wash had taken one look at River during breakfast the first week and tilted his head asking if she'd like a flying lesson or two since she couldn't dance. The grateful look she'd given him had seemed to almost embarrass the pilot but River had nodded. That had helped, occupying her mind with things to learn, something to concentrate on was the next best thing to meditation.
Mal had not been particularly helpful but no one had really expected that he would be. At least he hadn't told Wash that River wasn't allowed on the bridge without Riddick to keep an eye on her.

"C'mon baby, let's do some weights an' then we'll try a kata in the lounge," Riddick suggested as he saw River's muscles straining to lift her weight one more time.

"Yes," River nodded. "Physical exertion, mental discipline to stave off the effects of surgeries." She dropped down into his arms and pressed her mouth onto his. "Jayne has been very kind of late. He will try to irritate Simon in order to throw Mal off the scent of any change."

"Any luck on the cortex?" Riddick asked as they moved around the perimeter of the bay to the lounge.

"Not as yet," River shook her head. "Spent some time with Jayne, talking about her, getting pictures in his head of her mother and father, what she might look like as she aged." She sighed and took a deep breath. "Hoped to do more work but circumstances do not allow for it much."

"Well got a while before we make Jiangyin, an' I don' like how this is affectin' you liàn rén," He gathered her into his arms and kissed her gently, "You ain't been this...unsettled since...well since you read cards for those old men."

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven," River's head rested under his chin, her ear against his pulse listening to the blood rush through his veins. "Didn't realize how difficult it would be," She admitted. "Don't like that you have to worry about me, don't like how weak I am."

"Don't wanna hear any a that talk," Riddick nearly growled. "None a this is your fault River," He looked at Simon who was standing in the infirmary and knew that the doctor was just as concerned as he was. "You do fine when you get time and space for your katas," He rubbed his hands over her back and sighed. "Really dunno why I'm worried, Cap'n thinks you're chī xiàn. He ain't gonna be surprised if we do somethin' a little odd. He'll just think he's right."

"Richard worried because the more trouble she is the more likely Mal will put us off the boat," River murmured. "But that won't happen."

"Know that for a fact?" Riddick chuckled and felt a touch of apples and tequila trickle into her scent. She was curious and finding humor in something, most likely the captain.

"Hates Alliance," River said softly. "Found Serenity on the Cortex. Won't ever give anyone up to Alliance if he can avoid it."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded slowly. "Last battle of the war." He looked up as Jayne entered the lounge and nodded at him, Zoe on his heels, and continued his conversation with River. "Recall somethin' of it, Independents held the valley against all odds, held out even after Command called for them to lay down arms."

"You can look it up in the encyclopedia under 'Bloodbath'," Zoe told him crisply.

River nodded against Riddick's neck and sighed, citrus filled her scent and he knew that she was reading Zoe's thoughts, reading about Serenity. "Lost everyone," She murmured sadly. "Named his ship for it because he'll never be able to leave." Simon left the infirmary and joined Riddick on the short couch, his hand petting River's hair soothingly.

"Like on planet?" Simon asked finally and Riddick knew what the doctor meant. The three of them now and then referred to 'on planet' in conversations between themselves and Shazza. No one else
would understand what they meant but for the four survivors, 'on planet' meant the nameless rock
with three suns and monsters where they'd lost nearly everyone, worthy and unworthy alike. There
was only one planet for them.

"Very like," River said softly. "Lost in the valley and left to rot. Left to starve. Captain commanded
over two thousand, lost the officers, sergeant had to make do. Down to four hundred plus... only a
little over one hundred and fifty left when the ships finally came. Balls and Bayonets Brigade. Only
Zoe Alleyne left out of his entire platoon. Even she left him when she found a husband. No longer
only his to command, another man comes first now. Stings and it doesn't. As it should be, but it just
makes him more alone."

Riddick looked up to see Jayne's eyes a study in misery as he was sure his own were in the dim light.
Zoe's face was cool, composed, and if it weren't for the riot of her heartbeat and scent he might have
thought she was as calm as she looked.

"How did she know all that," Zoe's voice was almost level, but not quite. Her dark eyes were glued
to River until they lifted to meet Riddick's silver gaze.

"Most of it she found on the cortex," Simon answered the question with a shrug. "The rest, the
personal information...River's very observant and no one guards their tongue around her. Mal treats
her as if she's mad, you're better but you don't think that she might be listening and in spite of Rick
and I saying it multiple times no one realizes she hears far more than all of you think."

"So what does she know about me from snooping and listenin'," Jayne wanted to know. Riddick
looked at his old friend and saw the bigger man nod in acknowledgement and if he'd been sly he
would have kissed him. The distraction would certainly detract from Zoe's thoughts of wondering
how River knew what she did.

River smiled as she read what was in Jayne's thoughts, felt Richard's pleasure at his friends concern
and willingness to help. Wrapped in Riddick's arms and anchored by his mind she could immerse
herself in the thoughts of others, find new things to think about, exercise her brain in a way mere
meditation didn't allow. Seeking out thoughts and memories was like a mental kata, new each time,
and it helped her to maintain the disciplines that controlled her psyche.

cause with him in childhood. Family on Kerry still. Schooled in welding. Ranger. Tracker, hunter,
sniper by trade. Works for pay. You and my Riddick are bá xiōng dì, bonded in blood. Bonded by
steel." She smiled, "Patron of many houses of pleasure. Exceptional at physical combat much like
my Riddick. Bound by law several times. Jailed once for five days on Hera, drunk and disorderly.
Waiting for an interesting day."

Jayne chuckled slightly, "Well she's nuttier than peanut butter but she's damn entertainin'." He told
his old friend with a grin. "Oughta see if she can work a carnival with that act."

River shook her head, "Cortex terminals would give away the game." She disagreed. "Would have
to rely on superior senses and read tarot for clientele." She regarded the big man and Zoe
thoughtfully. "How will we get the smell out of the ship?" She asked curiously pointing towards
the cattle. "Illegal transport makes docking at a station with water and cleaning supplies problematic."

"Yeah, don' much care for the stench neither," Jayne shook his head. "Guess we'll find some stuff to
shovel it out, dry it up if we can. Get rid of the smell that way." He looked at Zoe hopefully.
"Could always lock everything down and open the air lock when we hit the Black," Zoe shook her head. "We'd have to touch down on planet again, get the oxygen back but it might be worth it to get rid of the smell."

River frowned out at the cows, "Will research ways to neutralize the smell of cow patties." She reached for her cortex and Simon rolled his eyes and handed it to her. Opening it she absently covered Riddick's eyes until the flash of the screen was done and was rewarded with a kiss on her palm. "Manure becomes a nitrate when it is aged; could be used for explosives," She said absently.

"No shit," Jayne chuckled. "Would it smell while it was agin'?"

"Manure does not possess a nose, therefore it has not the capability of utilizing the olfactory sense," River said absently as she searched the cortex. "However it would still be odiferous while it aged."

"Still tryin' to figure olfactory," Jayne grumbled.

"She's sayin' that the cow patties can't smell themselves but they'd still stink when they were gettin' old an' dried out," Zoe told the gun hand dryly.

"So olfactory is smell like aud-i-a-to-rey is for hearing," Jayne was muttering and River smiled slightly.

Riddick nodded at the gun hand, "Yeah Cobh, that's right." River could feel his sympathy for the uneducated man. She knew that the gun hand wasn't stupid but his dyslexia didn't afford him much opportunity for education. Anything to do with numbers was easy for him though he was careful to hide that from his crew, but words stymied him. He was slowly learning but it was a frustrating process for a man like Jayne, strong and scary to outsiders.

"According to the cortex there are very few ways to neutralize the odor without scrubbing down the entire bay and using carbon filters to clean the air," River shook her head. "Manual labor is required."

"Won't be the first time," Zoe shrugged nonchalantly.

River wandered into the lounge and wince, the cows were irritating. They were like a large many minded mass of hooves and tails and stench none of them realizing what they were. They'd been in the black for nearly a month and every day was worse. She'd learned as much as she could from Wash and Kaylee but after the third week she couldn't concentrate well enough to learn. Meditation without exercise was as useless as exercise without meditation.

Simon emerged from the infirmary and smiled at her, "River, how're you feeling?"

"Too many...and not enough...and its all pushing at me," River shuddered as she felt Simon's mind. He was remembering playing Alliance and Independents, the Independents had dinosaurs. "Simon lost his head in the heat of battle," She whispered. "He never saw me. He was never..." She pushed her fingers into her hair, against her scalp, feeling the scars.

Blood and blue and white... cold air, cold fingers, never warm enough, where was her Riddick, he always held her when she was cold. Too many minds, pushing at her, like the Academy after a surgery, "Two by two, hands of blue… No..." She moaned desperate for relief, "No, I don't...wanna go back to the..."
She felt Simon's hands touch her shoulders, driving his mind harder against hers, felt his worry, his fear for her, alongside the warmth of his love. It should have been reassuring, her brother's voice should have soothed her, "It's okay," He told her gently. "It-

"It's not okay!" River knew she was screaming, knew she shouldn't, there was a reason she shouldn't yell but she could barely hear her own voice over all the thoughts, the confusing alien thoughts of all the things that didn't know who they were. "You can't just dig into me, shove twenty needles in my eyes and ask me what I see!" She was rocking and sobbing and knew she sounded insane but she couldn't stop.

"I..." Simon was still trying to help even as she felt Riddick coming towards her, "We won't go in, won't go near it. Look," He shut the infirmary doors firmly. "See, no tests, no needles," He touched her cheek. "I promise, no infirmary, not unless you're hurt."

Riddick came in, his mind a soothing beacon in which she could immerse herself. For man who lived in the shadows his mind was full of light but she couldn't stop muttering, "No rutting tests? Stupid son of a bitch, dress me up like a gorrann doll!"

Her mate's arms wrapped around her and Simon came closer, his worry like a black star pulsing under his skin, pulling at her and she couldn't help kicking at whatever was in his hands, something hard and metallic that went crashing against the wall. She could hear Mal coming down to the lower deck, his entire mind was filled with worry and anger.

"River," Simon was picking things up and River shuddered in her man's arms. Her Riddick had her but even his mind couldn't immediately counteract nearly a month of tension and worry

"I got you baby," Riddick's hands weren't hard or too firm, they simply petted her hair, her skin, trying to ease the animal's fear.

River couldn't stop her trembling, caught in the vicious cycle as she spiraled between fight or flight, unable to do either. Mal entered the lounge and she stared, he was tall, backlit by the windows of the bright infirmary, "You're not him?" She shook her head, "Liou coe shway duh biao-tze huh hoe-tze duh ur-tze."

She could feel Riddick's amusement and Mal's irritation as the Captain stopped his forward motion to stand in front of the three of them. "So, she's added cussing and hurling about of things to her repertoire. She really is a prodigy," He remarked sardonically.

"It's a bad day," Simon didn't try to explain. River knew he felt there was no point. He wouldn't lie and couldn't tell Mal the truth. That left prevarication.

Mal either couldn't tell or didn't care, concerned with other things, "No, a bad day is when someone's yellin' spooks the cattle. Understand?" He gestured towards the hold, "You ever see cattle stampede when they got no place to run? It's kind of like a...a meat grinder. And it'll lose us half the herd."

"She hasn't gone anywhere near the cattle," Simon was rolling his eyes, River could tell just from his voice.

"No," Mal conceded, but it was a victory short lived, "No, but in case you hadn't noticed, her voice kinda carries. We're two miles above ground and they can probably hear her down there. Soon as we unload, she can holler until our ears bleed." River could feel him looking at her and shivered wanting to burrow into Riddick's warmth and never come out, "Although I would take it as a kindness if she didn't."
The facts just spewed out of her mouth, disturbing in their accuracy and foreboding in meaning, "The human body can be drained of blood in 8.6 seconds given adequate vacuuming systems."

He was still talking to Simon as if Riddick was a piece of furniture upon whom she sat, "See, morbid and creepifying, I got no problem with, long as she does it quiet-like."

Simon was going to say something stupid, River knew it, "Please, please, please," She moaned and pushed her fingers against her skull.

Riddick's hand rubbed gently over the scars under her hair and his deep dark coffee and whiskey voice rumbled beneath her ear against his chest, "She's rubbin' at the scars under her hair." He told Mal in a voice quiet with his rage. "She does that when her head hurts so much she can't concentrate on anything but the pain," River whimpered slightly as his hand ceased moving and sighed in relief as it started again. "They cut into her brain cap'n. Dunno what they were aimin' for," Riddick's lie was without a sliver of remorse for deceiving Mal. "But now she hears too much, sees too much, can't not see or not hear. And thanks to your precious cattle she hasn't been able to maintain her routine. This is what happens when things go wrong. It could have been much worse. Now to see that noble and most sovereign reason, like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh."

River shook her head, "They don't know what they are, nameless, mindless blobs with hooves and tails, forgetting what they're meant to do. No sun, no sky, no grass, they don't understand and they're afraid and they won't stop pushing on me," She wept against Riddick's chest, hating that she was crying in front of Malcolm Reynolds. "Stayed away, didn't touch, no blood and skin, no casting auguries in entrails," She moaned. "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

"This is the work of government scientists who thought my sister's brain was a rutting playground," Simon told the captain coldly.

"Bottom line, River needs her katas, needs meditation and her routine, activity and quiet," Riddick said flatly. "I'm amazed she hasn't gone wobbly before this. But if you've got suggestions we're open to 'em."

Mal wasn't having any of it, "I'm not a doctor. And I'm not your gorrann baby-sitter, either. Gag her, if you have to. We got trade to be done." He looked at Riddick, "Gonna need all hands on this Rick, sooner we get the cattle out sooner we can hose down the bay an' she can get to exercisin' again."

River felt the growl in her mate's chest vibrate its way to his throat, "Better now," She whispered. "Richard should help with the beasts. She will be better on solid ground." She could feel Mal's anger and concern, outrage that anyone should be treated as she had been, worry in spite of his decision to remain distant that she was a child under his care and he could do nothing. "Doesn't want the responsibility but cannot help but worry. Broken doll, snapped her legs off so she couldn't twirl around anymore. Rather she wasn't here but she is and now she's his too, hides his worry under cold words."

Riddick wasn't pleased with Mal's behavior but didn't go after the captain, remaining in the lounge with River in his lap, "Just relax baby," River could feel his lips brush over her forehead. "He ain't here, you find my mind, hang onto me." His voice was soothing and gentle, "Be groundside in a bit, can enjoy the sun, feel warmth on your skin."

River felt the ship land and loosened her grip on Riddick's shirt, "Mate must go and work. She will remain within until the minds are without and then she and Simon will seek the burning rays." Forcing herself away from him was one of the harder things she'd done and she could read in his mind Riddick's anger rising on fury over leaving her vulnerable. "She will be fine. Survived Reavers.
Can survive cows."

Simon's laugh defused the tension and he helped her out of Riddick's lap, "Sorry," The doctor apologized with a smile at them both. "It's just the idea that of all the things we've faced, Reaver space, the planet and monsters, Feds and slavers…canned goods and cows are what get us."

Riddick's dark chuckle was no less amused though it was obvious he still wasn't happy, "Yeah, guess that'd be sorta ironic." He was watching with a frown as River stood and wrapped her arms around her waist before he rose from the couch. "You find my mind an' use me to get your calm back angel," He commanded gently. His big hands clasped her shoulders and rubbed carefully as he laid tender kisses on her forehead, cheek and lips.

River felt part of her relax under his gentle ministrations, that awful fear that when she showed weakness she'd be repudiated for it fading away as her man proved to her that regardless of her foibles he still wanted her. "She will be well," She murmured softly. "Takes time."

"Yeah I know," Riddick's head came up at Mal's shout and the sound of Jayne's footsteps on the metal stairs. "Better get goin'," He sighed and pressed a soft kiss to her lips before he let go of her and headed into the bay. River remained where he'd left her for a moment, fixing in her mind the sensation of his lips on her skin, his arms and hands soothing her.

Riddick scowled darkly at the cattle as he finished setting up the corral. He had nothing against a good steak even if he hadn't much personal experience with that cuisine but the damn animals had thrown River out of her routine and his patience was at an end. Book was tying off his part of the corral and nodded to Riddick before he looked up the cargo bay ramp. Simon was carefully avoiding the cow pies on the ramp but Jayne was herding cattle past him and the doctor misjudged his step. Riddick sighed and rolled his eyes behind his goggles, "Really Cobh," He muttered.

Jayne was still almost chuckling, "'Bout time you broke in them pretty shoes," He lightly smacked a rope against a cow's haunch, "Yah! Get along!"

"You know they walk just as easy if you lead 'em," Mal told his big gun hand.

Jayne was still in a decent mood, "I like smackin' 'em."

Riddick looked at Book and received a half smile from the shepherd, the older man remarking, "Hope this corral's strong enough to hold them. 'Shepherd's a purely figurative title, you know."

The escaped murderer nodded with a half quirk of his lips that would serve as his smile until his woman was feeling better. River had come out with Wash and Zoe, and while the married couple had seated themselves on the top of the corral railing River had seated herself on the ground, looking at a calf.

Zoe was shaking her head over the mess and the amount of livestock they'd smuggled, "Next time we smuggle stock, let's make it something smaller," She suggested with a chuckle.

Wash nodded his agreement, "Yeah, we should start dealing in those black-market beagles." He looked down at River, "You have some thoughts on an alternative to cattle River?"

River tilted her head to squint up at Wash, "Goats or pigs would be better. Goats give milk too, smaller and easier to pick up. Mate could carry four easily." She frowned and added, "Males of the species can be problematic though."
"Honey that's true of any species," Zoe drawled with the air of a woman who knows of what she speaks.

River's giggle did something to Riddick's heart, he hadn't heard it in what seemed like forever, he felt that atrophied organ twist in warm pleasure at the sound. "Maybe human males and other lesser life forms," She teased back. "My Furyan gives me no trouble."

"None?" Wash chuckled, "Didn't you engineer a bar fight so he'd be entertained?"

"Not any trouble though," River retorted with a smile. The calf moved, staring at her now, meeting her eyes. "Little soul, big world. Eat, sleep, and eat... Many souls."

Riddick's lips quirked again, she was being mystifying on purpose so Mal would be irritated, he could smell the tequila on her that meant she was joking. He moved so he was standing on her other side, felt her hand slip up to caress and squeeze his leg as she looked at the baby cow.

Mal rolled his eyes at Jayne, "Cattle on the ship more'n three weeks, she don't go near 'em. Suddenly we're on Jiangyin and she's got a driving need to commune with the beast?"

River shook her head as she stared at the young thing, "They weren't cows inside. They were waiting to be, but they forgot. Now they see the sky and they remember what they are."

The captain smelt strongly of confused understanding, an odd combination on anyone but it blended with Mal's normal scent fairly well. Riddick got the feeling Mal spent a lot of time in that particular state of mind. The Browncoat regarded Jayne again, "Is it bad that what she said made perfect sense to me?" He regarded River then, "C'mon, now. Let's get you clear of the work."

Simon was slowly walking towards them, "What's going on?" Riddick took a deep breath and hoped Simon wasn't going to cause trouble in a misguided attempt to protect his sister. "What are you doing?"

Mal was shaking his head, his expression and voice eminently reasonable, "I'm fixing to do some business. Can't be herding these steers and your sister, too."

"She didn't mean any harm," Simon protested slanting a quick glance at Riddick. "And she's with Rick."

"I never figured she did. But when a man engages in clandestine dealings, he has his preference for things being smooth," Mal shook his head. "She makes things not be smooth," He indicated Rick with one hand, "And I told ya'll before I need Rick doin' his job, not babysittin'."

Simon was deeply pissed but it only showed as a slight snippy tone as he addressed the captain, "Right. I'm very sorry if she tipped off anyone about your cunningly concealed herd of cows."

Riddick watched as Mal began to guide Simon away from the corral and rolled his eyes as the captain began to speak, his tone not quite condescending but unmistakably determined. "I'm starting to think you got a little too much time on your hands, doctor. I think now I got a notion regarding that. Why don't you take your sister for a little walk."

Simon was now irritated and flummoxed, "A walk?"

"Yeah," Mal nodded, "Someplace... away."

Simon was shaking his head, "Uh, probably best we stay close. Alliance has us marked as fugitives."
Riddick sighed as Mal had an answer for that too, "Closest Alliance is the Cruiser Magellan. Hours out from here. And I promise you, they ain't coming to a backwater like Jiang."

"Still," Simon prevaricated, "I'm not sure it's such a wise suggestion."

Mal's tone hardened slightly, "Might not wanna mistake it for a suggestion." He waited a moment to be sure Simon had understood him, "Don't worry, we won't leave without ya."

River tilted her head and stood as Simon's scent blasted frustrated anger to Riddick's nose. Mal turned away from the doctor and pointed at River, gesturing for her to follow her brother. River sighed, "She would not be much help if she stayed."

Riddick bent and pressed a kiss to the top of her head, "Just remember your breathin', an' keep hold a me if you gotta. Ain't far from you ever bào bào."

"She will be careful," River looked up towards the hills. "Be wary of the watchers in the hills. They take what is not theirs and do not care for interference."

"Watchers in the hills," Riddick frowned. "Settlers up there?"

"Not...quite," River shook her head her frown echoing his. "They're greedy."

"River, you'd better get to steppin'," Zoe advised softly. "Cap'n's got that look. Kaylee an' Inara went on to town, mayhaps you an' Simon could meet up with them."

River nodded and turned expectantly to Riddick who grinned down at her, "Always gotta have your kiss goodbye." He leaned down and pressed a good hot kiss to her lips. "Don't you go findin' any fellas to replace me." He teased, her mouth under his lightening his mood like nothing else.

"Richard is unique, irreplaceable," River assured him with a grin. "Love you bàng jiār."

"Love you too zhī yīn," Riddick murmured and watched her dart off to catch up with Simon. Her dancers legs flew over the ground.

"Gorram that girl's fast...runs like a doe," Jayne remarked appreciatively. He slanted a teasing look at Riddick, "Course ain't like she's the one hunted, what moves fast an' hunts deer?"

"Wolf," Riddick smiled, a fully wicked stretch of his lips that revealed white teeth. "My woman's a wolf, same as me."

"Mated for life," Jayne nodded his understanding and was silent. Riddick nodded his agreement and stood with his friend, enjoying the silence and the day. The breeze was mild, the sun was warm, the world smelt good to his nose, even with all the damn cow manure, and River had laughed. He made a mental note to be nicer to Wash and Zoe, they had a habit of making River smile.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So we've started 'Safe' and Mal's beginning to realize that maybe he's not the only one with an awful past. On a curious note, what do you all think of Riddick's little chat with Inara. I realize it must seem nosy and a little out of character for him to be even interested in someone else's love life let alone Mal's but keep in mind, his only concern is himself, River, Simon and Jayne. Everyone else is peripheral and neutral and
he really isn't too interested except for how they'll effect he and his little pack. If Mal
and Inara implode that could mean trouble for him. So with as smart as he is, my
Riddick is figuring on some preemptive strikes to head off his captain's potential harm.

Keep in mind that as Captain (according to maritime law and the research I've done on
the 'Verse) Mal has absolute control over the ship. He's also legally responsible for
anything that occurs on it legal or otherwise. Riddick isn't unaware of this so he doesn't
want Mal to go nuts and start throwing them all into situations where they'll get killed
because he isn't thinking clearly. That doesn't sound like Mal does it? Oh yeah, wait it
does (cough, Miranda, cough, Reavers). But at last Mal is getting away from his asshat
behavior somewhat right?

We're going to see a little more of this in coming episodes and 'Safe' is one of my faves
because of its potential for change. So I hope you all enjoy and I'd love your opinions.

Chinese Translations:
gāi sī - damned/wretched
mèi mei - little sister
liàn rén - lover/sweetheart
chī xiàn - crazy/insane
bǎ xiōng dì - sworn brothers
bǎo bǎo - darling/baby
bàng jiār - lover/partner
zhī yīn - soul mate

Script Translations:
Liou coe shway duh biao-tze huh hoe-tze duh ur-tze - Stupid son of a drooling whore
and a monkey

Quote Sources:
Disinclined to acquiesce to your request. – Captain Barbosa – Pirates of the Caribbean
Means 'no' – Captain Barbosa – Pirates of the Caribbean
Tremble, thou wretch, that has within thee undivulged crimes, unwhipped of justice. –
King Lear – William Shakespeare
I am a man more sinned against than sinning. – King Lear – William Shakespeare
Now to see that noble and most sovereign reason, like sweet bells jangled, out of tune
and harsh. – Hamlet – William Shakespeare
The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. –
Paradise Lost – Milton
River smiled as she followed Simon into the general store, he was still aggravated that Mal was ordering him around. It was an irrational anger considering Simon was crew and Mal was the captain. River shrugged and sent Kaylee a grin and Inara a little wave.

"Morning, you two," Kaylee smiled back.

Inara nodded her greeting, "Don't usually see you two out and about planet-side."

Simon sighed and shook his head, River moved over to some equipment and began to touch it, trying to figure out what it was for. Yeah, we're... we're trying something different today," Simon explained with a nervous smile for Kaylee before he looked at River. "River, be careful with that... that's, um..." He looked back at Kaylee helplessly, "What is that?"

River smiled echoing Kaylee's expression as the mechanic explained, "It's a post-holer. You dig holes. For posts."

Simon shook his head and tried to convince River to leave the equipment alone, "It's, uh, it's dirty. And sharp," He tugged at River's arm, "Let's come over here."

River elbowed Simon hard in the ribs before he commented nastily on a plate, "Simon should remember his manners in a house not his own." She told him sharply. When Simon blinked at her River sighed and elaborated, "Simon should not say mean things because he's upset at the captain."

Simon sighed, "You're right." He shook his head over the plate. "I suppose I'm just surprised that this planet has a tourist trade so that they can sell the tourist crap."

River felt the pulse of embarrassment from Kaylee but the mechanic remained cheerful as ever, "Hard to believe ain't it? Glad you're out."

Simon offered the girl a half smile, his attention not wholly on Kaylee as he watched River wander around the store, "Mm..."

Kaylee continued cheerfully, "Give you a chance to have a little fun."

River was too far away from Simon to elbow him again, "Fun. Right, yeah," He was still half watching River and she could tell he was still angry with Mal, that drove his words more than any irritation with Kaylee. "I, uh, I consider this fun. Its fun, being forced to the ass-end of the galaxy. To get to live on a piece of lè sè wreck. And to eat molded protein. And to be bullied around by our fèi wù bà niáng yăng de of a captain. It's fun."

River could feel how hurt Kaylee was and sighed, the other girls feelings washing over her. She shuddered as Kaylee whispered, "Lè sè?"

Simon blinked and tilted his head, focusing on Kaylee, "Sorry?"

"Serenity ain't lè sè," Kaylee told him, her voice gaining strength.

"No, I... I didn't mean." Simon protested, obviously realizing he'd just gravely insulted Kaylee.
"Yeah you did," Kaylee argued. "You meant everything you just said."

Simon shook his head, "Well, yes and no," He sighed. "I'm angry. I shouldn't talk when I'm angry. Actually I do better to just shut my mouth period. I'm sorry. I was being foolish."

"You were being mean, is what," Kaylee was well and truly angry and unwilling to hear anything Simon said in apology at the moment. "And if that's what you think of this life, then you can't think much of them that choose it, can you."

River watched as Kaylee exited the store, Inara following her and giving Simon a look that told him just how badly he'd screwed up. She watched Simon dart outside and catch Kaylee by the arm and nearly get punched before he held up his hands in surrender. He was easy to hear, "Kaylee, please, I am sorry." He apologized. "Mostly because of what I said about Serenity. River loves your ship. She thinks of it as home. It's harder for me because... well she doesn't need me. I'm not needed on Serenity and I'm used to being needed. So I get angry. I say stupid things. It doesn't make me right. It just makes me the stupidest smart man I know."

Kaylee gave a watery chuckle, "River's always sayin' men are stupid."

"River is a genius," Simon agreed readily, "She says I'm a boob." He stood very straight and River could see him through the dirty windows as he captured Kaylee's hand and bowed over it. "Please accept my deepest apologies on behalf of Serenity and your selves for my hurtful and uncalled for remarks. I hope you will allow me to earn your forgiveness."

Kaylee's giggle was a little confused, "Apology accepted." She smiled.

Simon shook his head, "You'll have to get Inara to explain what I meant...I'd better," He looked around as if realizing River had not followed him out. "Oh dear, sorry to run, I'd better..."

"You'd better go find River," Kaylee told him.

River giggled as she felt Simon's slight panic when he didn't see her through the windows. Chasing her would give him something to do, keep him from being an idiot in front of Kaylee again. It would give Inara time to explain what Simon had meant by his apology. River grinned as she dashed out the back door and followed the sounds she heard, violins and guitars, the rhythmic thump of feet, dancing.

Riddick kept his face angled so the sun wasn't in his eyes, the rest of his senses working overtime, he had to work past the stench of the cattle, concentrate on what he could catch past that. It was easier to listen, hear heartbeats in the woods, approaching the ship and the corral, Mal as Zoe walked towards the ship. Riddick nodded to Zoe as she passed him to take up position on the hill overlooking the corral, "Two coming from the west," He muttered quietly. Wash had already gone inside, the pilot made a point of noninvolvement when business might possibly involve guns or bullets. Book was still enjoying his time outside, soaking in the sun from his position near the corral.

"This is the last time," Mal was muttering not really to Jayne who walked beside him, mostly talking to himself, "Last time with cows." He looked up as Zoe came towards him, "Hear there was an idea regarding beagles? They have smallish droppings?"

Zoe's voice was her stoic business tone, "I believe so, sir. Also, your disreputable men are here."

"Better go take their money," Mal nodded and Riddick watched as Jayne moved to stand on the
opposite side of the corral, clearly covering one area while Riddick covered the other.

"Careful Mal," Riddick muttered as the man passed him, "They smell of nerves. Twitchiness ain't a good thing when it's a simple deal like this."

"I gotcha," Mal returned quietly continuing his seemingly casual stroll forward around the corral to meet the two men who'd emerged from the woods. His path took him closer to Jayne where Riddick heard the captain pass on the info Rick had given him. Jayne nodded and rolled his shoulders before leaning forward on the fence.

"Morning, gentlemen. You must be the Grange brothers," Mal greeted the not entirely pleasant looking duo. "Hope you're in the mood for beefsteak."

Jayne was putting on his foolish gun hand act, "Attractive animals, ain't they?"

The older Grange frowned at the question, "T'ain't well fed. Scrawny."

"Fei hua," Mal shook his head. "Milk and hay, three times a day. Fed to 'em by beautiful women."

Jayne grinned, obviously picturing it in his mind, "That was somethin' to see."

The younger man was shaking his head slowly, his eyes roving over the cattle, "They's branded." He pointed it that out with the air of someone revealing a flaw.

Mal, the consummate salesman, nodded enthusiastically, "Oh, you boys are hitting all the sellin' points. A fresh brand's a dead giveaway. Claim 'em as your own."

The older Grange pursed his lips, "Twenty a head."

Mal gave a half chuckle, "That's an amusing figure, in light of we already agreed on thirty with Badger."

"That's afore we seen 'em," Riddick heard the older man argue. "They're atrophied, standin' around on a ship for near a month."

Mal shook his head, "My comprehension is less muscle, more tender the meat. Thirty."

Riddick watched as Book slanted a glance at Mal asking, "Problem?"

Mal shook his head in reply, Riddick could find some amusement in the captain's bargaining as the Browncoat explained to the shepherd, "No. 'Bout a minute from now, we'll agree on twenty-five."

Riddick narrowed his eyes as the Grange brothers startled at a rattling noise, their hands were on their guns nearly as quick as River's or his would be. Book commented that the men seemed a bit jumpy and Riddick sent a look at Jayne who nodded in return easing the safety strap off his six-gun handle.

The brothers didn't notice Jayne and Riddick's increased tension, still negotiating with Mal as they were, "I'm thinking..." The older one paused thoughtfully, "Maybe we walk away entirely."

Riddick's hand drifted towards his gun as Mal's irritation hit his nose with a sharp scent though the captain's voice didn't hold much of an edge, amiability spread over the implied threat, "I'm thinking, you do that, and we got ourselves trouble." He paused and nodded to Kaylee and Inara returning to the ship, "Mornin', ladies." The captain looked again at the brothers, "Serious trouble. Of the you-owe-us variety."
Riddick nearly chuckled as the women passed Jayne and approached him; the younger man was too busy looking at Inara's swaying hips to pay much mind to the bargaining while the older one was obviously trying to figure out how hard a bargain he could drive. Finally Kaylee and Inara reached the safety of Serenity and the older Grange nodded, "We can go to twenty-five."

Riddick frowned, heartbeats in the woods, someone's adrenaline was up, it didn't smell like Simon or River, Mal was talking to the men, getting ready to take their money, "Mal, we got incoming." He fell back into military speak without thinking, "At least three, at one o'clock."

"Right," Mal didn't have much chance to react, wasn't even able to grab the bag of cash before several lawmen burst out of the brush.

Riddick cursed and ducked into Serenity's shadow, drawing his gun, grateful that the sun was behind him, he'd be harder to see. The lawman in charge didn't seem to even see him, barking out, "Marcus and Nathaniel Grange! You are wanted in connection to the illegal killing of Rance Durbin. You are bound by law to stand down!"

Riddick heard Mal muttering to Jayne, "You know, I'm starting to find this whole planet very uninviting."

Jayne was almost painfully alert, his tension singing through the air, heart beating triple time as he regarded the lawmen, "Yeah." He cast a cautious glance over his shoulder and found Riddick in the shadows of Serenity. Riddick nodded at him and noticed that Book hadn't moved much farther than five feet away from the gun hand and captain. That was not a good place to be but moving out of the line of fire might just draw more attention than the shepherd needed.

Everybody's gunbelt was dropping to the ground, Cobh was groaning over dirt getting on his precious six-gun. Mal was trying to make nice with the cops, playing at being an innocent bystander. Of course that required lying through his teeth about who owned the cattle, which prompted the lawmen to demand paperwork of the Grange brothers. Paperwork they obviously wouldn't have since the cows had just been smuggled on world.

And then it all went to hell, the distractible brother punched a lawman and stole his pistol. Zoe, being more astute about their clients than Mal, shot it out of his hand from her sort-of snipers position on the hill. Riddick took careful aim and began to lay down covering fire for Mal, Jayne and the shepherd. The older Grange brother was hollering for his brother to hurry up, as he snatched up a pistol and began to do the same thing for the younger Grange. Mal and Jayne were attempting to retrieve their guns and the money. Funnily enough Jayne's tension was gone now that he had something to do while Mal's blood pressure had to be soaring sky high since he nearly got shot in the hand before he grabbed the bag of money. Finally he grabbed it and rolled back towards Jayne, narrowly avoiding a bullet to his forehead.

Riddick managed to hit a dodging Grange brother in the arm, the pistol the man was holding went flying and Mal tackled him. The lawmen closed in on the two of them as Jayne grabbed the other Grange brother by the scruff of the neck and bashed his forehead against a tree disorienting the would-be fugitive. Riddick cursed as he smelled blood, dark and rich with oxygen. He knew the minute Jayne saw the shepherd on the ground, the big man's scent bloomed with grief. One of the last shots must have hit the shepherd.

Riddick watched as the lawmen left, vividly conscious of how close to Books heart or lungs the bullet must have gone for him to smell that much oxygen in the blood. Book was still conscious, Mal was talking to him, keeping him awake, giving him hope. That was the one thing Mal was good at, giving hope to his people. The minute the lawmen were out of sight Riddick ran, shouting for Zoe to bring a stretcher, "Mal, get ahead a me an' get the infirmary open," Riddick told his captain. "Me an'
Jayne got Book."

He looked at Jayne and knew the man was remembering the same thing he was, "Rick, you gonna be able to do this 'til the Doc gets here?" Jayne was worried or he wouldn't have asked.

"You remember your part?" Riddick retorted, "I don't forget a gorram thing an' you know it Cobh." He knelt in the bloody dirt by Book and used his shiv to open up the shepherd's shirt. "Book, you're leakin' some here." He told the man, "Gonna need to push a little bit on the wound, ain't gonna tickle."

"Thought you were a murderer son," Book asked weakly. "Isn't this a little out of your purview?"

Riddick tore off his teeshirt and began to press the wadded cloth to the wound, "How'd ya think I got so gorram good at killin'." He told the darker man, "Had to know where to shiv folks." He shook his head as Zoe came out with the stretcher. "That bein' said this is why I prefer knives to bullets. Ain't ever shivved someone by accident."

Jayne nodded as Zoe put the stretcher down on the ground, "All right," The big merc said quietly. "Shepherd, Rick an' me'll lift ya on the count a three." He looked at Zoe, "Put your hand where Rick's is, gotta keep pressure on it."

Rick waited until Zoe's hand was covering his and then took his place at Book's shoulders, "All right, this'll feel a little odd Book." He nodded at Jayne who counted down and quickly they moved the injured man to the stretcher. "Zoe, can ya keep pressure on if we go at a fast walk?"

"Can do," Zoe's stoicism covered a wealth of worry but you'd never know it from her expression. "Let's move."

Riddick scowled as Kaylee caught sight of Book, "What's going on?" She came further down the stairs and ran forward, "Oh my god. Shepherd? Shepherd, can you hear me?"

Jayne shook his head at Kaylee, "Just let us get 'im in the infirmary." He told her bluntly, "An' maybe pray some." Mal had put the exam table flat and had pulled out Serenity's rudimentary supplies making sure to get out of the way as Riddick and Jayne put the stretcher down and took off the side supports. Jayne looked at Mal, "Don't look good."

Mal took a moment to call Wash down to the infirmary before he turned and regarded Book, "We've gotta try and stop this bleeding." He observed.

"Yeah," Riddick agreed flatly. "Didn't hit his heart but I think it nicked a lung, he's got a lotta oxygen in the blood I'm smellin'." He moved to the sink and washed his hands, "I started to cut his shirt offa him, one a you finish that. Jayne, get everything laid out, just like the old days."

"The old days?" Mal repeated quizzically. Kaylee was crying and trying to reassure Book, when Wash appeared in the door.

"He ain't breathin'," Kaylee cried. Sure enough, Book's back arched and his body began to shake, convulsions racking his already frail form.

Riddick cursed, "Cào nǐ zǔ zōng shí bā dài! Jayne!"

"I got it," Zoe pulled a cap off a needle and handed it to Mal who injected Book. The convulsions stopped thankfully and the captain turned to look at Wash.

"Wash, I want you to go to town," Mal told him. "See if you can't find that jǐng cháng méi yòng of a
"Hurry," Kaylee added tearfully.

Riddick shook his head and looked at Mal, "Gonna need you to stay out of my way." He said quietly as he took the tray Jayne had laid out. "Me an' Jayne got experience with this."

"With what? Gunshot wounds?" Mal argued even as he moved out of Riddick's way. "Who among us ain't."

"No, with field surgery," Riddick looked at the wound and shook his head, "Jayne gimme the bottle." He began to carefully clean the wound, "Gotta lot of dirt here."

"Where'd you get training in field surgery," Zoe asked quietly washing her hands of Book's blood. She'd rinsed Riddick's shirt too.

"In the gorram war," Jayne said with a scowl. "Where'd ya think? Osiris?"

"When was ya'll in the war?" Mal asked as Riddick's hands moved deliberately with a tweezer like instrument. The murderer's hands were deft, his gestures almost delicate as he fished grit and fabric out of the wound.

"Well I joined up in twenty five oh six," Riddick murmured. "Jayne joined me a year later. That's where we met." He looked at the Shepherd's skin, "Anybody know his blood type?"

"I'm B negative," Kaylee offered. "Wash is type O, he said oncet."

"Mal, you or Zoe type him an' we'll see if we can transfuse him," Riddick suggested. "Me an' Cobh, we was both good at trackin' so we ended up in the same unit." He knew he was talking more than was his wont but he always had chatted when he was working on fixing someone up rather than killing them, chatter relaxed him and his patient both usually. He and Jayne were used to bickering over wounds; it just seemed to come naturally once he started with bandages and instruments. Talking to Mal and Zoe was relaxing them some so it wasn't as if he was wasting his breath.

"What unit was that," Zoe asked as she began the blood work. "He's A positive," She shook her head. "Dunno if there's anyone here can donate exceptin' Wash."

"I'm A neg," Jayne offered. "I can give Book blood."

"Right," Riddick nodded, "Cobh, take a seat, Mal you or Zoe, take your pick, one a you transfuse Jayne, the other one is my new nurse."

"Zoe you're better with needles'n me," Mal took Jayne's spot near the tray while Zoe grabbed the kit to run a tube from Jayne to the Shepherd. "So what unit were the two of ya'll in?"

"Oh, weren't too well known," Riddick shook his head, "Fuckin' lights," He cursed. "Be easier if I could do this in the gorram dark."

"Would ya see better?" Mal's voice was tense.

"Fuck yeah," Riddick nodded as he dug more grit and fabric from the wound. "I see better in the dark than I do in the light even with goggles."

"Kaylee, you turn on one little light by me, the rest of 'em you turn out. An' turn out the lights in the lounge too," Mal commanded and Kaylee obeyed at a run.
"I'm done with the needles and tubes," Zoe proclaimed from her side of the sick bed. "Jayne, gonna get you some water."

"'Kay," Jayne muttered determinedly not looking at the needle in his arm or the blood slowly moving from his body to the shepherds. Soon only one light by the tray illuminated the infirmary.

"Okay, Mal, I can't touch my goggles, you're gonna hafta pull 'em up for me," Riddick told the captain. "Just do it slow, lemme adjust."

"Gotcha," The captain nodded and did as he was told, slowly pushing the goggles up to Riddick's forehead. "Good to go," He said and went to wash his hands before he went back to the tray.

"Damn that's a helluva sight better," Riddick gazed down into the wound. "Mal, gonna need ya to get a syringe, pull the plunger out totally. Get a piece a gauze and wrap it over the opening, like you were cannin' peaches, get some tape to keep it in place."

"All right," Mal began to pull an empty syringe apart, following Reddick's instructions, "Two layers a gauze okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine, air'll get through but not dirt or nothin' an' that's what we want," Riddick told him.

"Why'd we want air?" Mal asked curiously as he finished the syringe.

"Cause he's got one lung ain't working right," Riddick told him. "Bullet nicked something, ain't sure what's goin' on there but the lung ain't takin' air in or pushin' it out right. Gonna push the needle into the lung, get air going through that. Don' want his brain to starve."

"Like that fella at Du-Khang?" Jayne asked in a fuzzy voice.

"Yeah, kinda," Riddick nodded. "Zoe you might wanna get Jayne somethin' to eat, I got some dried fruit in the cabinet behind the coffee. He needs sugar or he's gonna keel over."

"I'm on it," Zoe left the infirmary.

"Ya'll were at Du-Khang?" Mal asked as he handed Riddick another instrument.

"Saw every battle in the war nearly," Riddick shrugged and began to do his best to close the wound. "Siege wasn't the worst we saw."

"Never caught the name of your unit," The captain remarked as he handed Riddick more gauze.

"Never told ya," Riddick chuckled as he began to bandage the shepherd. "But we all got hurt so damn much me an' Jayne took on Battalion Aid duties. Never left a man behind. 'Course if we had it woulda given away that we were there. We did manage to scrounge enough to eat decent, stealin' from the enemy an' all, built up a lotta muscle with alla the work we did."

"Well I'll be a monkey's uncle," Mal blinked. "Ya'll were in the Dà Chôngs."

"Never said that," Jayne shook his head. "Rick, I don' wanna kill the cap'n today. Don' make me." Riddick slanted a glance at his old friend, sure enough; blood loss was making him a little loopy. He never had liked needles and the combination of little food, giving blood and watching the red liquid move from his body to the Shepherds was just enough to make Jayne fuzzy around the edges.

"Ain't gonna Cobh," Riddick replied calmly as Zoe reentered the room with a plastic bag of dried fruit. "Eat some a that an' you'll feel better."
"Why is Jayne asking you to not make him kill me?" Mal asked in a bemused tone.

Riddick shrugged and pulled his goggles back down before he flipped the lights on, "You think we were in the Đàn Chóng unit but you gotta ask?"

"Đàn Chóng ain't known for mercy nor for lettin' secrets out. Any enemy saw them was the enemy who died," Zoe said mildly after her eyes had adjusted. "Though I cain't quite see you an' Jayne as members of an elite scout an' sabotage squad."

"Well we've relaxed some since then," Riddick chuckled slightly and began to wash his hands. "Got the wound cleaned out, got it packed an' got his lungs workin' but this is all stopgap, keep him from dyin'." He shook his head. "He needs a surgeon, I didn't dare try to take the bullet out, it's too close to some big damn arteries an' I'm just as likely to kill him as I am to save him if I try it."

"So we're waitin' on Simon," Mal said quietly, his anger surged through his scent and Riddick nodded slightly.

"That we are," The convict grabbed his wet and bloody shirt from the sink, balling it up in his hand before he left the infirmary. "Unhook Jayne from the Shepherd before he passes out," He called over his shoulder. "I gotta put on a shirt."

River had found the dancers, found the festival of Jiangyin and let the happiness the citizens of the town felt wash over her. Girls and boys were flirting, delicately or with heavy hands, dancing together and then away, the music was infectious. She'd laughed and joined them, finding a place that let her twirl from partner to partner, reveling in the music along with them. She'd felt when Simon found her, felt his worry drain away into joy as he watched her dance. This reassured him more than anything else that she would someday heal, more than her most lucid of speeches or combat prowess, to see her dancing and laughing let Simon know that pieces of the girl he'd lost were still part of her. She hadn't been completely changed in trying to survive.

And then she'd felt something else, Richard was worried, focused, determined and resolute in his aims, someone was hurt. Suddenly the dance was no longer her focus and she stopped, Simon was needed, someone was hurt, crew was hurt and Simon was needed at home.

But Simon was afraid, confused, worried for her and trying to understand what was happening, River frowned and hopped down from the dance stand, looking around for him. He wasn't watching her anymore, he was going away, but he was reluctant... River took a deep breath and loosened her hold on Riddick's mind to concentrate on Simon. He was moving slowly, unwilling and stumbling, he couldn't see, but she could tell where he was, the angle of the ground, he was being taken into the hills.

This was the sort of thing for which the Academy had trained her, locate a target, find her way to it and kill without anyone being the wiser. She'd just leave out the killing part and focus on the finding. River closed her eyes and tightened her grasp on Riddick's mind, the mental equivalent holding his hand while outstretching the other for Simon. She wasn't stable, didn't have enough mental control to do this for long, but for an hour or two she could manage.

It took a little over ninety minutes and she could feel her control fracturing. If it had been any other
day she could have done this without any difficulty. But coming off a near month without her normal
routines, with only meditation and unbalanced physical exertions...she could feel herself regressing.
She'd need to meditate, need to do her katas and ground herself solidly before she would be semi
normal again. As it was, her words...her speech centers felt like they were deteriorating. She was
going to scare Simon, he'd never liked vague allusions and metaphor and with her near violent fit that
morning...

She knew the instant he saw her, his horror was nearly overwhelming, "No," Simon shook his head.
"Oh, no."

River grinned as she came out of the trees, relief at seeing him putting the smile on her face, "Found
you!" Simon ran for her as one of the men behind him shouted undoubtedly angry that his captive
was attempting escape.

"River," Simon shouted, "No! Run!"

River shook her head, if she left him it would be harder for the rest of the crew to track them, "Found
you." She smiled hopefully, maybe if she looked unworried and reassuring he'd feel better about the
whole thing.

"Go," He stumbled as he ran and the men caught up, surround them both.

"Bring her," The one in charge snarled.

"Simon shouldn't worry," River told her brother as reassuringly as she could, "Furyan will find us."

"River there's no way—"

"No talkin'," Simon's rebuttal was cut off with a shove to his back as the leader prodded them up the
path.

Riddick found himself pacing back and forth near the ramp, trying to figure out where River and
Simon could be when Wash came back. He'd been keeping an eye on Book, but there wasn't much
more he could do apart from worry and he could do that just as well in the bay as he could in the
infirmary. Jayne was doing pull ups with his leather straps under the catwalk but then exercise had
always been his go to for working off worry or stress.

Riddick could barely catch River's scent, faint on the breeze, dilute with the air of Jiangyin and
tinged with roses. She wasn't at her best and wouldn't be until she had a couple of solid weeks
meditation and katas under her belt again but she was aware and he knew she could feel his mind.
Whenever she got wobbly he'd always made sure she knew to keep a tight grip on his mind, like a
rock in the middle of a zen garden. Why she and Simon weren't coming back to the ship, why her
scent wasn't getting stronger he couldn't figure.

Wash drove the mule up the ramp and into the bay, drawing everyone's attention, Kaylee rushed
forward, "Where's the doctor? Why isn't he with you?"

Wash spoke slowly, his eyes, rightfully worried, were on Riddick, "He wasn't in town. Wasn't
anywhere."

Kaylee shook her head in denial, "He was in town. We saw him there. Him and River. I can show
you—"
The pilot was already shaking his head, "Town's not that big, Kaylee. Believe me when I say he wasn't there."

Jayne dropped down from his straps, "Knew it. Probably saw them cops, turned tail." His scent said he suspected worse and was verbally grasping at straws.

"Simon wouldn't. Might hide, wouldn't run," Riddick contradicted the big man. "Even if he were inclined to it, River wouldn't let him."

Mal came into the bay with an air of purpose and resignation, a frown on his handsome face, "Doctor could be called a lot of things. Coward wouldn't be one of 'em, though."

"You don't think they were arrested, do you?" Inara took Kaylee's hand, as much for her own comfort as the mechanics.

Wash shook his head, irritation coloring his tone now, "Worse than that, probably. Looks like maybe they got snatched."

Inara's elegant voice was confused, "Kidnapped?"

Wash was hooking the mule down to the grating as he replied, his tension like the smell of bay leaves to Riddick's sensitive nose. "I went by the sheriff's office. Seems if we had checked the posted alerts for this rock, we might've known it. Settlers in the hills take people sometimes. Usually tradesmen and the like."

Mal frowned and Riddick's sense of unease deepened, the captain was making a decision, one Riddick knew instinctively he wouldn't like, "And now they got themselves a doctor. And we don't."

He paused moved towards the cargo bay controls, "We're goin'." He began to shut the bay door.

Riddick tensed even further, forced himself to not palm a shiv as Kaylee objected to Mal's actions, "Wh-what are you doing? What about Simon and River?"

Mal continued to close the bay doors, "Forget 'em. We already lost two people today. If I can help it, we won't lose a third." He glanced at Wash who was already on the stairs, "Wash, get us in the air."

Riddick scowled, he knew from the sudden spike of nerves off Inara and Kaylee that his expression was darker than anything they'd ever seen from him. Jayne's scent sharpened with anger, as he realized what Mal was saying. Riddick shook his head, "Won't leave them here," He said flatly and crossed the bay to where Mal still stood by the controls. Mal was turning to argue with him when Riddick's hard fist met Mal's jaw with a sound crack.

Rage surged through him and Riddick bent, easily picking the captain up by his coat lapels, tight on the fabric of the taller man's shirt collar, slowly cutting off blood flow to Mal's brain, "I ain't lettin' you just take off an' leave my family on this godforsaken moon."

"We're stayin' put," Riddick began to say when a strange scent hit his nose and something hot and sharp stabbed him at the base of his neck. He was shouting, trying to throttle Mal into staying on the planet when the drugs hit his brain, he had only vague awareness of Zoe's voice, his body crumbling to the steel decking, Mal collapsing nearly on top of him, Jayne's careful hands, his friend's voice angry and then resigned and being carried.

"River…” His voice was slurred, his hands bound with steel, Riddick could barely get his eyes open. "Shea," He forced the words out past his numb throat and tongue, "Gotta get to River."

"Yeah," The bigger man's blue eyes were worried. "I'm workin' on that Rick." Riddick felt his
friend's hand on his shoulder, the strong firm squeeze of his fingers. "Water's comin'."

Riddick nodded and let himself relax, slumping down onto the floor, darkness overtaking him.

River moaned as she felt Riddick's mind fill with fury. Her mate was so angry, ready to kill, his fury was like a living thing inside him, the animal nearly maddened. She could feel his hands, hard on the captain, his words spit out like venom, could almost see Mal's face turning red for want of air as Richard shook him the way a dog would a rat. "Richard, Richard," She shuddered as something stung his neck, a thousand times worse than a bee sting, his mind fogging under it.

There had been a few times in the Academy that Mathias had drugged her partner once she'd been placed with Riddick. Each time the drugs had fogged his mind, made the animal rage out of control, a wolf in a man's body, guarding her jealously from any who might try to take her away. The man had been buried beneath the animal, her wolf pressing his body to hers, desire and the need to protect uppermost in his mind. She hadn't truly feared his intentions then, but she had feared his reactions should he come out of the drug induced haze to find the animal had taken her to mate. That fear had been enough to turn the animal to protection, petting and nuzzling her hair, sniffing at the perfume of her skin and pressing gentle little kisses on her forehead and cheek as if to reassure her.

It had been after that she'd truly begun to desire her partner, when she was becoming a woman in spite of everything the Academy had done. The last time they'd come to drug Riddick she'd stood in front of him and argued with Mathias, citing her partner's behavior the last time they'd tranquilized him. She'd emphasized what she'd felt in his mind, the retreat of his thinking brain, the animal coming to the forefront but too wild to be disciplined by a chemical cocktail. It hadn't kept the scientist from experimenting on them both but it had kept Riddick from becoming the animal again.

Now when they'd thought they were safe, when they'd found a haven, someone had drugged him again, unknowing of how much damage it would do, of how badly they could be hurt when the animal woke without the man and without its mate. River shuddered and prayed to the uncaring god that Jayne would have the presence of mind to help her partner. Everyone on the boat would die if the animal wasn't given free rein to find her when Riddick awoke.

She shuddered and moaned again, stumbling against Simon, "Shūǐshēn huǒrè. He's gone, gone, gone… We're lost…lost in the woods."

Simon tried to reassure her, though his own worry was nearly overwhelming her, "It's going to be okay. They'll find us. Once the Captain realizes what happened, they'll come."

River couldn't help the whisper, "No, no, no," She looked up and saw Serenity rising over the tree line, pointed towards the atmosphere of the planet, very clearly leaving. She felt Simon's shock and then his anger rising over it as he realized what must have happened.

"See there? No one's coming for you," The leader of the kidnappers sneered. "You just keep moving."

River looked from the sight of Serenity retreating into the black to the kidnappers, "If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you."

"Hmm…" Simon made a thoughtful noise in his throat, "Deuteronomy twenty four seven." He recalled, "Very apt."
"We ain't sellin' ya," The leader sneered. "Now get along."

River shook her head, "Best to not be around when my zhàng fu comes for us." She tilted her head at Simon, "When the wolf rages all men run." She shuddered as they continued walking, "The mind is clouded and only the animal remains, he will bring a plague of blood down upon them if he cannot find her, death will come like a cloud."

Simon regarded her sharply at the mention of a clouded mind and he frowned, "River, will Richard be all right?"

River shook her head, "Needs his mate the way she needs him, bleeds inside when they are parted, the string has been torn out." She lost her balance and had to lean against her brother, "Simon must not oppose him when he comes for them. He will seek out his pack, but Simon must not prevent him from taking his mate away. Will not harm her, but must keep her out of prying eyes, a warm safe den where he may regain his mind and reason."

"Ah," Simon nodded his understanding though River could read quite easily that he didn't completely comprehend the deterioration Richard would suffer or how wild the Furyan would be once Riddick did reach them. Wisely he said nothing and continued walking, making no comment on her lack of balance when she was usually the epitome of grace.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So Simon and River have officially been kidnapped. And Mal has met the animal. What do we think? Even though I wrote it I was a little pissed at Zoe, though really, with a man like Riddick throttling someone… I'd be a little worried too.

And what do we think of Riddick and Jayne's medical skills? Personally I always thought anyone as good at killing as Riddick had to have a good thorough knowledge of anatomy. And as smart as he is it was only a short leap from 'knows anatomy' to 'field surgery'.

Do we like the little glimpse we've gotten of Riddick and Jayne's shared past? I wanted that connection to have layers and we'll find out more about it a few chapters ahead. Also on the plus side, Mal's going to act less like an ass soon. That's always good right?

I wanted for Simon to not be quite as clueless, annoyed but not completely ignorant of how insulting he was, and I really, really wanted him to apologize. We'll see in a bit exactly how much he knows he screwed up.

As always, reviews and feedback, critiques and comments are appreciated.

Chinese Translation:

lè sè (garbage)

fèi wù gǒu niáng yǎng de (good for nothing son of a bitch)

Cào nǐ zǔ zōng shí bā dài (fuck your ancestors to the eighteenth generation)

jīng cháng méi yòng - frequently useless)
Dà Chóng(s) - Tiger(s)

Shuǐ shēn huǒ rè (deep water and scorching fire / abyss of suffering)

zhàng fu (husband)

Script Chinese Translation:

Fei hua. - (Crap talk)

Quote sources:

If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you. - Deuteronomy 24:7 – The Bible
The Furyan woke, growls vibrating his throat even in as he regained consciousness, there were voices near but none he counted a pack member. Chained, they'd chained him, like he was a beast they could yoke, chained him and taken him far from his mate. Her scent was lost to him now, only the remains of her perfume on the air, fading with the scrubbers of the life support system. He growled again, rage firing even hotter at the thought of that loss. Soon he'd be without anything of hers, deep in the black while his mate was dirtside, and he yanked at the cuffs that chained him to the floor. The floor creaked and his lips spread in a parody of a smile even as he roared his anger and loss into the air.

The dark woman married to the laughing man was speaking to the man of shadows. The shadow man smelt of blood and pain, old fears and memories put away now flooding back to the present. The shadow man's voice was weak, "That bad?"

The woman sounded crisp, matter of fact, when worry clouded her scent. No one could hide from the Furyan's nose, from his senses, "Battle wounds are nothing new to me, preacher. I've seen men live with a dozen holes in 'em this size. An' Rick fixed you up so you'll hold pretty good for a spell."

"That right?" Shadows clouded the dark man's voice, more memories tugging at him, weakness in his words.

"Surely is," The woman was brazening out her bluff, even as she moved to mop the fever sweat from the shadow man's brow, "Knew a man whole had a hole clean through his whole shoulder, once. Used to keep a spare hankie in there." She moved a bit more, leather over armor creaking slightly, fabric rustling and the Furyan knew she was walking around the bed from the feel of vibrations through the floor.

He pulled on the chains again, and again, unable to stop himself even as he listened to what was being said, "Where's the doctor? Not back yet?" The shadow man was asking weakly.

A lie from the woman, smells of rosewater, wrong on her, like pepper in his nose, "We don't make him hurry for the little stuff. He'll be along."

Furyan growls vibrated through the air at the lie, the lie about his Omega, his pack, family, gone, left, abandoned like worthless husks on a backwater world, his fury so loud in his ears he barely heard the shadow man's last words before unconsciousness overtook the shepherd for a while, "He could hurry... a little."

River hung onto Simon tightly as they crossed a very make shift bridge into some sort of village. The houses were run down and also seemed makeshift, as were the people. Jiangyin had not seemed to her to be overly civilized but the town had boasted a few shops and the possibility of culture even if only on festival days. This was so many steps below the town that she wondered if they'd slid headfirst into the dark ages of Earth That Was. "For lo I bring you tidings of great joy," She whispered and sure enough the leader of the men who'd kidnapped them stepped forward.
"Look what we got! Got ourselves a doctor. A real doctor," He shifted slightly and looked at Simon standing behind him, "Stand up straight."

River heard someone near one of the houses, a woman exclaiming in gratitude, "They brought home a doctor. Thank the Lord."

Simon looked at River and sighed and she shrugged up at him, "Cannot go against our nature." She reminded him softly. "You are a healer. Until my zhàng fu comes for us, you may as well help."

"Yes," Simon nodded slowly as the leader began urging them forward again. "How are you doing?"

"Her mind is fragmented again," River sighed. "She does not like being apart from her mate. Knows he will not be pleased with what he finds here."

"Will it help to keep a hold of me?" Simon asked in a low voice, "I understand it won't be the same."

"There is comfort in the familiar," River conceded her voice just as soft, "But the Furyan is… crystalline, elegant and layered, his price is far beyond rubies, no jagged edges, nothing unknown or overwhelming."

"You love him for his mind?" Simon had a smile in his voice as they were led toward what River guessed was the hospital.

"Simon has seen my husband," River retorted dryly. "Could any woman love him only for his mind when all of him so stimulates the senses? Sound, sight, touch, scent and taste?"

"Taste?" Simon blinked down at her as they were halted in front of a tall man with an air of authority.

"Yes," River nodded, "Richard tastes of salt and spice and love."

"So, Stark, you found us a doctor," The burly grey haired man was looking Simon over. "Don't recall requestin' a child though."

"She's his sister," The leader of the kidnappers whose name was obviously Stark explained deferentially. "She keeps goin' on about her husband coming to get them."

"When you enter into our fold you are born anew," The man shook his head. "All past bonds are cast aside. All are of new flesh and blood. A new husband will be chosen for you. He looked at River critically and the at Simon, "Neither of you are much more than children, how old are you?"

River shivered and shook her head, "She is old and young, child and woman, wife and not wife." She looked up at the man, "Patron, head of church, head of village." Her head tilted and she frowned, "My Richard will come for me. Come for his brother. All bonds are sacred in his eyes."

Simon smoothed a hand over River's hair, "My sister was hurt, grievously. Her husband is very protective," He lied smoothly. "I would not recommend marrying her off to someone else, she doesn't like men much."

"She will learn to obey as is a woman's place in God's plan," The Patron was implacable.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," River retorted solemnly.

"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord," The Patron said with an air of having
won the argument.

River shook her head at the Patron, "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value."

Simon broke into the quote argument before the Patron could respond, "Regardless of what the bible says or what you say regarding your church, she is my sister and while away from her husband is under my protection." He drew himself up, "I am past my majority, being twenty two years of age." He took River's hand and tugged her closer to him, "She is married. By our religion she cannot be unwed, unless her husband consents to it."

"What religion is that?" The Patron asked suspiciously.

"The religious order of Saint Jude and Saint Francis," River smiled happily as she lied, "Very common on Osiris where we are from."

"We'll give you time to become accustomed to our ways," The Patron decided. "A month or two perhaps, for you to see that our faith is kindly and right. Your sister will stay with you during that time, but any man of faith may pay proper court to her so that she may consider them as potential husbands when it comes time for her to wed."

River tilted her head thoughtfully, "But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you'."

"You see," Simon said quietly, "She is wed to one man." He shook his head, "Regardless, this is a discussion best had after your sick are seen to. River is a capable nurse in her own right so I'll be keeping her with me."

"Stark, show 'em to the hospital," The Patron ordered, clearly not pleased but unwilling to concede that he'd lost the argument.

"In here," The man Stark showed Simon into the hospital and leered after River as she passed him. "I don't figure it's as fancy as you're used to, but it's what we got." He nodded semi-respectfully to a young black woman, "I got your doctor."

The woman rose from tending a child who was obviously sick, "Oh, praise the Lord." She smiled, her voice soft and gentle. River frowned thoughtfully, the woman was dressed like the others in the village but her speech wasn't the same.

"Doralee here'll show you what's what," Stark cast one last look at River and left the dingy building.

"What's your name?" Doralee smiled at Simon.

"Simon," River told her quietly as her brother looked around evaluating the situation.

The woman was a bit startled but smiled, her expression still gentle, "Well, hello there. Who are you?"

Simon seemed to come back from his thoughts, "This is... River." He regarded her with a slight frown, "You're tired, why don't you sit down for a bit. I'll need your help after a while. Your stitches
are as good as mine." He smiled a bit ruefully, "And if I let you get too tired Richard will have my head." He looked at Doralee curiously, "Has there been, uh... is there a sickness here?"

The woman shook her head, "Not especial. Just people get sick or injured. Mostly people heal on their own, but sometimes..." She hesitated spreading her hands.

"Sometimes, you need a doctor," Simon nodded his understanding. He looked around again and nodded once, determination taking over his features. "Bring me light, and any supplies you have."

River watched as Simon treated one of the villagers, he couldn't hide his caring heart for long, even furious as he was he was gentle with the people who needed treatment. "You keep that bandage clean now, you understand?" He admonished one man.

River had looked at the bowls of water and shaken her head, fetching wood and building up the fire so the water boiled before she even thought of using it to wash the patients. Right now she was cleaning off a little girl, vividly aware that the dark skinned woman was watching her. Half an ear on the conversation behind her, River smiled and murmured reassuringly to the little blond girl aware that she wouldn't ever get a response verbally.

Doralee was looking at her again before she asked Simon about her, "She's not quite right, is she?"

Simon shook his head, "She's been through some trauma. She's recovering, though. Her husband has been a miraculous help with that. When she has a purpose its as if she was never hurt."

"She won't get a good conversation out of Ruby, I can tell you that much," Doralee's voice was amused but affectionate. "That little girl's mute."

River smiled at Ruby as she moved on to the next child, a little boy who'd obviously fallen down and scraped his entire shin. Simon was curious about Ruby still, "Do you know the cause? Was she born deaf?"

"No," Doralee shook her head and River turned to look at the woman. "No, she was fine until two years ago when she stopped talking." She paused a moment as she met River's gaze, "A place like this might be good for your sister. Quiet. Safe. A place where folks take care of each other."

River shook her head just as Simon retorted dryly, "Mmm, yes, seems like a lovely little community of kidnappers."

Doralee remonstrated gently, "The Lord says, 'Judge not'."

Simon wasn't having that, "They took us off the street!"

River kept sponging off the boy's leg and kept one eye on Doralee, "For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Romans thirteen four," She tilted her head at Doralee who seemed slightly shaken but rallied.

"Sometimes life takes you places you weren't expecting to go," The woman told them both.

"'Life' didn't bring us here. Those men did," Simon retorted. "And I will tell you now I have no intention of remaining here a moment longer than I must."
"You were on a transport ship, right? Taking a journey? It's the way of life in my findings that journeys end when and where they want to," Doralee persisted. "And that's where you make your home."

The doctor wasn't convinced, "River's husband, my brother, is on that ship." He said flatly, "This isn't our home."

With an almost disturbing reasonable tone, Doralee asked, "If it isn't here... where is it?"

River rose from where she was crouched to retrieve the iodine and tweezers so she could clean out the scrape more thoroughly. "This boy's leg has an infection," She told Simon, "Not bad, but its going to hurt until I clean it out." She looked over at Doralee, "Teacher, taken when her ship stopped, from Bernadette by your way of speaking." River shrugged, "A woman's place is with her husband, for he shall leave his mother and father and cleave unto his wife and they shall be of one flesh."

"But he's gone now, left you here," Doralee argued. "So you have no husband now."

The Reader shook her head slowly, "She was taken away from him. She cannot put him aside, and he shall not forsake her. Time and distance shall have no meaning." Her voice was soft and fervent, her faith absolute. "He will come for her. Promised her by all the stars in the sky, promised he would always come for her."

"Then he'll come and he'll be with you here," The schoolteacher said with an air of triumph.

River shook her head, "No. Deliver me from the workers of iniquity, and save me from bloody men."

Doralee looked shaken, "Psalms fifty nine two, child knows her bible."

Simon nodded, "She and your Patron got into quite the quoting match earlier." He smiled as River deftly began to clean the boys scrape. "River what was that other quote you told Stark earlier?"

River smiled wickedly and looked directly at Doralee, "If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you."

Doralee's whisper was worried, "Deuteronomy twenty four seven."

Simon spread his hands before he moved on to his next patient looking from Doralee to River, "She wants to go back to her husband. He'll be coming for us, make no mistake about that."

He could smell his own blood over the scent of the shadow man's, his wrists were scraped raw from jerking continually at the chains that bound him down. But he was almost free, the link was bending, the metal parting until his weight and fury. He could hear everything, the woman whose perfume hid the scent of illness from everyone but he and his mate, the concern of the dark skinned woman in the sickroom, the dying man's rattling breaths, the clouded sunshine of the girl and the worry of the leaf who flew, the resolve of the one who'd chained him and determination from the largest of them, the one who was nearly pack.

That one was coming closer, cautious but absolute, followed by the scent of clouded sunshine, and the dark woman was leaving the sickroom, moving upwards towards her husband. The animal
snarled in frustration, jerking at the chains again as the big one came near the door. If any of the enemy came in and saw what he'd done they'd find new chains, find a way to keep him down, keep him from freedom and his mate.

Then the door was sliding open and he could smell fear on the girl standing in the sickroom, smell worry on the man before him as he couldn't help but growl and clench his fists, jerking at the chain almost desperately ready to break his wrists in order to escape.

The big man was speaking, "Rick, gotta be quiet now, cain't get ya out if ya ain't quiet." A large hand, gentle on the his shoulder, calming the animal minutely, "Got somethin' ta wedge that open right here."

He relaxed at the scent of truth, of friendship, memories of warmth and firelight, of blood exchanged, the time of war, "Bǎ xiōng dì," He remembered, his words a low rumble in his throat.

"Yeah Rick," The blood brother nodded. "Here," He pried the link opened and found a set of lockpicks in Simon's desk, using them to remove the chains, leaving them on the bed. "C'mon, gonna steal the shuttle, get you off the boat. Kaylee's keepin' watch in the infirmary," He pried the door open and poked his head out looking around.

Blood in his ears, pounding like rage, filled his head with the urge to mount the stairs and kill the one who'd had the audacity to chain the Furyan; to chain one who had sworn he would never be chained again. But his blood brother was leading him away, quietly up to the empty shuttle, taking him by the shoulders and looking down into his eyes. He would not kill his brother, would not kill the man who'd gone against his captain to free him, but the need for blood was mounting. "Fly away," He ground the words out to show that he understood what his brother was telling him.

"Yeah Rick," His brother nodded and opened the shuttle doors. "Head back to Jiangyin, we'll probably scoop you up 'long the way. Mal'll come back for the shuttle if nothin' else. Then he'll have a reason to go back for 'em. We'll get your family back Rick. I swear it." He barely had the control to restrain his snarl at the thought of not finding his mate again. But his brother was still speaking slowly and carefully, "I gotta go or I'm out the airlock. You got 'bout three quarters an' hour 'fore we dock with that cruiser. So get gone quick like."

He nodded stepped into the shuttle, closing the doors as his brother turned and loped away. He could still smell his brother, knew his intent to return to the infirmary and pretend ignorance, deception sitting lightly on the big man's shoulders. Seating himself at the controls he took a deep breath, most often in this shuttle were the pilot and his wife, stealing time together, the leaf man left warmth and good humor lace with affection on everything he touched. He growled and powered up the shuttle, breaking away from the bigger ship as the cortex shrieked to indignant life.

He growled and gnashed his teeth at the screen, the man who'd chained him filling the cortex angry and scowling, loud words that made no sense him. His mate was in the opposite direction of the big ship, he was going to her. That was all that need be understood. The leaf man was pushing the angry one out of the way, talking about air and distance but he couldn't concentrate on the words. His entire chest ached with the need to be closer to her. "My mate, going to her," He forced the words out past his growl, hearing them as a roar. "No more chains!"

The wave wasn't quite cut off when the leaf man addressed the angry one, "Well Mal, now you've done it. There is no Dana only Zul."

"What in the gorram hell are you talkin' about?" The angry one's voice was a squawk of indignation.

"Rick ain't home no more," The pilot's cheerful voice explained, "I'd suppose bein' chained up an'
taken away from River an' Simon snapped the man. At a guess, I'm sayin' we just talked to River's láng."

He concentrated on pushing the shuttle as fast as it could go towards his mate. That was all that mattered now, he had to reach her. He could feel every part of him stretching towards her, the need as essential as air. His pack was without him, his mate hurt and with only the Omega, the healer to protect her.

River had slipped out of the hospital and sighed in relief, Simon wasn't too awful but the teacher's mind was a morass of conflicting thoughts and information without any order to it. As badly as her own mental state was the exposure to Doralee and the worried and ill people in the hospital only made her worse. It was hard to think straight, difficult to remember what to say and what wasn't safe to speak about.

Ruby had thoughts in her mind of berry bushes where she liked to go and hide, she had been hoping to go there but Doralee was keeping a sharp eye on her. River had promised to go for her and bring back berries. It would give her some much needed time alone and she could bring the fruit back for Simon and Ruby.

Unfortunately when she got back Simon had noticed she was gone, River made a face, she'd really thought the man with the broken leg would take longer to deal with. Simon had gotten faster at handling emergencies. Taking a deep breath and trying to fix her thoughts in a straight line River moved towards the front door just as Simon opened it. "River, don't... what is that?"

She couldn't help smiling, "For you." She showed her the berries in the pouch she'd made of her skirt. Part of her was thankful she hadn't worn her new clothes outside today. If she hadn't been wearing a skirt the Patron or Doralee most likely would have given her one and insisted she wear it.

"Oh," Simon gave her a half smile.

"I picked them," River told him and as expected Simon figured out what she needed.

"Ah, yes, here," He held out a wooden bowl and helped her empty the berries from her skirt into it. "We wouldn't want your dress to stain, especially as you'll be wearing it until Richard gets here."

She couldn't help smiling at the thought, "Yes." She picked up a berry and handed it to her brother. "You must eat. Important to keep up your strength if you are to run with my láng and I."

"Hmm..." Simon nodded as he picked up another berry and put it in his mouth, "Hodgeberries." He smiled slightly, "Do you remember when we found those giant hodgeberry bushes on the Cambersons' estate? And we thought they'd grown wild, but..." He shook his head, "Long while ago."

River sighed, "I took you away from there."

Her big brother shook his head, "No."

"I know I did. You don't think I do, but..." She pressed her fingers to her forehead as if to prod her memory. "Days like today, without Richard, without my katas for so long, no routine... I get confused. I remember everything. I remember too much, and... some of it's made up, and... some of it can't be quantified, and... there's secrets." Dark eyes looked at her, soft with sympathy and she knew he worried but he also had faith that she'd get better, "It's the secrets that drive me out of my mind..."
Simon. If it weren't for them, what I learned from Richard would be enough to keep me stable. I'm sorry that I'm not...

Simon covered her hand with his, "It's okay." He told her softly. "Really River, don't apologize. It's really okay."

She shook her head, feeling muddled again, "But I understand. You gave up everything you had to find me. And you found me broken." River turned her hand and squeezed her palm to his. "Found me with my lăng. It's hard for you. You gave up everything you had."

"Mèi mei, everything I have is right here," Simon traced her cheek with his free hand. "You and Richard are my family. I can never regret coming to find the two of you. Even if I didn't know about him at the time."

"You need to eat. Keep up your strength," The genius smiled as she repeated herself. "We won't be here long. Daddy will come with Richard and take us home. And I'll get better," She looked her brother in the eye and prayed he'd understand her, "I'll get better."

He nodded slowly, his gaze speculative but his eyes fell on Doralee and when he looked back at River his lips curved in a little smirk. When he spoke again it was to change the subject, "These are better than the Cambersons' berries."

She nodded solemnly, "They are. Except they're poison." She giggled when Simon spat out his berries and looked panicky, "He believed her. Made a face."

Her big brother rolled his eyes, "You are such a brat!"

River looked over at Doralee with Ruby and gestured for the girl to come over, "Promised her a treat." She explained giving Ruby a handful of berries.

Doralee shook her head as Ruby began to devour the berries, "You get to bed, now."

Simon watched the little girl make her way over to her cot and then took in River's face. River guessed she must look tired judging from her brother's next words, "We should probably think about doing the same. It's been a big day, what with the abduction, and all."

The teacher smiled, her face alight with kindness, "Well, y'all don't have to sleep here. There's a house set aside for you. We've been looking for a doctor for a good while, so things are ready."

River couldn't really blame Simon for being a little surprised, he wasn't as used to crazy people as she was these days. Everyone's thoughts sounded mad at times, even his. She shook her head, Ruby's thoughts were very loud, every time she was forced to lie down in her bed she remembered her mother, her sister, wondered if each night was the night someone would come take her away and let her bleed out into the dirt. "Her sister got killed. Mother got crazy, killed the sister. That one lived," She murmured wrapping her arms around herself. "Has nightmares that her Mother will come and finish what she started."

The teacher, her mind rippled with amazement and joy and the twisted belief that God's will had brought River and Simon to the village, exclaimed in amazement, "Ruby talked to you, honey?" She looked from River to Simon, "I-it's true what she's saying. Poor woman went out of her mind. Tried to kill her two girls. Ruby lived." She looked back at River, "Sweetheart... you are an angel. No one's been able to get Ruby to speak even a peep. Her laugh was just the wrong side of manic, "It's a miracle, that's what it is."

River shook her head, "Simon..." She looked up at her brother pleading and knew it would be too
late to keep the words in. "Ruby doesn't talk. Her voice got scared away." She stood and tilted her head, "I can hear crickets. I hear..." She looked out at the woods that surrounded the village and sighed. "The dead speak so clearly, so loudly. Ruby's voice is buried with her mother and sister."

Simon looked at Doralee and then at River, "Who were Ruby's mother and sister?"

"Mother was a seamstress," River looked at Ruby and then out in the woods again. "They took her from the town, wouldn't let her leave. Needed her to sew for them. Made her husband to an old man who wanted her." She shook her head, "Then they were all surprised when the woman lost control, no medicines, barely enough food, vitamin deficiency unbalanced her, no sunlight, sewing all day, felt pain in every limb when she moved. Drove her mad. Killed her older daughter so she wouldn't be forced to be a wife too soon. Tried to kill Ruby, to spare her the same fate, but she bled out before she could."

Doralee was looking at River with a horrified expression, "I don't understand. If Ruby didn't talk, how do you know..."

Simon shrugged, "River's always heard things. Her husband is the same way. He can hear a conversation on the bridge from the tail of the ship. He can hear through hull plating." He tilted his head, "Of course Richard can also tell when someone is lying, just as my sister can. It's part of why they're married." He frowned slightly and River knew it was because of the expression on Doralee's face. "What's wrong?"

The teacher was backing away from River, shocked and afraid, "'And they shall be among the people. And they shall speak truths and whisper secrets and you will know them by their crafts'."

"What are you talking about?" Simon asked in exasperation.

River looked at Doralee and spoke in unison with her, "'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!'"

River sighed as Doralee dragged her out by the arm to the square and began ringing a loud bell, "Very loud." She complained pulling away to cover her ears, "Stupid woman." She looked over at Simon who was furious and appalled, "Sorry, tried not to say, but it gets muddled without structure."

"I know," Simon gave her a distracted nod as he regarded Doralee, "This is lunacy. You're supposed to be the teacher here. What exactly is it that you teach?" He stood next to River as the village folk emerged from their homes to gather in the square.

The Patron stalked up, "What's going on, woman? Why are you knocking us from our beds at this hour?"

"The new doctor's sister's a witch," Doralee told him in a near panic. "She read Ruby's mind. Saw things she couldn't-"

Simon scoffed loudly, "No, River is not a witch!" He looked at the Patron, "She's exhausted and she has keen senses, hears more than most. But a witch she most certainly is not."

"I'm sure that's true," The Patron nodded gravely and looked at River, "You're not a witch, are you, nián qīng rén? You'll recall, I'm the Patron here. Do you know what that means?"

River nodded, "Yes. You're in charge. Ever since the old Patron died."
"That's right," The Patron nodded again.

River hated that she couldn't leave it at that, wished with all her might that she could get control of her thoughts and tongue but she was so gorrarn muddled from the stupid cows and the lack of routine, "And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." She frowned and knew that the bible quote wasn't going to buy her enough time, the Patron was thinking too hard on the old Patron, on what he'd done, and it came flooding out on her tongue, "He was sick. But he was getting better. You were alone in the room with him."

The Patron lunged forward and the back of his hand slammed across her cheekbone, pushing her back against Simon. His mind was filled with anger and fear and it erupted into words that spelt out her doom, "This girl reads minds and spins falsehoods. She's a witch, and we must purge the devil from her. With fire!"

River shook her head as their bloodlust overwhelmed her mind, the entire village united in one moment, hating her, their twisted thoughts invading her mind until she could only try to fight them. Punch, kick, spin and punch again, but their minds were too dark, raw and ugly and she didn't have Riddick to steady her and she couldn't fall into her trance and simply kill all of them. And then one of them got Simon and held him and his sudden upsurge of fear shocked her into a momentary stillness before someone else hit her again and knocked her into the dirt to be bound up like a hog for the slaughter.

He was feeling both better and worse, better because he was closer to River now, but worse because he was feeling a bit like he had on Planet before they'd gotten acclimated. One lung short wouldn't have been so bad in comparison to the way he felt now. His blood was still up though, so when the cortex lit up with a wave he growled at it, albeit a bit more weakly than he might have a few hours ago.

"Aw, now don't be like that Rick," Wash's smile wasn't a bad sight but it wasn't what he wanted. He growled again and followed it up with a baring of his teeth in a visible threat. "C'mon Rick, if you pull over we'll pick you up. Headed back to Jiangyin."

His only response was to stop the shuttle's forward motion and relay that information via the cortex link. When Serenity pulled up alongside the shuttle he managed to get her docked, only to hear Wash from two different directions, from the cortex and the bridge, "Mal, he looks bone tired and not in the best of moods. Mayhaps you'd like to step careful so you don't end up with a bellyful of shiv?" Mal's reply was lost as Riddick turned off the cortex and began the process of powering down the shuttle.

He'd barely managed to push himself out of the pilot's chair when Mal stormed in, gun pointed in a threatening manner, the captain's fist swinging towards his jaw. He couldn't stop the growls that were vibrating in his chest even as Mal put a foot over his sternum and pointed the pistol down at his face, "Gimme one reason why I shouldn't shoot you right now?" The captain demanded, "One reason I should keep you on the boat after this stunt."

He was vaguely aware of Kaylee rushing in, kneeling next to him, "He's bleedin'." He didn't want Kaylee to die, she was friend to his mate, Riddick felt some of the man coming back with that thought, though the low growl in his throat didn't ease down anymore.

Mal shook his head, gun still pointed down at Riddick's face, "No he ain't, don't got a scratch on
him, 'ceptin' what he done to himself."

Kaylee had her hand on his shoulder, was almost putting herself between Mal's gun and his chest. Jayne was standing in the doorway trying to figure a way they'd all live through this impasse. Kaylee shook her head and he felt his eyes start to focus on what was happening in the here and now, "No."

"It's what River said, 'bout a string, 'bout bein' pulled apart an' bleedin' inside. He's bleedin' Mal, that's why he's so crazy. It's his animal... Mal you took him away from River."

Riddick took a deep painful breath, "Kaylee, get 'way, don' want you gettin' shot 'gain."

"Get away from the guns." His voice was weak, exhausted, he could hear it, but for the first time in the past six hours the animal was letting the man speak, for all that a snarl underscored his words, "I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you—especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly." He heaved in another breath, "Can't take the animal, more miles than it can count, away from its mate. The beast goes mad, has to get to her or die tryin'."

"Well you damn near did."

"Get away from the guns." He told her, "Get away from the guns." His voice was weak, exhausted, he could hear it, but for the first time in the past six hours the animal was letting the man speak, for all that a snarl underscored his words, "I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you—especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly." He heaved in another breath, "Can't take the animal, more miles than it can count, away from its mate. The beast goes mad, has to get to her or die tryin'."

Mal stared down at him nonplussed and shook his head, "Well you damn near did." He took his boot off Riddick's chest and stepped back, holstering his gun.

"Hell Rick, we all know you're nuts," He said mildly. "C'mon, some oxygen an' you'll be good as new. Mal says we're goin' to fetch crazy girl an' her idiot brother."

Riddick didn't have too good a hold on the animal at the moment, but he knew as he was being half carried down to the infirmary that he had to object to that statement on general principle, "She ain't crazy, no more'n me," Riddick slurred his words and lost his balance. "Shit." Jayne took more of his weight until they got to the infirmary where Book lay on the exam table. Riddick nearly collapsed onto the side bench and tried to take a full breath only to start coughing.

"Yeah, 'cause you're perfectly sane," Mal drawled from the doorway, watching Jayne slap an oxygen mask over Riddick's mouth. "Stealin' a shuttle that don't process oxygen levels right. Whyn't ya steal 'Nara's?"

"Woulda been rude," Riddick muttered through the oxygen mask and looked at Book critically.

"Rude," Mal repeated, "You nearly throttled me, stole my shuttle and ain't spoken more'n fifty words but you didn't want to be rude to her." He shook his head, "I'mma start thinking the wrong half of your duo is labeled crazy."

"Been tellin' ya that," Riddick retorted. "Book, you got any pullin' when you breathe?" He changed the subject.

"A little heaviness in my chest," Book reported, "Nothing they didn't tell me to expect."

Riddick nodded, "Simon'll wanna keep ya on antibiotics for a while, pneumonia can still kill ya. Nicked your lung."

"So I understand," Book nodded. His eyes flicked over Riddick and Mal and then back to Riddick, "As I understand it Mal and Zoe have experience with such wounds, why would you insist on doing the work on me yourself? You could have left, gone in search of River and Simon, might have even found them."
Riddick shrugged and looked at Jayne who had decided to lounge in the doorway once he'd gotten the oxygen mask over Riddick's face, "For all the smells of your past, whatever secrets you got, got a right to 'em. An' you're friendly with Cobh an' he's my brother. Could say I had ta help ya, had to use what I know to help ya, or I wouldn't be any better'n them what collected their prisoners an' left ya to die. River wouldn't a wanted that."

"But you were okay with chokin' me an' stealin' my shuttle?" Mal shook his head in astonishment. "Rick we really gotta talk 'bout your behavior an' over reactions."

Riddick shook his head, "Now ain't the time." When Mal looked as if he was planning on insisting an argument Riddick held up his hand. "Ain't playin'," He told the captain. "Was close to the animal takin' over when I throttled you. Couldn't catch her scent anymore. It's kinda like Kaylee said, 'bout me bleedin'. I mighta snapped outa it, you coulda let me off the boat, come back for us after you'd gotten Book help. Or me an' Cobh coulda tracked River an' Simon an' brought 'em back. But Zoe pumped me fulla drugs an' I don't...do well with that. River coulda told ya."

"That growlin' you were doin' whenever someone passed your door, that weren't just 'cause you were pissed?" Jayne asked as if he was confused. Riddick took a moment to admire his friends cunning before he answered.

"Woke up...but it weren't the man were takin' action," Riddick shook his head. "Right now, man's kinda in control, but I'm too far away from River an' Simon. Hangin' on by a thread but the animal...it don't take challenges too well. 'Til I get my sanity back...cain't talk over much, cain't really even think clear. Was near dyin' when ya caught up with the shuttle or I mightn't a been able to even give you the words Kaylee talked on. I'm at my limit right now Mal. Don' wanna kill ya, didn' even when I choked ya. Just the animal...tryin' to get to its mate."

"All right," Mal wasn't pleased but from his scent he didn't think Riddick was lying. "So what do we do to keep you from going feral again?"

"Jayne needs to go into my bunk, find me some a River's things from the laundry, her scent'll soothe me some, an' it'll be the strongest on old clothes," Riddick shuddered and tried to regain control over his own nature, not finding it easy. "A blanket she's been layin' on, hair brush... somethin'," Before he'd finished speaking Jayne was taking off, his feet pounding up the steps.

"Okay, Jayne's on that," Mal nodded, "What else? Keep menfolk away from ya I'm guessin'."

"Mostly you, an' Zoe since she drugged me," Riddick forced the words out. "An' I cain't be in here anymore," He pulled the oxygen mask off and bolted from the infirmary right down to the bay doors and took deep breaths conscious of Kaylee following him and Mal staying away, going so far as to mount the steps to the catwalk.

"Rick, what else can we do to help?" Kaylee approached him cautiously. She smelt of caution, a faint wisp of burning oil but nothing like fear. "You need to work out? Need a chore or somethin'?"

"Cain't fight, I'll kill someone," Riddick pushed the words past the rumbling in his chest. "If Wash could go for hard burn...we can get more fuel." He shook his head, "S hard to think."

"S'okay," Kaylee soothed him. "How's 'bout I get some water, clean off them wrists of yours?"

"No," Riddick took a deep breath very aware that the animal was growling loudly at Kaylee, "Cain't...my mate has to do that... sorry Kaylee...go, go to the engine room. Don' wanna scare ya no more."
Jayne was rushing down the steps, a shirt of River's, her quilt and her hair brush in his hands. "He's right Kaylee," The bigger man said quietly. "Go on up an' coax Serenity into givin' us some more speed. Let Wash know the faster the better. He's hangin' on by a thread. Only touchin' dirt is gonna help him."

Kaylee nodded and didn't run but she did hurry out of the bay, "We'll be there in no time Rick. You'll see."

Jayne approached him cautiously, "Got a coupla things thought would help." He draped the quilt over Riddick's shoulders like a cape. "Now her shirt had some of her unders 'neath it so I grabbed them too, figured her scent'd be good an' strong on 'em. Wrapped 'em up in her shirt so's they's still private." He handed Riddick the bundle of cloth and the brush. "I'm gonna go an' sit with Book, maybe try to figure where they was took to so we can get 'em back."

Riddick closed his eyes, he'd lost his goggles somewhere along the way. He still saw too well in the twilight of the ship and there was no pretending when his eyes were open that River was here. With his eyes closed he could breathe in her scent and at least try to calm the animal. He heard Mal walking quietly overhead, mounting the steps that would lead him to the bridge. The captain's voice was clear as a bell when he spoke with Wash and Zoe, "Wash, go at full burn, fast as we can. Kaylee's in the engine room. The man can't hold out against the animal much longer."

"You got it," Wash agreed. His voice was as amiable as ever but his scent was full of licorice scent, his worry radically different than the ginger pop smell of his fear. "We'll need to hit a fuel station afterwards."

"We'll deal with that when we come to it," Mal was worried but not overly much. River's rent must not have been spent yet.

Riddick took a deep breath filling his lungs with River's scent and shuddered, this wouldn't work for long.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So we've seen more of the animal and I hope I've written this well enough that you all can get an idea of what Riddick is seeing and feeling in this state. I studied my cats for three days before I wrote this and then read up everything I could about wolves and their pack behavior. I'm hoping it comes across as animalistic enough but also realistic. We can't entirely disengage our minds after all and still be functional, even with drugs.

What do we think? Good? Bad? Ugly? Something else entirely? Oh, surprise in the next chapter... diverting from canon. Don't know if any of you will see this one coming.

And wow...this was a very quotey chapter wasn't it. I couldn't help it, if anyone could get into an argument with bible quotes it would be River.

Chinese Translations:
zhàng fu - husband
Bǎ xiōng dì , - sworn brothers
There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:8

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. - Colossians 3:18

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. - Proverbs 31: 9b-31

But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you'. - Ruth 1:16-17

There is no Dana only Zul - Ghostbusters

For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. - Romans 13:4

A woman's place is with her husband, for he shall leave his mother and father and cleave unto his wife and they shall be of one flesh. - Genesis 2:24

Deliver me from the workers of iniquity, and save me from bloody men. - Psalms 59:2

If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you. - Deuteronomy 24:7

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. - 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you-especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly. - Jane Eyre - Charlotte Brontë
River shuddered as the Patron's hand wrapped around her arm dragging her towards a post and pyre. She was too bruised and muddled to fight anymore, Riddick would be so ashamed that they'd overwhelmed her so easily. Rough hands jerked at her, binding her wrists behind the pole. She opened her eyes, everything was hazy, nothing beyond torchlight.

Simon was trying to bargain, "Take me instead. Take my life for hers."

The Patron would have none of it, "The witch must die. God commands it." He nodded at his people who moved forward with torches to light the pyre.

River took a deep breath, if she could delay...delay...maybe... "Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected." She stared down at the Patron, "Thou shalt not kill."

"You shall not suffer a witch to live," The Patron retorted and the men with the fire moved closer.

Simon shouted, running forward, "No! Get away from her!" He pushed and pulled at the hill folk, his elegant surgeon's hands punching, laying two men out as Riddick had taught him. "She has done nothing to you! If she dies tonight, it won't be God's will that killed her, it'll be you! Your lunacy! Your ignorance!"

River knew the moment her brother realized he had no hope of changing their minds, that nothing he could say would make an impact on their willful witlessness. He moved back towards her and stepped up onto the platform holding River.

"That's not going to stop us, doctor," Stark told him flatly.

River smiled and looked at Simon, "Post-holer. Digging holes for posts."

Her brother looked up at her and smiled, taking one last step he wrapped his arms around her. "Light it," He didn't even look at the Patron when he said it.

River couldn't stop smiling, she was awash in Simon's love, felt Riddick's mind nearby, his animal howling for its mate, Jayne like an avenging angel, all the crew returning for them. "Time to go," She whispered her warning to her brother. Looking at the crowd she shook her head, "The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he, who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee."

She laughed as she heard the roar of engines above them, Serenity like a storm of light and joy in the night sky. Jayne was harnessed up, standing over the open cargo bay trapdoors, Vera in his hands aiming at the hill folk. Mal and Zoe were entering the village coming from the back of the crowd. They had to speak loudly to be heard over Serenity's engines. "Well, look at this! Appears we got here just in the nick of time. What does that make us?" Mal asked with a smirk.

Zoe never took her eyes off the mob of angry hill folk, "Big damn heroes, sir."
"Ain't we just," Mal nodded, "Sorry to interrupt, folks. Y'all got something that belongs to us and we'd like it back."

River nearly laughed as the Patron objected to Serenity's interference. "This is a holy cleansing. You cannot think to thwart God's will."

Mal shook his head, "Y'all see the man hanging out of the spaceship with the really big gun? Now I'm not saying you weren't easy to find. It was kinda out of our way, and he didn't want to come in the first place." He shrugged slightly, "Man's lookin' to kill some folk. So really it's his will y'all should worry about thwarting." The captain gestured for a moment to the darkest shadows of the village where a pair of silver eyes were gleaming. "An' if ya ain't worried 'bout him, you might wanna recollect that the little woman you're set on burning has a larger and more violent half. An' he's real partial to her. Damn near killed himself an' me to get back to her." Mal tilted his head at Simon as if taking in the doctor's predicament for the first time, "Gotta say, doctor, your talent for alienatin' folk is near miraculous."

River felt Simon sigh against her, relief making him giddy, "Yes, I'm very proud." Her brother's voice was dry.

"Cut her down," Mal commanded. "Or I won't be responsible for the blood pourin' outa any man harmed her."

The Patron scowled furiously, "That girl is a witch."

Mal looked at him as if the grizzly haired man was a fool, "Yeah, but she's our witch." He cocked his gun and pointed it straight at the Patron, "So cut her the hell down."

River looked at Simon, "Richard is very angry, the animal is uppermost in his mind. Simon must not be worried when Riddick reaches her." She whispered as a hand cut the ropes that bound her, "Don't object to anything he does." An involuntary moan escaped her lips as her arms fell forward and there was a bestial roar from the shadows.

Riddick's run was more like the lope of a wolf, ground eating, relentless as he closed the distance between them, bounding up to the platform to stare at Simon, inhaling deeply, "Go, go to Cap'n," Riddick growled the words out at Simon after he'd looked the doctor over in a half a moment before he turned his attention to River.

River looked up at him and wincing, lifted her hand to touch his face. Before she could raise her arm much more than a few inches Riddick's arms were around her body lifting her so she could touch him easily, 'Mine." He growled the words out and she nodded. "Bruises," The word had the inflection of a question.

"She fought to live," River winced. "Did not win." Her shame over her failure nearly overwhelmed her and she blinked back tears.

Riddick frowned wrath filling him as he stared up at River's face, her face was marked by someone's hand, an ugly bruise covering half her face. Burnt sugar and burnt cinnamon and pecans filled her scent nearly drowning out the blood. The steel and silk that normally wound through her scent so strongly was faint to his nostrils. "Mine," He growled. "Bruises, who?" He stared up at her and ignored the pain of the torchlight in his eyes, ignored Mal and Zoe behind him.

"Fought men who wished to burn her, was struck down by the false Patron when she spoke the
"truth," River's words were whisper soft. "Tried to control it; couldn't...couldn't stop the words, like
rain falling into the river, flooded through her."

"Struck you," Riddick growled furiously and turned to regard the Patron who had turned and was
looking at him in horror. "Struck my mate." Rage was pounding through him, his blood hot in his
veins with the need to punish the one who'd hurt his woman. The animal had slipped its leash and
only River's touch was keeping him from destroying every man in the village who'd touched her.
Leaping down from the pyre was easy, but River slid down his body and shivered, citrus winding
through her scent as her bruises were touched.

Her hand fell away from his arm as he stalked towards the patron and he stopped waiting for her to
walk beside him, her place was always at his side, not behind him. "My woman," He snarled in the
face of the taller man who'd tried to kill River. "Behold, the whirlwind of the Lord goeth forth with
fury, a continuing whirlwind: it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked," He dragged the
quote from the depths of his memory and produced his shiv. "Pain," He pronounced the word
deliberately and slashed his shiv over the man's belly. "Fury," He thrust the shiv deep into the
Patron's lung as the man fell to his knees. "Wicked," He sliced the man's throat without a second
thought and his gaze fell on Simon. "Who?"

River put her hand on his arm and pointed him to three men who also bore bruises on their arms and
faces, bruises that could only have come from fighting River, from restraining her, "Took Simon,
took her. Wished to dissolve her marriage and have her for himself."

Riddick lost control of the animal upon hearing that; couldn't care less that he was about to kill three
men on River's word, no matter that Simon nodded in verification of her story. The animal craved the
blood of those who had visited this suffering upon his mate. He lost himself in the fight, in blood and
anger and death and when the three men were lifeless and bleeding out on the ground he turned and
roared at the rest of the folk gathered around them. He was covered in blood and sweat and River
was simply standing a few feet away. She nodded at him and he sheathed his shiv again, "Any
more?"

River shook her head, "Furyan has avenged the wrongs done to his pack." She looked at the hill folk
and tilted her head, "Tried to warn them. Tried to tell them but they would not hear her, "And I will
strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and
destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee."
She turned and looked up at Riddick, "Forgives her? Please?"

"Survived," Riddick told her simply. He didn't have any other words at the moment, the animal was
still too strong. "Home," He said quietly and looked her over carefully, his hands as gentle as he
could make them when he touched her skin. "Carry home."

She nodded and lifted her arms so he could scoop her up and cradle her against his chest, her slender
form feeling weightless in the relief to have her where she belonged again. Riddick looked at Mal
and the captain nodded gesturing for him to follow Zoe, who was already walking out of the village.

Mal was staying a half a beat behind, regarding the villagers as Riddick carried River away, "Now
ya'll have seen what happens when you take the wrong man's family away from him. I suggest you
rethink your little kidnapping policy 'fore it gets the rest of you killed. If you'd set fire to his woman
that man woulda killed you all, down to the last woman and child."

River shook her head and Riddick looked down at her, "Stop, must take Ruby home." She shook her
head.

"Ruby?" Riddick wasn't sure if he understood, "Gem?"
River squirmed against him to get down and ran back into the village, "Ruby, must take her home." She hurried up to the captain. "Please Daddy."

Riddick growled lightly and looked over the crowd, "Who?"

A black woman stepped forward and folded her arms, "I won't allow you to take that child into the den of iniquity that is the world of men."

He growled and stalked forward silently demonstrating just how he'd invaded their village without being seen or heard, "Mate?"

"Ruby deserves to go home too. Poppa in town, no legs, couldn't search, no one would help," River poked her captain stubbornly in the side.

"Ow, Lil Witch you're gonna be the death of me," Mal argued and looked at Riddick. "I ain't arguin', just ain't sure a baby's gonna go with us, ya know covered with blood as ya are."

River darted through the village and returned after a few minutes carrying a girl of perhaps nine with dirty blond hair and a mouth reddened by berry juice, "Ruby," She presented the little girl to Riddick who leaned forward and sniffed at her thoughtfully.

"Berries," Riddick nodded, "Ride?" He tilted his head at the girl and she looked back up at him fearlessly.

"She says yes," River nodded solemnly, "Wish she could stay with us."

Mal regarded her with something like alarm, "Ain't you two got enough to do? You wanna 'dopt a kid can't even talk?" He shook his head, "Sides if she's got a pa he'll be worried sick 'bout her."

Riddick ignored his captain and lifted the child onto his shoulders, putting her hands firmly on his shirt so she could hang on. River smiled up at Ruby reassuringly, "Cling like a burr." She instructed the girl as Riddick put one arm around her back and scooped her up again. "Home now."

Riddick didn't remember much of the trip down to the valley or into the town, Mal deemed it more politic to have he and River wait at the ship. Zoe and the captain took Ruby into town and to the sheriff's office. When he got River aboard the ship the relief of having her back hit him like a wave. He felt almost dizzy from the lack of tension and still couldn't entirely relax. Carrying her into the lounge near the infirmary Riddick raided the sickroom drawers for supplies and began to doctor her bruises. The animal was still dominant, stubbornly remaining uppermost in his mind and he couldn't help kissing and touching, his fingers feather light over her welts.

Finally River held up her hands for him to stop and forced him to sit while she straddled his legs and began to wash the blood off his skin. When she got to his wrists he could smell her tears as she cleaned the bruised and abraded flesh, her tears more than anything else made the animal retreat. "What happened?" She asked pressing kisses to his palms.

"Went a little crazy when Mal said we were takin' off," Riddick admitted without shame. "Tried to throttle him. Zoe doped me. Drugs worked just as well as they always have."

"But your wrists..." River was openly weeping over his wrists, knowing exactly what caused these types of injuries.
"Yeah, woke up chained to the floor in Simon's room," Riddick said quietly. "They'd gotten a length a chain an' cuffs, manacles really, an' bolted 'em to the bed frame where it's attached to the floor." He pressed a kiss to her cheek, tasting her tears, "Zoe didn' know what I was gonna do to Mal. For all she knew I was really gonna kill him."

"I promised after we got off planet, no more chains," River said tearfully. "No more drugs against your will. No more chains." She shook her head, "We can't stay here anymore."

"River?" Simon had come out of the infirmary and was regarding them both with a concerned air, "Why are you cry-" He stopped mid-word as he got a look at Riddick's wrists. "Buddha be merciful what happened to you?"

"Check your room," Riddick growled the words out though his tone gentled when he spoke to River. "Bảo bão they didn't know what was goin' on, an' they didn't kill me. We ain't ever told 'em what happens when I get doped up." He kissed her gently, "This is a good place for all that Mal is forever tryin' to figure us out. C'mon, let's stay. We'll explain to 'em what's goin' on with the animal an' it'll be fine."

River tilted her head and sighed, "She is overreacting again isn't she?"

"Maybe a little," Riddick tugged her closer and wrapped his arms around her. "So good to have you where you belong again."

"Speaking of that," Simon emerged from his room with the set of manacles in his hands. "I think you might owe me a new set of lock picks."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded. "Sorry 'bout that Simon." The surgeon just shrugged and took a seat nearby where he could keep an eye on Book in the infirmary but still talk with them.

"So why Ruby?" Simon asked thoughtfully after a moment. "Why her out of all the children?"

"She didn't belong there," River said simply. "Her mother died trying to make sure her daughters weren't kept there. Unfortunate methods but her motives were pure. Women are not well treated in that village."

"Cap'n's back," Riddick said quietly. "But he an' Zoe still got Ruby with them." He looked at River who had a mischievous look on her face. "So where does she really belong?"

"Shazza, Badger," River smiled. "We return to Persephone to give Badger his cut."

"Lil Witch, we got a problem," Mal strode into the bay, carrying Ruby who was squirming. "All right Lil Bit, River an' Rick are right up them steps." He followed the now running blonde child and sighed as Ruby threw herself at River, invading the lap of the most wanted murderer in the 'verse without a second thought.

Riddick couldn't help but chuckle, "Dad, she followed me home. Can I keep her?" River and Ruby's giggles were like music as he stared whimsically up at the captain.

"Her Pa weren't too worried 'bout her," Zoe said quietly. "Man passed after his wife an' daughters were taken off by the hillfolk. That was 'bout two years ago."

River sighed, "Sad." She shook her head and looked at Ruby. "Must bathe and have a thorough exam by Uncle Doctor Simon," She told the girl firmly. "And must follow Captain Daddy's rules. Very important." Ruby nodded solemnly and River smiled. "Introductions after the aforementioned."
Riddick grunted as Ruby's elbow hit his stomach as she scrambled down from the couch, "Ain't any runnin' on the boat less we're trainin' Ruby." He called out as she dashed across the room to Simon.

The doctor chuckled as Ruby handed him a handful of berries. "That's very kind of you Ruby," He thanked her. "River just grab one of my shirts and a pair of shorts. She can wear some socks until we find her decent shoes." His sister nodded and moved towards his bunk.

Mal looked at the three of them, "Any one a you gonna ask my permission 'bout yet another passenger?"

Riddick sighed, "Thought I did." He pointed out. "Won't be long Mal, figurin' we'll meet up with Shazza. River thinks Ruby'll take a shine to her an' Badger."

"All right, ain't like I'd feel easy taking the baby back to them backwards kidnapping hill folks," Mal grumbled. "You an' River get Ruby situated, she can have one a the dorms or sleep in with you two, I don't care so long as you clean up any mess she makes. Get that done an' we'll have a chat at dinner 'bout the days events."

River regarded Mal thoughtfully as she came back into the room with clothing over her arms but didn't say anything to the captain. "Richard, come with us, Ruby must see that the blood washes off."

"Yeah, an' it ain't like we all can't use a good bath." Riddick pushed himself up out of the chair and went to grab Ruby away from Simon. "C'mon now, this has hot water an' all, better'n what those moron hill folk had for baths I'm guessin'." He said when she wiggled as if to escape, "Me an' River are gonna do it too, gotta be tidy for dinner."

River shook her head as Riddick entered began to strip down to nothing, "Richard does not have clothing with him." She pointed out dryly. "She will fetch clothing for her man and herself."

Riddick grinned and began to run the water in the sink, "Ruby can watch me scrape a layer a this hair offa my face an' head."

River's smile was sweet, "Told you, want to do that for you someday." She slipped out the door.

Riddick sighed and looked at Ruby, "Pretty sure River's got plans within plans." He told the little girl lifting her up onto the toilet seat so she could see. He held up the straight blade razor, "Now this is sharp an' it ain't for you to touch. You get old enough an' wanna learn, you wave me an' I'll teach ya how to use a shiv. But for now, less River or me say, don't touch sharp things. Đồng ma?"

Ruby nodded solemnly and Riddick began to lather up his face, "Don't worry none though, even Mal wouldn't throw ya off the boat. Pretty good bunch a people. River an' Simon are mine. She's my woman. Simon's her brother that makes him my brother. Guess you're kinda like my mêi mêi. Dunno if that's all right with you or not." He caught a scent like violets and tilted his head to see her nodding. "So violets means happy. That works."

River slipped back into the head and regarded he and Ruby, "Richard is a Furyan," She said softly, "Hears, sees, smells, tastes and feels more than human men." She smiled slightly and shook her head, "I simply hear...what you're trying to tell me."

Riddick smelt violets and vanilla and looked at River, "Violets mean she's happy," He said with a shrug as he scrapped foam and whiskers off his face and head. "Not sure 'bout vanilla. Guess we'll
figure it out." He kissed River gently on the mouth after he wiped the excess shaving cream off his face and head. "I'm thinkin' you first, an' then Ruby an' then me." He suggested as he stripped off his bloody shirt.

"Sound thinking," River nodded and began to remove her skirt and sweater.

Adventures in bathing aside, it didn't take long to get everyone up to the galley. River smiled slightly as Ruby kept petting the sleeve of Simon's shirt. Her brothers shirt was long enough to be a dress on Ruby and River had grabbed a pair of the spandex shorts she wore to practice since they'd cover more of Ruby's legs. With a pair of thick woolen socks covering her feet and calves she looked like a child playing dress up but she was covered and warm enough once River had grabbed one of Simon's sweater vests and tugged it on over the shirt. Riddick had chuckled and said she really looked like Uncle Doctor Simon now.

"All right folks," Mal nodded at Riddick when he entered behind River, carrying Ruby to spare the little girl the stairs. "Wash," Mal hollered down the hallway to the bridge, "Get a course set and come have somethin' to eat." He turned back to Inara and Zoe, obviously finishing a story, "So then Shepherd says to the Companion, 'Well, a good goat would do that'."

Jayne and Zoe laughed while Inara chuckled and took her seat. Simon smiled as Kaylee entered and pulled her chair out for her. Wash hurried in and blinked at the sight of Riddick holding a child but recovered nicely and took a seat next to his wife. Kaylee handed Mal the basket of rolls as everyone seated themselves. "Oh, good. Thank you," Mal grinned and passed the rolls around the table. Ruby grinned and stole a roll of Jayne's plate.

"Hey! Wait, wait, wait..." Jayne objected as everyone laughed again and grabbed another roll from the basket as Ruby blinked and smiled up at him. "You an' me gonna talk ān ān 'bout takin' offa my plate." River leaned down and whispered in Ruby's ear and the child tilted her head and looked up at Jayne innocently. "Awww, don't gimme that look, I ain't taken it back have I?" Jayne groused.

"Well tuck in and enjoy, an' then I guess we all gotta talk some," Mal said quietly. "Few things we weren't aware of that a little talk mighta helped prevent."

Riddick nodded slowly, "Got my brain mostly back, won't be easy 'til I have some time alone with River. But just bein' close to her helps." He ran his fingers down River's cheek and looked past her at Ruby, "That means for tonight at least Ruby, you'll be bunkin' with Uncle Doctor Simon or in a room next ta his. Don't think you wanna be in our bunk tonight."

Ruby laughed aloud and made a circle with her thumb and forefinger while poking her opposite forefinger into it. River blushed and swatted at her hands gently, "Very rude." She admonished. "And no, we aren't." When Ruby made a confused face River sighed, "I know, Simon and I told the Patron and everyone else in your village that Richard and I were married. We are not."

Riddick smelt cayenne and wondered if that meant Ruby was confused, he'd figured out when he was showering that vanilla meant humor, "We'll explain it better tomorrow babydoll." He told her quietly. "Right now, ain't really the time."

"Maybe we could discuss why you felt it needful to use drugs enough to knock out a horse on my brother?" Simon asked in a chillingly correct voice. "As his doctor I could have told you it was ill advised."
"You wasn't here doc," Jayne pointed out with a shrug. "That were why Zoe figured he needed sedatin'."

"You were wrong," River said quietly. "If Richard had wanted Mal dead Mal would never have seen it coming," She looked at the captain, "You don't even have bruises around your neck from his hands."

Mal shook his head, "No, no I don't." He looked at Riddick, "What exactly were you tryin' to do when you were cuttin' off blood flow an' oxygen?"

"Wanted to track River," Riddick shrugged as he ate. "Still had a coupla hours daylight left, an' at night it woulda been easy for me to find her. Jayne coulda tracked her an' Simon in the light."

"But you didn't say that," Mal pointed out in what he obviously thought was a reasonable manner. "You stalked over an' acted like you were gonna kill me."

"You said we was leavin' Mal," Jayne reminded him. "An' you ain't known for debatin' your orders."

"Had to make you listen to me," Riddick shook his head, "You were already raising the ramp, closing up the ship, cuttin' off the last of River's scent. Animal was gettin'...nervy you could say."

"All right," Mal nodded slowly. "So what happened afterwards?"

River could feel her lips pursing angrily, "Always told you Richard protected me. Alpha male, the animal rampant inside him." She tilted her head and glared at Zoe and then Mal, "Simon never uses drugs when Richard is hurt, the animal burns through them."

"Which is why Zoe loaded up a syringe with enough sedatives to knock out a horse," Simon continued. "It's still in his system." He looked at Riddick, "If you'll let me, I can set you up with a saline drip, flush some of it out of your system. Or you can just drink a lot of water and I'll get you vitamins."

River took a look at her man, narrowing her eyes thoughtfully and then looked at Simon, "Needs time alone more than saline. Water and vitamins please." Her gaze turned back to Mal and Zoe, "Scientists drugged Richard four times when we were there. Each time he was unconscious for perhaps an hour or two and when he woke..." She smiled slightly, "When he woke he wasn't Richard, wasn't the man. The animal had taken over..." She shook her head, "In cryo Richard can remain awake, aware, but tranquilizers... they do something different."

"When you were with him an' they drugged him," Zoe's voice was deliberate, showing nothing of the regret River could feel in the first mate. "What happened?"

She looked at Riddick and lifted her hand to caress his face, she could feel the warmth of his mind, the animal nearly purring under her touch, the love and trust she felt for him soothing the animal like nothing else, "The first time, the animal wanted me, but I was afraid then. My fear...burnt cinnamon in his nose... Richard put me behind him, even put his back to the door. Surrounded me with his body to protect me. Gentle, kissed my forehead, finger combed my hair, tried to keep anyone from hurting me even himself."

Mal tilted his head, "You mean to tell me he ain't ever slipped? Not once when they drugged him up?"

Riddick spoke then, his voice a dark rumble of sensation over her skin, and River smiled slightly, "Goes 'gainst every instinct for the animal to hurt its mate." He said slowly, fatigue was slowing his
words. They'd need to go to bed soon, take comfort in each other. "Animal knew who she was the moment I saw her...just couldn't let anyone know." He looked at River and she nodded, she could explain.

"Mal, animals don't rape each other," River said quietly. "Animals don't torture. A cat might toy with its prey, might play but the death itself is quick and merciful. Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to." She caressed Riddick's face again, "When the animal knew I was afraid, when it was uppermost in Riddick's mind, any instinct it had was to protect, not to take or possess." She shook her head, "But this time, when he woke from the half sleep the tranqs put him in...he was chained down. I wasn't with him to soothe him and he was being taken farther away from me with every moment. It's a wonder he didn't kill all of you when he escaped, but to his mind that probably would have taken too long. Faster, simpler to steal a shuttle than kill people the man considers allies."

"That why you near killed yourself Rick?" Mal was frowning at Riddick's bruise blackened wrists and the raw wounds from jerking at the manacles. "Like an animal gnawin' its leg off to escape a trap?"

"Closest you'll come to understandin' yeah," Riddick nodded. "You were lucky the oxygen was screwed up on the shuttle or I woulda killed ya for pointin' the gun at me later. Animal was in control, barely had enough sense to realize what Kaylee was talkin' 'bout. It's a gorrarn miracle I could dredge up that quote; 'tween the drugs and the oxygen I was already half dead."

Simon nodded his agreement, "It's a testament to your strength and stubbornness that you weren't permanently damaged." He frowned thoughtfully, "If you'll come by the infirmary tomorrow I'd like to run a few tests, measure your responses and make sure you aren't still oxygen starved."

Riddick nodded, "In the mornin'." He conceded and looked down at River and Ruby past her. "Lil Bit you gonna be all right iffen we go off to bed?"

Ruby tilted her head and nodded thoughtfully before her eyes flew up to Jayne and her hand snaked towards the half roll he still had left. "Ah, no," Jayne picked it up and grabbed the bread basket putting another roll on her plate. "You want more you ask, point or tug on me or somethin' but takin' offa other folks' plates ain't kosherized rules."

Ruby stared up at him and nodded solemnly before she began to eat her second roll. River kissed her forehead, "Jayne has the right of it Ruby," She seconded the gun hand. "Long day, must retire now."

Simon smiled down the table at Ruby, "I'll read you a story out of my Encyclopedia, from Earth That Was before you go to sleep ān ān," He promised gently.

River stood and winced as her bruised limbs were forced to work, Riddick standing up beside her to wrap an arm around her waist. Before they could leave Mal spoke quietly, "Rick you take tomorrow off, much time as you need. I'll spell Wash on the bridge. 'Spect I coulda done better by you. Sorry I didn't."

River smiled, pleased when her mate just sent Mal a tired smile, "Hell Mal, you had a wild Furyan; a rabid wolf on your hands, I'm just glad I didn't hurt no one an' I'm alive to get over it."
exhausted, her scent filled with notes of pineapple that always meant mental and physical exhaustion.

He growled and rolled so she was beneath him, pinned to the mattress and kissed her, his lips demanding, need filling him. He wanted her scent to cover him, wanted her body marked by his, his scent on her, "Gotta tell me to stop tiān shǐ." Riddick groaned the words as his body began to press against hers, her legs parting under his weight, cradling his hips to hers while his dìdāo rubbed over her nether lips, feeling her heat and honey scent gathering between her thighs.

"Not sure I want you to stop this time," River admitted. "The Patron would have given me a month but then he would have married me to someone else, or to himself, I couldn't tell. Maybe the man who'd stolen us." She shuddered, burnt cinnamon wove into her scent, "Didn't want that. Want you to possess me, mark me, make me yours." She felt his mouth on her cheeks sipping at the salt of her tears, tasting her, wanting every last part of her. "Would rather be a little afraid with you and belong to you utterly," She admitted, shifting under him so his body was perilously close to hers.

Riddick groaned, he could smell the truth in what she said, but the animal it wanted its mate whole, ready and eager for it. Maybe it was pride, maybe neither the man nor the animal could bear the scent of regret on her skin. "Can't," He pulled his body away from hers and her legs wrapped around his waist, "Can't hurt you River. Can't," He shuddered, his body was ready, was more than ready, but the rest of him, even the man knew it wouldn't be right. "Please River," Riddick knew he was begging and he never begged, but he buried his face in her hair. "Please zhī ài don't make me hurt you," He groaned the words against her ear and felt her thighs loosen. "Give you whatever you want, my mouth, my mark, but I don't wanna hurt you."

"Shhh..." Her arms wrapped around him, fingers stroking his newly shaved scalp down to his neck and shoulders. "My Riddick, my beautiful murderer, won't ever make you do what you don't want," She shivered under him, no doubt reading his anguish, the animal's panic at the thought of hurting his mate. "Impatient and afraid does not make for readiness," She agreed softly. "Give you whatever you want my mate," River's words echoed his, "My mouth, my mark, whatever you need. Won't ever ask you to hurt me, my love."

Riddick moaned as she shifted her hips under him, his jī ba was now pressed hard against her clit, her honey wet on his flesh and every time he shifted slightly he felt arousal echoing through her body to his, her honey scent hot in his nose. He rotated his hips over hers and felt her shiver in need, "Wanna feel your teeth on my neck." He groaned hotly into her ear as he pumped his hips against her again. "Want a scar says I'm yours."

River was moaning under him, his hands had found her breasts, tugging and teasing the sensitive nipples before he palmed the soft flesh and rubbed in the way he knew she loved. "Yes," She shivered and he could almost taste her arousal in the air. She was close, he could feel how close to her fall she was, hot and wet under him, felt so good beneath him. "Riddick, please...I'm...so..." She was writhing beneath his body, every scent that burst off her skin simply fed his hunger.

"C'mon River," Riddick coaxed as he drove her relentlessly toward pleasure. "My woman, my mate," he groaned as his balls tightened and he got closer to his fall. "Gotta feel you, need to feel you markin' me River," He shuddered as her hands slid up his spine, her lips on his neck, just under his ear, he could feel her teeth, the delicious scrape of them against his flesh. "Ohhh..." She was moaning into his ear, and abruptly her entire body stiffened with shock as her fall cascaded over her without warning. Her scream of pleasure, a harsh cry of his name cut off as she sank her teeth into his neck. Riddick shuddered and her name erupted from his lips as he fell, his seed hot and thick on her belly and curls. He couldn't help himself as his body jerked and emptied he bit down on her shoulder, her blood bursting onto his tongue.
"So beautiful," Riddick muttered. "Don' wanna move yet." He wrapped her more closely in his arms and kissed the wound he'd given her. He felt her tongue laving the bitemark she'd given him and moaned as his body began to quicken again. "Wanna keep your mark on me bǎo bǎo," He groaned and began to kiss her again.

"Inara has salves...can ask her," River was moaning under him again and he knew that this would be a long night for both of them. The animals needed to be sated with touch and scent and taste and that wouldn't happen with only sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So Mal seems to be growing up a little bit at least right? Waiting for answers instead of demanding them. What do we think of how 'Safe' ended? I just couldn't see Riddick, nearly out of control, with River endangered, letting the Patron or the men who'd kidnapped his pack live. The hill folk really are lucky he didn't slaughter the lot of them. It's not as if River was in any condition to stop him.

What do we all think? I've been accused of, and I'm paraphrasing here, 'lazy writing' because of how River acts in this episode. I just really liked this opportunity to show that both of our duo really are stronger with the other one around. River might seem weaker than Riddick but mentally I think she's the strong one. It takes a lot of discipline to act even halfway normal or in control when you're in pain. It also takes just about all of your effort, especially if its nothing you have any hope of controlling. I've had to drive with a migraine and its not something I recommend. (Yes I'm over forty and I've had a full and varied life.)

We're going to take a few chapters before we get to 'Our Mrs. Reynolds' because River and Riddick have a little job to pull of their own.

Chinese Translations:

Bǎo bǎo - darling/baby
Dòng ma? - Understand?
mèi mei - little sister
ān ān - honey /endearment in addressing a little girl
tiān shǐ - angel
diǎo - cock
zhì 'ài - most beloved
jī ba - dick
bǎo bǎo - darling/baby

Quote Sources:
The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the
tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he, who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee. - Ezekiel 25:17

Behold, the whirlwind of the Lord goeth forth with fury, a continuing whirlwind: it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked. - Jeremiah 30:23

Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to. - Mark Twain
River moaned as she tried to move, her body had stiffened overnight though she and Richard had slept very little. He’d found a bowl and bathed her after their third session of their version of lovemaking, allowing her to do the same to him when she’d insisted. The animals within had done their best to mark each other with their scents, she’d bitten Riddick more than once, he had bloody teeth marks on his shoulders and neck as well as his pectoral muscles over his heart. Riddick's animal had done much the same with her, her back below her neck bore the marks of his teeth as well as her shoulder and her thigh.

"Bǎo bǎo you all right," Riddick frowned as he watched River moving so stiffly. "Them bruises a yours…we didn't aggravate 'em did we?"

"Too much time immobile," She groaned as she tried to stretch. "Must have stretching and katas before sparring and weights." River looked over at Riddick, "You will be feeling the effects as well."

Riddick pushed himself out of the bed and shook his head, "Little stiff; ain't bad if I'm alive." He shrugged easily. "Lemme pull on some pants an' I'll talk to Inara 'bout those salves." He put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed drawing a moan of pleasure from her lips. "Might see if I can get some lotion from her, give you a little rubdown. Might help with the pain."

"She can endure if he does," River frowned at him and shook her head.

Riddick frowned, that was the problem with a reader, she knew when he felt pain, when he was ignoring it or suppressing it, just as he could smell it on her when she was doing the same thing. "Shoulders are the worst of it for me, I give you a rubdown and you work on my shoulders an' back afterward," He bargained. When she folded her arms with a wince and a stubborn look he sighed. "C'mon River, you know I can't stand it when you're hurting. Makes me twitchy."

"His suggestion is acceptable," River wrinkled her nose at him. "In the future we must stretch before retiring so that we may avoid this discomfort."

"Yeah, neither of us were thinkin' last night," Riddick agreed with her and sat back down on the edge of the bed. "Animals needed each other."

"Yes," River moaned faintly as his hand ran over her back, gently rubbing over her spine. "My Riddick doesn't need lotion, his touch is soothing."

"Well why don' I get my woman all warm an' relaxed an' we'll have our workout," Riddick bent and pressed a kiss to her spine. "An' after that, got somethin' to do with Kaylee."

"The bond," River smiled. "She will be a good sister to him," She moaned as his big hands worked on a kink in her shoulder and panted. "Would like to be massaged another way," She flipped onto her back and caught his hand in hers, pressing it palm down to her breast. "She would like Richard Riddick to stretch her with his hands," The wave of hot desire from her partner seemed to roll over her skin like a tidal wave.

"I can do that," Riddick covered her body with his. "Thinkin' its time I used your toy on you too. Maybe you'll like it more if I'm the one usin' it on you tiān shī?"
"Possibly," River's hand drifted to his diǎo and began to stroke his flesh teasingly. "Want your diǎo in my mouth. Want you to enjoy me."

"I always do," Riddick groaned, concentrating on ways to drive his woman as crazy as she made him.

It was past fourteen hundred ship time when Riddick and River emerged from their bunk. Still moving a bit stiffly they stopped in to see Inara and then Simon before going out into the bay and dazzling the watching Ruby and Jayne with a display of kung fu among other things.

When they were going through their cool down Simon came out and began to test Riddick's reflexes worriedly. Finally pronouncing him fit and with no ill effects from the lack of oxygen the doctor smiled, "Feeling better I would guess." He looked at River and then at Riddick, "Ruby has been helping Jayne with his chores."

River grinned at Ruby who nodded her enthusiasm while Jayne sighed and caught the little girl to sit in his lap with an ease surprising to anyone who didn't know the merc was the oldest of four.

"Yeah," The big man smiled down at the child, "Lil Bit an' me we swept out the bay an' checked alla the lights. Even loaded the cleaner with the dishes."

"Been workin' hard," Riddick observed, feeling his lips curve into a smile. "Eat breakfast?"

Ruby nodded and smiled up at Jayne who shrugged, "We had some egg protein an' ham. Made up somethin' simple for lunch." The big gun hand told them. "She's gonna have a nap in a bit," He looked down at Ruby sternly. "Simon's gonna read her a tale an' then she's havin' a nap."

Ruby shook her head stubbornly and Jayne frowned back, equally stubborn until Riddick intervened, "Cobh, let's see how she does without one, might be what she needs to sleep through the night."

Jayne tilted his head and shrugged, "Fine with me. Doc said he'd start teachin' Ruby her letters this afternoon. Guessin' anytime he's ready'd be good."

River smiled, "Ruby will enjoy that. No one bothered to teach her anything since she stopped speaking."

Ruby nodded and hopped down from Jayne's lap before taking the big man's hand and tugging on it. Riddick watched as the tiny girl bullied and cajoled wordlessly until the gun hand got up and was pulled towards Simon. "Guess you're gonna be sittin' in on the lessons," Riddick chuckled. "Hey Simon, be nice all right?"

Simon blinked first at Riddick and then at his new student and her big companion, "If Jayne wants to listen I don't see why he shouldn't." The core doctor lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug, "Just don't make fun. I haven't exactly done this before."

Jayne shook his head as Simon led them into the lounge, Ruby pulling Jayne along, "Ain't like I got a lotta expertise in this doc. Might learn somethin' myself."

River tilted her head and looked at him, "If we want to speak to Kaylee in private we'll need to do so soon." She murmured. "She's in the engine room." She draped her arms around his neck, "Before he goes to offer Kaylee the bond, must kiss his woman."

"Oh yeah?" Riddick grinned down at her and sat down on Jayne's weight bench. River simply
followed him down and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Yes," River nodded, "My mate. Must kiss his woman. She will have his lips on hers. A night of embraces is not enough to make up for a day of lost kisses." Her dark eyes twinkled up at him teasingly even as she pulled his mouth down to hers.

"Hmm...I guess I can kiss on you some...b'fore I go an' get me a sister," Riddick murmured against her lips. She was always so soft and sweet under him, the passion of her kisses took him by surprise sometimes. He couldn't ever forget she was a warrior the same as he was but her affectionate nature made him ascribe a gentility to her passions that wasn't entirely accurate. A kiss with River filled him with more heat and need than he'd felt when he'd seen whores naked. Her hands slid up to caress his neck and scalp and her mouth opened under his, sucking on his tongue until he was holding her tightly against him, feeling the delicious pressure of her breasts against his chest.

"Riddick is very wicked," River murmured as he slowly eased out of their kiss, her lips brushed over his and then his chin and jaw before she slipped out of his arms.

"I'm a bad man," Riddick agreed with a grin. "And you're my wicked woman."

"Come then, let's go corrupt Kaylee," River giggled and he rose, following her swaying hips up to the engine room.

The bubbly mechanic crawled out from under Serenity's engine with a happy hello when she saw who had come to visit, "Ya'll look a lot better'n you did last night." She smiled joyfully.

River smiled and sat in Kaylee's hammock, "Kaylee must pay attention to my Riddick." She commanded with a sweet smile at her friend. "Richard wants you for his sister."

"Sister?" Kaylee finished wiping her hands on a rag and shook her head curiously. "I don't understand."

"It's a little odd, it's a Furyan thing I guess," Riddick took a deep breath. "I want to make you my sworn sister, my blood sister, the way Jayne is my brother." He told her gently, "If that's what you want."

"Well sure I'd like you as a brother, but I don't get why," Kaylee nodded even as she questioned his intentions.

"It's hard to explain," Riddick shook his head and sat down on the steps that led into the engine room and extended a hand to Kaylee. "If you do it, it'd mean that you're my sister, I'd protect you with my life, just as I would River or Jayne or Simon."

"But why?" Kaylee nodded even as she questioned his intentions.

"I'll explain in a minute," Riddick smiled as gently as he could. "For now, if you agree to the bond, give me your hand." He held one of his sharpest shivs in his other hand.

Kaylee frowned worriedly, "Is it gonna hurt?"

"Yeah, some, as little as I can help though," Riddick nodded honestly. He wouldn't lie about something like that, not when it was about the blood bond and especially not with River watching.

"All...all right," Kaylee extended her hand slowly and Riddick took it in his own. He frowned down at her palm and made sure the skin was clean before he drew the point of his shiv over her palm in a long shallow slice. Quickly he did the same on his hand, from his palm to the fleshy part of his
thump, a bit deeper than hers to get more blood before he clasped his hand over Kaylee's. Firm pressure, palm to palm, blood to blood until he could hear the pulse of her blood in his and finally, his heartbeat through her veins.

He was conscious of Kaylee's discomfort, his grip was very strong, she was confused, but she wasn't afraid. Finally he pulled their hands apart and drew her palm to his face so he could smell her wound. Satisfaction rolled through him and he smiled as he caught his scent in her blood, "You're my sister now Kaylee, my méi méi, just like Cobby's my brother. You ever need me, for anything barrin' that could hurt or take me from River… you just ask. Don't care what it is."

"But I didn't do nothin'," Kaylee was confused, happy but confused, he could smell it on her. "Really, Rick you don't owe me anything."

"You kept Mal from killin' me, realized what was wrong, put yourself 'tween me an' his gun," Riddick was implacable. "He'd a killed me Kaylee. Mighta felt bad about it later, but I woulda been just as dead. River woulda been lost."

"I couldn't just let him shoot ya," Kaylee argued. "Jayne woulda done the same if he'd gotten there first, he's the one talked me inta helpin' him get ya out."

"I know," Riddick nodded. "An' I'd owe him my life twice't. But you didn't hafta stand up to Mal an' you did." He looked over at River, "Way River an' me are…you saved both of us Kaylee."

River broke in argument, "Means you're family Kaylee, your Rick's sister like I'm Simon's brother." A glimmer of a smile curved her lips, "Doesn't make Simon your brother. He's still fanciable."

River turned to the two of them, "Way River an' me are…you saved both of us Kaylee."

Kaylee blushed, and hugged them both, an embrace smelling of affection like strawberries and sun to his sensitive nose. "Nice to have family, just don' like to think of it as owin' or anythin'. Woulda helped ya even if you was meaner than a polecat an' twice as ugly."

Riddick chuckled, "Know what you mean." He smoothed a strand of hair behind his new sister's ear. "Best c'mon down an' have Simon clean that cut, make sure we get it bandaged good. He'll probably bluster at me some but that'll just be worry for you."

"Don't see why he'd worry on me," Kaylee shrugged but began to follow him out of the engine room. "I've gotten plenty a cuts and scrapes workin' on our girl. 'Spect that's why my hands ain't soft an' pretty like Inara's an' River's."

River caught Kaylee's uninjured hand in her own and let Kaylee feel the calluses across her palm, "Don't have soft hands either." She told the mechanic with a smile. "Zoe neither. Strong women, strong hands."

"River's right," Riddick tossed the words over his shoulder. "Don't have much use for a woman can't hold her own, thinkin' Simon's the same way." He waited for Kaylee to come abreast of him before continuing forward, conscious of River's amusement at something as she walked behind the two of them. "An' cuts an' scrapes from Serenity's different than my shiv slicing open your palm."

Kaylee shrugged and shook her head but didn't argue the point. When they entered the infirmary where Simon was quietly making notes on a datapad Riddick put a gentle hand on Kaylee's shoulder and brought her forward. Before either of them could speak, River came into the bright room and smiled at her brother. "Simon must be a doctor and also zhèng rén jūn zǐ," She bowed politely and folded her arms as she regarded her big brother.
Riddick looked from his woman to her brother and tilted his head. Simon both looked and smelt confused but when River looked significantly at Kaylee his face cleared and he nodded his understanding. Unfortunately that still left Riddick and Kaylee in the dark. Deciding to ignore it for the moment, Riddick brought Kaylee's hand to Simon's attention, "Need to make sure this is good an' clean." He showed the doctor the long thin slice across Kaylee's palm.

Simon blinked at the wound and got out the appropriate cleansers, "Did you cut yourself on the engine?" He asked curiously. "I don't see any tearing of the flesh, no bruising."

"Nah," Kaylee shook her head. "Rick's got one that's similar, cross the bottom of his thumb, said it makes me his sister."

"Jié bài," Riddick added helpfully. "Kaylee kep’ Mal from shootin' me when I stole the shuttle." He looked at his new sister's palm, "Need it cleaned doc, but if Kaylee don' mind, the scar's pretty important to keep."

"I imagine some of that salve I smell on you and River would do the trick," Simon murmured. "But let's clean it out first." He looked at Kaylee with concern, "You let me know if it hurts Kaylee, just because Rick's your gē ge doesn't mean you have to act like him."

Kaylee chuckled, "Since I cain't see in the dark, don't guess that'll be too likely." She glanced over at Riddick with a half-smile. "I'm a big ol' fraidy cat when it comes to guns an' fightin', don't 'spect you'll have much use for me."

"Use ain't got a thing to do with it," Riddick kept his voice low and soothing. The last thing he wanted to do was work Kaylee's nerves. "Value your heart Kaylee. That kindness an' need to help folks. Scared you mighta been but you still put yourself 'tween me an' Mal's gun."

"You what?" Simon looked from Riddick to Kaylee and back again, "When exactly was Mal getting ready to shoot you Rick?"

"That woulda been about the time we caught up to 'im an' he was ready to pass out from lack of air," Kaylee rolled her eyes. "Didn't wanna take Inara's shuttle 'cause it would be rude. How he could be half outa his mind an' still remember that is beyond me."

River came to lean against Riddick, her slender form warm against his side taking his scarred palm in her hands and pressing kisses to it. "Animal still knows right from wrong," She explained softly. "Still did not wish to harm or frighten his friends."

"Well Jayne an' me did what we could," Kaylee shook her head as Simon smeared a smelly salve over her cut and wrapped a bandage around it. "I sent Zoe up to the bridge an' kept Book company while Jayne helped Rick bust out but we was both nervous as hell Mal'd put Jayne out the airlock so we had ta be really quiet."

Simon shook his head, "How did you even get into the shuttle before Jayne?"

"Rick had locked the shuttle behind him, Cap'n needed me to get the doors unlocked," Kaylee smiled. "Jayne was right behind us, but if he'd made a move while Mal had his pistol out Jayne woulda got shot. Mal wasn't in too good a mood."

"I imagine not," Simon shook his head and patted Kaylee's hand before he moved over to examine Riddick's cut palm. "Rick, as Kaylee's older brother on the boat, I need to address something with you."

"All right," Riddick caught a whiff of amusement from River and wondered what the doctor was up
"You are older than Jayne though I consider you both her brothers now," Simon said quietly. "So it falls to you as to how you will allow me to make amends to your sister for the insult I dealt her on Jiangyin."

"You insulted my sister?" Riddick's voice was still mild but he couldn't help the growling undertone that vibrated through it at the thought of anyone giving insult to Kaylee. As he understood it, insult in Simon and River's world meant that Simon had said or done something extremely uncouth or rude to Kaylee, in some cases it could mean an unwanted physical act though he doubted Simon had gone that far. It wasn't something he would normally have thought of Simon but the doctor had been in a very bad mood when Mal had sent him off to town with River.

"I have no excuse," Simon nodded formally. "I was angry with the captain and made derogatory remarks about Serenity. As I am aware that insulting Serenity is tantamount to insulting Kaylee I apologized. But I wish to make formal amends. I hope you will give me leave to do so."

"But he already apologized," Kaylee shook her head looking at the two men. "He said it real pretty an' all."

River shook her head at Kaylee, "Asked that he be allowed to earn forgiveness." She reminded Kaylee, "You never asked Inara what he meant."

"Means he has to apply to the head of your family an' be allowed to make amends," Riddick explained quietly recalling his lessons in etiquette with River. "He ain't allowed to be over familiar with you until he's done so. That means that he must treat you with the utmost respect until he's given leave to relax his manners around you again. He insulted you, said hurtful things, because he was angry with someone else. That isn't the behavior of a gentleman."

"But I ain't a lady," Kaylee protested.

"Yes you are," Three different voices contradicted her in various tones and volumes and she blinked in shock.

"You are Kaylee," Riddick nodded. "An' Simon needs to treat you as such." He looked at Simon. "You'll remember that when you speak to her."

Simon nodded, his entire manner deferential, "Absolutely." He turned and bowed slightly to Kaylee and offered her a tiny smile before he turned back to Riddick, "Now let me see your hand."

River hummed to herself as she tapped away on the keyboard of her cortex and was aware of Wash's curious look, "If he has a question he should simply ask." She smiled as he took a seat beside her.

"All right, I'll bite," Wash's voice was humorous. "What are you doing?"

"Working." River's smile widened to a grin as she checked something on Serenity's cortex against the data on her own screen.

"But what on," Wash took a seat next to her, glancing curiously at the screen.

"Well," River tapped something else. "Searching for information, narrowing possibilities and formulating plans for a second story job whilst we are on Persephone."
"Uh, crime?" The pilot blinked at her, "Since when do you plan crime?"

"Must retrieve information," River murmured tilting her head. "Preliminary work is almost done, looking for building plans now. Will need to wave Badger and Shazza, she and Richard will need backup for the crime. Distraction will be necessary."

"Why go to Badger though," Wash's voice was a little hurt. "Why not ask us? We could help."

River smiled at him, "Know you would." She tried to reassure him, "But Cap'n doesn't believe she is capable of planning or executing a job. Cannot put crew in the position of being forced to disobey orders so they might help, or lie to the Captain."

"So how are you gonna work that with Rick?" Wash wanted to know, "Since he's you know, part of the crew that isn't supposed to suborn mutiny?"

"It's simple Wash," Riddick said easily as he entered the bridge carrying Ruby, "I ain't Mal's first. I belong to River. Just like she an' Simon belong to me."

"Like Jayne an' Kaylee now?" The pilot wondered, "And what is going on with Kaylee and Simon? I am sorely confused."

"Not hard to figure," River smiled at him as Riddick sat with Ruby in the navigator's chair and began to show the little girl letters on the cortex keyboard. "Jayne and Kaylee are blood bonded with Richard, siblings to my zhàng fu. Still belong to Mal but my Riddick considers them his to protect." She shrugged as her fingers danced over the keyboard conscious of Ruby's curiosity along with Wash's as she worked, "Still part of Mal's pack though. Problematic."

"Yeah, considerin' Mal's plans usually don't go so smooth," Riddick muttered his annoyance palpable.

"There is no Dana only Zul," River agreed slanting a grin at Wash who rolled his eyes.

"Yeah that was a prime example of how things go less smooth around here," The pilot agreed. "So what are you planning to steal with your job the rest of us can't help with?"

"Information," River said promptly. "Looking for someone and this place I intend to rob may have information regarding her whereabouts," She turned to look at Riddick soberly. "Can't say anything yet, no way of knowing if the intel will be any good. But it's a place to start. Have to do something."

"Yeah, know what you mean," Riddick agreed. River smiled happily, Ruby was pleased that her new friends could understand her, even Simon was very good at figuring out what she meant, and the rest of the crew, especially the big man Jayne seemed to enjoy having her around.

"Was thinking it would be a good idea to find some information on the cortex about sign language," River looked at Ruby, "So that you can speak to people without using your voice. Very smart girl, no reason not to communicate."

"Won't that be a little confusin' for anybody who don't speak it?" Wash pointed out with a half-smile already working the cortex for the information.

"Until we can get Ruby the tools she needs to speak to everyone around her, best to have at least a few she can talk to," Riddick said after a moment of his own work. "We can print off some things, teach Ruby, let her teach herself an' Shazza ain't stupid woman. She'll catch on pretty quick."

River nodded as she brought up an old text with illustrations, "Old ASL speech, still used because a
better method was never found if hearing or speech could not be restored." She sent the information
to the printer in their bunk and smiled slightly. "Can teach Ruby now," She announced after mentally
flipping through the book once again. Setting the cortex to search for more information on the subject
she turned and smiled at Ruby. "We'll start with the alphabet."

Dinner that night was interesting with everyone trying to learn sign. Mal laughingly declared a
moratorium on language lessons lest someone lose an eye to an errant chopstick or knife. "Did want
to talk to you an' Jayne, now that you're somewhat recovered," The captain looked at Rick and then
at the larger gun hand. "The docs on the Magellan said whoever did the field surgery...probably
saved Books life. Know that Zoe an' me coulda kept him stable but we couldn't do half a what you
did. Hoped maybe you could enlighten alla us a bit on where and how you learned those skills."

Riddick leaned back in his chair and shrugged lazily. For once he wasn't concerned about hiding
something, this wasn't to do with River or on planet or anything he needed to hide. Not talking about
the war was more habit than anything else. "Learned in the war," He said finally. "Told ya I joined
when I's 'bout fourteen. Met Cobh 'bout a year later. Neither of us much more'n kids."

"Why'd you join up?" Zoe asked quietly looking at both of the men in question.

Riddick looked down at River and smiled slightly, "Well I joined up after I killed a man who'd raped
a girl I knew. Orphans don't got many folk who'd look out for 'em, but this girl, couldn't a been
more'n twenty, few years older than River or Kaylee here, she kept an eye on alla us street kids."

River took his hand in hers and squeezed his fingers gently, "Still not easy to speak of what was
done to her." She told the captain, quietly. "A man, wealthy, powerful, took an interest, but she was
young and didn't want an old man paying court to her, regardless of his riches. Just wanted to go her
way."

"He didn't take to that," Riddick said heavily. "And I came into the store where she worked one
night to find her under him, beggin', cryin' for him to stop." He swallowed and took a deep breath,
River's scent of cinnamon and citrus, steel and blood and silk reassuring him that she was all right,
this didn't bring back bad memories for her, only anger and pain at what his friend had suffered. "I
grabbed a knife an' I found the sweet spot."

"Sweet spot?" Mal blinked in confusion.

Riddick shrugged, "The abdominal aorta." He explained quietly, "That's sorta the signature of
Richard B. Riddick. That's how I'm known for killin' them as deserve it." He shook his head, "Part
of why I was so partial to Mellie was she was always finding new books for me to read. Read
anything I could get my hands on. One of 'em was a book on anatomy. 'S how I knew where to stab
him."

"And you joined the Independents to hide from the law?" Zoe asked quietly. Riddick looked at she
and Mal, neither of them were pleased by that little tidbit. He could smell displeasure on them both,
anger over the use of their cause for personal gain.

"Well, at the time I figured the Independents were the furthest from self righteous rich hún dànsto who
would rape a girl because she don't like 'em," Riddick drawled mockingly. "An' seemed like Mellie
woulda approved. I never got to ask her, she died of an infection because of the rape." He rubbed his
fingers over River's palm, "And I for damn sure wasn't gonna join the Purplebellsies. Figured I
already knew how to kill, could see in the dark, I'd join up maybe we'd win eventually. Maybe what
happened to Mellie wouldn't happen again."

"But it did," Jayne muttered angrily. "In our unit, before the Dà Chóngs, caught one of the soldiers trying to rape another one. Nice girl, liked to play banjo. Rick an' me, we caught the gǒu niǎng yǎng de on top of her, trying to get her pants off. Had a helluva time keepin' Rick from killin' 'em."

"Yeah, that was the first time Jayne stood up to me," Riddick chuckled. "This big dumb actin' kid tellin' me we gotta take the guy to the lieutenant." He rolled his eyes at Jayne, "So we did, after helpin' the girl get herself in order, brought her with so it was three against one."

"Who was your lieutenant," Mal asked quietly.

"Paxton," Jayne sneered. "Sāo lǘ didn't do shit about it. So we ended up taking that pi yǎnr out to the lines and used him to figure out where the land mines were."

Riddick chuckled wickedly and saluted his old friend, "That was Jayne's idea. I was all for stringin' him up by his entrails."

"Messy," Zoe made a face and Wash wrinkled his nose.

"Yeah well I ain't ever minded blood," Riddick told her with a smirk.

"So how'd you end up in the Dà Chóngs," Mal steered them back to the original topic.

"Well Jayne an' me we didn't exactly bother to tell anyone where we were goin'," He concentrated on the feel of River's skin against his palms. "An' we didn't exactly alert the sentries that we'd left."

Jayne laughed, "We useta sneak outa the camp an' steal from the Alliance camps since they had better rations. Guess we did it once too often 'cause we got some attention from this Major."

"Yeah, Major Hiccocks," Riddick recalled with a sigh. "He was in charge of the Dà Chóngs when they were more overt... he recruited us so they'd be better at sneakin' around. Only rule was we couldn't leave any trace of who we were. Had to be clean."

"It wasn't a bad duty," Jayne remembered. "Always was plenty interesting and we ate good. Mostly 'cause we couldn't pass up stealin' anything."

"Yeah, drove Hiccocks nuts," Riddick laughed. "Didn't matter where we were, what he had us doin', me and Cobh managed to steal anythin' wasn't nailed down." He and Jayne shared an amused look before Riddick shrugged again, "Now an' then, we'd end up with someone hurt, an' it weren't like we had access to medical facilities. I studied up, much as I could, 'tween jobs or missions, what have you, learned what to do. Since me and Cobh were tight, he ended up actin' as field medic."

"Seems to me, your unit ended up in near 'bout every battle of the war," Mal recalled. "But Jayne you don't ever talk about it. Riddick, you neither."

"Well part a that's just...trainin'," Jayne seemed uncomfortable. "We weren't to let anyone know what unit we were out of. Dà Chóngs weren't top secret but brass figured better for no one to for sure know where we were, or if we even existed. We were gorram effective but we wouldn' a worked half so well if folks knew who we were."

"Got to be a running gag in the unit, you know I'd tell you but then I'd hafta kill you' sorta thing," Riddick added with a half smile. "That's why Jayne was sayin' he didn't wanna kill you when we were fixin' Book up."
"But why'd you never say anything to us Jayne?" Kaylee's pretty face was confused and a little hurt, "Everybody knows Cap'n's a war hero an' all but you never said nothin'."

"Hell Kaylee, never talked about the war at all," Jayne shifted in his chair and shook his head. "An' the way I came on the boat, knew no one'd ever believe a word that came outa my mouth. An' it weren't like there was a lotta good to talk about."

"Kaylee for some the war's a pretty…personal topic," Riddick added gently. His little sister was a good woman, but she hadn't seen a lot of ugliness in her life. That was something he didn't want changed and from the look on Jayne's face he agreed. "Especially for Cobh an' me. We ain't like Mal, didn't do a lotta straight up fightin', weren't what you'd call 'honorable' in how we made war."

"Saw near every field was fought," Jayne added, "But it weren't like anyone was to know we's there. Sabotage the Alliance field command at the Valley on Hera at the beginnin' of it an' stayed for a good long while makin' sure our guys had a decent chance but..." He shook his head and drifted into silence, his memories like Riddick's, of that bloody battle taking over his thoughts.

"They'd slip us in, let us wreak havoc, an' then pull us out again," Riddick explained quietly. "So we did a lotta killin' but..."

"But the Đà Chóngs were the ones who'd give us an edge, unit wasn't made for a stand up fight though rumors said they had some folk damn skilled at killin'," Mal said slowly. "But they were known for gettin' the job done, not for playin' nice."

"Weren't made up of nice men," Jayne's voice was quiet, subdued. "Me an' Rick, weren't more'n boys really, an' we's round men an' women lost family, lost everything to th' Alliance. Guess you could say them folks shaped us as much as any family we mighta had before the war."

"But you knew Zoe an' me were in the war an' you still didn't say anything," Mal persisted. "You saw just as much as we did, weren't nothing to be ashamed of."

"Mal," Wash's voice was quiet and sympathetic and Riddick was once again reminded of why he liked the quirky pilot so much. "Jayne's right. The way he came on the boat, everything out of his mouth was suspect for the first year," He pointed out. "And Jayne isn't exactly the loquacious type." Bright blue eyes were somber as they met Riddick's before regarding Jayne and then Mal again, "You're pretty hard line when you get going Mal. I mean, you tell Jayne at least once a week that you don't trust him. You were demanding answers Rick and River told you they wouldn't or couldn't give because you didn't trust them."

"Husband what are you sayin' exactly," Zoe's voice wasn't quite as neutral, a touch of worry in her tone.

"That its hard to come out and talk on something as hard as the war or Rick an' River's past, when people are sitting around being all judgy and superior," Wash shrugged. "Mal took Jayne for a merc and maybe that's accurate but if that's how you treat him that's all you'll get. Same with River an' Rick. And Simon to an extent. You have a habit of thinking a certain way about someone and it isn't easy to get you to budge from that."

"Jayne, that about right?" Zoe regarded the merc thoughtfully.

"I ain't educated like Rick," Jayne admitted. "Never said I was better'n a merc, an' how I got here, well ain't nothin' that leads to anybody thinkin' well a me. But I been here more'n a year an' never turned on ya'll. Not even when the Fed offered me 'nough to buy my own boat. An' that weren't just 'cause it woulda meant turnin' in Rick's woman."
"Why'n't ya ever talk to me Jayne?" Kaylee tilted her head a little hurt still, "Ya been a little, you know, crude but you ain't ever been mean to me."

"Aw Kaylee you're like this little kitten pounces on sunbeams," Jayne smiled at her affectionately. "Liked that about you. Didn' wanna mess that up with alla the ugly I carry 'round with me. I could just sit an' listen to ya bubble on 'bout Serenity an' people an' it felt like home, bein' round my sisters."

"I like that," Kaylee smiled at him. "I'm glad you felt good even if you did complain some 'bout me and my cheerfulness."

"Didn't wanna get too close," Jayne shrugged. "Didn't want you to get hurt. 'Course we get fugitives on the boat an' you get hurt anyway." He gave Simon, River and Riddick a mock glare.

River shook her head, tequila chasing through her scent and Riddick smiled, "The girl was in the box, not responsible for the foolishness of her menfolk." She declared with a grin.

"Oh now River, that's where you've got it wrong," Zoe intoned solemnly. "The woman is always responsible for the menfolk. We're the ones they look to for good sense. Don't make no nevermind if you were asleep. Just means you gotta fix their mess when you wake up."

Wash chuckled, "Yeah that sounds about right." He kissed his wife's cheek affectionately. "Of course all men are idiots really, its only us smarter ones that catch hold of a woman to keep us out of trouble."

"Hey!" Mal and Simon protested and then Mal realized Jayne hadn't objected to the sentiment. "Jayne you got something else you're not tellin' us?" The captain tilted his head, "Got a woman stashed away dirtside somewhere that you don't feel the need to disagree?"

Jayne sighed and shook his head, "We done talked 'bout the war already Mal. I'm all talked out for today." He rose from his chair and took his plate and cup to the cleaner before leaving the galley.

Riddick looked after his old friend, misery practically wafting off his skin as he headed towards his bunk and shook his head at Mal, "Don't ask him to talk about his woman." He advised quietly, "Me an' River know, but that's about all he can stand. Ain't a happy tale."

"She die?" Kaylee asked sorrowfully, instantly sympathetic.

"No," River shook her head. "Not kind to speak of her." She said firmly, "Not even well meant."

"How awful could it be?" Mal was trying to make a joke that fell sadly flat at the stoic mask of Riddick's face and the sorrow in River's eyes.

"He jests at scars that never felt a wound," Riddick said quietly. "C'mon Qīng Xiāng, let's get on to bed. More work tomorrow." He was conscious of curious eyes on his back but no one called for them to stay so he hoped Mal would let the topic lie.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: What do we think? Now that we've heard some of Jayne and Riddick's history together? I thought about having them grow up together (Fun With Rick and Jayne would have been great!) but ultimately decided to go this way instead.
I also really wanted to show that Riddick values highly instances of loyalty, appreciates that someone like Kaylee would put herself on the line in order to help him. I haven't worked out the details in my head yet but Jayne and he have a similar bond due to something similar. We might go into that in a later chapter.

Chinese Translations:

Bǎo bǎo - darling/baby

tiān shǐ - angel

diǎo - cock

mèi mei - little sister

zhèng rén jūn zi - man of honor

Jié bài - to become sworn brothers or sisters

gē ge - big brother

zhàng fu - husband

hún dàn - bastards

gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch

Sāo lǘ - jackass

pì yǎnr - asshole

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

Quote Sources:

There is no Dana only Zul – Ghostbusters (LOL again)

He jests at scars that never felt a wound – Romeo and Juliet – William Shakespeare
The appointment with Inara wasn't going as well as the Companion had hoped. River knew Inara had been truly worried about River's inability to fall without Riddick in the room with her. That she'd progressed to at least that far was something the Companion was pleased with but Inara's goal for River was normality. River wasn't sure how to explain politely that she didn't care about normal. She looked at Richard and shrugged slightly, "Inara is worried for me."

"Well River, I think I have reason to be worried," Inara said pointedly. "You may not see it as cause for concern but I do."

"Worried I won't be normal because I don't fall at my own hands," River said softly. "Worried I'll be dependent upon a man for my pleasure," She shrugged. "Don't fall, doesn't mean I can't."

"Have you ever," Inara asked her eyes shrewd. "Have you ever had an orgasm that wasn't given to you by Riddick?"

River could feel herself blushing and hid her face in Riddick shoulder as she answered, "Yes, she has."

She could feel Riddick's chuckle under her face and his hand stroked down her braid to tug lazily on the end, "Been playin' without me?"

River shook her head, "Tried after Mal acted foolish when I first woke on Serenity, remember?" She reminded Riddick, "When you said you couldn't watch? I tried...didn't like it." She looked at Inara and elaborated, "Fourteen when she entered the Academy, more than old enough to experiment with masturbation." She admitted looking up at him and then at Inara. "Never liked it much, always felt alone, isolated. Pleasure was shallow, not worth feeling so isolated afterwards."

"But you experienced desire," Inara asked with a confused frown, "There was an impetus to the experiment?"

River tilted her head thoughtfully, "Imagination. Ran wild, dreamt, woke wanting and desperate. Put my fingers to my body. Stimulation, fueled by imaginings, orgasm." She shook her head, "Satisfying the first time, after the dream. But when deliberately attempted, invoked rather than provoked, repeat experimentation rang hollow."

"Ahhh," Inara smiled. "I think I see what you mean, and why you find your own efforts so dis-satisfactory."

Riddick pressed a kiss to River's hair and smiled down at her, "For all River's a genius, she ain't a deliberate creature." He agreed quietly, understanding what Inara meant. "Need to be roused naturally, by stimuli or by your dreams, thinking of something... you been tryin' to keep a schedule almost." He chuckled and tipped her chin up so he could kiss her gently on the lips, sending shivers through her.

"All right then, let's change the parameters of your homework," Inara suggested. She slanted a glance at Riddick, "I'm afraid this will be difficult for you as well. I want you two to abstain from making each other fall."
River jerked her head to look at Inara so quickly she felt and heard her neck click, "Will not." She shook her head, "Won't give up touching him, sleeping in his arms. Won't, not even for your normal. No." She was aware her voice was almost manically fervent but Inara had no idea what she was asking, to go without Riddick's touch, the safety of his arms was to embrace every nightmare the Academy had forced onto her brain. She might as well dose herself with smoothers and open her mind to Reavers.

"That wasn't what I said," Inara shook her head and River could almost taste the Companion's exasperation at River's assumption. "I said don't make each other fall. Be together, at night, sleep together, I know the two of you need that, but I want your need, your imagination to run wild again River." Her gaze fixed upon Riddick and her jaw firmed, "That goes for you too Rick. You said that when you two were locked up that any sort of sexual contact was frowned upon. That masturbation wasn't something you were terribly interested in once you met River. I want the two of you to stimulate each other, visually, verbally, however you like but without touching each other."

"You want us frustrated enough to take ourselves in hand," Riddick didn't sound pleased. "Told you the animal don't much care for the thought."

"And when you first saw River, you couldn't have her," Inara plainly hadn't forgotten a thing they'd told her. "Use those memories of your need to drive your passions now."

River sighed and shook her head, "Three days." She stipulated with a hard glance at Inara, "Will abstain for three days, but beyond that…no promises."

"Why three days?" Inara frowned thoughtfully and made a note in her book.

"That's the longest River an' I ever been away from each other," Riddick explained. "The scientists...they took her away once... couldn't catch her scent, couldn't hear her, didn't know what they'd done...took seventy two hours before they brought her back. I went...feral is the only way I can explain it. The last day...they tranqed me at the sixty eighth hour...woke up an' River had my head in her lap, pettin' an' soothin' the animal."

"I'm surprised they didn't simply kill you," Dark eyes were compassionate even if her words didn't seem to be and River shook her head.

"Too valuable, couldn't be defined, couldn't be quantified, unpredictable but the female subject performed better due to his training and presence," River repeated what she'd read out of Mathias' mind.

"River what about you, when you were with Riddick, did you ever experience desire for him before you two escaped?" Inara was making notes now, "For that matter did you ever find any other male attractive?"

River giggled, "Was twelve and had a crush on Simon's friend Brandon, pretty gold hair, bright blue eyes," She recalled. "Then I heard him tell Simon I was freaky smart, and couldn't I leave them alone for a while, he didn't need a tagalong," She rolled her eyes. "Learned to pay attention to character more, admire beauty but don't bestow affection based on that alone."

"But physical attraction," Inara persisted. "What precipitated the dream you had that led you to touch yourself the first time?"

River frowned remembering, "Normal day, studied astrophysics, dance, wrote a history paper." She rubbed her cheek against Riddick's shoulder and was rewarded with a stroke of his hand down her back, "Felt odd when I got ready for bed." She took a deep breath and looked at Inara, "Always
been intuitive, knew things. Theorize that even when I was a student rather than a subject that the staff dosed us to bring out latent abilities."

"So intuition could be expanded upon," Inara's voice was soft. "I understand." She looked down at her notes, "These are encrypted. River you and Rick could probably break my code but no one else on Serenity can. Whatever you speak of to me, and I know there are things you haven't told me, will not be repeated to anyone. I'll stop taking notes if you like, just to be on the safe side."

Riddick was frowning but he looked down at River and gave her a half smile, "May as well tell her." He suggested, "She's already figured out a lot. I can tell from her scent."

River nodded her agreement, "Know she has. Suspects, isn't sure she wants to be proven right." She looked at Inara, "Your suspicions are correct, much of my abilities aren't...of the senses like Richard, though they did increase my hearing, sight and smell. I am not as like him physically as we have led Mal and the rest to believe."

"They took your intuition and expanded upon it," The elegant woman shook her head in dismay. "But how?"

"Screwed around with her brain," Riddick pulled River into his lap, his arms surrounding her with warmth and love.

"They did multiple surgeries," River explained. "So now I can hear...everything, but not with my ears. Intuition became dreams, became flashes of knowledge. Changeable and difficult to grasp but absolutely correct within their sphere. I know that you're dying. I know that Mal dreams of Serenity Valley each night. That Wash was in a POW camp. It's how I know what Ruby is trying to tell us. How I knew about the Reaver on the derelict and that the Purple bellies would come."

"This is... well it's a little scary," Inara confessed finally. "I assume Simon knows?"

"Yes," River nodded. "With all we have been through before we reached Serenity there is no way he could not. Has helped her conceal it, though part of Mal's misunderstandings have been because Simon was trying to mislead him." She shrugged, "Jayne suspects and Wash theorizes regarding intuition at least. But nothing is certain enough for either of them to speak of it."

"And Jayne wouldn't say anything against you anyway, no matter how he talks about you to Mal and the rest of us," Inara remarked shrewdly.

"Jayne is very good at misleading his crew, better than Simon even," River grinned. "Richard's friend from long ago, through the war together, would never betray Riddick's woman."

"And you Riddick?" Inara regarded River's partner thoughtfully, "Do you remember anything of what they did to you in the Academy?"

"Besides torture, an' figuring out, wrongly, my limitations," Riddick's coffee and whiskey voice drawled, teasing River's skin with its sound. She shivered and tried to burrow closer to his body, could feel his pleasure and amusement over how his voice affected her. "Didn't do much beyond studyin' me. No surgeries that I recall, just a lot of drugs and experiments to see how the animal was affected." His hands rubbed over River's arms and back, one large palm skimming down her thigh possessively, "It was River they was interested in."

"All right," Inara nodded her understanding. "This dream you had River, you believe your intuition prompted it?"

River sighed slightly, "Felt odd, as if things were tickling my brain, when I went to bed that night."
She shook her head, "Didn't understand why, but when I slept...I dreamt. A man in the darkness, strong, beautiful and powerful. Felt his touch on my skin, gentle, but knew I belonged to him, utterly." She took a deep breath, nearly shuddering under the onslaught of remembered sensations, "He...I felt so..." River looked up at Riddick in wonder as her mind made the connection, "I was dreaming of you." She whispered in awe, "I...felt you, dreamed of you in the dark, dreamed of how we would be."

She was conscious of Inara's amazement and at the same time disappointment that even River's first experience of sexual feeling had been stimulated by Riddick. "Inara would prefer it be simply a dream, rather than brought on by her mate?"

The companion sighed, "My hope was that until the Academy your desires had been developing in a manner similar to other girls."

"Was developing as normally as I could," River shrugged, "Cannot separate the brain from the body, always saw more, felt more than other girls my age. Even before the Academy I was different," She hesitated and might not have said anything else but for feeling Riddick's resolve that she was absolutely perfect the way she was, even flawed he loved her. "Not interested in normal. Never was, never will be. Want to function. Want to be a real girl, be able to share everything with my Riddick. Want to have him inside me. Need that. Don't need normal."

"You are a real girl," Riddick muttered darkly, his voice like a caress. "You're my woman River."

"And that is the crux of my concern," Inara protested. "River's sexual identity is bound up in yours. That isn't healthy or good. You're not a nice man Riddick, River's very young, easily influenced and she's bound her fate to yours. What if you get tired or bored or what if something happens to you? What will happen to her then?"

River could feel Riddick's anger at the Companion's words, a flood of emotion storming through him until his body shuddered with the effort of controlling it. Her hands stroked his face and shoulders tenderly, hoping to ease his anger, to reassure him as to her heart, "Inara you speak as if this were one sided." She told the woman quietly. "As if he has not bound himself to me. Do you truly not see how much he values me? He sits and lets you insult him, insult the feelings he has for me, abuse his loyalty and controls his need to storm at you because he loves me."

"I ain't normal," Riddick's voice was low and rough with the effort of sitting still and not rampaging through the shuttle with his fury. "Never have been, no more than River has. I know I ain't nice. Never cared to be. But I love her. She's..." He shook his head, "I've got a couple billion words in my head, poetry, prose, ancient and new but there isn't anything to describe what I feel for her. She's my first thought when I wake up an' the last thing I think about at night. She walks through my dreams. I know its the same for her."

"Appreciate your concern," River gentled her tone as she felt her man's tensions ease somewhat. "But I can't go back and become normal anymore than I can undo the surgeries on my brain. Can only go forward."

"All right," Inara sighed. "I'll think some more about how to proceed, but the homework stands, abstain for three days. But..." She smiled a bit wickedly, "Riddick I encourage you to think amorous thoughts of River, provoke her into self pleasure. River, you do the same for Rick. If it helps...think of your time in the Academy when you were attracted to each other and couldn't do anything about it. The memories might encourage you."

River nodded and shivered slightly at the memory, a frisson of desire on her skin as she remembered when she'd first truly wanted her partner. "Will take your suggestion," She looked at Riddick. "Must
do more research on the bridge. Wash is with Zoe and Mal is sleeping."

"Let's go an' do that then," Riddick nodded to Inara in farewell and carried River out of the shuttle, unwilling to relinquish her even to let her walk just then. "Ruby's with Jayne an' Simon," He said with a smile, "Kaylee an' Jayne are learning the sign language from the book." He tilted his head listening, "They're playing tall card and using it to help them all learn."

River giggled, "Only another two weeks before we hit Persephone. Should have a good grasp of the language by then, Ruby is very quick."

"Yeah," Riddick agreed with a half smile. "Yeah she's a good kid." He settled into the pilot's chair and let River out of his arms to sit in the co-pilot's seat and bring up the cortex. "So how's the job comin'?"

"Not badly," River tilted her head. "Have the layout of the building, problem is the intel gathered may have everything I need to track her or there might be little or nothing. This is simply where the trail leads."

"Well we'll find out, either way we won't know 'til we do the job," Her partner said simply. His silver eyes gleamed as he looked at her and River shivered a little bit under that gaze. She would never understand why he found her so beautiful, even seeing through his eyes didn't explain fully the pure need he felt when he looked at her. Then the tenor of his thoughts changed, curiosity teasing at her, "So 'xactly what were you thinking alla those times I caught the scent of honey back when we were locked up?"

River smiled slightly, her mind going back to the mornings when the only good thing to look forward to in the day was when Riddick would surround her with his warmth again at night. "Your warmth," She told him simply. "Know you didn't realize how much I loved you, how much it meant to me that you were willing to keep me from being cold. Strength and affection and heat wrapped around me at night, keeping me safe and warm." Her smile widened and she tilted her head looking at him, "Always found him aesthetically pleasing, battle scars spoke of his prowess, continued survival. And to hear your voice was like fur brushing against my bare skin."

"You never said," Riddick murmured, "Not even after when we were in cryo an' had all the time in the world to talk." He regarded her thoughtfully, "We talked on all sortsa things but we didn't talk about the whys of each of us wantin' the other."

"At the time why wasn't as important as knowing our desires were reciprocated," River sent him a half smile. "Locked in a box alone and wanting nothing more than to feel his voice on her skin again."

"An' I craved your touch," Riddick confessed with a low growl of remembered need. "Those little hands that always rested on my chest when you slept, the way your hair would spill over my shoulder, your cheek against my neck...couldn't stop thinkin' about it."

River moaned slightly and her fingers trembled over the cortex keys, "Dreamed of you, your kiss, your voice, before I even knew you." She looked over at him and saw him inhale deeply, knew he was breathing in honey, "Found you...and was so afraid after what they'd done to me... but you never hurt me. You never touched me like that. Big hands, big man, rubbing my back and feet to warm me, desire in every cell but you never did anything that would scare me."

"Worried when they drugged me that I'd lose control, that the animal would take over an' make you mine," Riddick told her quietly. "Knew you were afraid a me still. Knew if I hurt you...never be able to take it back."
"After...when it was only the animal and I," River recalled, "You looked at me, the animal looked at me, touched your diǎo and I was afraid that if you touched me that you would never forgive yourself. Knew my friend didn't want to hurt me. But...the animal...stopped." She smiled as she remembered, "You looked at me still but you moved slowly, wrapped a blanket around me and took me into the corner of the room. Surrounded me with your body, kept yourself between me and the door." She met his gaze fearlessly knowing he would smell the truth on her like blood, "You kissed my hair, my forehead, my cheek, your mouth gentle, tender with me. Little kisses so sweet on my skin to reassure me that I was precious to you. Touched to keep me warm, kept me safe. I started to love you then, that even the animal who wanted me from the first wouldn't take what it wanted if I was afraid."

"Think if we did what Inara wants now that we wouldn't hafta wait three days?" Riddick muttered with an annoyed look over his shoulder in the direction of Inara's shuttle. "Feelin' so gorram worked up its gettin' a little uncomfortable."

River looked at him and shrugged, "Know that I can put this off, we can go to our bunk...and you could show me." She began to close out her work and rose from her chair, "I will show you." She trailed a finger over his chest and shoulders as she passed him, looking over her shoulder as she walked off the bridge.

His growl as he followed her just made every muscle in her body clench and she opened the hatch to their bunk with a smile, "Riddick would like a show?"

"Long's its you showin' off," He nodded striding towards her as she climbed down into the bunk.

River smiled as she watched him close and lock the hatch behind him, before she began to unlace her boots. Kicking them off and pulling her socks with them she tilted her head, "Richard must remove all of his clothing." She commanded pointing towards the bed. "And she will do the same."

It wasn't that difficult a command for him to follow, his clothing ended up on the floor while hers was carefully folded and placed on the bureau until she was naked for him and he couldn't stop staring at her. She'd taken her toy from its box and unbolted the chair from the wall, placing it an angle facing the bed before seating herself on it.

"What're you up to Qīng Xiāng," Riddick muttered as he sat down on the bed across from her. His hand stroked her diǎo lightly, as she spread her thighs so he could see how flushed and damp her nethers were.

"Giving my Riddick a show," She set the toy aside and cupped her breasts in her hands, squeezing her nipples between her fingers. Her head lolled back and a breathy sigh emerged from her lips as she tugged and squeezed the sensitive flesh. River knew every sound she made, every movement was tracked by her bàng jiār driving his own lusts higher and higher. She kept her eyes slitted open just enough to see him in the dim bunk, his hand stroking his hardened flesh, eyes riveted to her body, nostrils flaring as he breathed in her scent. "My Riddick likes to see his woman like this?" She murmured the question, "Likes that she shows off for him?"

"Cào dàn yeah," Riddick's voice was a growl of need. "Wanna watch you fall River."

"She will fall for him," River promised and slid her right hand down to her yīn dì, stroking the sensitive flesh and moaned her last word. "Can feel you watching me, my Richard, like heat on my skin. Love how that feels." She saw his fist tighten around his jī ba and stroke upwards deliberately as if the sound of her moaning forced him to accelerate his own actions.

Riddick groaned as he watched River's fingers rubbing her swollen little clt, one hand still playing
with her nipples, he wanted to grab her and spread her thighs, push right up into her tight little táo huā yuán and make her his. The scent of her need, but without being able to touch her was driving him mad. She'd be so hot and tight, tighter than she was around his fingers, slick and wet.

River's breath caught at the force of his thoughts and she shuddered grabbing for the toy, "Richard's thoughts...you make me need the toy inside me, my mate." She moaned as she pushed the plastic inside her body. It still made her feel so full, tight and stretched around it. "Ohh...very full, this way, feels so deep, Riddick..." She shuddered again. "Tell me, please, what should I do?"

"Turn it on," He growled the words out. "Turn it on an' let it fuck you River. Let it work your nethers while you play with your pretty tits." Riddick worked his own flesh nice and steady, it wasn't hard to control his desires, his hand didn't feel nearly as good as hers. Then she pushed that dildo inside her body and begged him for help and he felt his balls start to swell hotly.

River couldn't help the startled cry she uttered when she did as Riddick told her and turned on the vibrator. It began to whirl and move inside her, thin extensions surrounding her clit and stimulating it. "Oh, oh..." She moaned and shuddered, "Please, oh, please, need..." She lost her words as she saw Riddick's hand move faster on his cock, stroking hard over his flesh, precum seeping out of him already. For all that she'd used the toy before she'd never turned it on. It wasn't the same as Riddick's fingers, would never be as good but it was implacable, and deeper than his fingers could go, driving her higher and higher. "Richard, needs to stand..." She begged. "Please, come closer to her."

"We ain't allowed to touch River," He ground the words out reluctantly. "Or I'd be suckin' on that pretty clit a yours."

"Want Richard's jīng yè on her breasts, giving her his scent," River begged. "Please, nearly there... its so deep in me Riddick. Please."

When she begged like that he couldn't say no, Riddick knew that was his weakness. He stood and began to work his diǎo hard, groaning with the effort, keeping pace with her until he heard her breath catch, saw her body stiffen minutely and knew she was almost there. "Here you go River, my River," He groaned, shuddered and bent forwards slightly as his fall shattered his control, seed jetting out of him, hitting the soft skin of her breasts and stomach.

She could smell him, feel his need, the sensation of his seed hitting her flesh was like nothing else in the 'verse. River moaned and let herself fall, her body convulsing violently around the vibrator with a harsh cry of release, her pleasure almost pain it was so intense. The vibrator, unlike Riddick, didn't stop when she did and she whimpered trying to retrieve her co-ordination enough that she could turn it off.

Riddick groaned and managed to turn the toy off, relieving River of its continued ministrations, before he tugged it out of her body and set it on the bureau. A damp cloth wiped his seed from her skin and she was trembling before he was done, trying to keep still. "River," He cupped her face in his hands and looked down into those gorgeous eyes. They were so dark they were like the Black, he could get lost in them if he forgot himself, "You all right baby?" He hardly ever called her that, she wasn't a child, didn't need him to treat her as if she was, but now and then, she was so vulnerable, it just slipped out. He couldn't ever think of her as anything but a woman or he'd go nuts but now and then...

"Sensation overwhelmed, she nearly fell again when you began to cleanse her skin, had to concentrate so she wouldn't," River murmured. "Had to follow the rules."

"Fuck the rules," Riddick knew they owed Inara a lot but he really wanted to strangle the woman at this point. "An' fuck that stupid toy," He pulled her out of the chair and onto the bed, covering her
body with his, unable to resist kissing her anymore. "I'm past carin' what Inara thinks anymore," He told her as she moaned and wrapped her legs around his waist, rubbing her wet pussy against his cock. "What the hell good am I if I can't make you fall," He groaned and kissed her neck before putting his mouth to her breasts and sucking hard on the sweet flesh.

"Ohh..." River shuddered and moaned into his mouth. "Want you, so badly," She confessed as his mouth found her breasts and gave her that hot wet suction she needed. "Want your cock inside me Richard. Want to try, please."

Riddick groaned over her skin and felt his body become instantly ready, the animal roaring in him that it was time, time for his mate to become his, "Promise to try Qīng Xiāng." He murmured, "You get scared I stop, no questions asked," He propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her. "Don't force it tiān shī. Don't ask me to hurt you."

"Would never," River shook her head on the pillow. "Nervous, but not afraid, want to try. Please, my mate, need to be claimed by you."

"Hmm..." Riddick shuddered, his body taut and ready and half of him wanting nothing more while the other half...he'd rather take a shiv to the gut than hurt her. "We'll try."

Riddick caught River's eye and smirked at her as she was keying information into the cortex. That one look was enough to get her giggling again even a week after the fact. To say that their attempt at sex had been a disaster was to put it mildly. They'd no sooner gotten themselves worked up and ready, to the point where Riddick was sincerely worried that the animal would go insane he was controlling himself so much, than they'd been interrupted by the proximity alarm. They'd ignored it, heard Wash go rushing past and then the ominous sound of Wash tripping.

Riddick had continued kissing River but she'd begun to giggle, apparently Wash's thoughts upon falling and hitting his head were so funny she couldn't help it. When she'd begun to explain the pilot's thought process and how he'd wondered as he lay on the ground if he should really be seeing little blue birds or if stars were more appropriate and why would anyone see things singing and twinkling around their head after they'd suffered a blow to it? Riddick could smell Wash's bemused humor and his pain from the bunk and had laughingly groaned and hauled himself up, chuckling as he did. River hadn't been able to stop giggling and Riddick had just pulled on a pair of shorts so he could haul the pilot off to the infirmary.

He'd left the hatch open, hoping to get back to River, but Mal had come out of his own bunk and accidentally got a look at River as she stood at the ladder, the angle had been just enough that the captain had gotten an eyeful of River's pretty breasts. The embarrassment the Mal had suffered was enough that Riddick didn't want to kill him and apparently Mal's thoughts were funny to River because she'd giggled the whole time she'd pulled on a shirt and cargos. Not bothering with shoes she'd slipped up to the bridge past Mal, Wash and Riddick and cued up the feeds so she could see what had triggered the alarms.

While she'd been on the bridge Kaylee had come to the hallway to see what the fuss was about and Mal had warned her off on account a Riddick being half naked, to which the mechanic had chirped, "Really?" Her tone both hopeful and curious as she moved closer to see the big convict who was helping Wash to his feet.

River had started giggling again and her humor, along with Kaylee's cheerful and appreciative lust without a hint of covetousness had tickled Riddick so much he'd started chuckling as he half carried
Wash down to the infirmary. Mal's voice had come back in stereo as he'd gotten to a com and told Simon to hide Ruby's eyes because that innocent child was too young for such sights. That had set River to howling with laughter. In short order everyone was gathered in the infirmary, once Mal and River had figured out that the only thing out in the Black was them.

Kaylee was told that as soon as she'd finished gawkin' that she could work on the proximity alarm problem. Zoe and Inara were standing in the infirmary, Zoe with Wash holding his hand, Inara standing ramrod straight near Book who'd apparently joined the Tall Card game. Ruby was staring at Riddick's mostly exposed skin thoughtfully but she didn't appear alarmed. River walked into the infirmary and handed Riddick his cargo pants, kissing his bicep as she watched her brother work. Most everyone's eyes were on Riddick except Jayne who was trying to entertain Ruby by attempting to practice his sign language with her.

Riddick sighed and looked at River, the not so amusing part was folks on the ship had gotten a good look at a lot of his skin, his back and legs included and he was not a pretty sight. Simon knew of course, he'd done a thorough exam and offered emollients and other treatment to help the scar tissue become more elastic. It had helped, not that a little pain had ever stopped Riddick from doing what needed to be done but it had made River happy to rub the salves and lotions into his skin and he'd liked her hands on him and the effect of the treatments was good so it had been a win/win. But elasticity or not...nothing on Serenity could make scars and burns look like anything but what they were.

It was Book who finally asked the question, Kaylee had gotten tears in her eyes and kissed his cheek before she left the room to do her work, she'd taken Ruby's hand and brought the child away with her, which Riddick could only agree with. Riddick could smell that whatever had happened to him, wasn't something Kaylee had wanted to hear in front of other people, not then anyway. "Son, what happened to you?"

"They tortured him Book," Simon's voice was absentminded as he examined Wash. "Torture leaves scars," He frowned over the pilot and shook his head, "You have a mild concussion." He told the injured man. "I want you to take it easy for a day or so."

Wash had murmured his agreement, his not quite focused eyes trying to fix on Riddick, "Looks like they used a bullwhip on you Rick." He commented finally, "And something hot." His voice was easy but his scent held notes of uncomfortable firsthand knowledge of how the scars were made.

"Yeah," Riddick nodded and caught a whiff of raw fury from Jayne even though his old friends face was still and set. "Towards the end...trying to control us... They figured out... that the best way to force one of us...was to torture the other," He shrugged. "They wanted River to embrace her abilities an' she was resisting. I'd told her to, didn't want her to fall into their trap of 'knowledge is always worth pursuing' lè sè."

"Gave in when she could not bear it anymore," River murmured softly. "Did not want them to take my Richard's eyes." She shivered at the memory and Riddick wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Yeah, she was better at playin' 'em than I was," Riddick admitted with a frown. "Couldn't stand it when they..." He growled at the memory and pulled River into his arms to calm the animal.

"What did they do to River," Book asked gently. "Tortured her as well?"

"Brought them into a room and hooked them up to machines, asked questions," River said quietly. "Two months before escape, forced Riddick to watch as they strapped her to a frame. Then began to ask him questions..." Her hand slid over Riddick's bicep, a reassuring caress, "For every wrong answer, pain for the girl. Cat o' nine tails, hot slices on my back. Fine line, how much could she take,
how stupid could he appear to be, what would be believed, how could he hide what he knew, "River kissed the bitemark over Riddick's heart adoringly, "Did his best…then lost his temper."

"Killed the gǒu niàng yǎng de askin' the questions," Riddick snarled out the answer to the question on Book's face. 'And they still wouldn't stop hurtin' her."

"Still managed to deceive them though," River added consolingly.

"I didn't care about that anymore," Riddick shook his head, "Just couldn't take the smell of her pain, started to destroy the room I was in, broke the chair, the table, started beatin' the window with the table legs tryin' to get to her. They finally had to tranq me to get me down long enough for transport back to our room."

"Could you just…give in? Let them have what they wanted?" Inara asked the question Riddick knew was in everyone's mind.

River shook her head, "We knew, knew that our only hope of escape was to hide as much as we could. Hide Richard's intelligence, hide my control, conceal as much as we dared in the hopes that someday they would underestimate us. All we needed was one good day. But…" She looked at Riddick and he sighed.

"We were getting to the end of our rope," Riddick looked at Mal directly. "We knew they were talkin' about another surgery for her. We didn't know what that might do, and they were wondering if they should start experimentin' on me. After that it'd only be a matter a time before they figured out what they had. Heard 'em talkin', knew we had a short window before we had real problems."

"And then Simon came," River smiled happily. "Came for his sister and found her partner too. Got them both out. No more experiments on the Furyans."

Simon's face was a study in horror at the tale, quickly schooled to impassivity, while Wash's expression was strangely neutral, he and Zoe both. Mal looked as if he was ready to kill someone while Jayne's face was like stone, Riddick looked at Book and Inara. The Companion appeared horrified while Book was nodding to himself as if something profound had been explained. "The wounds appeared to be systematically distributed over your body," Book explained his curiosity. "Someone went through a great deal of trouble to torture you but not leave you in any serious harm other than pain."

"Yeah, they were masters at that," Riddick agreed, nuzzling River's neck. "Worst for me was when they'd take her away, do their experiments, the waitin'…" He shuddered.

"It's the worst," Wash agreed quietly. "You never know what you should hope for."

"Well we're gonna go an' finish gettin' dressed," Riddick scooped River up, leaving the infirmary. "Got some work of our own to do." He felt how cold her feet were and growled lightly, disliking her discomfort, "Let's keep goin' with the job plannin', when we get closer to Persephone, we can wave Badger and Shazza, see if we can hire some hands." River nodded her agreement and rested her head on his shoulder, one arm around his neck, stroking the outline of one scar winding over his shoulder.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: So a little more history... I wanted the crew and Mal especially to realize just how much River and Riddick had been through at the Academy. That their reluctance to return isn't only the lack of freedom or being trained to be assassins (as much as Riddick ever needed training) but that terrible things happened there.

I also wanted to firmly establish that even before the Academy River was never normal. She was never going to be a typical girl, if she was, Riddick wouldn't have even found her interesting.

We're gearing up to a little mini-episode and a reunion of sorts. Our Mrs. Reynolds is coming up and that's a fun one for me because I have a very clear idea of the changes I want there.

Questions? Comments? Great thoughts? I love to hear them all.

Chinese Translations:
diǎo - cock
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
bàng jiār - lover/partner
Cào dàn - fuck
yǐn dǐ - clitoris
jī ba - dick/penis
táo huā yuán - vagina/garden of peach blossoms
jīng yè - semen/seed
tiān shǐ - angel
lè sè - trash/garbage
gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch

Quote Sources:
I'm shocked and appalled...I didn't use any quotes in this chapter. I must be slipping.
A week later they were back on the bridge with Ruby and Kaylee, Riddick keeping an eye on the Black while River worked on the cortex. Despite Kaylee's week long attempts to fix it the proximity alarm was still touchy and she was still working under the console almost daily. Every now and then the two of them would exchange looks and River would start giggling again or Riddick would chuckle, making Ruby smile.

"Not long until we're on Demeter's progeny," River spoke absently as she refined some malware, "I think we are ready to call Badger and Shazza."

That got Kaylee's interest, "I never got to hear how ya'll met." She commented from behind the console. "She and Simon sure seemed close." Her curiosity and a tiny thread of jealousy drifted through the air, clover mixed with warm grass and dandelion.

Riddick chuckled, "You don't gotta worry 'bout Shazza mèi mei." He shook his head, "Shazza lost her husband not long after we all met. She an' Simon, well they kinda hung onto each other when we were all driftin', he let her mourn, just held her, tried to help as best he could. She didn't feel so alone an' he felt like he could actually help someone. River was hurt an' there weren't anythin' to be done 'til we got picked up. They weren't sexin' or anythin'. Just got to be good friends."

"Oh," Kaylee didn't quite understand but she got the gist, "So they're like Mal an' Zoe kinda?"

"Apt comparison," River agreed. "Shazza isn't bound by blood ceremony the way Kaylee is, but she is bound nonetheless, by shared experience." She began to initiate a wave, "Will let them know we are on our way, looking for help with crime." She watched as Riddick slouched down in his chair and began to doze, Ruby's sleepy scent lulling him into a nap.

"What crime?" Kaylee blinked but closed her mouth over any more questions as the screen flickered to life.

"Reynolds you'd better—" Badger's face crinkled into a smile as he saw River's pretty face instead of the captains. "Well nǐ hǎo River, nice to see you instead a Reynolds."

"Badger leapt before he looked," River giggled at him. "Don't worry she won't tell."

"Much appreciated," The little man chuckled. "Need me to get Shazz or was there somethin' I could do for you? Much as I appreciate the face time, don't think your man would like me flirtin' with you overmuch."

"Wished to let you know we return to Persephone very soon," River nodded. "Need to find two people to aid me in a job. Need a distraction at a certain place and time. Hoped you and Shazza would have people we could count on, lump sum payment provided in lieu of job share."

"Well if I know Shazz she's always ready to take on a chore or two on your behalf," Badger nodded. "I'll scout out someone reliable for you to back her up. Any idea as to the when and the where of this?"

"Fancy auction and fine dining," River answered, "Man in question must be…separated from an alert tag for at least ten minutes. Leave it up to Badger's team how it's done. Alarm wired to the tag,
not lawmen, don't want the message to reach his ears."

"Hmm… that could be Shazza's sort of fun, if I find someone sticky fingered enough to go with her," Badger mused. "Why ain't you askin' any of Reynolds crew with this though? Thought you was thick as thieves."

River giggled but her mirth was cut short by Mal's voice behind them, startling Riddick awake, "Yeah why ain't you askin' me?"

River sighed and rolled her eyes at Badger, "He will ask Shazza and find the potential fourth?" She confirmed and when he nodded, "See you in a week then Badger. Love to you and Shazza." His pleased smile spread over his face as she cut the wave and turned to frown at Malcolm Reynolds. "Interruptions are rude," She commented.

"An' wavin' one of my more irritatin' associates without my permission is just as rude," Mal retorted taking a seat in the navigator's chair.

"She has connections with Badger that are separate from the Captain's," River said quietly keeping an eye on Riddick who was looking tired still and irritated with Mal.

"And since when do you pull jobs," The captain ignored what she'd said with his typical single-mindedness. "We might not be dirtside long enough to pull anything."

"Resupply, check the buffer panel again, acquire another job," River ticked off the things to do on her fingers, "Takes at least three days, plenty of time for her to pull a job with her partner and two others."

"That don't explain what you're doing pullin' a job or why you ain't asked any of us to help," Mal shot back.

"You don't think River's sane enough to plan a job," Riddick muttered. "So why would she ask you for help Mal? And we wouldn't use your crew for our own job since we didn't think you'd want them involved and we weren't gonna have 'em goin' behind your back."

"Wash asked could they help and we told him as much," River nodded decisively. "Decision was made to use outside help. Shazza and someone from Badger's crew. Payment to be made to Badger for the hired help."

"Not a share of the job?" Mal tilted his head, "Normal dealings are a percentage off the top."

"Not stealing anything of monetary value to anyone but the girl," River lied effortlessly. "Thus the need for payment to Badger."

"What're you stealin'," Mal was curious, River could tell and she saw Riddick's sensual mouth curve in a wicked smirk.

"Information," The Reader said simply. "She and Riddick simply need a distraction to relieve someone of a certain object so the theft goes unnoticed until the next day."

"There's information worth stealing on Persephone?" Mal frowned speculatively, "You be able to sell it later on then?"

"Only to the unscrupulous or worse, to those who would pay in order to find family," River shook her head, her eyes dark. "Records of indentures, illegal and otherwise."
"But why—"

Mal was cut off as Riddick sat up and rolled his eyes, "Mal unless you're plannin' on bein' the fourth man on this job, it ain't any a your business. Even if you are the fourth man, we weren't plannin' to speak on what we're stealin'. Nunya."

"Yeah, yeah, nunya bizness," Mal muttered obviously thinking. "All right." He nodded suddenly and was startled when River began to giggle as if she was hysterical. "She all right?" The captain looked at Riddick worriedly.

"Yeah she heard somethin' funny," Riddick nodded and regarded the captain thoughtfully, "All right what?"

"I'll be the fourth man, that way my crew ain't workin' with a stranger," Mal shrugged. "Don't like Badger much, but he can usually be counted on for decent help. Problem is his decent help ain't always decent."

"Is the captain able to work with Shazza? She is…not impressed with Malcolm Reynolds," River had calmed her mirth and was regarding Mal thoughtfully.

"I don't guess stabbin' my crewman in front of her would have endeared me to her at all," Mal agreed. "But I 'spect we'll manage."

River tilted her head, "Must promise he will not insult our friends." She said finally after regarding him for a long moment. "Shazza is dear. As dear as Zoe is to you. Must not insult her as you did Riddick and Simon. What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted? Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just; and he but naked, though locked up in steel, whose conscience with injustice is corrupted."

"Ain't lookin' to insult anybody," Mal held up his hands. "So what's the job pay?"

River named an amount that had the captain coughing in surprise and Kaylee whistled under the console, "You sure you don't need a fifth hand Riv?" The mechanic asked cheerfully. "I sure could use some cash."

"Kaylee is Riddick's mèi mei," River spoke as if that explained everything.

"Yeah?" From Kaylee's puzzled tone it clearly didn't.

"She means if you need somethin' all you gotta do is ask mèi mei," Riddick told her gently. "Same's Cobb. He knows, but what he needs can't be bought." He smiled slightly as Kaylee's wide eyes peered at him from under the console, "River did some huskin'; had a nice windfall, keeps sayin' her money is my money. Means its yours an' Cobb's too. An' Simon's not that he much cares."

"That's nice a ya River," Kaylee smiled. "Appreciate it an' all. Think I'll keep if for emergencies though, lessen you wanna hire me out." She cussed at something in the console and peered at her captain, "I need new wire for this gorram alarm. The copper is half green, that's why the alarm keeps goin' off."

"Put it on the list for Persephone," Mal told her.

"An' we need a new compression coil," Kaylee added frowning at him. "Old one ain't gonna hold out much longer. It blows and we're driftin' Cap'n."

"Put it on the list, order a priority, an' whatever River an' Rick pay me I'll put to the parts," Mal
offered. "Don't know how far it'll go but I'll do my best."

"Yes cap'n," Kaylee sighed and slid out from under the console, taking the hand Riddick offered with a smile and laughing as he pulled her up like she was goosedown. "Does wonders for a girl's confidence, havin' a man toss her around like she's a feather." She slanted a glance at River, "Don't it."

River smiled at Kaylee happily and gazed sideways at Riddick, "She does greatly enjoy her mate's strength and skill." She mused dreamily, "Can carry her for miles."

"Oh no, bridge ain't no place for that type a gossip, you wanna talk like that take it to the engine room," Mal ordered with an ill concealed shudder of unease. "I cain't be knowin' things like that."

River giggled as Ruby wrinkled her nose in agreement with Mal and hopped down from Riddick's lap to climb into Mal's. "Ruby doesn't care for the topic either, finds being in Uncle Rick's lap when Aunt River makes eyes disquieting," She commented. Kaylee laughed and left the bridge to do some work in the engine room presumably.

Mal tugged on Ruby's blonde braid, "See I knew you were the sensible one a that family." He told the little girl. "River why don't you wave Badger back an' tell 'em you only need your friend for the job. Let Ruby get a look at him since she was asleep when you waved before," He suggested quietly.

Ruby's hands fluttered and moved in her sign language and Mal frowned and tilted his head, "Got everything but the last bit, lil sprout." Ruby impatiently repeated her gestures and Mal chuckled, "Rick an' River seem to think you'll get on with Badger and his cousin, especially his cousin Shazza. But since she works for Badger seems like you'll be seein' him 'round quite a bit. Won't hurt to be prepared for how ugly he is."

Ruby wrinkled her nose and River laughed and shook her head, "He is not ugly, merely short and Mal doesn't like him." She began to put the wave through and waited for it to reach Persephone. Badger's face was not the one they were greeted with, nor was it Shazza. "Salutations," River said when she was sure the cortex wouldn't short out. "Transport ship Serenity for Badger please."

"Just a mo'," The none too clean face replied and a hold screen popped up. They'd waited five minutes and River was contemplating disconnecting the wave when Badger's face came on.

"Hello again," Badger smiled despite his surprise, "Fraid I've barely begun looking, though Shazza says she's on. Also said to tell you that the clothes you ordered and those books Rick wanted arrived yesterday."

"Good news," River grinned in pleasure even as Badger frowned, catching sight of Mal behind River. "Thank you very much. Found a fourth man so as you have enlisted Shazza's aid we are set for the job."

"You didn't go through that idiot Wong did you?" Badger asked worriedly, "The man's all right for some things but his people don't have much skill."

"No, she didn't," Mal shook his head, "I'm the fourth man Badger, so you better not try to scam my crew."

"Last I 'eard River weren't your crew an' Rick was there on sufferance," Badger retorted. "Didn't you cut the man when 'e was tryin' to save your sorry 'ide and our deal?"

"And since then he's tried to strangle me and steal my shuttle," Mal shrugged. "Kinda makes us even
Badger was nearly chortling he was so tickled, "River is he tellin' me true?" The little crime lord laughed, "I can't wait to tell Shazza."

"Must also make introductions," River interjected gently, "Would like you to meet Ruby." She turned slightly so Badger got a good look at the child sitting in Mal's lap. "Ruby's voice was taken from her."

Ruby waved hello to Badger and immediately began to sign her questions, River smiled as she translated, "Ruby wishes to know how you got the name Badger."

"Ah, that's an old story, back to when I was just a sprout myself," Badger smiled. "You come an' have tea with me, I'll tell it to you little one." He tilted his head, "Been a long time since I seen sign language. You'll have to help me remember when we meet."

River smiled, "Will send you the text I found. Very helpful. We have all been learning."

"Well I'll look forward to the meeting," Badger smiled. "River you an' Rick need me an' Shazz to hunt up any supplies for this job? Anything else we can do? For a price you understand."

River giggled, "Will send you a list. Expect your standard rates with Shazza's discount applied. And a doll for Ruby if you can find a nice one. Too long since she's had play things and we have none here."

Badger nodded, "Well we'll see you in a week, an' I look for your wave. Expect one back in a few days depending on what I can find. We'll see if we need to adjust anything."

"Will do," River grinned. "Hugs and kisses."

The little man's grin disappeared as he cut the wave and River turned to look at her Captain to find a bemused expression on his face, "How do you deal with the man so sweet?"

"Don't understand the question," River shook her head. "Be thou familiar, but my no means vulgar. The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel. Badger is good people."

"Badger is not good people," Mal shook his head. "He tries to swindle me every time we deal."

"Respect," Riddick had kept quiet, knowing River would take care of any issues with Badger. Now he sat up and stretched. "Badger's got respect for me an' River an' Simon. We got respect for him."

"Man's got delusions of standing, thinks he's a criminal mastermind and better than everyone else," Mal objected.

"As I recall, he said you couldn't be trusted either," Riddick mused. "Spoke of someone he didn't want to see us, worried you'd turn us in for the reward. Mentioned how the person in question had tried to offload imprinted goods on him."

"And he tried to turn us into the law," Mal retorted. "He ain't to be trusted."

"If I were to take all evidence and sort it into two piles you and Badger would be equally suspect," River shrugged. "Badger doesn't think I'm crazy. He has respect for my abilities."

"Badger hasn't heard you goin' on about Blue Hands and takin' fits of violence, throwin' things all
"No, but he has information you don't," Riddick shook his head. "Plus River's fine when she's got her routine. You saw how she was before Jiangyin. She an' I, we need those katas, need the sparring and workouts or the animals...they get to feelin' like they're in a cage again. It's worse for River 'cause she ain't been dealing with this alla her life like me."

"Genius," River reminded the captain. "Perfectly capable when I'm given a chance to adapt to my surroundings," She tilted her head and brought up a plan on the cortex for Mal to see. "Creating a malevolent program to corrupt the security feeds of the building we will invade. Finished but for the final touches. She and her mate will break in." She frowned thoughtfully, "Would like to borrow shuttle two. Faulty oxygen level processors will not be a factor in atmo."

"Use a ship shuttle sorta shouts to the 'verse what ship you're workin' out of don't it?" Mal objected in a mild voice.

"More husking, and false papers for the shuttle. Create a fake identity for it that leads back to a nonexistent ship," River's fingers were flying over the cortex as she spoke. "Easy as lyin'," She quoted Kaylee with a smile. "I will make false identifications for Shazza and my captain, procure appropriate clothing and a layout of the building where team B will be working."

"Huh," Mal was studying her as if she'd started speaking Latin. "How're you gonna do alla that?"

"Girl is a genius," River reminded him with a grin while Riddick chuckled wickedly. "She will provide counterfeit papers for all of the Captain's jobs if he gives her a share. May consider this an… audition."

Mal leaned back with Ruby and regarded River thoughtfully, "Mean the protein bars I sold Patience I mighta sold to Badger an' we'd have the paperwork to say I had the right to 'em if you'd been around?"

River tilted her head as she considered, "Federally imprinted goods would be tricky but could be gotten around. Yes, might have been able to sell to Badger, might not even have been flagged as a smuggler had the girl been on board to fool the Purplebellies buzz."

"How?" Mal blinked at in shock and River smiled. He could believe in fake paperwork but not that she could counterfeit a ship's ID.

"Like wearing a mask," River shrugged. "Buzz reads make and model of the ship, tries to dig deeper. I create a mask for Serenity to wear, call it another name. Easy for the Buzz to read, gives the Feds false information and lets Serenity go unscathed."

"Huh," Mal was regarding her with a little more respect than previously and Ruby giggled at the look on his face. "Oh hush you," He tugged the blonde braid again. "Ain't no call to be makin' fun a my ignorance."

Ruby's hands moved rapidly and River grinned, "She says it's more the look on your face when you're surprised."

"Yeah, that's right, make fun of the mean old man," Mal groused good humouredly. "Is alla this why Wash calls you a cortex genius?" He asked River thoughtfully, "He's been fair adamant that you're better with the boards and keys than he is."

"In part," River shrugged. "Wash is kind, knows she requires work of her own to fill the hours." She tilted her head at Riddick who to all appearances was dozing again, "Her mate is also vastly
intelligent, she likes finding new things for him to read. Considering furthering our education."

"Hmm..." Riddick hadn't been asleep, just resting his sensitive eyes from the glare of the light from the hall. "How'd you mean bǎo bǎo?"

"Easy to counterfeit identities," she tilted her head. "Richard could get the education he wanted, degrees in literature and anthropology, medicine, whatever he likes. Intelligent enough to learn whatever he'd like, and coursework can be completed through the cortex."

Mal was regarding her as if she'd lost her mind, but shrugged, "Guess you can do what you want with your money, your equipment." He looked over at Riddick with a half frown, "So how much more've ya'll gotta do to plan this job?"

"Must acquire costumes for Shazza and captain," River said absently. "Captain must practice his lifts...must get better, able to acquire the target and return it without notice." She slanted a glance at him thoughtfully, "Should practice on the girl and Riddick. Or Jayne."

"What makes you think I need practice?" The captain looked at her and then at Ruby who was rolling her eyes up at him, "And you Lil Bit, none of your sassy looks. Ain't nice to make fun of an old man."

"She doesn't make fun," River told him as Ruby spoke with her hands again, "She suggests that she learn too."

"Well now I've heard told you learn more teachin' someone else," Mal was smiling now. "Be happy to teach you Lil Bit."

Riddick chuckled, "Why doncha work on that in the bay, me an' River'll finalize the plans up here."

He looked up as Wash wandered onto the bridge, "If Wash don't mind the company."

The pilot shrugged tiredly and regarded his co-pilot and River with a whimsical smile, "You two are always welcome company. And of course, Ruby is a delight to have." He waited until Riddick had pushed himself out of the pilot's chair and took his seat, "Anything I need to know about?"

"Yeah, while we're on Persephone I'm gonna be working with Rick and River on a job, you an' Zoe'll have the boat," Mal nodded as he rose with Ruby still in his arms. "Spect the two of you can line somethin' else up iffen I can't. Me an' Ruby'll get to cookin' dinner, ya'll start your finalizin' an' whatnot." He nodded to River with more respect than she'd ever seen from him and left the bridge.

Wash blinked after him and regarded his two friends, "You two slip somethin' into his coffee?"

"Nah, River explained about hacking a cortex and creating a fake id for Serenity," Riddick took Mal's chair and began his own work on the cortex. "That got him thinkin' hard."

"Hope we don't start smellin' smoke from him thinkin' too hard," Wash muttered with a grin as he checked the instruments. "Watch out though, Mal's gotta habit of wantin' to be in charge in any situation. Its your job, if he's the hired help you're gonna hafta keep him firmly in that box."

River smirked, an expression disturbingly like Riddick's on her pretty face, "Cap'n will find out that if he tries to take over my job he'll be dealing with a very unhappy employer."

Riddick chuckled, "I'm sendin' our list over to your screen River." He said after a moment, "Add anything you can think of an' send it on to Badger. I think we'll be good except for Mal needin' practice."
She frowned down at the list absently and added a few items, "Strong rope, also disposable untraceable knives, just in case." She explained as she sent the list in a text wave to Badger along with a promise of payment upon delivery. Turning her chair to regard her mate, River smiled, "Should be fun."

Wash chuckled as he angled his chair to regard the two of them, "I'm learning that I shouldn't question your ideas of fun." He remarked, "So what's the heist?"

"Second story job," Riddick said after a moment, drawing River's feet up into his lap and pushing off the little slippers she habitually wore for their workouts. His big hands surrounded her chilly feet drawing a sigh of delight from his mate. "River an' me are gonna bust in, quietly, usin' River's program to take down the security system. She's gonna go down through the vents, deal with the security team an' make sure the system don't come back on. I can't fit in the vents," He growled lightly still not pleased that they'd be separated, "So I gotta go down through the lift or the stairs, and deal with any wanderers."

"Then we break into the safe Riddick will find and steal what we came for," River moaned slightly as Riddick's agile fingers began to press and ease all the muscles in her feet. She'd added ballet to her morning practices, katas, sparring, ballet while Riddick worked out and then she'd use the weights while Riddick taught Simon and Kaylee the rudiments of hand to hand combat, Jayne often helping or acting as a spotter. Book would join them as an observer, spotting for her if Jayne was needed to help teach Simon or Kaylee. She loved being able to dance more fluidly but the toll on her feet was obvious. Riddick didn't like that her feet got so banged up but he understood she needed dance the same way he needed to fight now and then. His way of dealing with it was to give her a footrub when they had down time.

Wash's eyes were wide as he got a good look at her feet, apparently he hadn't realized when she'd spoken of bloody feet that she'd meant it as a constant, not only when she performed, "River… can't Simon do anything for your feet? I mean that's gotta hurt."

River smiled at the pilot, he was such a sweet man, "Dancers never have pretty feet Wash. Simon could heal the nail beds and when we get supplies I'll ask him but I don't even feel the pain anymore."

"River, I'm pretty sure at least one of those toes is broken," Wash pointed out. "How does that not hurt? I busted a toe and I was limping for weeks."

"Wash, we both been tortured, we've fought injured," Riddick's dark voice rumbled, a hint of humor in it as he moved his hands to River's ankle, soothing the tendons there. "Hell I dislocated an elbow, popped it back in an' went right back to fightin' the sāo lǘ who'd done it a few months back. Always healed quick, and I'm guessin' the Academy did somethin' to River so she's similar. Broken toes… don't mean a helluva lot."

"Yeah, when I'm not starrin' straight at the scars I can almost forget what you've gone through," The pilot looked up as Zoe strode onto the bridge to take a seat in her husband's lap. "And since I've only seen River naked the once and even that wasn't something I was exactly keen to ogle I haven't noticed her scars so it's hard to remember."

River tilted her head at Riddick and then slanted a glance at Wash before sat up a bit straighter and tugged the hem of her soft sweater up. Riddick growled a little bit in his throat and she glared at him, "Hush, not planning on showing him my shuāng rǔ, just my back."

"Then put your shoes back on and let me help otherwise he's gonna get an eyeful an' since I kinda like Wash I ain't keen on killin' him for lookin' at what he won't be able to help," Riddick's voice was
an oddly gentle snarl as he picked up River's shoes and slid them back onto her feet.

"As the other person who'd have to kill someone in this little group I tend to agree with Rick," Zoe's drawl was no less adamant for its relaxed tone. "Don't know how well I'd fare against you River but I do know I'd have to do some damage to you and him."

"Uh, yeah," Wash gave an audible gulp. "As the party most likely to be injured in the supposed scenario, I'd much rather everyone's clothes stayed on." He groaned and hid his eyes in Zoe's shoulder as River straddled Riddick's lap and with her mate's help began to lift the back of her sweater. "Really, I'm a believer, you don't need to show me."

River giggled as Riddick's thumbs rubbed over a ticklish spot deliberately, "No more torment please my lăng." She squirmed against him and was rewarded with a groan.

"All right," Riddick's voice had roughened with desire, lust automatically flooding him when River's body touched his. "I got my goggles back on Wash so you an' Zoe turn up the lights, you'll get a good look at what they did to her." He'd pulled her sweater up so the entirety of her back was exposed, from the base of her spine to the nape of her neck.

"Wǒ de mā," Wash sounded more shocked than he had when he'd seen Riddick's scars. "You weren't… This happened recently."

"Two months before Simon got us out," River knew her scars were still healing, they hadn't faded to the silvery tissue of Riddick's yet, reddened flesh that would preclude her wearing anything that exposed her back for some time.

"Thought you were their pet project," Zoe's inquiry was flat, neutral, a dead give away that she was hiding her emotions, her fury over what had been done. "Why would they do this to you?"

"Wanted answers," Riddick's voice a dark rumble, thunder in the small space as he tugged her sweater back down after smoothing his palm over her back, reassuring her as to the beauty he saw when he looked at her. "And they were more interested in her brain, in making her like me, than in keeping her body...whole." He pressed gentled kisses to River's forehead and hair and she sighed, relaxing into his body. "We figured later that they were fairly deliberate about where they put the marks. An' there's healin', medical stuff that Simon explained could help. Academy had access to a lot more, body sculptin' an' the like, could erase everything they done to us if they chose."

"But you left before they could," Wash said quietly. "Not that I blame you much."

River sighed and turned in Riddick's embrace, taking an unquantifiable amount of comfort just from his touch, "Pet project simply meant more attention, not necessarily good." She said dryly. "Learned to hate how touch bespoke intentions."

"Mean you can tell when someone touches you, iffen they're gonna do wrong by you?" Zoe was still keeping her voice neutral but her curiosity was piqued.

River shrugged and let her head rest against Riddick's chest, her mate needed the reassurance that she was well and whole in his arms, "Hyper sensitive senses." She offered softly, "Just like my Riddick. A thousand variables, a thousand pieces of information at any given moment. The animal calls it instinct, hyper awareness. Humans call it intuition. Academy wanted the animal's skills in a human body, controllable, young and easily molded."

"Didn't count on her takin' to me so well," Riddick sounded grimly satisfied. "Didn't count on us."

"Much that they did not see," River agreed and before anyone could comment Mal's voice was
River couldn't help the smile that curved her lips as Shazza and Badger approached Serenity's ramp. Riddick chuckled as she spun a pirouette in her boots, "You get anymore happy you're gonna start beamin' like Kaylee." He told her as Jayne entered the bay along with Mal.

"Very happy to see Shazza again," River told him unnecessarily. Ruby was sitting quietly on the weight bench and Jayne grabbed her up and tossed her in the air before sitting down himself with her in his lap. River caught the girls thoughts, affection for Jayne, worry the new folk wouldn't like her, pleasure that River and Riddick were happy. "Ruby should not worry. Badger has been practicing his sign language so he will understand her. Also brought many things for the little one's comfort."

"Lil Bit," Mal sighed. "Iffen ya really, really don't take a shine to 'em, you don't gotta go. Serenity just ain't the safest place for a little 'un."

Jayne nodded his agreement even as he hugged Ruby, River knew the child reminded him of home, of his absent family. "Comes to that, iffen we can swing the trip, might be we could take you by Kerry, see if you an' my Ma get along," He suggested looked at Riddick and River. "If this don't work out, I mean," He added nodded towards the approaching cousins.

"Let's worry on that when we gotta," Riddick suggested. "Badger seems right eager to meet Ruby," River smiled knowing that Riddick had caught Badger's scent.

River laughed as Shazza appeared with her cousin at the bottom of the ramp and threw herself into Shazza's arms, "Missed you." She proclaimed loudly.

The taller woman chuckled and walked forward a little more slowly than her normal gait as she carried River in the hug along with her. Bedside Shazza, Badger was chuckling, "It 'asn't been two months even." He reminded the diminutive girl.

"Very long when Shazza is far away," River dropped to her feet and tugged her friend toward Riddick before bestowing an equally enthusiastic hug on Badger. "Missed Badger too. Makes her laugh."

"Most welcome news I've 'eard all day," The little man smiled. "That wouldn't be you laughin' at my ugly mug would it now?"

"Badger is not ugly, he has character," River kissed his cheek and tugged him over to meet Ruby. "Ruby, would like you to meet Badger. Badger, this is Ruby."

Jayne gently set the little girl on her feet and smoothed her hair with one huge hand before reminding her of her manners, "Gotta bow polite like Lil Bit, 'member how Simon taught ya?"

Ruby bobbed a little bow towards Badger and immediately began signing frantically, making the little criminal boss chuckle, "Gonna 'afta slow down there little Miss Ruby." He tilted his head in a small bow, "I ain't a genius like River an' Rick an' Simon. I'm still learnin'."

"She wants to know what you do," Mal's voice was quiet and carefully neutral. "She grew up on Jiangyin, 'round farmers an' such."

"Well Miss Ruby, I run a business or two," Badger spread his hands, "Find things that need doin' an' folks like your Cap'n Reynolds are the ones who do 'em."
Ruby's hands signed, more carefully and slowly this time and Badger tilted his head, "Am I helping River and Rick?"

River smiled at Ruby and indicated Shazza, "Shazza works with Badger and she is helping us along with Mal." She reminded the girl, "She and Badger are cousins."

"Got some work to do," Riddick had slung an affectionate arm over Shazza's shoulders. "Less ya'll got a better locale figured on usin' the galley to plan this out." He tilted his head at Ruby and Badger, "You two wanna join us, don't mind you knowin' whats goin' on Badger, might could give us some insight."

"Don't mind if I do," Badger grinned sunnily and offered Ruby his hand.

"Where you want this?" Jayne picked up the sack Badger had been carrying.

"Oh them's things for Miss Ruby, figured she might not have much in the way of clothes, an' the doll River asked for is in there too," Badger told him. "Maybe Ruby could try some of 'em on, see if she cares for my taste at all." Ruby's eager nod drew a chuckle from Jayne as he hefted the bag over his shoulder and followed everyone up to the galley.

River kept an eye on Mal, he was being quiet, never a good thing with the captain, but he wasn't thinking anything particularly insulting. Book and Simon were in the sitting area off of the galley having a game of chess, River could hear Inara in her shuttle, the Companion wasn't feeling well, Kaylee was in the engine room, Zoe and Wash were on the bridge. Jayne moved towards the heater and lifted the kettle in a silent question. "Yes please," River nodded giving him a smile. Jayne knew this job was part of her hunt for Ciara, she and Riddick had explained their plans. The big gun hand had been quiet for a long moment and then asked if there was anything he could do to help. He would wait for the two of them in the shuttle, a little tidbit that Mal didn't know yet.

"All right," River brought up her cortex and opened the lid before she set the screen in the center of the table. "Mal and Shazza are team B. Your job is to lift the alarm alert off this man," She flicked a picture at the screen and watched as it projected the image of a portly, balding man with a flowing mustache into the air for everyone to see. "Must be done before twenty hundred hours. Can be returned, lost, discarded anytime after twenty two hundred hours, but it cannot be in his possession between those times."

"How're we gonna get close to him," Mal tilted his head. "As you recall, high society and I don't much get along." Badger chuckled and Shazza rolled her eyes but neither commented.

"Hacked the dinner and auction," River shrugged. "Wasn't hard to husk out the seating arrangements and tweak them. Mal and Shazza are on an arranged date, getting to know each other at a charity event. Seated by owner of alarm alert. Dinner begins at eighteen hundred."

"Gives you two hours to make the lift before the deadline," Riddick told them. "Don't care who does it, don't care how you do it. Just get that gorram tag offa him and signal us when you do. We're already gonna be en route and we've only got so much time before that shuttle is sitting around a little too long."

"Well how are you at making lifts?" Mal asked Shazza curiously.

"I've been told I could use some practice," Shazza said dryly slanting a glance at Badger who was only half paying attention to the planning.

"You could," Badger shrugged, proving he was paying more attention than he seemed though he
was obviously more interested in pulling girls clothes out of the bag and holding them up to Ruby to measure for possible fit. Some of them he discarded with a frown, placing others in a pile on the chair next to him.

"Well River told me the same thing," Mal sighed, "So I'm guessing we do our best to figure where the fella keeps the alarm and pick pocket him."

"Keeps it attached to pocket watch as a fob," River told them. "Asking the time will be too obvious, must practice stealing a pocket watch."

Mal sighed, "Well I spent half of yesterday trying to lift a wallet offa Jayne." He admitted, "I think half the time he knew I'd made the lift."

"Every time," Jayne grunted the words out as he poured tea into cups for everyone, Ruby's cup cut liberally with powdered milk. "An' don' make faces," He admonished her. "Little Bit like you needs milk to grow up strong an' pretty as River an' Kaylee."

"I notice you don't add me to that list," Zoe remarked from the doorway as she sauntered into the galley with Wash behind her.

"Last time I commented on your looks you told me you could hurt me," Jayne shrugged. "Sides, Kaylee an' River's my sisters...sorta. An' you got Wash to tell ya you're pretty."

"That I do," Zoe took a seat and regarded the dress Badger was holding up to Ruby, "Color washes her out. She needs somethin' darker."

Badger made a face but nodded, "We got a few that work right babydoll?" He'd clearly adopted Riddick's nickname for Ruby. "Got a place you can try 'em on? See if we've been judgin' right?"

Ruby's hands moved eloquently.

River translated when it seemed Badger didn't understand, "Ruby has a bunk down in the passenger dorms but she can use the our bunk so she doesn't have to go up and down the stairs." She brought up the layout of the auction house for the rest of then to study before walking down the hall to open the bunk she and Riddick shared.

"Try on clothing," She watched Ruby climb down the ladder. "And no touching Uncle Rick's shivs. Or Aunt River's sword. Or the guns."

"Whyn't you just teach her how to use 'em," Shazza asked curiously.

That elicited a laugh from Zoe and a rueful groan from Jayne and Riddick, "It's been tried." Wash explained as River sat down and began to pull up the schematics for hers and Riddick's part of the job. "Ruby's just a little young to be wielding weaponry just yet. She knows how to take a gun apart, and put it together."

"That's always lesson number one," Jayne explained with a half smile. "But you can't practice shooting on a boat." He shook his head, "I got glared at for a solid week when I wouldn't let her shoot at the targets Rick an' River use for their throwin' knives."

"Babydoll doesn't understand the concept of ricochet just yet," Riddick added.

River rolled her eyes and looked at Jayne, "She will initiate mask program once shuttle has left Serenity. Jayne will accompany she and Riddick, remain in shuttle to remove it if required." She pressed on with the explanation of the plan and ignored the fact that by the end of it the entire crew was gathered around the table. To be fair Kaylee was making dinner and Badger was paying more
attention to Ruby than he was the plan.

"So you're going through all this to steal information?" Inara asked curiously as she began to set the table for dinner. "Why?"


"River an' me need what this man has locked away," Riddick said quietly. "Ain't anybody's business 'cept ours. We're payin' a flat fee to the folks helpin' us out."

"How long we got to practice lifting a pocketwatch?" Shazza wanted to know, her dark eyes concerned.

"Charity auction is tomorrow night," River replied. "Clothing for Shazza and Mal has been ordered, delivery imminent. Badger has brought us supplies for our part of the job."

"Well 'spect we'd better get practicin' after we all eat somethin'," Mal regarded Shazza thoughtfully and River groaned.

Riddick's eyes flew to her face and she sighed heavily, "Captain now attempts to learn how Shazza knows Simon, River and Riddick."

Shazza chuckled, "Well now since that's not a topic we like to discuss he's going to remain ignorance." She looked at Mal, "Best leave it alone. We've got enough to deal with if we're going to do this job. Don't need to get worked up about the past."

Riddick nodded and rose to help Kaylee with the food, "Mal when we can stand to talk about it we'll tell you. 'Til then just let it be."

The captain sighed but nodded his resignation, "All right, clear off the cortex and let's eat."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So we're planning the job and we'll have a little bit more of that type of fun before we start the job. Mal and Shazza have to learn to behave properly at this auction thing. Plus I've had requests in the past for River in a pretty dress so I had a little fun with the next chapter.

Mal seems to be improving some, at least he's learning to take no for an answer and he's got a little more respect for River now. We'll see if that lasts. Mal can be a little inconsistent.

Chinese Translations:

mèi mei - little sister

nǐ hǎo - hello/hi/how are you?

bǎo bǎo - darling/baby

sāo lǘ - jackass
shuāng rǔ - breasts
láng - wolf
Wǒ de mā - Oh my god/My Mother!

Quote Sources:

What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted? Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just; and he but naked, though locked up in steel, whose conscience with injustice is corrupted. - Second Part of King Henry VI - William Shakespeare

Be thou familiar, but my no means vulgar. The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel. - Hamlet - William Shakespeare
River smirked at Riddick as Mal goggled at Shazza in her fancy dress, "Arranged for fancy shuttle service for Captain and Shazza." She remarked as she circled the captain and shook her head. "Captain still acts as though he is wearing a monkey suit," She poked Mal in the back. "Stand up straight."

Riddick took a deep breath and caught the scent of cinnamon, River was getting irritated, "Simon, c'mon outa there an' straighten Mal out will ya?"

Simon emerged from the infirmary where he was giving Book a quick exam and shook his head when he saw Mal, "I thought you'd been in the military." He criticized, "Don't you know how to carry yourself with dignity?"

"Hey I have dignity," Mal objected. "Just feel like ten kinds a fool in this getup."

"Well if you don't straighten up you're going to look like at least nine kinds of one," Simon told him. "One does not slouch in formal wear. Stand up straight; you're the captain of Serenity gorramit."

Riddick chuckled, "Mal, think of it as you ain't ashamed a who you are. Walk around in the get up, get used to it, relax into it."

"Easy for you to say while you're wearin' fatigues and boots," Mal sniped back childishly.

"Hey I got a suit," Riddick retorted with a grin. "You put a hole in it if you'll recall."

"Seems I recollect somethin' along those lines," Mal was walking around, trying to get comfortable in his suit. "A 'course I was gettin' beat on at the time so it's all a little fuzzy."

"So I know what I'm talkin' about," Riddick shot back. "Trick is to act like you belong, but not too familiar. Relax but don't slouch. Be funny but don't make 'em laugh. Be pleasant but not memorable. You want a mark to like you an' forget about ya the minute you're outa sight."

Mal frowned thoughtfully, "Don't know that I've ever run a con a that sort on anybody." He admitted with a worried look at Shazza who was having lessons in how to walk with more of a sway and less of a stride from River. For a moment Riddick watched curiously as Mal's gaze fastened to Shazza's hips as they swayed in her gown. River was telling her to put one foot directly in front of the other, giving the taller woman an alluring swing to her hips even as her posture was ramrod straight.

"Sure ya did," Jayne chuckled from where he was sitting on the weight bench. "You an' Zoe both, acting all innocent on Regina."

"Huh," Mal frowned and tried to move more normally, his frown deepening as his clothes didn't allow as long a stride as he was used to.

"Problem is you're used to walking in a hurry," Simon evaluated after a moment more of watching the captain. He looked at Kaylee and offered her his arm, "May I?" The pretty mechanic giggled and slipped her hand into his elbow, "Walk as if you're enjoying the sights." He suggested and began what his parents had called a constitutional and what River referred to as a promenade, a slow elegant walk around the bay as if following a path. He and Kaylee chatted and occasionally Simon's
hand reached up to pat hers on his arm, both of them acting as if they were in no hurry.

"Yeah but you're born to that," Mal complained. "I weren't raised up on Osiris Doc, I'm a ranch brat from Shadow."

"An' me an' Badger are offa Dyton," Shazza seconded. "We don't sound the part or look it neither."

River looked at Riddick and tilted her head, "Practical demonstration of adaptive abilities?" She suggested with a smile.

"You just want me to put the other suit on," Riddick rolled his eyes. "But yeah, we can do that, if you put on that fancy dress you bought too."

"She will," River nodded her agreement before turning to look at Shazza and Mal, "Follow Simon and Kaylee, practice. She and her mate will return."

Riddick chuckled as he scooped River into his arms and began to carry her up the steps. It wasn't strictly needful but he liked having her body pressed against his, her slender curves just felt gorram good. Pausing to kiss her in the doorways wasn't exactly necessary either but it was damn fun. She was giggling, smelling of honey, tequila and caramel by the time they reached their bunk. "Don't suppose you're feelin' better? Maybe could make good on those intentions of ours...iffen we got time," Riddick asked hopefully.

Her sigh was resigned and he caught the maple of her regret before she spoke, "She is sorry that her body chooses now to assert its independence from her brain." River was almost pouting up at him and Riddick smiled, kissing her gently.

"Bǎo bèi you know I don't mind," He kissed her again to punctuate his words. "Rather have your cycles be normal than messed up 'cause a the drugs they had you on. Just means you're a woman. My woman."

"He does not wish her to add a contraceptive to her routine?" River tilted her head, "Taken orally contraceptive is ninety-nine point seven percent effective and could remove the discomfort of her cycles altogether."

Riddick tilted his head thoughtfully at that, River's time was damn uncomfortable for her, and thanks to their animals when she was in pain he wanted to climb the walls or kill something to make it stop. Simon had, uncomfortably, explained that since River wasn't in her twenties yet she could expect this discomfort for a few years to come. He'd offered her a shot to prevent conception but River had flinched away from the needles and Simon hadn't brought it up again. "Well, when we do start sexin' not sure I wanna get you pregnant right away. Wanna be just us for a bit. An' I dunno how Mal feels 'bout babies on the boat anyway. But if you don't mind a pill every day I wouldn't either. It's your body afer all. Just hate how much it hurts you Qīng Xiāng."

River nodded thoughtfully and kissed his chin with a little smile, "She will think about it. For now, must impress Captain with how grown up she looks."

"Yeah, an' that I can get into a suit an' not look like an ape," Riddick grinned and kissed her once more before he let her feet touch the floor again.

"Also would like Simon to see that my mate is more cultured than anyone believes, can dance with the girl if he wishes," River was stripping off her clothes and simultaneously opening the wall locker and pulling out the clothes and fancy unders she'd bought to go with her dress.

Riddick began to pull off his shirt and sighed as River stood in only her panties, pulling her hair up
into a soft elegant pompadour. "River, you sure I can't help you out at all," He wheedled putting his hands on her hips and tugging her close. "Could put my mouth on you, suck on your sweet little yīn dì, relax you some?" Her moan was like a shiver through the air and he smiled against her spine, "C'mon tiān shǐ, you been takin' care a me for four days. Lemme take care of you."

"She is not..." River was blushing, he could smell the blood rushing to her cheeks.

"River, zhēn 'ài I just want you to fall under my mouth," Riddick coaxed pressing kisses to her back. "Won't do anything that's uncomfortable, but it's been four days and you ain't fallen," He turned her around so he could kiss her belly. "Animal just needs its mate."

"Hmm...she will speak to Simon regarding contraceptives," River sighed and her hands slid over his shaved head. "But she will let her mate do whatever he likes with her, after the job is done. Will be better by then and eager for his touch."

Riddick sighed and kissed her belly, "Guess I can wait iffen you don't wanna yet." He took a deep breath of her scent, groaning over how good she smelled, "I love you River. Just want you to feel good, relax you and show you how much."

"Know you love me, feel it in every look, every touch," River's whisper was like a benediction. "Love my Riddick. Love that you want to pleasure me, love even more that I can say no. Kisses, but never pushes."

"Hmm... ain't any fun 'less you want it," Riddick kissed her belly and smiled at her. "Better get your underpinnin's on before I lose control." Her giggle rang through the bunk and he couldn't help chuckling. "Remind me to tell Kaylee we need a capture or two of you in that gown."

River rotated her ankles before she slipped on the dancing shoes with their sculpted heels and tightened the laces up to her ankles. Riddick was watching her as she slipped pretty copper dangles in her ears, she could hear in his mind how much he itched to touched every bit of her exposed skin. He'd left off his jacket, lounging on the bed in the formal wear she'd chosen for him, looking every inch the dangerous man she'd fallen in love with. Nothing could disguise the wolf, the Furyan, but she wouldn't have him any other way.

"Richard B. Riddick is very handsome," She told him as she brought the cuff-links over to fasten at his wrists. "She wishes they could attend the party and someone else pull the robbing part of the job, enjoy time in his arms."

"Yeah, I'm thinkin' I need to put my hands on you," Riddick's voice was low and growling with need, her exposed shoulders and dipping neckline rousing the animal. "We'll show Mal an' Shazza just how good we clean up, an' we'll have some dancin' of our own, show ’em all we ain't just animals."

"Simon will be pleased for her sake that Richard can adapt to surroundings," River remarked as she fastened the second cuff and took a moment to secret a dagger down her bodice and one on her thigh. She could feel his surge of lust as she secreted her knives under her gown and smiled happily. She knew he had at least five of his shivs hidden on his person and if he had his way she'd have more than two. "Knows that Riddick is a genius but hoped the girl would be able to live somewhere other than the boat if she wished. Will like that Riddick can fit in, or at least appear to do so."

"Yeah, I 'spect the Doc'll be all sortsa relieved that I ain't completely ignorant," Riddick agreed
pushing himself off the bed and grabbing the mandarin collared evening jacket. He wasn't sure how River had managed it but she'd had the whole getup tailored, the same as she had for Mal and Shazza.

"Sized him up the moment they met," River giggled at him as she touched her throat and then shrugged. "Lucky Kaylee could lend her earrings. Will have to acquire jewels eventually. Theft could be fun."

Riddick grinned as she held her skirt and began to climb the ladder out of the bunk, "Now that I could get behind, stealin' so's I can find you bits of pretty to wear. I'm thinkin' sapphires'd suit you, or emeralds."

"Rubies, like her mate's mind, blazing red and clear as crystal," River smiled at him as he climbed out of the bunk.

They continued to argue the merits of various jewels, deciding that rubies and diamonds would be pretty, but to suit the dusky rose gown she wore pearls would be best. River could hear the amusement in her mate's mind that they argued over what they'd steal when she'd gotten enough money husking Niska to buy the crown jewels several times over.

They were so busy teasing and bickering with each other as they came down the stairs to the bay that it took Riddick more than a few seconds to realize that the big hold was silent with shock at his and River's appearance.

Simon's voice was the first to speak, pride and pleasure coloring his tones, "River, you are jué dài jiā rén to whom I have the fortune of being related."

"Damn Rick, didn' know ya cleaned up that pretty," Jayne chuckled and nudged Book who was simply staring at the duo gracefully descending the stairs, River's hand on Riddick's arm.

Riddick rolled his eyes behind the tinted spectacles as River's hand squeezed his arm, "She is very fortunate."

"Uh, wow," Wash and Zoe had joined the rest of the group in the hold, the pilot and his wife sitting on some crates out of the way. Badger and Ruby were playing cards with Ruby's doll observing along with Inara who was braiding Ruby's hair in a fancy updo, and all three individuals were blinking, Inara in pleasure and the other two in shock. Wash looked at his wife and then at the other people in the bay, "How do they do that?"

"What? Go from looking like half wild an' savage killers to a society core couple?" Mal clarified the question though it was obvious from his tone that he couldn't answer it. "Gotta say, ain't rightly sure I can measure up to that," He gestured at Riddick and River before looking at Shazza and adding. "Already outclassed by the beauty I'm practicin' with."

Shazza's blink of astonishment at the compliment was echoed by Inara and Zoe though Kaylee simply beamed, "It's the dress." The Dyton native smiled finally, "Dunno how River managed to have a custom dress made without measurin' me but if anyone could she could."

"I was curious about that myself," Riddick admitted. "Since these suits and gowns are bespoke." He shrugged, "She said she sized me up the minute we met."

"She did," River smiled. "Must thank Kaylee for the earrings." She beamed at the girl on Simon's arm, "Likes the pretties too."

"You sure look awful shiny River," Kaylee was smiling happily.
"How many knives ya'll got stowed under them togs," Jayne wanted to know, "Since you can't carry a gun easy."

"Three," River grinned at Riddick since he'd missed her placing the last knife, too distracted by her cleavage. "Ankle sheath, thigh strap, bodice."

"Five," Riddick shrugged easily. "Ain't hard to figure where," He bowed to River and then regarded Mal and Shazza, "From what I remember of River's tales of society doings, there'll be dancin'. You don't wanna stick out so you should dance at least once. Waltz is easiest and best for a couple on an arranged engagement."

Shazza exchanged a glance with Mal and shook her head, "Maybe its best we play cards or somethin'?" She suggested a bit desperately.

River tilted her head and frowned, "We will show you. Easy as lyin'," She threw a grin at Kaylee. "Simon and Kaylee should dance also, the more couples the better, dance floor will be crowded."

"Well then," Book bowed to Inara, "May I?"

The Companion smiled as she finished Ruby's hair, "If my escort doesn't mind." Her smile was impish as she looked at Ruby and Badger. The child nodded in enthusiasm, her hands flashing, while Badger just grinned.

"Be a sight to see," He looked at Ruby. "Care to take a turn little one?" She nodded eagerly and the little man smiled, "Promise you won't step on me much?"

River sighed happily as Jayne found some music and put it on the cortex, Riddick's hand on her waist pulling her close to his body as his palm closed around her hand gently, "Three corner waltz, turn on the third corner, move in a square around the dance floor." She recited the steps in pleasure as he guided her through them.

They danced without the others for a moment, simply enjoying the public intimacy of the waltz; a dance once considered so scandalous permission had been required before a young lady could perform it with a partner. She could hear Simon's pleased thoughts; half on his pretty partner and half on his sister, glad she was so happy, glad Riddick would dance with her. The dancing had been the only part of their old life she'd truly loved.

Then it was time to tutor the others and it turned out everyone wanted to learn to dance. River smiled and kissed Riddick's cheek, "Must teach your brother. If he is to court a lady, he must be able to dance with her." She said softly, "Must show her he is willing to try."

Riddick slanted a wicked look down at her and kissed her lingeringly on the mouth before hollering, "Cobh, get over her an' dance with my woman. I'm gonna show these two how it's done."

River smiled up at Jayne, "Do not worry." She reassured him, "She wishes to dance with Shea." Her voice was low and unheard by the rest of the crew save Riddick. "If he is to court Ciara, he must know how to do one thing she likes. Waltzing is an embrace performed in public with permission." She took one big hand and put it on her waist only to have Jayne pull away.

"Gotta wash my hands," He told her as he took in the pale color of her dress. "Look too pretty to dirty up with my big ol' hands." Jayne gave her a half smile as he took off for the head near the passenger dorms and she could hear his thoughts that he didn't want to mess this up. He couldn't read well still, couldn't write much, but if he could learn to dance then maybe Ciara wouldn't mind him being so ignorant. Granted she'd known him all of their childhoods and knew how hard letters were
for him but still...

When he returned the big merc was scrubbed and his face and hair was damp, his hands reddened from scrubbing but clean, and he carefully put one hand on her waist. River grinned up at him, "He will find this easy in comparison to other things. Graceful, physical man, like my mate. Dancing will come easily to him."

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Riddick shook his head remembering, the waltz and other dances had come easier to Jayne than they had to Mal, though the captain and Shazza hadn't done bad. Zoe and Wash had gotten interested enough to learn and between Inara, Book, Simon, he and River, just about everyone had learned enough that they wouldn't disgrace themselves if they ever set foot in a fancy ball again.

Now though, his and River's fancy togs were tucked away in the wall locker, Mal and Shazza were on their way to the dinner and auction and he and River were gearing up. And River was trying to lay down the law to him.

"No killing", She was giving him that steely eyed look as he secreted knives around his body and checked his gun belt. "She is in deadly earnest Richard."

"You are no gorram fun right now,"' Riddick groused cheerfully as he double checked her harness. "Not even a little?"

"I will incapacitate the guards," River reiterated, "You deal with tying up the cleaning crew. Bags over heads from behind, tied up and concealed." She tilted her head, "If security gives me trouble the no killing rule will be revoked. But Richard should not use the sweet spot as his means of death. Signature method will give rise to questions."

"Wonder how gung-ho these fellas are 'bout their jobs," Riddick mused with a wicked gleam in his silver eyes.

"Promise to bad mouth them, but if they are not provoked into attack then they must not be killed," River eyed him sternly and Riddick caught the scent of steel filling her scent warning him that she meant every word.

"Why'd you want me on the job if you don' want me killin'?" He frowned as he turned her around and stroked a hand over her hair, his animal's affectionate touch belying his grouchy words. "Coulda done it with Simon an' he wouldn't a argued even."

Her smile was sweet and feral at the same time, "Wanted to play with my Riddick. My bàng jiār. Will not do a job without him, can't leave him out of the fun. And Simon is not appropriate for this job." Her smile faded slightly, "He would rather not do the job?"

"Rather hunt down the gǒu niáng yǎng de that sold her off an' slit his throat," The big man told her. "But I'm not havin' you go off alone, not when the price on your head is as big as mine. Just don' care much for rules." He shrugged and kissed her forehead, "Still like doin' crime though. Figure there's always a way to have fun."

River grinned at him her expression impish, "Piece of art in the lobby, we could get it for Badger, if we can swing a way to get it out of the frame. They won't let him in the building."

A slow wicked grin spread Riddick's lips and his silver eyes gleamed in the twilight of their bunk, "Well now... that could be a nice little piece of fun." He mused as he double checked his knives and
the gun on his hip. "Specially if the guards start makin' a fuss." River was rolling her eyes but he could smell the tequila scent of her amusement and knew that she was resigned to some blood being spilled so long as it didn't track back to him.

"My lâng likes trouble even if it comes in threes," River shook her head as she checked her rope.

"The soul secured in her existence, smiles at the drawn dagger, and defies its point," Riddick chuckled and kissed her again. "Jayne's just about ready. He's armin' up like he's goin' to war."

River grinned and tilted her head, "He hopes someone will try to take the shuttle so he may do battle as well."

Riddick rolled his eyes, "Well he's doomed to disappointment. I hope." River's tequila scent bloomed again and he chuckled. "Yeah I know, it never goes smooth."

River kissed Riddick gently on the mouth before she slid the door open to the shuttle, "Mal and Shazza are doing well." She told him with a smile. "Will keep in touch zhēn àìi." She tapped the earwig she had tucked into her ear and stepped carefully out of the shuttle.

Before she'd taken three steps Riddick's voice was murmuring in her ear, "Grace was in all her steps, heaven in her eye, in every gesture dignity and love."

"With thee conversing, I forget all time all seasons and their change, all please alike," River murmured back as she reached the access door beside the elevator and ran her forged card through the lock. It hummed at her pleasantly and she smiled as the door popped open. "Entering the vents, radio silence please unless there is an emergency."

"You got it Qīng Xiāng," Riddick's voice affirmed and River slipped inside the air vent.

It was hard to not talk to Riddick, to not answer the thoughts she heard from him still, he and Jayne were having a conversation about films, what they should watch when they got back to the ship. Riddick was trying to talk Jayne into watching Much Ado About Nothing, insisting that Jayne would like it. He was talking about Dogberry, how the actor who played the character looked like the captain.

River smiled as she slid gently down a shaft to the first floor. Two rooms over and she'd be directly above the security station. Inwardly she scoffed as she reached the metal grate that was supposed to block anyone from accessing the security station and the safe through the vents. And anyone with the ability to get down the vents and a screwdriver could get past the grates. You just had to be very quiet about it, and like River, very slender. Unscrewing the grate and setting it aside didn't take long. Once she'd gone past it she grinned and put it back in place. No sense in making it obvious how she'd gotten in. Her leg cramped again and she winced in pained irritation, she needed to upgrade her potassium intake before this sort of job.

The security team was below her, all four of them sitting in their chairs and watching the cortex screens. River rolled her eyes and gently removed the vent cover setting it off to the side. The harness she wore was rechecked and tightened and with a half smile she attached her magnetic clamp to the vent beam overhead. She'd had to stoop to keep from bumping her head on it the entire last leg of her crawl but it came in handy for the spider drop she'd be doing. She'd have a slow eight foot drop which should put her right above the guards' heads. This part would be fun...
River giggled into the earwig as she finished tying up the guards. One of them had already regained consciousness but as she'd relieved him of all electronics and weapons he couldn't do much more than spout harsh language. The blindfolds were simply a precaution against the guards giving a physical description as she'd been moving too fast for them to see her well. "Beast this is Beauty, you are go for the elevator," She murmured as she began to run the security system. "Proceeding to the lobby," She rose from the chair and began to systematically blind the cameras. It was a decent security system, the cameras went on auto if there was any glitch in the central system.

"How are you doing Beauty," Riddick's voice was carefully core in its accent, coolly modulated.

"My knots are better than your knots, I have four security guards hogtied and you only have two cleaning crew," River retorted grinning to herself. Her mate had carefully stashed the cleaning crew he'd found inside cabinets which would make for an awkward surprise for the staff when they came in.

"There were only two cleaning guys to knock out, you can't stack the deck and then tell me you're winning," Riddick growled into the com.

"Did not specify rules at the beginning of the game," River murmured sweetly. "Besides, you have taken down all the cameras on two levels and I'm still on level one. Don't be mean."

"Ain't bein' mean, being factual," Riddick grumbled as he took out the last camera. "All right, just got the motion sensors left."

"Taking them down now," River moved back to the central security cortex and began typing. "He owes her a massage," She commented as she tried to loosen her calves.

"Not that I object to gettin' my hands on you in any fashion, but how's that?" The big convict murmured as he began to make his way down to the first floor. "I'm stoppin' to get the painting for Badger. Think he'd like two? The other one's sorta pretty too."

"Get both, if he doesn't want the other one we can give it away or if we like it maybe we can keep it," River groaned as her calf cramped again. "Need the kinks worked out of my legs and back, too much time crawling through the ducts. Felt like a mouse in a maze and not even a cookie at the end, just four idiot men who don't smell good."

"Long's we get outta here in one piece you'll get your massage băo băo," Riddick chuckled into the com as he began to remove paintings from their frames and carefully rolled them up. "I'm almost done in the lobby, wanna let me back with you?"

"Holler when he wants the door open," River murmured as she worked the cortex. "Not literally please."

"Yeah that would be of the bad," Riddick's voice was still amused. After a moment there was a quiet rap on the metal door and she keyed the code to open it.

River grinned as she began to husk the security cortex more thoroughly, "Did you find what we were looking for?" She looked up as he entered the security room.

"Think I did," Riddick nodded. "How's the rest of this going?" He dropped a kiss on her hair and braced a hand against the console in order to look at the screens.

"Waiting for confirmation," River sighed. "But I have an idea of how we can keep from being
bored." She looked behind her at the safe, "Bonus?"

Riddick chuckled, "Yeah, that sounds like fun." He looked down at the guards as one of them began to spout obscenities in Chinese, disparaging his and River's parentage. "So...what do you think? This qualify?"

River chuckled and nodded, "Did say that he could. Nice satisfying snap."

"Nothing to lead back to us," Riddick agreed and kicked the guard in the stomach before he yanked him up and gave his head a sharp twist. The loud crack was a disturbingly ominous sound and the other guards stopped wiggling. "Well let's get cracking."

River rolled her eyes at him, "Very punny." She said dryly and opened the safe.

Riddick regarded the pile of platinum sitting in the center of the safe and smiled, "Well that's a pretty sight. Almost as pretty as you."

River grinned and grabbed some of the bags the tellers would use to move cash from their drawers to the safe, "Let's see how much we can get before the signal comes in."

It took a little bit but by the time they got the signal the safe was unloaded of the cash and some of the prettier things River could tell wouldn't be missed from the safe deposit boxes. Riddick was chuckling to himself because River had found a pretty pearl and pink gemstone necklace and earrings that would match her dress. She'd found sapphires, diamonds and emeralds as well as rubies. There were some very valuable things that she hadn't taken. River sighed slightly, it wasn't fair to take something that was so loved as the little pendant of coral or the elaborate diamond necklace with the gorgeous canary center stone, the wearers loved and valued the pieces, parts of their heritage they guarded zealously.

Riddick had looked at her and he'd known she was sad to leave the pieces, had reached for one only to have her shake her head. "I'll explain later," She said softly. "But there are things...I won't take." She dropped the velvet pouches into her hip bag and smiled. "First part of the plan is complete." She tilted her head as her earwig chimed, "We must hurry then. Thank you. A half hour at the most? That will do."

Riddick tilted his head regarding her and River nodded, "Took the entire thing, will drop it elsewhere in half an hour."

"Then let's get to work," Riddick nodded a smirk curving his lips.

The rest of the job was pretty easy, the motion detectors in the large corner office were tied only to the alarm Mal and Shazza had lifted. Once those were disabled from the desk the alarm ceased to send the alert and River hacked the door lock to enter the safe room. The data was stored in dozens of crystal discs, River sighed, "It never goes smooth. Why don't it ever go smooth?" She echoed Mal's word back on Jiangyin, "We'll need either his filing system or more sacks."

"Well we've got time since the alarms are disabled," Riddick suggested. "Husk his cortex and see if you find anything. I'll start looking in the safe room, see if there are labels."
"Viable plan," River agreed. She spoke into her earwig, "Shazza? We've run into a snag here, is there any way you can delay getting that watch back to him?"

"If he doesn't get it back soon won't he notice that something is wrong?" Shazza's voice was hushed and worried.

"Not if Mal lifts his wallet and any other valuables without getting caught," River smiled as she found a good potential file. "He'll just think he was robbed. Especially if a beautiful woman flirts with him."

"We'll work on that then," Mal's voice had a smile in it. "Pretty sure I've got the most beautiful woman at this shindig on my arm."

"River you didn't tell me he was a dangerous flirt," Shazza's voice held a laugh.

"For every inch, that is not fool, is rogue," Riddick's voice was low and amused and Mal's 'Hey' of protest didn't even register as the women giggled.

"We'll get it done River," Shazza promised. "Just tell me this won't blow back on me and mine?"

"False papers remember? Would never endanger her friend," River reminded her. "Will be as quick as we can."

Riddick heaved a sigh as he and River finally entered the shuttle. It had taken them several hours but they'd found the information they'd needed. Who could have known the man would have that many data discs? River was exhausted and he'd made several trips checking that the guards hadn't squirmed free while River searched the cortex and had gone through the crystal disks looking for the information they'd come to steal. She'd finally hit the jackpot and figured out the system used to file the data discs. After that it was simple process of elimination. She'd looked at Riddick when he came back from his last trip and sighed, "Finished. We have what we came for."

"You're exhausted Qīng Xiāng," He frowned down at her as she began to reload her portable cortex. "Anything else you want to do?"

"Would like to send an EMP through the office," River admitted, citrus winding through her scent. "Hate that this man has all this information, but destroy it and he'll know we were here."

"Can you copy everything he has before you wipe it?" Riddick frowned. The steel of her scent was eroded with exhaustion, pineapple and silk and blood almost overwhelming the steel.

"It will take approximately half an hour to transfer all files," River murmured. "And an EMP must be improvised."

"I can do that," Riddick wished he could take his gloves off and touch her skin but that wasn't feasible at the moment. His lips brushed over her forehead, "Use my mind to anchor yourself bǎo bǎo, it's been a rough couple a days. Between teachin' an' plannin' and doin', we could use a solid day of nothing."

"Concurrence is a foregone conclusion," River raised her face to his. "Needs her mate to possess her, fill her and make her his completely," She whispered. "More than anything needs to belong to him."

"You do," Riddick kissed her hard on the mouth. "I told you that when we were stuck on planet.
Told you even if we never, remember? I want that River. Want that more than anything. But I don't want to hurt you ever."

"Won't, couldn't, wouldn't ever," River shook her head even as her fingers danced over the keyboard of the cortex. "She knows what is in him, remember? He belongs to her."

"You start to feelin' better after this job then we'll try again," Riddick nodded his agreement, hoping his eagerness to be with her wasn't influencing his better judgment. "Hopefully Wash won't concuss himself this time," He added with a roll of his eyes.

"She is eager as well," River commented. "Difficult to know what Zoe and Wash do in their bunk, feel the backwash of sensation and not understand that it is meant for pleasure and procreation."

"That's the other thing," Riddick was busy digging through the pack Jayne and he had prepped before the job, setting up the improvised EMT. Regardless of Mal's orders or any plan made, he and Jayne always carried these packs, tools of their trade secreted away inside. The tools of saboteurs, guerrilla warriors and rangers. Everything could be used for more than one purpose and along with found materials both of them could use the pack's contents to hold off an invading force, destroy a citadel or blow up a ship. An EMT wasn't even hard to do.

River was tilting her head, listening to his thoughts and sighed, "Richard is worried the animals, once taken to mate, will reproduce."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded. "Gotta admit, that speaks to somethin' in me with a powerful voice River," He looked up from his work, "But I want you healthy, feeling good and comfortable about our lives before that happens. We don't know what a baby would do to your mental balance."

"The secrets unbalance me," River said softly. "I know they do but I can't look at them, I'm sorry. I can't look at them yet." 

"You don't have to," Riddick scowled angrily. "I don't expect you to. We've got enough to deal with now, haven't even been settled six months. You ain't even twenty years old."

"You think I should take the contraceptive," River's voice was sad. "Until you're sure I won't go insane from being pregnant with your child."

"No," He shook his head and looked at her. The spectacles he wore couldn't hide how tired or how lovely she was. She was the most perfect girl in the 'verse. "No, because if something happened to you because of me, I wouldn't be able to... I'd burn the 'verse to the ground River. I'd kill everything around me, I wouldn't be able to stop. I'd be a rabid wolf. You're so... you're so strong River it's easy to forget that you're slender. You're tiny." 

"Afraid," River whispered. "Afraid he will lose her. Cannot bear the thought so he pushes it away."

"Yeah," Riddick admitted a bit reluctantly. "I know I told you I want it to be just us for a while. Wasn't lyin'. Just...other things sneak in. Things I don't like to think on."

"The animal doesn't like fear so you push away the thoughts," River nodded her understanding. "He feels about pregnancy the way she feels about the secrets."

"Feels like I'm lettin' you down," Riddick sighed and shook his head. "But everything we talked about before stands. We get the info we need here; sooner or later we'll find her. We dunno how Mal'll react to her comin' on the boat let alone if I get you pregnant. We both like Serenity, we like the boat, like the people, and right now..." He looked at her and tried to give her a smile, "I love you River. I don't want to lose any part of you."
"Contraceptive should be taken then," River said quietly. "Eliminates her cycles, takes away discomfort, removes the possibility of procreation for the time being." She offered him a smile that smelt of caramel, honey, silk and citrus and blood, "He should try to not think about it so much. Nature finds a way. Life finds a way."

"Yeah," Riddick took a deep breath and nodded, gratitude suffusing him as he realized River was offering to take pills or shots until he got over the fear of getting her pregnant. "Thank you Qīng Xiāng. I promise...I'll work on it."

"She will work on the secrets," River smiled. "And all files are transferred."

"I'll make sure everything is exposed," Riddick took a quick look in the safe room and nodded. "Go on up and I'll set this off, come up after you."

"She should go up last," River protested. "If the elevator doesn't work, he cannot climb up the vents the way she can."

"I'm not setting it building wide," Riddick pointed out. "I can always go downstairs and out onto the street, get back that way while you and Jayne take the shuttle, if it takes the elevator out, which it shouldn't."

"Will not argue but she doesn't like this," His mate shook her head but went to the elevator and moments later his sensitive ears picked up the sound of the lift going to the roof. Riddick smirked to himself and set off the EMP when he was certain Jayne had gotten River into the shuttle. Seconds later every electronic device in the office was dead, and he was thankful he'd remembered to turn off his earwig before switching the EMP on. He had never, in his life, misjudged the range on a bomb or an EMP. River had no way to know that but still, he was her partner, he wasn't a complete moron. Dismantling his equipment and repacking it didn't take long and then he was taking the stairs two at a time to the third floor and the elevator from the third floor to the roof.

"Let Mal and Shazza know that they can dump the stuff anytime they like, stay for a little while longer afterwards, and then head back to the ship," Riddick murmured and caught River's affirmative, repeating the instructions to the first team.

"Thank Buddha," He heard Shazza mutter, "These shoes are murder."

"I'd offer a foot rub but I'm afraid I'll get hit," Mal's voice was definitely amused.

"Captain should recall that he is surrounded by women at home," River murmured. "Team B is returning to base. All souls accounted for, mission successful."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So our mini episode is nearly done. I hope you like it. SpaceAnJL was a guinea pig for some of the dialogue and she's awesome to bounce things off of. We may have wildly different views of the 'Verse at times but we both agree that Firefly rocks.

I don't want anyone to think that Mal is being an ass again by flirting with Shazza when according to canon he and Inara were more than a little attracted to each other. Mal always struck me as someone who given half a chance wouldn't mind a little flirting or compliment paying when the situation calls for it. It's a chance to have a little fun and
get paid and that would put him in a pretty good mood, hence the compliments. Especially since River and Riddick planned the job and things are going more smooth than they would with Mal's plans.

This was also a nice way to show off River and Riddick's abilities which will come in handy for what I have in mind later on. Yes, eventually our duo will be infiltrating someplace where they won't be crawling through ductwork. But that's for the future.

Chinese Translations:

Bǎo bèi - honey/darling
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
yīn dì - clitoris
tiān shī - angel
zhēn 'ài - true love
jué dài jiā rén - prettiest girl ever
bàng jiār - lover/partner
gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch
láng - wolf
bǎo bǎo - darling/baby

Quote Sources:

The soul secured in her existence, smiles at the drawn dagger, and defies its point. - Cato - Joseph Addison

Grace was in all her steps, heaven in her eye, in every gesture dignity and love. - Paradise Lost - Milton

With thee conversing, I forget all time all seasons and their change, all please alike. - Paradise Lost - Milton

For every inch, that is not fool, is rogue. - Absalom and Achitophet - Dryden
Dare To Dream It Could Be

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Riddick and River were sitting in the lounge with Jayne when Mal and Shazza came in, Shazza shaking her head and laughing at Mal. Shazza's spencer jacket was unbuttoned and she was in the process of shrugging it off as she entered the passenger lounge, "Rick, you and River didn't mention your captain would spend half the night trying to flirt with other women." She remarked as she took a seat next to River.

"Didn't know he had that habit," Riddick tilted his head towards Mal catching a whiff of the captain's chagrin. "Mal, we send you out with a lady, our friend, and you neglect her half the evening when you're supposed to be on a first date?"

Mal flipped his coattails behind him and sat on the ottoman to regard his two gun men and expert consultant before he replied, "Picked a few pockets. Stole a few necklaces, figured if one man's things went missing it would be less suspicious if his weren't the only ones." He looked over at Shazza, "This one kept chatting up all the men, talking about the auction."

Riddick watched as River narrowed her eyes at Mal, "Exceeded mission parameters." She murmured, "Let me see the jewelry." Mal fished some sparkly things and a string of pearls out of his pocket and handed them over. River carefully laid the pieces out on the table in front of her, and took a deep breath. One by one she picked them up and examined them, silk and blood flaring hot in her scent as she used what the Academy had done to her to determine if the jewelry was safe to keep.

Citrus bloomed through her scent and Riddick sat forward, "River." He looked at the necklace she held, a double stand of chocolate pearls.

"Cannot keep these," River murmured softly. "Passed down, five generations, treasured beyond wealth." She set them aside and picked up a ruby pendant, shrugging over it before she fingered a chain of braided gold and peridot. Finally she tilted her head, "All but the pearls are fine for you to sell." She said finally.

"How'd you know that about the pearls," Mal didn't question her conclusion, Riddick was pleased to note that apparently Mal could learn new tricks.

"Tagged," River was lying, effortlessly but it was a lie. Riddick would have heard the buzz or whine of a tag on any jewelry.

Shazza was regarding River shrewdly but didn't contradict her, "I'll take the pearls by a good pawnshop on my way back." She offered. "He sends tagged jewelry to the honest Feds. It'll get back to the rightful owner."

"How'd you know they was tagged though," Mal was a little confused.

"We can hear tags Mal," Riddick told him with a shrug. "Like I can hear a cortex is on, a camera is around or any sort of electronics. Makes this high pitched buzz, sounds like a whine, like a mosquito or something."

"That's all sortsa handy," The captain rose. "You all get everything you needed?"

"And then some," Riddick nodded. "Little bit of wandering around tomorrow, buy a few things
needed. Visit with Ruby and we'll be good."
"Yeah," Mal looked at Shazza. "You seem sensible enough. Badger really qualified to take on a child like Ruby?"

Shazza's chuckle was low and wicked and Riddick could smell the lust that hit Mal at the sound of it, "You don't know my cousin too well Captain Reynolds. He's the oldest of six kids, youngest was twelve years younger than him. He's more than qualified. He lost family before the war. His sister after him and her children were killed in a terraforming disaster."

Riddick turned sharply as the scent of burnt cinnamon hit his nose, River was simply staring into space, shivering, "Qīng Xiāng, what's wrong?"

"Blue," River shook her head, the scent of her fear nearly overpowering. "They'll come when you call," She shuddered and Riddick couldn't remember moving but he was picking her up and wrapping her in his arms. "Richard, they'll come, take us back, take us away..." She buried her face in his neck. "All the kings horses and all the kings men... broken. Broken like an egg on the ground filled with chocolate and shiny bits and all the things they put inside her."

"River I've got you," Riddick kissed her forehead, her cheek. "We're on Serenity, we're safe." He reminded her gently.

"Ain't lettin' Alliance on this boat River," Mal's voice was the most reassuring Riddick had ever heard it. "Gimme half a day to arrange some work, we won't even be on planet no more."

"They put things in," River shuddered in Riddick's embrace. "Need to take them out."


"Figure she wouldn't be so worn out if you two weren't helpin' me," Jayne shrugged as he followed them up the stairs, nearly as silent as Riddick. "She needs about twelve hours sleep it sounds like. Good sparrin' and work out session too."

"Jayne has the right of it," River's whisper was pained but the smell of burnt cinnamon was easing. "Meditation, katas, strength training...must follow routine, quell the secrets rising."

"We'll do that," Riddick nodded. "Just rest now tiān shǐ. He helped her down the ladder and took the bags Jayne handed him before shutting the hatch. River's tired hands were stroking down his back and he could still smell citrus on her skin.

"She wants nothing more than her mate," River sighed and Riddick wrapped her in his arms again before he kissed her forehead. "But she knows without the contraceptive they will merely be frustrated."

"Yeah," Riddick groaned. "And you need to rest more than you need a shot," He watched as she dragged off her work clothes and sat heavily down on the bed. "Why don't I give you a rubdown, take care of those muscles that were bothering you. Like to get my hands and mouth on you liàn rén."

River's scent of citrus mixed with honey and Riddick smiled as he pulled off his clothes and grabbed a tube of lotion. There weren't many scents that both he and River liked but she'd managed to find something that wasn't too heavy and didn't clash with her body chemistry. And there were worse things that River's skin smelling like cookies for a little while. And after what seemed like a month of
work crammed into a week it would be good to just get her to relax and turn off her brain for a bit.

"Love you my Riddick," River murmured as he scooped her up and pulled the quilts back, laying her flat on the sheets to give her the massage she needed. Soon all he could think of was her scent and her skin and the wonderful sound of her sighs and moans as her pain eased and pleasure built. By the time his hands and mouth were done with her she was boneless, satiated and he'd lost control, spilling his seed over her belly after she'd fallen.

"My woman," Riddick gave both their bodies a quick clean up and wrapped her in his arms, skin to skin under the quilts. "Time to rest zhì àì. Time to let me protect you."

"Hmmm...my Riddick," River's sleepy sigh was still possessive as hell and always sent a flush of pleased heat through his chest. His last thought before he closed his eyes was that he wouldn't ever let her get away from him.

River looked at her brother and tilted her head, he was still behaving very properly towards Kaylee but just relaxed enough that the pretty mechanic understood that he wanted more. It was funny how frustrated Kaylee got with core manners and how hard Simon had to work to relax his behavior just enough to make sure Kaylee knew he liked her but not so much that he was behaving improperly since he hadn't gotten Riddick's permission to act informally around Kaylee yet. Right now though Simon was more concerned with her request for birth control.

"You want me to put you on a contraceptive prescription," Simon repeated her request slowly. He put the data pad he was holding down and tilted his head. "When I offered before you flinched away at the thought of a needle."

"Been considering it," River said quietly. "Don't like needles after what they did, but schedules are erratic, work interferes with my routine, cannot afford to miss a pill if I take an oral contraceptive." She considered a moment and continued, "A manual contraceptive would be rejected by the animal and quite frankly even if Riddick could ignore the animal long enough to use one I wouldn't want him to."

"Then you're seriously considering consummating your relationship with Riddick," Simon frowned. "Are you certain that's wise?"

River stared at her brother and didn't need to read him to know what was going through his mind. He worried that a new medication would upset the delicate balance of her system. He was afraid sex would overwhelm her mind, unaware that she'd been 'overhearing' the emotions of Zoe and Wash since she'd woken from cryo. "Already fairly intimate with my Richard," She pointed out. "Engaging in coitus should not have an adverse effect."

"But the hormones from the contraceptive could disturb your system," Simon shook his head. "I wasn't thinking of those sorts of consequences when I offered you the shot the first time. I was only thinking that a pregnancy could be dangerous to you."

"You ain't the only one," Riddick's dark chocolate and coffee voice spoke from the doorway of the infirmary. "But they put her on all sortsa stuff at the Academy Doc, it was only the last few months that she started getting unstable again. Don't think it was the drugs that did it."

River nodded in confirmation of what her partner was saying, "Whatever psychosis, if that's what you want to call my unstable times, that I suffer from, it isn't brought on by hormones. I was fine
with the shot you gave me on planet. I don't like needles, but I can deal with them now and then if it means putting Richard's mind at ease and keeps me from getting pregnant before we're ready."

"If you notice any changes, any ill effects, promise me that you'll come to me," Simon looked at them both. "This shot will last a full six months so it takes a week to go into effect. I'll set a reminder that you'll need another then."

River nodded, "Promises, any problems, we'll tell you." She smiled at her brother, "She is grateful for the gē ge is understanding of her needs."

"You're my sister River, I just want you to be happy," Simon shrugged and looked at Riddick as he moved behind River and wrapped his arms around her middle while he readied the shot. "My choice for you would not have been an escaped convict with a history of violence and murder but my choice isn't what's important. I know Riddick will put your life above his, and that matters to me."

"I put her before anyone else on the boat or in the 'verse," Riddick's voice was like fur brushing over her skin and River sighed with pleasure. "That's just how it is."

"I know she feels the same about you," Simon tilted his head as he regarded the two of them; "This shot can't go in your arm River. I need you to lower your trousers and bend over slightly."

"Shot in the ass," River giggled at the thought and did as he said, vividly conscious of Riddick's eyes roving over her exposed flesh even as he turned his body to hide her from the doorway.

"Slight pinch," Simon was quick and deft with any sort of needle, she barely felt it go in. A tiny sting as the contraceptive was injected and then an icy sensation as Simon dotted the area with a numbing salve and put a bandage over it. "And you're good."

Riddick's hands tugged her trousers up and caressed her skin as she straightened, keeping her in his arms and dropping a kiss on her head. The question he asked Simon wasn't one she'd thought of though she should have expected Riddick would, "After River and me have been together, should I bring her down to you for an exam?" The big man asked worriedly, "I read that after a girl's first time, she's s'posed to get an exam, make sure nothin' untoward happened to her innards."

"Ah, you mean if there was any tearing or internal bruising," Simon nodded his understanding. "Riddick since you're able to smell blood, and you know when she's in pain, I expect you'd know if she needed an exam. But unless River's in pain, then no, she won't need to get up on my table." He tapped his datapad meaningfully, "I've got all of her medical records here, and there's no reason sex with you should harm her in anyway." The doctor smiled a bit wickedly, "Not unless there's something about you that's more closely related to a horse than a man."

"My bàng jiār is gifted," River giggled again and was rewarded with a mental groan from her love. "But he will not harm her."

"Then neither of you need to worry," Simon shrugged. "Honestly Riddick, I'd be more worried about you. River tends to obsess about everything; you might not leave your bunk for days."

Riddick's low wicked chuckle sent shivers over her skin, "And you think that's a problem Doc? You gotta step up your courtship of Kaylee if that's how you think."

The core doctor just smiled, "I haven't earned forgiveness yet." He said quietly, "So my courtship, of necessity, proceeds slowly."

Anything else they might have wanted to discuss was derailed as Jayne poked his head in the infirmary, "Hey ya'll need to get up to the galley, Mal's got us a job."
"Somewhere civilized?" Simon sounded hopeful and Jayne rolled his eyes at him.

"We barely left Persephone and you want more civilization? You're on the wrong boat doc," The gun hand sneered more out of habit than malice.

"We'll be right there," Riddick nodded and River smiled.

"Mal said specific for you to come River," Jayne added. "Wants your, uh...insight, I think he said it was."

"Happy to help," River grinned and laughed aloud when Riddick scooped her up and began to carry her out of the infirmary and up the stairs. Entering the galley in Riddick's arms incited a confused look from Zoe and a concerned question from Kaylee.

"She is fine Kaylee," River smiled. "My Riddick simply enjoys carrying me."

"He do tote you around a lot," Jayne observed with a roll of his eyes. "Did we get more tea when we was dirtside? I put it on the list."

"Upper cabinet, to the left," The Reader informed him with a smile. "She would like a cup too please."

"Figured," Jayne found the canister and began making tea as Mal began to explain the job. Book and Simon wandered in after a while, the shepherd working on a meal that had apparently been in progress while Simon sat next to Kaylee and presented her with an origami flower.

After a moment Inara came out of her shuttle and joined them, seating herself gracefully in the empty chair next to Zoe, not terribly far away from Mal but not beside him either. River looked thoughtfully at the Companion, Inara wasn't feeling well today, everything ached and she was longing for tea with whiskey in it to ease the tension her disease caused in her muscles. "Inara, would like to speak with you please, after dinner," She asked quietly.

Riddick looked at her and inhaled sharply, catching the scent of Inara's pain, a frown marring his handsome face, "Need me for this conversation," Was all he asked.

River shook her head and leaned closer to kiss his cheek and whisper, "Inara's muscles tense and jump, she needs whiskey and a massage. Intend to offer the latter."

"Here you go," Jayne put a mug of tea down in front of River and set his own at his spot next to her. "Rick you want any?"

"Yeah if you'll put some whiskey in it," Riddick chuckled and was given a strange look by Mal. "I don't drink overmuch, you may have noticed, but a finger or two of whiskey along with tea is nice."

Jayne's eyes narrowed at Riddick but River shook her head slightly to divert him from the question he wanted to ask, "We got some, iffen you're serious."

"Thought you didn't drink Rick," Mal asked curiously.

"Now and then a finger a whiskey with tea, or a beer or two, yeah," Riddick shrugged comfortably. "I can't drink whiskey straight, or to excess. Animal likes that about as well as it does drugs." He tilted his head at Jayne, "So how about it?"

"I'll get it," River stood and glanced at Inara, "Inara would you like some tea?"
"Please, that would be lovely," Inara's beautiful smile showed no sign of the strain she was feeling. River nodded and rose to fetch the tea and whiskey. It wasn't hard to pour two fingers of the alcohol into the teacup and then pour the tea. Setting the cup in front of Inara and the bottle in front of Riddick she took her place again. "So apart from the possibility of being outnumbered, there doesn't seem to be much that can go wrong with Mal's plan," She commented.

"That don't mean something won't go wrong," Jayne grumbled. "Somethin' always does."

Wash chuckled as Mal began clearing his visual aids off the table to make way for dinner, "We do seem to have the worst luck that way."

"I'm fair certain that any blessing I could give would have to be well received by her captain," Book said as he brought over a platter of rice and vegetables. "So I'm afraid that while I can bless you all individually as you wish, blessing the ship herself would do little good."

"I'd feel better if you'd just say a little prayer over that compression coil," Kaylee muttered with a rebellious look at her captain.

"Anyone else like a blessing?" Book asked a bit whimsically, "Riddick? River?"

From the shocked expression on his face he was completely unprepared for their voices to speak in unison, a growl from Riddick underscoring their words, "No."

"I see," The shepherd blinked in surprise. "The two of you don't believe in God then?"

"Considerin' the last planet we was on wanted to burn her at the stake 'cause a God, don't think Rick's really feelin' too friendly towards the Almighty," Mal offered an explanation.

"That's one reason, but it's not the right one," Simon shook his head as he rose and held Kaylee's chair for her. When Mal and Book both looked at him, the doctor shrugged, "As I understand it, both my brother and sister believe in God."

"Not that I'm one to get in the way of anybody's religion or lack of it, so long as God don't come on my boat," Mal tilted his head at Simon curiously, "But I ain't quite gettin' the problem."

"Absolutely believe in God," Riddick slowly repeated the words he'd spoken on planet.

River slid her hand into his, as she finished what he'd said, "And we absolutely hate the fucker."

The shock of their words along with their cool expressions had half the crew gaping at them; Jayne included, "Hell Rick, you ain't never said you minded me-"

Riddick cut him off with a shrug, "I don't care what other people believe or don't Cobh." He said quietly. "Pray or don't, Buddha or God or whatever you want to call Him... it makes no difference to me. But gettin' a blessing from a preacher or whatever spoke over me, that's askin' for things of someone never had a care for me. I gotta believe. Got no choice in that. But belief don't mean love. Just means I believe. Got no use for God and he none for me."

"I don't quite understand," Book admitted, and there were nods all around the table from everyone but Jayne, Simon and Mal.

River hated how these conversations made her mate feel, closed in and bombarded with good intentions that led to hell, the weight of everyone wanting to 'save' him. "Think someone can spend half their life in the slam with a horse bit in their mouth and not believe?" She spoke slowly and
clearly, her hand gripped tightly in Riddick's fingers, "Think he could start out in some trash bin with
an umbilical cord wrapped around his neck and not believe?" She looked at the faces around the
table, horrified and pained as if they'd heard anew all the torture she and her mate had undergone at
the academy. "By the same logic, and the same sympathy, how could she not believe after being
abandoned by her parents to torture and eventual death? To rape and experiments? After men,
followers of that self same God, decided to turn the girl's mind into their plaything? Always believed.
Logic insists that God exists. Logic does not insist that the girl and her mate must love God."

"Huh," Mal blinked at her thoughtfully and then at Rick, "Well this is all becomin' a bit too
philosophical for me." He looked at Book, "Told you once Shepherd, you're welcome on my boat.
God ain't."

"I understand," Book was shaken, River could tell he found their revelations disturbing and
saddening but he would pray and seek solace with his God. He would never try to insist on
reconciling she and her mate with the Almighty. That was all she could ask.

"Good, now if you gotta say a blessing over the food say it to yourself," Mal instructed. "But do it
after ya'll have passed the plates around. Smells good, so let's eat it while its hot."

"Thank you for cooking," Riddick looked at Book. "Even if you do pray over the food as you're
making it." The convict smirked mischievously and River smiled.

"Inara," River murmured her friend's name as she entered the shuttle. The Companion's voice had
been tired as she'd called for River to enter and that Inara hadn't greeted her at the door said more
about the older woman's fatigue than anything else. Inara rarely allowed her disease to interfere with
her manners.

"I'm sorry River, I don't think I'm up to a conversation," Inara's exhausted voice said from her couch.

River shook her head and walked towards Inara, "You're in pain and the whiskey helped some but
not enough. You need a massage. Riddick will be here in a minute to help me. Between the two of
us we can make sure your muscles are relaxed, not twitching and painful."

"River, its not necessary," Inara argued wearily.

The slender girl frowned at her friend and counselor, Inara even looked exhausted and she never
looked tired. The disease must be taking a toll today, "When did you last have your medication?"

"I haven't today," Inara shook her head. "I can't take it every day or I'll build up an immunity. I'm
low on it anyway so it works out." She sighed, "Not that I don't trust you River, but I don't know
about letting Riddick give me a massage. It's not in my nature to give anyone else control."

River nodded her understanding but it was Riddick's voice who answered the Companion, "I don't
need to control you Inara. I don't feel desire for you, and I got no need to bend you to my will.
You've helped River an' me. This is something we can do for you."

"You two know how to give a massage," The dark eyes were curious in spite of her fatigue as she
regarded the two of them.

"Knowledge of musculature is extensive," River nodded. "Inara should remove her clothing, lie on
her bed, pillows under her collarbone please." She stripped off her shoes and long jacket before she
picked up the bottle of vanilla orchid oil she'd found on Persephone. She was painfully aware of
Riddick toeing off his boots and pulling his shirt over his head. Her mate was so handsome it was almost impossible for her to not react physically to the sight of him. Inara had stripped completely and now was stretched out on her bed. River looked at Riddick to see him watching Inara with a thoughtful expression. A touch of her mind to his had her smiling; her mate was remembering her stretched out for him on this same bed.

River gently touched Inara's cheek, "She will make certain Inara feels better." She promised, "Her friend will not suffer. And we will play a game, stimulate the mind and relax the body."

"A game?" Inara was almost smiling at the thought, "I don't think I could manage hoop ball now River."

"Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Riddick's voice was low and soothing as his hands began to rub Inara's calves.

"Ulysses, Alfred, Lord Tennyson," Inara recognized the verse and River smiled.

"See? A game," She teased her friend gently. "Would you like to give us a quote?"

"Hmm..." Inara thought for a moment, "No cheating River." She teased the Reader back before she gave her quote, "If thou could'st empty all thyself of self, like to a shell dishabited, then might He find thee on the ocean shelf, and say, 'This is not dead,' and fill thee with Himself instead. But thou are all replete with very thou and hast such shrewd activity, that when He comes He says, 'This is enow unto itself - 'twere better let it be, it is so small and full, there is no room for me.'"

"Sir Thomas Browne," Riddick answered after a moment.

River smiled and began to think of her quote, "He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man I am not for him."

Inara laughed a little and gave the quote's source, "Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare." She smiled.

They'd succeeded in relaxing the muscles of Inara's back and she'd just turned over, a cloth covering her breasts and hips. Riddick was kneeling between her legs, one of her feet on his thigh as he gently rubbed the muscles of her ankle while Inara's head rested in River's lap. River was giving Inara a scalp massage, and she could feel Inara's pain and tension draining away when the door opened.

"What in the name of the dear an' fluffy lord is goin' on?" Mal's voice was unwelcome and shocked in the deliberately quiet atmosphere of the shuttle. Inara moaned as the captain's voice intruded, River could feel the pain that sliced through the Companion, a throbbing behind her eyes.

Carefully removing Inara's head from her lap River slid off the bed and stalked silently over to the captain, "Get out." She hissed pushing the bigger man back. "Out of here."

Through Mal's surprised reaction and her admittedly powerful force of will she backed him out of the shuttle and shut the door behind her. "You have no right to come into a Companion's shuttle when she's with clients," River hissed. "How dare you intrude on our therapy? We're finally getting better, Riddick can actually touch someone else without feeling as if he's betraying me. I don't have the urge
to kill Inara when he's touching her."

"That's what this is?" Mal stared over her shoulder at the shuttle door, "Your therapy?"

"Inara was suffering from a migraine, everything hurt. Since we had therapy anyway I suggested that we massage her," River continued the lie she'd begun. "It served dual purposes, we get our therapy and Inara's pain was relieved."

"Why did she have to be naked for you to massage her," Mal folded his arms.

"You can't massage through clothing, you need scented oils, hands on skin," River rolled her eyes at him. "Why did you come into her shuttle anyway? You knew we were talking."

"I needed to-" Mal broke off and shook his head.

"Why would you try to pursue her?" River wanted to know, "She's a Companion. She can't take a lover who isn't a client. Any sort of personal relationship is forbidden by the guild. They probably wouldn't even approve of her friendship with Kaylee."

"That's just..." The captain blinked at her.

"Its the life she chose," River tried to explain. "You might not have any respect for her job but Inara chose this. She chose this life. It is a calling, like Simon has to be a doctor or Wash has to fly. She has a great gift of healing, through intimacy or conversation. But it means she isn't free to give her heart."

"So she's like a priest?" Mal wanted to understand, she could tell, but he was sore confused.

"In a way," River nodded. "It might help you to deal with her more if you considered her a priest. She's just as off limits. And you'll only break your heart if you fall in love with her."

"I always thought we had-"

"Chemistry? A connection?" River tilted her head and smiled, "Its part of her training to attract. Even Book finds her attractive, likes her. She does her best to repress that part of her training when she's around the crew because she won't ever be with any of you sexually."

"So it's just me reacting to the Companion," Mal said heavily.

"No, you like Inara, because she's a lovely, compassionate and kind woman," The Reader replied gently. "But you can never be anything more than friends. It's unkind to press her for more and it's cruel to mock her for being what she is. Yes, the guild can be political just as any organization can, but Inara isn't her guild. I know she would gladly be your friend, and she even cares for you, but to press for more... Mal it's just...mean. And unkind. And when you barge in you show disrespect for her work, her home, for her."

"So, knock first?" Mal took a deep breath and looked at the shuttle door. "She gonna be all right with me interrupting?"

"I'll need to restart the scalp massage but I think so with a good night's rest," River nodded. "Mal, just...be her friend. That's what she needs."

"Tell her I'm sorry for the interruption," The captain sighed. "Another day and we'll be on Triumph. Plannin' on Beaumonde afterwards."
"I'll let her know," River nodded. "I'd better get back to her."

Riddick looked at his woman thoughtfully, his talk with Inara after the duel on Persephone had helped as the Companion had stopped subtly encouraging the Captain's infatuation. River's talk with Mal had made him see that a Companion was more akin to a priest than a whore, and just as ineligible for romance. "So you sure you're all right with staying on the boat," He asked as he slid his shivs into their sheaths.

"No room for her in the wagon," River shrugged. "No point in swimming alongside," She ran her hands over his sides and back checking the fit of his gun belt and shoulder harness. "She and Wash will monitor the situation. Prepare a mask for Serenity just in case."

"Good thought," Riddick caught her in his arms and kissed her, loving how her lips felt under his. She was soft and sweet and in less than a week they'd try to make love again. "Not much longer tiān shǐ, until we can try," He felt her shiver in delight at the thought, honey bright in her scent. There was a little thread of sage to her scent, she wasn't telling him everything, was actively hiding something. "River?"

"Cannot wait to be with my Riddick, my Richard," River murmured against his mouth. "Mal comes to find you though," She sighed as he reluctantly let her go and finished check his guns and knives.

"Yeah," Riddick pulled the hatch of their bunk open and began to climb out, River following him up, still trying to figure out that ribbon of sage to her scent. "I'm comin' Mal, you don't gotta come and shout down the hall," He told the captain as Mal appeared at the galley door.

"You know it's a mite disconcertin' you tellin' me I don't gotta do what I'm fixin' to do," Mal blustered. "Wash, we close enough yet?"

"Within spitting distance," Wash hollered back. "You should be good to go."

Riddick chuckled and grabbed River up for one last kiss, "You be good Qīng Xiāng."

"You be bad my lǎng," River laughed as he kissed her again and set her down with an affectionate smack to her ass.

"Always am," Riddick told her as he followed Mal out. The honey and tequila of her scent followed him all the way down to the planet.

"Rick, you keep your mind on the job," Mal admonished.

"Don't see why, it ain't like I'm liable to miss a bunch of thieves comin' up on us. Give you warning when they're near a mile out depending on their horses," Riddick reminded his captain of his superior hearing. "I am startin' to see why you left the details of this little plan out when you were tellin' us the job."

Jayne shook his head, "How'd you think I feel about it?" He looked the captain up and down, "You are crazier than I ever thought River was."

Mal shook his head, "It's a cunnin' disguise. They'll never see it comin'."

"Gotta say sir, that problem with your brain being missin'," Zoe was checking her ammo supply, "I'm wondering if it's makin' a reappearance."
"No respect," Mal muttered as he finished donning his disguise and stomped towards the wagon.

Riddick looked at Zoe and nodded holding up his hand and five fingers, the first mate called quietly to Mal, "Riddick says they're only five minutes away at most now."

He tilted his head listening as the horsemen drew closer, nodding to Zoe and was rewarded with a nod in return as her ears caught the same sound he had, rhythmic splashing, horses trotting through the river they were traveling on. Then it was obvious that the bandits had arrived, the smell of horseflesh was stronger, overlaid with sweat and gun oil, and to make it very plain to he and Zoe one of the men began talking. "Pardon me for intruding, but I believe y'all carrying something of mine."

Riddick smiled to himself as Jayne began to play his part of a trader, "T'ain't your'n!" His voice was a bit shaky as if he was rattled by the appearance of the bandits.

"Did you think we wouldn't find out you changed your route?" The bandit sounded smug, "You're gonna give us what's due us, and every damn thing else on that boat. And I think maybe you're gonna give me a little one-on-one time with the missus."

Riddick could smell Jayne's amusement and knew that the big merc was going to poke fun at Mal and the bandit at the same time. This should be good, "Oh, I think you might wanna reconsider that last part. See, I married me a powerful ugly creature."

Riddick and Zoe exchanged amused looks as Mal's voice rang out, high pitched and indignant, "How can you say that? How can you shame me in front of new people?"

Zoe to her credit, did not start laughing but it was close. Riddick could tell she was fighting to remain stoic as Jayne shot back, "If I could make you purtier, I would."

Mal's voice sounded hurt and appalled, appropriate considering he'd donned a prairie dress and bonnet for the little charade, "You are not the man I met a year ago." The clicking of guns didn't quite stifle Riddick's amusement at the conversation but they did signal to he and Zoe that imminent violence was possibly upon them. "Now think real hard," The captain's voice was firm as he addressed the bandits, "You been bird-dogging this township a while now. They wouldn't mind a corpse of you. Now you can luxuriate in a nice jail cell, but if your hand touches metal, I swear by my pretty floral bonnet, I will end you."

Riddick took a deep breath, inhaling and looked at Zoe, shaking his head; the bandits weren't going to go quietly along to a jail cell, no matter how luxurious. And then, as if he hadn't given Zoe enough warning, the bandit shouted, "Take 'em!"

That was his cue to lean around Jayne's side of the wagon and shoot the nearest bandit dead in the heart while Zoe did the same thing on Mal's side. In a matter of moments every horseman was dead.

Riddick climbed out of the wagon and began to strip the bodies of valuables, clicking reassuringly at the frightened horses. "Jayne hand the reins off to your wife an' gimme a hand with the horses," He called as Zoe picked herself up out of the shallow water. "Damn Zoe, if you'd a told me you had the urge I coulda shoved you out halfway down the river. I just didn't think Wash'd like river water as a perfume."

"Rick your sense a humor leaves a bit to be desired," Zoe rolled her eyes as she dried and holster her mare's leg. "Anybody got work for the doc?"
"We're all fine here," Mal looked at Jayne and then down at his unspotted dress. "Rick's got the right idea; let's gather up what we can. Ain't like Elder Gommen has a lot of cashy money to pay us."

Before the captain could say anything else a slender figure climbed down from a tree, a rifle over her shoulder, "Didn't even get to take a shot." She pouted up at Riddick.

"Coulda told you that," Riddick chuckled and kissed her. "That's what you get for hornin' in."

"Would love to know how you conjured this'd be the spot," Mal told his youngest sub-contractor. "And don't think it's escaped my notice that you weren't exactly invited to this little shindig. How'd you get here?"

"Shortest distance between two points is a straight line," River shrugged at him. "And crashing a party makes it more fun. If you'd needed me you would have been glad I was there."

"She's good, didn't even see her up in the trees," Jayne commented.

"So you ran, overland from the ship to here?" Zoe was still trying to take in River's method of transportation.

"Yes," River shrugged, "Wasn't far."

"That's a distance of six miles at least," Mal regarded her thoughtfully. "Did anyone know you were coming?"

"Told Simon I was going for a walk," River shrugged. "I was carrying a rifle so he didn't ask for details. Simon is not stupid, much."

"Great," The captain rolled his eyes. "Well help out with the bodies or the horses, we've gotta take 'em all back to the settlement."

"And though mine arm should conquer twenty worlds, there's a lean fellow beats all conquerors," River said softly as she moved towards the horse.

"Whose hand may grip your nostrils - Your forelock who may hold? E'en they that use the broads with us - the riders bred and bold, that spy upon our matings, that rope us where we run - They know the strong White Horses from father unto son," Riddick smiled slightly.

River tilted her head at him and continued the poem softly, her voice soothing the animals as she led them, one to another until she was holding all six sets of reins in her hands. "We breathe about their cradles, we race their babes ashore, we snuff against their thresholds, we nuzzle at their door; By day with stamping squadrons, by night in whinnying droves, creep up the wise White Horses, to call them from their loves."

Riddick couldn't help but be aware of Jayne's amusement at Mal and Zoe's confusion, nothing they'd said had led them to expect River would be good with horses or any sort of animal but it was one of the things she'd loved when she was a girl. She'd had horseback riding lessons, she and Simon, as any child of a good family would. Reading a horse was different than reading a person but emotions were still emotions and she knew how to soothe the frightened animals. While she dealt with the horses the rest of them had dealt with the bodies, now loaded in the back of the boat.

"All right then, anybody cares to, ride a horse, I'll take care of driving the boat," Mal said in resignation as his crew regarded the mounts hopefully.

Riddick grinned as he approached River, "So which one'll tolerate the wolf best liàn rén?"

"liàn rén"
"She will, needs a gentle hand but likes you. Likes the sounds you made," River handed him the reins of a dappled mare. "He is for Zoe," She handed the first mate the reins of a stallion, "Needs a firm hand. Wife and first mate can provide that."

Jayne had already walked up to the horses and held out his hand to be sniffed and nuzzled, a big gelding was now trying to nibble on his shirt, "Reckon this one likes me well enough." He patted the big animal's neck and hoisted himself into the saddle.

"He does," River laughed and tied the two spare horses to the boat before she climbed up into the saddle of another mare.

"Well let's be movin' on then," Mal flicked the reins over the backs of his horses and got the boat going again.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So we have the conclusion of our mini-episode, a little blip with Inara and the beginnings of 'Our Mrs. Reynolds'. For the sheer silliness of the lines and the insanity of the situation I love this episode.

Chinese Translations:
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
tiān shī - angel
liàn rén - lover/sweetheart
zhī 'ài - most beloved
gē ge - big brother
bàng jiār - lover/partner
láng - wolf

Quote Sources:
Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. – Ulysses - Alfred, Lord Tennyson

If thou could'st empty all thyself of self, like to a shell dishabited, then might He find thee on the ocean shelf, and say, 'This is not dead,' and fill thee with Himself instead. But thou are all replete with very thou and hast such shrewd activity, that when He comes He says, 'This is enow unto itself - 'twere better let it be, it is so small and full, there is no room for me. – Sir Thomas Browne

He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man I am not for him. – Much Ado About Nothing – William Shakespeare
And though mine arm should conquer twenty worlds, there's a lean fellow beats all conquerors. - Old Fortunatus - Thomas Dekker

Whose hand may grip your nostrils - Your forelock who may hold? E'en they that use the broads with us - the riders bred and bold, that spy upon our matings, that rope us where we run - They know the strong White Horses from father unto son. – White Horses – Rudyard Kipling

We breathe about their cradles, we race their babes ashore, we snuff against their thresholds, we nuzzle at their door; By day with stamping squadrons, by night in whinnying droves, creep up the wise White Horses, to call them from their loves. – White Horses – Rudyard Kipling
Riddick tilted his head as Simon approached him. Kaylee was sitting with River, the mechanic braiding River's hair and putting flowers in it, sweet smelling to his sensitive nose, "Simon, somethin' you want?" He smiled as River's caramel scent washed over him, his woman was happy.

"I hoped I might have your permission to dance with Kaylee," Simon bowed very properly from the waist. He'd taken the time to change out of his doctor clothes into a slightly rougher shirt and pants, boots instead of his shoes so, on the surface at least, he fit in with the crowd.

"Kaylee? That all right with you?" Riddick looked at his méi mei.

"I'd like that," Kaylee finished the braid and kissed River's cheek. "Do you know these dances Simon," She asked putting her hand into his.

"I was hoping you might teach me," Simon admitted with a shy smile.

"I'd be dee-lighted," Kaylee giggled and tugged Simon off into the dancing while River moved closer to Riddick.

"He loves her," River murmured softly. "He's not accustomed to loving anyone but me, so it surprises him and he doesn't understand yet. But I know what he's feeling."

"Pregnancy, horses in the desert, and love," Riddick chuckled and stood, extending his hand to her with a half bow of his own.

River stood and placed her fingers in his, "The three things that cannot be long hidden." She agreed with a smile.

"A few dances an' then we can try to ride herd on the crew," Riddick suggested as they whirled into the dancers, the music and beat making the steps near effortless for him to follow in River's wake.

"Yes," River agreed with a smile that swept the scent of honey and caramel towards him. Curiosity as to her happiness must have been uppermost in his mind because she explained, "His mind is always returning to her. How much he wishes for the bond, for her, for their bodies to be one and simply for her company. It is a joy to her."

"And to me that you're willing," Riddick admitted with a smile of his own. "Takin' chances with you ain't in my nature but its damned tempting to hole up in our bunk for a coupla weeks."

"She sympathizes," His woman smiled up at him and he couldn't stand to not kiss her again. The dance was forgotten as she whirled into his arms and he carried her out of the firelight's circle and into the shadows. Her pale face surrounded by dark hair and night and flowers was his own personal image of beauty as she looked up at him.

"So tā mā de gorgeous," He muttered as he brought his lips down to hers. Her hands slid under his shirt, felt so good on his skin and her mouth was wild under his, nipping and sucking on his tongue as his hands cupped her pì gu and held her close to his body. "Don't think we're gonna end up ridin' herd bǎo bǎo. Wanna be alone with you."
"My mate likes the outdoors," River moaned into his mouth. "She wishes only he and the darkness."

That was all he needed to hear, Riddick hauled her up into his arms and began striding towards the outer edge of the settlement, past the hills was a pond where he and River could spend some time. The hill hid them from the light of the fire, though it glowed like a sunset to his eyes. The water was cool and dark, sweet smelling and he took River right to the edge of its banks, soft grass, sandy soil and the scent of her. He had to set her down to take off his shirt and trousers, toeing off his boots when he noticed River undressing, "No," Riddick put his hands on hers, "Let me."

He loved that she'd let him do things like this. At the academy they hadn't been allowed to be tender towards each other, not unless it was instinct or the animal, like the way he wrapped her in his arms at night. River was fiercely independent, not wanting to ever be seen as the weaker half of their duo, even if physically he was more powerful. It never mattered to him, he'd never understood men who insisted their women be meek and quiet and powerless so they would feel strong and important. A strong man needed a strong woman. His mate was the strongest, most powerful, beautiful woman he knew, and she didn't need him to take care of her. But he loved doing it, slipping her shoes off, unbuttoning the long jacket and inhaling her scent. His hands made short work of her trousers and her undergarments were tugged away and put in a pile with the rest of their clothes until she was naked in the darkness for him.

"Please my Richard," River whispered, "I want to taste you."

"After," He promised her, feeling her shiver of desire as he spoke. He didn't think his voice was anything special but River had said more than once that she loved how his voice sounded. He'd always known she loved to hear him talk to her as they made love, he just hadn't quite understood why until they'd talked before Persephone. Now he could listen and hear her heartbeat quicken minutely when he said her name, or the touch of honey in her scent when he spoke. She felt so good, her skin against his lips, it wasn't a hardship to tell her how she felt to him. "I want to taste you天 shǐ. Your skin is so perfect," He brushed his lips over her collarbone and felt her shiver again. "You'll let me River, you'll let me drink your honey."

"Yes," River's hands were petting his scalp and neck, his shoulders, fingertips tracing the lines of his scars and the slight indentation of the marks she'd left on his neck and shoulders. "My mate, my lăng must do as he pleases with his woman," She smiled as his mouth found hers and kissed her again. Every time her lips touched his it was like fire bursting through his body. He could feel his blood grow hotter with every touch of her skin to his. "It is the same for her, Richard's touch, ignites her blood, sets fire to her soul until she fears she will be only ashes in his arms."

"No," Riddick shook his head and kissed her again, "No, we'll be luán fèng."

"Luán," She whispered in amazement against his lips, "Truly?" He could smell her amazement, the caramel of her joy, that he considered her to be the mythical bird, the mate of the phoenix.

"Of course," If he hadn't made it plain that she was the most perfect, beautiful, wonderful and brilliant girl in the 'verse he was going to have to work on his communication skills. "Let me show you River," Riddick put his mouth on her neck and scraped her skin lightly with his teeth, loving how she moaned every time.

"Yes, please," She trembled and he felt her sagging against him, her body prioritizing sensation over staying upright. Riddick loved that, she was so responsive, felt so good, he pulled her against him and shuddered when her gentle hands began to stroke and tug on his dìǎo. Laying her down on the grass he made sure his shirt was under her body and began to kiss his way towards her perfect breasts. Her reaction when his lips reached one nipple always made the animal want to howl with pride that he could give his mate such pleasure. Her body suffused with honey, the scent of her made
him dizzy with pleasure as he sucked and nibbled and listened to her moan and gasp for his touch.

He couldn't wait much longer to taste her, moving down to her belly and nipping it with his teeth only to have her purr for him at the sensation. Her animal was rising to meet his, her hands clutching at him now, little cries of need as she lifted her hips, wanting his mouth on her hot, blood filled yīn dì. Riddick groaned and pulled her hips up, kneeling between her thighs and lifting her body to his mouth. "Wrap your legs around my shoulders River," He commanded her, his voice hot on her mound. "Damned if I'm going to stop playing with your pretty shuāng rǔ while I eat your gorgeous pussy. You brace yourself if you want my mouth on you River."

The surge of honey filled his nose and her heartbeat seemed to triple as she obeyed, her limber body braced against his and her arms pressing hard to the ground. The moan that left her lips when his big hands covered her breasts sent blood pounding into his cock and he groaned against her clit. "That's it River, my woman is going to have everything she wants," He told her as he licked the honey off the inside of her thighs teasing her before he slid his tongue deep inside her táo huā yuán and felt her spasm around his tongue, a half strangled scream in her throat. "God yeah River, I love that," He told her, pleased she'd simply given herself over to the pleasure of it. "Gonna eat every bit of this honey of yours, devour my woman whole."

"Please yes, my Richard, my Riddick," Her voice was a whisper. He wanted to hear her scream it, her fall making her lose control but that was the price of being under the stars. Richard B. Riddick was dead on a Hades moon according to the 'verse. But it felt so good to hear her say his name, she deserved a reward for giving him that.

Riddick gave her breasts a squeeze tugging at her nipples gently and began to methodically lick and suck every bit of honey off of her body until she was moaning and begging him to make her fall, he'd avoided her clit so carefully. "Want my mouth on your clit River?" He teased her by placing careful little kisses on her nether lips.

"Yes, please, my wolf, please make me fall," River moaned the answer. "Please."

"You don't want to do it yourself," He slid his tongue through her lips, delving into her again, licking out more honey as she shuddered against his mouth. "Tell me what you need River. Tell me what you want your man to do."

"Oh, Richard, my...my clty, my yīn dì, I want your mouth...on it," River panted the words out, somehow leveraging her body closer to his mouth. "Please, my mate, need your tongue, your lips...need you."

"Tell me," Riddick blew cool air over her clit and watched as a tiny fall rolled over her body. "I'm yours River. I'm yours. I need to do what you want," He groaned against her thighs, his mouth biting and sucking hard on her skin. It was true, the animal truly wouldn't let him do anything that River didn't like. The animal hadn't taken her in the Academy, but it also was insistent that its mate be equal in all things. Equal power in the bedroom meant he was River's, to do with as she wished, just as she was his. He felt the moment she understood, the joy that bloomed through her scent. It may have started as his game but it would always end as hers.

"I want my Richard, my murderer to put his lips around my yīn dì and suck and lick until I fall under his mouth," River was panting with need but she got the words out and the minute she did Riddick groaned and did as she bade. God she tasted so good, hot and slick and so sweet, sensitive flesh being pulled carefully into his mouth, sucking on that little bud and flicking it with his tongue until she was writhing up to him, his chin and neck soaked with her honey as she fell over and over again. It was all he could do to not put her up on her knees and thrust into her. As it was he had to let her body slid down his and rest on his shirt while he panted and tried to regain control.
And then his mate proved that she was truly Riddick's partner and lover, grabbing him and pushing him flat onto the grass before she took his hand and slid it into her hair. Her mouth surrounded his diào sucking hard and fast, her fingers squeezing his balls while one hand crept down and began to play with her clít.

He couldn't take it, there was no way he could handle her falling without his hands on her, not now. Grabbing her hips, Riddick manhandled River until she was crouched over his face, her gorgeous pussy hot and wet over his lips, "Now you can suck me off if you want." He growled and bit her thigh hard, wanting his mark on her more than ever before he pushed three of his fingers into her tight little pussy and began to fuck her with them.

Her mouth was so tight on his diào he thought he'd go insane but he managed to divide his attention between her mouth and her sweet tight yīn dào. God she was so good, hot and greedy for more, more of what only he would ever be giving her, his woman, his mate, Riddick latched onto her clít and sucked on it hard, took it between his teeth and tugged while he pushed his fingers into her again. Her mouth suctioned tight around his dick and he couldn't stand it, his hips thrust upwards, River's hands weren't enough to hold him down completely and he couldn't stop it, his seed erupted up into her hot sweet mouth. Before he'd even finished she was pushing back on his hand, fucking herself onto his fingers and moaning around his jī ba as she fell violently around his hand.

He didn't quite black out but he was vividly aware of her biting down on his hip as she came, her teeth breaking the skin as she screamed his name against his flesh, using his body as a gag to deceive any listener as to exactly who her mate might be. She was shuddering, panting and weak-kneed, falling over his body to one side while all he wanted to do was pillow his head on her thigh and lick her some more. Even as he had the thought she slid one knee upwards, making a place for him.

"My Richard is very wicked," She murmured and began to kiss his bruised and bloodied hip, her tongue moving to bath his cock thoroughly and rousing his body to desire again. "He enjoys this position?"

"Can't see your face when you fall," Riddick admitted his only dislike. "Love watching you go over River. So beautiful." He watched idly as she curled onto her side, her head pillowed on his hip as she began sucking the tip of his cock, fire streaking through him again. "Can you again zhì 'ài? Won't hurt none?"

"Feel stretched and delicious," River pulled her mouth off his cock to answer him. "If Richard will use only one finger on her this time, find the treasure spot with his fingertips while his mouth sucks on her clít, any ache will be soothed. Want your body inside mine...a week has never gone so slowly."

"Yeah," Riddick agreed as he began to slide one finger deep inside her, feeling for that slightly ridged spot just behind her clít. He knew just where it was on her, had made a point of finding it the first time he'd slid his fingers inside her. Anatomy books were good for more than just killing, and he'd taken every bit of knowledge he'd gathered and applied it to the body of his mate. Her moan of gratification as he began to lightly lick and suck her clít while he rubbed that spot deep inside her was better than music to his ears. "So beautiful." He groaned against her clít, feeling his hips start to twitch again. He shuddered trying to resist, wanting to make the second time last but River wasn't having it.

"My mate will give me his jīng yè," River demanded. "Want it, hot in my mouth, taste and swallow, imagine my man filling me with his diào as he did his fingers, his hips working, and fucking his woman good and hard, making me his." She sucked hard on his dick and let her teeth scrape the sensitive head slightly until he nearly howled against her clít with the painful pleasure of it. "Richard
"will stop this nonsense?" She licked at the head of his cock again. "He will give his mate what she wants?"

"Yeah," Riddick wasn't sure when he'd lost control of their little game but he was a man who knew when to admit he'd lost. Losing to River was a helluva lot of fun though, and hearing her scream around his cock as he made her fall again and again did draw out his second fall for a while, until she figured out what he was doing. Sneaky little Reader. That even though she was aware of his little plot and kept letting him pleasure her made the animal want to howl with pride. His woman liked what he was doing so much that she didn't mind not getting her way, at least for a while.

Then she decided to make him wait for his fall, her hand tight around the base of his cock, preventing his seed from going any further until he almost, almost, felt like begging for it. Riddick groaned around River's clit, and added another finger carefully, her body tight and needy, suctioning him in. Her shocked moan almost caused her grip to loosen, slightly and he shuddered feeling his release coming closer until she tightened her fingers around him again. "Cào dàn River," He shuddered and groaned, and decided to up the ante. His lips carefully surrounded her clit and began to suck gently at first and then increasing pressure, while his free hand felt its way down to her pretty breasts. River loved to have her nethers stimulated and her breasts touched at the same time, that had been part of why he'd played the way he had earlier. His hand on her breast, fingers tugging on her nipple should make her just crazy enough for them both to fall hard and fast.

Her moan was desperate as his hand palmed her breast and began to squeeze it lightly, his mouth slowly tightening around her clit. With her mouth stuffed full of his cock every time she moaned it was like a vibrating caress on the sensitive skin. Her hips were writhing, trying to get more of the pressure, more of his fingers inside her and he pressed his head down on her thigh firmly to keep her where he wanted her. He wanted her honey to drench his skull when she fell, he wanted to lick and suck and drown in her scent. Her yīn đạo was hot and tight and so gorram wet he wanted to forget sense and everything else and fuck her blind. His fingers found her nipple and teased it, her moan rose to a near scream, still gagged on his cock and he shuddered right along with her. He couldn't take much more of this, it was almost painful to not fall at this point, but he wanted her to fall along with him, wanted to know as her orgasm was taking her as his was taking him. Carefully he surrounded her nipple with his fingers, and as his mouth sucked hard and tight on her clit, he gave her nipple a sweet sharp tug, his fingers pressing firmly against that sweet spot inside her, his own personal sweet River spot, his guarantee of her pleasure.

She screamed, bucked onto his mouth and fingers and her hand released his cock and squeezed his balls so hard and good he lost complete control and thrust up and into her mouth and down her throat, his fall hard and fast, erupting out of him. He could feel her throat working, swallowing and groaned as her body twitched against his mouth still minutely humping his face as she came down from her orgasm.

Riddick groaned again and tried to pull his hips back only to have River swallow hard around the head of his cock and lick at the base of it until it felt like she'd milked every last drop of seed from his balls. Only then did she release him and kiss his hip. "Richard likes her little tricks," River's voice was smug and lazy. "Her mate likes that she will dominate him in bed now and then."

"Like that you know its your right," Riddick pressed a kiss to her thigh and clit and gently removed his fingers from her body, licking her honey from his skin and groaning at how good she tasted.

"You like what I did?"

"Yes," River nodded happily, no trace of shyness in her body language or her scent. "Loved it. Loved my Richard being dominant with his woman. Loved everything. Loved being fucked with his hands... can't wait to have your cock inside me." She looked at the water and then at him, "Should
clean up, time passes and we must ride herd still."

"Hmmm..." Riddick nodded and scooped her up, carrying her to the water and walking into it. Not sure of why, he kissed her gently on the lips, he didn't notice his scent on her much, and that bothered him for some reason.

"She swallowed his seed," River told him with a smile as his hands gently rubbed her skin. She began to imitate him, "Stomach acid negates the scent of Richard's seed." She explained softly. "Loved that my man lost control enough to thrust, loved that you shot down my throat. Felt incredible, helpless and so powerful at the same time. Indescribable that I could make you lose control like that."

"C'mere then," Riddick tugged her closer in the water, "And lemme kiss you." He found her mouth and began to brush kisses over it, feeling need build in him again as she responded so eagerly he wondered what it had done to her that he hadn't ever kissed her after she'd had her mouth on his dick. He'd have to ask later, for now, she tasted incredible, perfect, hot and sweet and right and he was really not going to fuck his woman her first time in a gorrampond a week before the contraceptive kicked in. And then her hands were on his dick, warm and soft and she was pulling on him, tugging and stroking while he kissed her, and he didn't want that, he just wanted her warm, the silky feel of her pussy against him, hot and soft and wet. The animal had its blood up, its mate had been marked and carried his scent and she was ready and willing and so good against him, he barely got them to shore before he fell upon her, his dick hard against her pussy, rubbing over her clit, she was so wet and slick with honey. Riddick groaned and bent his head to suck her breasts, he wanted her writhing, wanted her legs wrapped around his hips, wanted a taste of what it would be like to fuck her.

"Want to feel Richard's diǎo against me," River begged. "Please, rub it over her, let her feel what it will be like? Please Richard, just a bit?"

"Can't put it in," Riddick warned her, his voice a growl as the animal fought the man to take its mate. "I get you pregnant and that shot starts working, don't know what it would do, don't wanna find out." He groaned as he looked down at her, thighs splayed wide, her pussy hot and dripping with honey and took his cock in hand, rubbing it around her entrance, teasing her with it.

"Oh, ohhhh..." River shuddered, "I can feel, in your mind, what it would be like," She whispered. "I want more, please, do it again, please..." She shuddered and her hands went to her breasts, pulling and tugging at the sensitive flesh. "Please Richard, please..."

He groaned and began to stroke his cock, his hand rough on his skin until he rubbed his cock over her pussy again, coating it in her honey. Now his skin was slick and he was covered in her scent and she was so beautiful, he rubbed the head of his cock over her pussy again, made sure to rub back and forth over her clit before he circled and teased her yīn diào again. "Your pussy is so fucking gorgeous River," Riddick groaned. "God I wanna fuck you so bad."

"Please, it feels so good, to have you tease me with it," River moaned and tried to squirm closer. "One more time, please my mate, I can't... I just...I need it...I need your jī ba rubbing against me."

He groaned and moved forward, sliding the length against her, rubbing his cock against her slit and pushing at her clit with the head, "Is that what you want River?" Riddick growled, "You want to feel your mate getting ready to fuck you? This what I'm gonna do River, a week from now, I'm gonna lock our bunk and spread you out. Gonna rub my cock all over your pussy after I suck on that pretty little clit a yours. And then I'm gonna just," He pulled back and held his cock against her sheath, pressing just slightly, giving her a feel for it, and was unprepared for her to shudder violently, honey and caramel erupting from her scent, coating the head of his cock as she fell at the feel of his body
ready to take hers. "Tā mā de dì yù," He groaned and did it again, pressing just slightly and shuddered at the feel of her body trying to cling to him, hot and wet and so ready for his dick.

"Want my Richard to fall too," River moaned and reached for him. He fell on her again, humping her pussy, his diǎo felt hard as a rock despite two orgasms already, he could have easily picked her up and plowed into his woman and she would have welcomed it. The animal wanted to do exactly that. Riddick groaned again and felt her legs wrap around his hips.

And then that sweet voice of hers spoke into his ear, "Need my mate to fall, cover me with his seed, mark me, make me his." She whispered for his ears alone, "My big man, possessing me. I'm yours Riddick, I'm all yours and you're mine. You're going to fall with me, I'm so close my love, please fall for me, make me fall with you Richard." Her words came in moans and pants, so soft only he could have heard her, her body was slick and wet and he could feel her ready for him. "I want your seed, hot on my pussy," She moaned into his ear. "I need it, I won't fall without it Richard. You know what I need. It's what only you can give me. Please kiss me."

He growled, harsh and raw in his throat and took her mouth, hard, demanding as his body over hers, forcing her to keep up with him, one hand on her ass, squeezing her rhythmically as their bodies frantically rubbed and humped and struggled for completion. She was crying out into his mouth, Riddick didn't know why he'd never done this before, she was going to fall so easily just from his kiss, his body over hers and his mouth on her lips, she was close, he could hear it in every moan and the animal was... "Mine," He growled against her lips, "Only me, swear."

River had never had the animal come out while she and Richard were making love, but she supposed with everything they'd done tonight and the knowledge that they were only a week away from truly possessing each other the animal was closer to the surface. But she'd know that growl, that blaze of silver in Riddick's eyes even brighter than his normal gleam and the sound of the animal anywhere. She'd fallen in love with the animal just as much as the man, "Yours, I swear," She moaned into his kiss. "Belong to you. Only to you. Please, need your seed, need it, on my pussy, on my clit, need your scent, want to be soaked in it."

The roar of delight was almost deafening as the animal shouted into her mouth, his lips still hard, kissing her as if he never intended to stop, but his orgasm sent his seed like lava over her body and her own animal couldn't help but react, her hips grinding her body to his, humping his cock until she was writhing and screaming into his mouth with the shattering pleasure of it. "Yours," She whispered into the still furious kiss. "I promise. I'll always be yours."

"Yours," The animal looked out from Richard's eyes, a hot silver beast glowing inside her big man's body. "Always yours. River."

"Yours. Riddick," She whispered against his lips. "Richard B. Riddick, my Furyan."

"Yes," He nodded, still kissing her, practically lapping at the inside of her mouth as he spoke. "Mine. Soon. Mate. Blood, seed, bond."

"Yes," River promised. "Very soon. I swear it." She lifted her shoulder, pushing it closer to his mouth, "By blood I'll swear it." And the animal surprised her, smiled and kissed her shoulder gently before continuing to kiss her mouth.

"Mate is small, bleeds too much," Was all he said as he continued kissing her. Gathering her into his arms again he carried her back to the pond and carefully washed her body, as tenderly as the man
would before laying her on the bank. "Beauty," He kissed her again and again until the kiss gentled and brushed over her cheek and hair and shoulders. "Taste her," The animal looked at her hopefully and she could only nod and let him bend his head to slide his tongue over her slit and taste her honey. "She is honey. Sweet. He loves sweet things."

"She loves him. He loves her," River petted his scalp affectionately. "He would like more?"

"Not for him, for her," The animal side of Riddick nodded, and bent down to press his lips to her clit, licking her over and over in a manner completely different from the man. An uncalculated and patient slow build of pleasure that rolled over her body in ever increasing waves until a tsunami of ecstasy washed through every part of her and she would have screamed but for his hand, gently covering her mouth.

"Now you," River reached for him weakly, her limbs trembling but he shook his head and began to roughly fondle himself. "Please?"

"My mate, cannot take her," The animal shook his head and took her hand in his, kissing her palm. "Must mark her. Cannot take her." And River could only watch as he handled himself roughly until he was groaning, harsh and dark in his throat and his seed was spilling over her belly and breasts, hot and thick and perfect. Riddick's beast groaned and grabbed for her, kissing her, his hands catching hers and pressing her palms to his seed, "My scent on her. My mate." His kiss was hot and passionate and then gentle, "Soon, his mate in truth."

"I promise," River kissed him gently, lifting a messy finger to her mouth and licking it clean. "One week more."

His kiss wasn't entirely a surprise, apparently the man had trouble with his seed on her lips but the animal loved it. Maybe it was because it meant she was his, maybe the man had decided he didn't care as much about the taste, maybe the animal had been creeping out the entire night, influencing Richard or the animal could overwhelm any other objection, but she loved it. A man would never understand how difficult it was for a girl to pleasure a man orally, to trust that nothing would happen she didn't want, to embrace the powerful aspect of it. She could, objectively, intellectually, understand why the man wouldn't kiss her afterwards, but part of her still felt as if she was being rejected. "Sad," His voice was low, disturbed. "He makes you sad?"

"No," River shook her head, "My mate makes me happy."

"Feels sad," He kissed her again, his mouth demanding and loving both. "Tell."

"I loved you kissing me, after I've had your jī ba between my lips," River said slowly. "I feel loved and accepted, as if I haven't done anything wrong." She wasn't sure how much the animal would understand, could feel conflict, anger and self loathing and determination.

"Feels good," She was told with another passionate kiss. "Right, lips to my mate, kisses after, tasting her mouth, her honey. Loves her. Her." His mouth was determined, his tongue sweeping inside, tasting her, the tang of his seed still on her lips, "My mate. Mine. My scent, my taste on her, with her. Mine."

"Yes," River smiled happily. "My mate," She stroked his face, "My wolf." She lifted her face for his kiss and was rewarded with fire as he pressed his lips to hers again.

River couldn't help but respond, gasping into his mouth, "Love, love, love you," She whispered. "I love you both. You know that right?"

"Saw her," The bright silver gleam was fading slightly, the animal retreating. "Saw. Loved." The awareness of Richard B. Riddick returned and his hands cupped her face, "Saw. Loved. And yet a spirit still, and bright with something of angelic light." He told her gravely and kissed her again, his tongue sliding past her lips, her mouth his plaything as he sucked and tasted and took all of her in.

"I love you so much," River whispered softly. "I didn't think it was possible, to love so much."

"Nothing we do in bed is wrong," Riddick told her passionately. "I hate that I made you feel like that," He kissed her again. "I love you. Don't ever just..." River shivered as he kissed her again. "River if I ever make you feel like that... just... tā mā de hit me or something."

"Will, or just make you so crazy the animal comes out again," River giggled happily and shivered again.

"C'mon, we'll try getting cleaned up again and get dressed," Riddick's arms wrapped around her and carried her into the water again. This time between the chill and their earlier activities they managed to control their urges though Riddick couldn't seem to stop kissing her.

"Hmm..." River giggled as Riddick picked up his shirt and began to dry her off with it, "Why did the animal come out?" She wondered, "I couldn't sense anything different."

"Somethin' about bein' outside I guess," Riddick smiled at her, she was surprised that her big confident man was actually feeling a little shy. Worried that she'd think the animal would overwhelm him too often for her. No woman wants an animal all the time after all. "Been close to the surface all day, but makin' love to you, outside...animal's been ridin' me all night."

"I love him you know," River looked at her mate with a smile as she pulled on her clothes. "I fell in love with the animal just as much as the man. You can't separate the two anymore than I can."

"River, the animal nearly fucked you on the river bank," Riddick reminded her. "I could barely control myself."

"I was begging for you to do it," River reminded him. "Richard, besides being on planet with monsters, this is the first time we've been outdoors for an extended period of time and haven't been surrounded by steel or stone. Both of our animal sides are close to the surface. We should have expected this."

"I barely got 'im leashed back," Riddick told her as he pulled on his pants and boots. "Dunno what'll happen if he got loose again."

"He won't hurt me," River smiled gently. "He never has, no more than you have. Relax my wolf. Enjoy the night. We'll walk and talk to Book, give both our animals time to calm, and then we'll go back to our bunk."

"Stars," The animal was back, bright eyes gleaming as he looked at her and River moved closer. "Rest."

"I can't," River sighed regretfully. "If we go near the fire it'll hurt your eyes. But if we're too far away, I'll be too cold, even with your warmth."

"Fire then," He began to guide her up the hill towards the light of the bonfire and Book. Half way there River began to shake her head and moved faster tugging him along with her until they were
Riddick's hands closed around her waist, a gentle embrace from behind as they drew near the dark man whom shadows clung to relentlessly. River leaned back against Riddick as he watched Book blessing the bodies of the bandits. "For all his secrets, means well," She commented quietly. The two of them moved closer to the shepherd as his attention was caught by something happening near the fire. A young woman was putting a crown of daisies and branches on Mal's head. As they watched she handed him a bowl and the captain drank, grinning at her happily. The girl got up and twirled into the dance while Mal pointed to his wreath to show the very drunk Jayne that he had flowers. The two men seemed to find that hilarious, so much so that when the young woman and a few others pulled them into the dance they went unresisting.

River shook her head as Riddick stiffened behind her, something about the entire play made her uneasy, like the jaws of a trap were settling around her, "Three little maids who all unwary come from a ladies seminary," She whispered a line from the ancient opera. "The game has begun."

"River, what do you mean?" Book's voice was gentle if a bit confused.

"It's a line from the Mikado," Riddick murmured, the animal retreating as his mate needed the man's intellect, his hands rubbing her shoulders, soothing the gooseflesh that had bumped up on her arms. "I'd have to look it up. I don't know a lot of opera."

River shook her head, "Don't know what's wrong, but something is, or will be." She whispered for Riddick's ears alone. "Time to ride herd now."

"Yeah, I'm thinkin' that's a good idea," Riddick nodded. "Let's gather up your flock Shepherd."

River looked up at her mate and smiled, "Only need be sure of where they are." She said softly. "Wish we could sleep by the fire...but we shouldn't." She shook her head in frustration, "Can't get more than that, just need to conceal that we are mates...the game has begun."

"Holdin' you indoors or out ain't exactly a hardship River," Riddick reminded her. The grin she was given was an equal mix of man and animal and she couldn't help but smile in return.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So not a lot of plot development here...just hints at the end. Sorry about that. But this was the first time River and Riddick could spend any amount of time outdoors in clean air with grass and trees and I thought they'd really want to take advantage of it. Natural habitat and all that.

Anyhow, let me know what you think, I didn't want to change how the animal spoke from 'Safe' too much but since anger wasn't the emotion driving him this time I did want him to be a bit more...tender. But the animal never struck me as having much use for words.

Chinese Translations:

mèi mei - little sister

tā mā de - fucking
pì gu - butt
bǎo bāo - darling/baby
tiān shǐ - angel
láng - wolf
luán fèng - luan and phoenix / husband and wife
diǎo - cock
yīn dì - clitoris
shuāng rǔ - breasts
táo huā yuán - vagina / lit. "garden of peach blossoms"
yīn dào - vagina
jī ba - dick/penis
zhì 'ài - most beloved
zhì 'ài - most beloved
Cào dàn - damn it/fuck
Tā mā de dì yù - fucking hell

Quote Sources:

And yet a spirit still, and bright with something of angelic light. - She was a Phantom of delight - William Wordsworth

Three little maids who all unwary come from a ladies seminary - The Mikado - Gilbert & Sullivan
River could hear Riddick on the bridge, his sensitive hearing picking up the heartbeat of the man beside him and then slowly moving outward until he knew where every soul onboard was in relation to the bridge. Her mate disliked all the people moving in and out of the ship, the wolf felt his territory was being invaded and didn't like that she was standing in the doorway of the lounge, watching the cargo bay.

Mal was walking with Elder Gommen, almost to Serenity, talking cheerfully with the older man, "Elder Gommen, thank you for the hospitality."

"We owe you a great debt. I'm sorry we have so little to pay it with, though I hope our gifts will show our regards," The Elder's words were sincere but there was an undercurrent, something not as genial as the old man seemed. River frowned thoughtfully and walked forward to meet the captain as Zoe came down the steps.

"Well I don't think Jayne's ever lettin' go of that stick," Mal was joking with the Elder and smiled at his crew as they approached.

Zoe spoke first, before River could say anything about Riddick heard, what she felt, "Mal, there's a patrol boat heading into atmo right now."

Mal's genial manner didn't drop but it did take an abrupt turn for businesslike, "Well we gotta fly."

The elder didn't take offense, walking back down the ramp, "We'll pray for a safe voyage, and hope to lay eyes on you again 'ere too long, my friend."

The captain nodded, "Count on it. Bye now."

"Bless you," Elder Gommen bade them farewell along with the rest of the settlers as the airlock began to close.

River was nodding at Mal as he turned to ask, "River, can you do—"

"Lì shí," River took his hand and forced him to come with her at a run up to the bridge. "Riddick, turn my cortex on," She called as she ran, Mal puffing a little behind her. When she got to the bridge the navigator's cortex was warmed up, the screen clear and she was aware of Mal breathing a little hard as she sat and quickly began keying her upload into Serenity's ID. It probably hadn't been nice to make him run but there was no way she was leaving him alone in the cargo bay with what she had heard down there. Felines were more merciful with mice.

"Well?" Mal demanded as Wash and Riddick left atmo.

"We wear the mask that grins and lies, it hides our teeth and shades our eyes," River smiled triumphantly. "Firefly transport ship Mickey Mouse has left Triumph."

Riddick chuckled as he and Wash began their run through and set up the course for Beaumonde, "Really River? Mickey Mouse?"

"Must appease my sense of the ridiculous," River grinned at her mate. "Dragged the captain up here
"Yeah, Mal, wanted to ask," Riddick turned in his chair once Wash had taken over the controls completely. "You take on a passenger?"

"Uh, no." Mal shook his head. "Not even a goat, no matter how much Kaylee begs for one."

"Then why am I hearing eleven separate heartbeats?" Riddick pushed his goggles back and looked at Mal in the dim light of the bridge. "Last one is down in the cargo bay."

"Oh no we did not," Mal turned and didn't quite stomp but his stride wasn't overly quiet either, down to the cargo bay.

"She will go with, Captain should not be alone," River said quietly. Riddick nodded and turned back to his work with a half smile on his lips, River could read that her mate was hoping this would be some fun at least. "Be good my Riddick," She teased him.

"Not in my nature," He chuckled as she left the bridge and caught up with Mal just as he was entering the cargo bay.

"Daddy should take care with all the odds and ends," River remarked catching Mal's hand in hers and swinging it childishly. His startled look met her mischievous grin and he sighed.

"Little one, am I ever going to understand you?" He began to move things out of the middle of the bay, organizing their stock as he and River searched for their stowaway.

"Not if she can help it," River sing songed the words and was rewarded with a snorted laugh.

"Ain't that just like a—Yah!" River turned as the red haired woman from the night before stood up and startled the hell out of her captain. Ever quick on his feet Mal had the presence of mind to follow up his yell with a question, "Who the hell are you?"

"What do you mean?" The girl was all innocence, butter wouldn't melt as she fidgeted with her shawl and looked up at Mal with wide eyes.

"Well, I think I was pretty clear." Mal glared, "What are you doing on my boat?"

"But... you know I'm to cleave to you...?" The girl's voice grew quieter.

If River hadn't known that this woman was worse than a harpy, a witch and a whore combined she would have found Mal's reaction amusing, "To-whubba-who?"

"Did Elder Gommen not tell you?" The voice grew confused and still somehow innocently sweet. River had to stop herself from making a face.

"Tell me what? Who are you?" Mal shook his head.

"Mr. Reynolds, sir," She looked down for a moment and then back up at him. "I'm your wife" River walked over to Mal and stood behind him, peeking out at the redhead curiously while Mal stood staring, as the woman continued speaking. "I am your wife. That was your agreement with Elder Gommen, since he hadn't cash or livestock—"

Mal shook his head in confusion, "I'm, I'm sorry. Go back to the part..." He paused and River could feel her captain frowning, "Where you're my wife?"

"I don't please you?" The girl's eyes were tragic and River nearly rolled her eyes, how her captain
could fall for this load of  Pública was beyond her understanding.

Mal was rapidly losing patience, "You can't please me. You never met me." He looked over at Zoe and Jayne who were entering the cargo bay. His voice was that of a man reaching for the last sane person in the 'verse, "Zoe, why do I have a wife?"

"You got a wife?" Jayne blinked and River frantically used Ruby's sign language to tell him to act like Jayne and not Shea. He continued after a moment of studying the captain and the red head, "All I got is that dumbass stick sounds like it's raining. How come you got a wife?"

Mal shook his head, "I didn't." He looked at Saffron, "We're not married."

As River watched the redhead grew visibly upset, "I'm sorry that I shame you."

The captain was close to panicking, "You don't shame me!" He looked at Zoe, plain to everyone in the bay that he was desperate for reinforcements, "Zoe, would you get Wash?"

River giggled as Zoe walked to the comm and hit the open channel button, "This is Zoe. We need all personnel in the cargo bay."

Mal protested, "Whoa, whoa. I said Wash."

Zoe was grinning as much as River was, sharing a moment of amusement with the diminutive girl still hiding behind Mal from the redhead, "Captain, everyone should have a chance to congratulate you on your day of bliss."

Mal was appalled and more than a little panicked, "There's, there's no bliss! I don't know this girl!"

Jayne was standing behind the redhead, looking down at her lustfully, one thick finger tracing the fabric of her dress, "Then can I know her?"

Zoe smacked him, though her smirk wasn't lost on the merc or River, "Jayne!" She frowned, her tone still teasing, "Don't sully this"

River was giggling behind Mal, her hands clinging to his shirt to stay upright as Zoe and Jayne's amusement washed over her, while Mal decided some captainy threats were in order, "You are gonna be cleaning latrines with your face you don't knock that off." He twisted so he could see River as the rest of the crew trooped into the bay, "And you Little One, don't think I'm deaf that I cain't hear you gigglin' back there like a little loony bird."

"Loons don't giggle Captain Daddy, loons scream like—"

He interrupted her hastily, "Yeah we'll wait on a demonstration a that 'til we're outdoors again." Mal looked at Riddick, "You wanna come and deal with this?"

"I think she's fine where she is," Riddick shrugged, "You're keeping her out of trouble aren't you." His grin was wild and wicked as he winked at River behind smoked blue lenses rather than his goggles. River could read his grim thoughts though, he didn't like the scent he was catching off the woman, avarice, deceit, death and lies and seduction twisted about her like smoke.

"Who's the new recruit?" Book asked curiously.

Zoe wasn't about to miss this moment to make her captain even more uncomfortable, "Everybody, I want you all to meet..." She paused dramatically and River giggled again, "Mrs. Reynolds."
Kaylee gasped excitedly and River felt a flicker of hurt from Inara, quickly masked with disdain as Kaylee squeaked, "You got married?!

River rolled her eyes as Simon clearly didn't know what to say, "Well, that's, uh..." He was plainly searching for a word and finally settled on the traditional, "Congratulations."

Wash was of a similar mind to his wife, "We'd always hoped you two kids would get together." Practicality asserted itself in the next moment though as he looked at Mal, "Who is she?"

"She's no one!" Mal burst out impatiently. River patted his back, poor captain wasn't finding this amusing at all, believed marriage was for love and respect, not to be done while drunk. The redhead didn't help matters by bursting into tears at the captain's words.

Kaylee gave her captain a look that said he was being a hún dàn, "Captain."

Mal was exasperated and tired of tears, "Would you stop that?"

"I'm sorry," The girl sniffled delicately.

"You brute," Wash admonished Mal in a mock solemn tone.

Kaylee was trying to comfort the girl, "Hey, sweetie. Don't feel bad. He makes everybody cry. He's like a monster."

River poked her head out from behind the captain and glared at Kaylee, "Not true."

Mal seconded that loudly, "I'm not a monster!" He looked at Wash, ignoring the laughter of Jayne and Riddick who despite his unease regarding the woman still found the situation hilarious since it was happening to the captain and not to him. "Wash, turn the ship around."

"Can't," The pilot shook his head.

"That's an order," Mal ground the words out.

"Yeah, but can't," Wash shook his head.

Mal wasn't pleased as he addressed his pilot, "What the hell is wrong with..."

River tilted her head as Book addressed Simon, "Have you got an encyclopedia?"

Her brother nodded, "Nà shì," The two of them went to fetch it as Wash and Mal continued their conversation,

Wash was speaking plainly, "...the Alliance touched down the second after we left, and there's already a bulletin on the cortex as to the murder of a prefect's nephew. That's right, one of our bandits has family ties. And thanks to River's work we could go back but I think two Fireflys coming and going from the same moon in a matter of hours would still ring a few bells. So unless you feel like walk into a gallows, I suggest we continue on to Beaumonde, and you... enjoy your honeymoon."

"This isn't happening," Mal groaned and glared at the girl, "Would you stop cryin'?"

River's eyes flashed to Inara as the Companion made to speak and she shook her head in a warning, as Riddick also gave the Companion a hard look. Inara took a deep breath and rethought her words, "Perhaps if we all took a breath and calmed down. I'm sure there's simply been a misunderstanding —"
Wash wasn't helping with Inara's stated aim for calm, "As one married man to another—"

Mal lost his temper, "I'm not married!" He shouted and then took a breath, looking at his erstwhile wife's stricken face, making a somewhat confused though sincere apology, "I'm sorry. I'm sure you, you have very nice qualities, but I didn't ever marry you."

River groaned behind Mal as Book entered with Simon's encyclopedia, "I believe you did. Last night."

River rolled her eyes and moved over to sit on the crate next to Riddick, careful to maintain her persona as a shy of strangers girl, and kept her gaze off the redhead and her hair covering her eyes. "Not helpful," She muttered.

Mal looked at Jayne who was still looking at the redhead lustfully, "How drunk was I last night?"

Jayne shrugged, "Well I dunno. I passed out." River rolled her eyes and Riddick chuckled slightly.

Book read from the encyclopedia, "It says here: "The woman lays a wreath upon her intended", which I do recall, "which represents his sovereignty'."

Mal blinked and looked at his 'wife', "That was you?"

Book continued his impromptu lecture, "And he drinks of her wine. And then there's a dance, with a joining of hands. The marriage ceremony of the Triumph settlers. You, sir, are a newlywed."

Mal blinked for a slow moment and then asked the question most pertinent to his situation, "What's it say in there about divorce?" With a wail of anguish the girl ran from the cargo bay.

River sighed as Kaylee said something very rude in Chinese and shook her head, "Sister is wrong." She whispered softly.

Mal snapped, "Guǎn nǐ zìjǐ de shì!" He began to stalk out of the cargo bay.

Zoe, setting aside her amusement, regarded her captain thoughtfully, "Really think you're the one to talk to her, sir."

Mal frowned as he continued to follow his wife, "Way I see it, me and her got one thing in common. We're the only ones don't think this is funny."

River stood and blocked his path for moment, "Wait please." She pulled him away from the woman's path. "Not what she seems." Mal blinked at her in confusion and looked at her and then Riddick who stood and joined them. "Told Book last night, the game has begun. She's the spider, wants us all caught in her net."

Mal frowned and Riddick's hand found River's hair, petting it as he asked, "What's she want?"

River tilted her head looking after the girl and frowned more thoughtfully, "Spins us about, seduce and lie, steal Serenity. Kill us all. She's a thief and a liar and no good will come of her."

Riddick was looking at Mal, "I guess, 'til we know her game, best play this out." He suggested quietly.

Zoe joined them, not liking the worried expressions the three of them were wearing and Mal nodded to his first mate before he began issuing instructions, "All right, 'til that time, lock down every cortex and you," He looked at River, "Do your genius thing to keep her out of the controls and anything.
River nodded, "Need Wash and Kaylee on the bridge. And need the shuttles locked down."

"How do you know?" Zoe asked the question that Mal conspicuously had not.

"I just know," River stared at the first mate and then switched her gaze to Mal. "Very important that Captain Daddy acts as discombobulated as he first appeared. Any change and she will suspect, training in certain arts exceeds mine. And must not let on to her that River is Riddick's woman. Sister, friend, mascot, daughter, but not his woman."

"She's gonna make a play for him?" Zoe asked quietly speculative.

"Can tell he's the Alpha, most powerful male on the boat. If she can't twist Mal about she'll try to seduce my mate," River scowled angrily.

"That'll be fun," Riddick chuckled. "Love watchin' you fight." He kissed her temple as River glared at him and rolled her eyes.

"All right, you pass the word," Mal looked at Zoe before taking a deep breath. "Get to it people. I've got a blushing bride to hunt down."

The bridge was Wash's favorite place on the ship that wasn't his bed. Just as Kaylee loved the engine room, Wash loved the bridge. Now he sat in the pilot's chair, Riddick in his customary seat beside him, "River, not that I don't enjoy the company but I was looking forward to a meal now that I've got a course set."

"Captain hunts for blushing bride," River remarked, closing the bridge door so none of their conversation would carry through the ship. "Bunks are still encrypted with passwords," She murmured thoughtfully. "Need to implement similar encryption on all cortex and ship controls."

Kaylee frowned thoughtfully looking at Riddick and then River, "But why? She ain't done a thing to us."

"Mèi mei," Riddick was deliberately keeping his voice relaxed as he spoke to Kaylee. He knew as well as River did that harsh words wouldn't help get anything done. "River an' me, we got ways a knowin' an' this woman… She don't smell like she acts. Smells of lies and games."

Wash frowned, one of his dinos was in his hands protectively, "So what do we do? Just let her have the run of the ship and hope for the best?"

Riddick shook his head, "Let her play her game but don't be alone with her, ever, either a ya."

River nodded her agreement, "Don't let her on the bridge." She tilted her head, "Acted shy, like a little girl so the spider would dismiss her as insignificant."

Kaylee shot her a grin of appreciation for the tactic and River returned it. Kaylee had a sharp brain under her optimism and cheerful nature and could appreciate the deception as occasionally she'd done the same thing with her smile and wiles. "It's gonna be hard to lock down every cortex and control, 'thout her noticin' I mean," She observed.

"No," River sat in Riddick's lap and smiled as his hands automatically wrapped around her waist,
"Began it when we came on the boat this morning. Bad feelings when I saw her last night. Wanted Serenity made safe."

"All right," Wash was generally okay with anything that made the boat and the crew safe, "So what do we need to do then? Besides you and Kaylee going around to the shuttles and the engine room doors."

Riddick smirked, "Act like yourself, just like you were in the cargo bay. Like you don't know what's goin' on. Just like you would if we hadn't talked to you."

"Yeah that's easy enough for me, but what about Jayne?" Wash frowned. River knew he didn't dislike the big merc as much as he had before Riddick had come aboard but he didn't have a high opinion of the gun hand's intelligence.

Riddick's chuckle was evil, "River clued him in this morning to act like he would before he met up with me again. He weren't nearly as drunk as he acted last night. He's like me more'n he lets on, don't like getting' drunk with strangers." He wrapped a lock of River's hair around his finger, pressing a kiss to her neck as she worked, "I'm gonna have a quick word with him, give him a little game of his own to play. That'll give her something to worry on."

Wash was looking at Riddick strangely and River giggled as she read the pilot's concern that anything Jayne did could have unfortunate repercussions, "Wash should go find Zoe, let her know what we're doing. We will stay on the bridge. She and Kaylee will go to the engine room next."

"All right," Wash gave a shrug and a sigh, "Just once could we have an uninterrupted stretch of calm?" He asked whimsically.

"Leastways I won't go crazy waitin' for the week to go by," Riddick growled absently as nuzzled River's neck.

"What's happenin' at the end of the week?" Kaylee wanted to know, her curiosity was like the sun to River's senses.

"Consummation," River smiled happily as she worked. "Cannot speak of it now but after the trouble is done, she and Kaylee must have girl time."

"Gěi lì," Kaylee grinned and took a seat. "So I was thinkin', we lock down every cortex it'll look like we know somethin's up. Guess we don't want that. So how's 'bout I sorta… complicate everything? Make it look like we're held together with spit and balin' wire. I can mess with everything just enough to confuse an' that way maybe she won't see the hides you're puttin' in."

"Good notion mèi mèi," Riddick smiled at her as he pressed kisses to River's nape. River could feel in his mind her mate's determination to touch while he could since whenever the tart was around he'd have to act distant.

"Nearly done here," River smiled. "My mate must store up his caresses until the spider is gone."

"Why'd you call her a spider," Kaylee tilted her head.

"She wishes to catch us all in her net," River explained with shrug as she finished keying in the sequence that would require a crew password to initialize any change.

"But spiders don't make nets, they make webs," The engineer was confused and shaking her head now.
"This one uses a net," River said darkly. "Richard should go and talk with Jayne about his idea," She told her man. "She and Kaylee will need to work on the door security. Spider is in the kitchen now."

"All right," Riddick scowled as she slid off his lap. He stood and looked down at her a moment before bending and giving her a sweet brush of his lips over hers. "You be careful 'round that jiàn huò," He admonished before leaving the bridge.

Riddick scowled darkly as he found Jayne lifting weights with Book spotting and Simon working a smaller set in the cargo bay. "Cobh, need to talk to you." He took the barbell out of Jayne's hands and set it with a thump on the holder. "Shepherd, you an' Simon had better hear this. Kaylee, Wash and Zoe are filled in already."

"Is this a discussion we should be having in the bay?" Simon looked up at the catwalks and Riddick considered and conceded the point.

"Everybody in the infirmary, Doc you get your instruments out, we'll play that Book had a little heart flutter or somethin' case anybody comes by," Riddick muttered in a low voice. Simon ran for the infirmary, Jayne saying Book's name in an alarmed tone and Riddick supporting the older man to the infirmary until the door was firmly shut.

"Well that was fun," Book reclined on the exam table and regarded Riddick as if he'd lost his mind. "What's going on?"

"Mal's bride is a black widow," Riddick said bluntly. He looked at Jayne, "And you're gonna give her a little something to worry about besides wrapping Mal 'round her fingers."

"Wondered what was up when River started signing to me to act like Jayne," The gun hand chuckled. When Book and Simon regarded him in confusion the big man shrugged, "Ain't my real name an' River knows it. I don't use the real one anymore. So River tellin' me to act like Jayne, means act like I ain't ever got my brother back, ain't ever helped his woman out or nothin'. Act like I woulda when I first come on the boat."

Book regarded Jayne with interested eyes, "That's an interesting parcel of information."

"Well it ain't to the point now," Jayne shrugged off the shepherd's curiosity. "Rick, what'd you have in mind?"

"Well what's the first thing you woulda thought iffen you were the man they all took you for more'n a year back?" Riddick was chuckling as he watched Jayne think and then get an evil look on his face.

"Well I've got my 'vury fav'rit gun' that I could trade for her," Jayne was grinning and Riddick was thankful the bigger man's back was to the windows. "Could corner Mal an' make the offer. That'd sure spook her some. Don't know many women willin' to take an ugly old man like me on."

"You're not old," Simon said absently. He was taking the opportunity to do an actual exam on Book, verifying that the shepherd's wound was fully healed and there was no lingering weakness in the lungs or heart. "You're only a year older than me." When Jayne just stared at him Simon clarified, "I did the math. You're a year younger than Riddick, joined the Independents a year after him. You were thirteen. That makes you twenty five. You look older because you were at war until you were seventeen and you've led a hard life. But you're only twenty five."
Riddick frowned thoughtfully, "Death cut the strings that gave me life and handed me to Sorrow, the only kind of middle wife my folks could beg or borrow." He shrugged when the three of them stared at him, "We've all had hard lives in our way Simon."

"Yeah so?" Jayne rolled his eyes, "It ain't the years, it's the mileage." He looked at Riddick, plainly wanting to get back to the plan, "You think that'd work?"

"Yeah I think that'll work," Riddick chuckled. "Go get your gun and be ready, Mal's headed up to Inara's shuttle, he's gonna try to hide there for a spell." Jayne left in a hurry and Riddick regarded the other two men, "Dunno how good you two are at acting, not very I'm guessin', so I suggest playin' least in sight for a while. River don't figure the woman's gonna wanna stick around too long, whatever she's playin' at'll come to a head pretty soon."

"I'll work on encrypting the infirmary entrance," Simon offered quietly. "If she comes by I can always say I change it weekly because of the drugs."

"I'll preach at her," Book smiled.

"Good enough," Riddick nearly grinned as he hurried out of the infirmary. He wanted a good spot on the catwalks when Jayne made his move.

He got up to the landing opposite of Inara's shuttle and leaned against the railing, listening unashamedly to the conversation Mal was having with Inara. The companion was doing pretty well being friendly without inviting Mal to fall in love with her.

Mal must have just got there because Inara sounded a little surprised to see him, "Mal, thank you for knocking but what can I do for you?"

The captain sounded a little desperate to Riddick's ears, "Oh, I just... needed a place to hide."

Inara's voice had a laugh in it, sympathetic but amused, "If you're seeking Sanctuary I take it the honeymoon's over?"

Mal had the sound of a man rolling his eyes, "Oh, she's a fine girl, don't misread. A hell of a cook, too."

The companion sounded a little preoccupied and Riddick caught a click of cortex keys, "I'm sure she has many talents. She's probably feeling a little desperate to please."

The captain asked, his voice more than a little confused, "Do you ever... wash your client's feet?"

Inara's voice, in contrast, was dry and witty, "It's my specialty." Riddick heard the sound of her silks rustling, she must have turned to look at Mal fully. "We'll be on Beaumonde at least two weeks, right?"

Mal might have nodded, "Mm. Can't exactly be sure, not with this new wrinkle. That is the plan though. Rick's been after me for some shore leave. Seems the man wants some time outdoors. The stay should be two weeks, its the arrival time I ain't sure about. Though if the man gets impatient enough he might spring for the fuel to go hard burn."

Inara's chuckle was throaty and amused, "He's eager for fresh air? Or something else?"
"I'm thinkin' he and his woman are wantin' some time together," Mal's voice was equally amused. "You do good work there 'Nara."

Riddick was grateful Mal hadn't mentioned River by name, even if his blushing bride wasn't anywhere in earshot at the moment. Inara sounded surprised as she thanked the captain, "I'm happy to do it. It's rewarding…to be able to help people."

"Well I don't claim I'll always remember but I'm tryin'," Mal offered. "River had to smack me around a bit but she explained you're more like Book than you are like some a Jayne's…women. By the way, hope me bargin' in didn't bother your head too much. River said it was hurtin' you."

"River has good hands so no harm done," Inara was smiling, Riddick could tell. "I highly recommend her scalp massage if you ever have a headache."

"I'll have to store up my favors," Mal sounded as he was truly contemplating doing just that. "Any advice you can give me on this wife situation?"

Inara's laugh was teasing but friendly, "I wish you hundreds of fat children."

"Aw, could you imagine that? Me with a whole passel of critters underfoot," Mal laughed. "I'd probably forget half of 'em dirtside somewhere, spend more time tearin' around after 'em than I would working."

"You'd be a good father," Inara's voice was sincere, friendly and kind, speaking not as a woman but the voice of an objective observer. "The way you are with Kaylee, even with River and Simon. Of course you'd have to find a woman willing to deal with you."

"There's always a catch," Mal was chuckling and Riddick heard the cortex buzz as the screen changed.

"Inara," River's voice had that scratchy cortex quality that always irritated his ears, "Need you to tell Mal to leave now. Should act affronted, as if you've yelled. Time for the second act."

The screen buzzed again, River presumably had cut the connection and Inara's voice was confused, "Mal? Do you know what she means?"

From the sound of his voice the captain was grinning, "Listen and find out. And thanks, for the sanctuary." He came out Inara's shuttle door and hollered back at it, "I wasn't lookin' for a fight!" Riddick smirked as Jayne came onto the catwalk holding his big Callahan. Mal turned away from the shuttle to leave and blinked as he saw Jayne, his mutter was darkly amused, "Always do seem to find one, though."

Jayne stalked slowly towards Mal in that quiet way he'd learned hunting as a boy, "There's times I think you don't take me seriously. I think that ought to change."

Mal's confusion was evident, Riddick and Jayne had figured that the captain was more likely to act naturally if he'd had no idea what was coming, "Do you think it's likely to?"

Jayne frowned and Riddick nearly laughed at the scent of amusement rolling off his old friend, "You got something you don't deserve."

"And it's brought me a galaxy of fun," Mal nearly rolled his eyes with the irony, "I'm here to tell ya."

Jayne barreled stolidly on, determined to say his piece, "Six men came to kill me one time. The best of 'em carried this." He came closer to Mal as he elaborated, "It's a Callahan full-bore autolock.
Customized trigger, double-cartridge thorough gauge." He took a breath and nodded as he held it out to Mal, "It is my very favorite gun."

Mal didn't move for a moment, Riddick could almost hear the man's brain trying to take it all in, "Das-shiang bao-tza shr duh lah doo-tze! You offering me a trade?!"

Jayne was affronted, "A trade?! Hell, it's theft. It's the best damn gun made by man. It has extreme sentimental value. It's miles more worthy than what you got."

It was Mal's turn to be affronted, "What I got? She has a name."

Jayne shrugged, "So does this. I call it Vera."

The captain regarded his big gun hand as if the man had lost his mind, "Well my days of not taking you seriously are certainly coming to a middle."

Jayne seemed to sense he was losing the argument, "Well, dammit Mal, I'd treat her okay."

Riddick nearly chuckled, Mal was forgetting the harpy wasn't the innocent she purported to be as he lectured Jayne, "She's not to be bought, nor bartered, or borrowed, or lent. She's a human woman doesn't know a damn thing about the world and needs our protection."

Jayne gave persuading Mal one last shot, "Well I'll protect her!"

But Mal apparently had enough of the conversation, "Jayne!" He took a deep breath and Riddick would have bet dollars to dumplings that the captain was remembering just who they were arguing about before he continued, "Go play with your rain stick."

Riddick watched as the captain headed down to the cargo bay, He could see the harpy was down there which was fine with him, there wasn't much trouble she could get into in the cargo bay. River and Kaylee were talking in the engine room, wanting to work on the spare shuttle next. Riddick looked at Jayne and grinned, "C'mon, lets go keep an eye on Mal."

"Yeah, he could use alla the help he can get," Jayne muttered, irritation riding his features as they walked towards the stairs down to the cargo deck. "I better put Vera in my bunk first though."

"Yeah, make sure you got your bunk locked up tight," Riddick gave the bigger man a half smile, "That arsenal you got could put a lotta holes in alla us if the wrong person got hold of it."

"Change the password every week," Jayne's lips quirked upward as he headed towards his bunk. Riddick tilted his head, listening to the conversations going on around the ship, Inara making appointments, River and Kaylee, Wash and Zoe, Book and Simon and the harpy and Mal.

Riddick let his fingers trail over the walls as he walked, it was a habit he and River both had, wanting tactile sensation, something more than the brush of air over their faces to show that they'd moved. Maybe it came from the weeks of sensory deprivation when they'd been stuck in cryo, or maybe it was an animal thing. No time to analyze it now, whatever the reason, he descended the stairs next to the infirmary and listened.

Mal was talking about growing up on Shadow, Riddick smirked, they'd told the man the harpy was schooled and he still fell for it. Homo sapiens were deeply stupid sometimes, Riddick sighed and walked forward, no rush in his steps, to sit on the steps and wait for the captain's attention to fall upon him.

Mal didn't notice him at first, still talking to the harpy, Saffron he'd heard someone call her, "Well,
her and about forty hands. I had more family for a kid...

"What?" Saffron asked, all innocence. Riddick nearly snorted his disbelief.

Mal tilted his head and looked at Saffron and Riddick could smell his realization that he was being played and baited, "Well that is odd."

Mal shook his head, covering his realization with confusion, "I just don't... I'm not one talks about what's past, and here you got me..."

Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth as Saffron inquired, "Does your crew never show interest in your life?"

Mal shook his head, "No, they're... they just know me well enough to..." He frowned and shrugged it off, "What about you? What's your history?"

Riddick looked at her and noted her eyes flicking over him and then over Mal, he could smell the calculation roiling off her, how could she play them both, how to seduce two entirely different men with one answer. "Not much to say. Life like yours, I'd fear you'd find mine terrible dull," She smiled hesitantly and Riddick pulled out one of his shivs, sharpening it methodically on the whetstone he kept in his pocket.

Mal ignored the rasping sound but for a nod to his gun hand, "Oh, I long for a little dullness. Truth to say, this whole trip's gettin' to be just a little too interesting."

When it looked as if the harpy was getting set to speechify and mystify again Riddick decided he'd speak up, "Hey Mal, River's 'bout done with that little chore you give her iffen you wanna check it?"

She up on the bridge?" Mal didn't wait for an answer, simply bounded for the stairs.

Riddick watched him go before looking at the girl thoughtfully. He wasn't anything she would have come across before and if she had any sense she'd know it. The spectacles he wore were obviously not to aid his vision, but he doubted she'd ever heard of a Furyan let alone seen one. When he'd regarded her just long enough to send tendrils of worry off her skin Riddick finally spoke, "Gotta say, ya don't look like the type a girl looking to sail the Black. Seem more the homebody."

"It's a little frightening," Saffron drifted closer, her manner deliberately hesitant as she neared him, to take a seat on a nearby crate. "New people," She added, "I've never even been on a ship, or off world."

Riddick's nostrils flared at the lie, "Well you get used to it." He stroked the blade over the whetstone again, "It's a good boat. Lonesome at times, but not bad overall."

"I thought you were..." Saffron paused, seemed perplexed, it was an artful look, sweet confusion on an innocent, only she was anything but. "I saw you dance with the little girl, and you went off with her."

He smiled, a grim smile that wasn't out of place on a gun hand or a merc, nothing like his smile for River; he wouldn't give this jiàn huò anything that was for River, "That's River, sweet little thing but she's way too young for me. Not more'n fifteen. Likes to dance is all. Tends to climb all over me an' Jayne."

"It's too bad that you're so alone..." The harpy had found her angle, or so she thought, "Seems like any woman would be honored to be your wife."

Riddick chuckled evilly and decided to let her play that angle, obvious though it was, "Well no one's
linin' up. But we spend a lotta time in the Black. Too bad your Elder made arrangements with the
captain."

"You're loyal to him then?" Her question was still innocent though her scent was rife with deceit and
calculation, "He's a good man?"

Riddick stood and stretched, his large frame powerful as his muscles twisted an expanded and he
smelt a surge of lust from the bitch in front of him, "Oh he's good enough." He answered with an
indifferent shrug. "Won't sell you off, as you saw."

She took a gamble then, letting her eyes show fascination and trail over his shoulders. Riddick fought
the urge to smack her across the face, hating her gaze on him for all he'd invited it, "Not even to
you?" Her voice was small and unsure but her eyes were inviting.

He held back the snarl in his voice, it would have warned her of too much, even a snake could sense
when a hawk was above it, and little weasels knew to hide from a wolf, smirking at her instead. "Oh
I ain't a good man little girl. When I want something, I take it." It was the only warning she'd get and
he could sense her discounting it as he walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So I figured with River and Riddick around...Saffron really wouldn't
have the element of surprise. So she's in for a bit of a rude awakening. And I thought it
would be fun to show how they were manipulating her.

What do we think? I don't want Riddick to kill her. Primarily because Mal won't really
approve of that and he is captain of the boat. Being captain pretty much makes his word
the law. If Riddick wanted to disobey he'd have to take on Zoe, which would mean
taking on Wash. He could do it but in doing so he'd lose half of the family he's gained.
So it's a matter of risk versus reward. I have something in mind though, a chance for
Riddick to play a bit.

The practical storytelling aspect of this is that if I want to do 'Trash' later and I really do
decide then we'll really see Saffron get even more of a comeuppance I have to leave
Saffron alive. So there's two reasons Riddick can't kill her. There's only so much
manipulating I can do in order to get the stories lined up the way I want. As it is
Jaynestown, Ariel and Out of Gas are shaping up to be different than the episodes at
least in how problems are handled.

Chinese Translations:

Lì shí - right away/immediately
dà fèn - human excrement
hún dàn - bastard
Nà shì - of course
Guǎn nǐ zījī de shì! - Mind your own business
Mèi mei - little sister
Gěi lì - cool/nifty/awesome
jiàn huò - bitch/slut

Script Translations:
Da-shiang bao-tza shr duh lah doo-tze! - The explosive diarrhea of an elephant!

Quote Sources:
We wear the mask that grins and lies, it hides our teeth and shades our eyes - We Wear the Mask - Paul Laurence Dunbar
Death cut the strings that gave me life and handed me to Sorrow, the only kind of middle wife my folks could beg or borrow. - Saturday's Child - Countee Cullen
It ain't the years, it's the mileage - Raiders of the Lost Ark
River slipped out from behind the stairs as Saffron was sniffing around, the redhead had a predatory look on her face that suited her better than the false innocence, "Has the bride become lost?" River asked in a soft voice, taking no small amount of pleasure in startling the woman.

"A little turned around," Saffron admitted with a shy smile, "I'm Saffron, I don't think we've met." She tilted her head hopefully, "You were in the bay when the captain found me right?"

River nodded as if a little uncertain, offering a half curve of her lips, "Not properly introduced." She agreed. "Captain Daddy has bad manners sometimes." She took the redhead's hand and began to Read the woman, "Called River."

"River," Saffron smiled. "That's pretty. It's nice to see someone, a girl, someone my age on the boat."

River widened her own smile and tugged on Saffron's hand towards the lounge area off of the kitchen, "Different from Triumph." She conceded, "Relationship dynamics are... confusing."

"I saw you dancing with one of the men last night," Saffron admitted and River could hear the undercurrent of her thoughts that such an innocent could never deal with a bad man like the one who wore specs. "Is he your beau?"

River giggled and smiled releasing the woman's hand patting the seat beside her as she sat, "Richard." She nodded, "Love to dance with him, picks up the steps very quickly, his hands are light and arms are strong."

"So he is courting you?" Saffron was trying very hard to pin down exactly what each crew person did, and how she'd have to play them or avoid them depending on their personalities. "He said something about you and the large one."

"Jayne is... funny," River settled on an ambiguous word. "Likes the girl fine, but calls her moonbrain and loopy when he is irked. Teaches me things though, how to handle a firearm." She pulled her legs up into a lotus position and smiled sunnily at the redhead. "Rick, he is Jayne's friend, he teaches me knives and combat."

"I'm fair confused as to who's who," The redhead admitted with a look that was pleading for information. "Everything's gone so fast."

"Would like a cast of characters," River's eyes were dancing. She could tell the absolute truth and still leave the woman mystified. "Two gunhands, Richard and Jayne. Much experience in the art of war," She smiled at the thought of Riddick, knew her expression was tender and elaborated. "Richard is very shuài. Good hands, gentle but skilled, very enjoyable when dancing."

"You got a crush," Saffron giggled and River barely refrained from wrinkling her nose at the description and the calculation she could sense from the woman.

"More...admiration," She corrected her. "Interesting man." River grinned, "Jayne is fun. Gun smithing is very interesting. Big bear of a man."

"Not too bright then?" The redhead was pretending sympathy while filing the information away. "He
seemed…" She gave a shudder as fake as her sympathy.

River shook her head, "Straightforward, adaptive." She explained with a smile, "Friend to Richard and the girl. Settling down type. Would like a wife someday. Thinks Daddy's wife is pretty, tried to trade so the wife would know she was welcome elsewhere if not with Daddy. Sweet but…non-comprehensive." She uttered the lies without regret.

"I was a little surprised to see a woman havin' charge of the men," Saffron offered with false diffidence.

River smiled slightly, her expression as much a mask as Saffron's was, "Captain Daddy, Malcolm Reynolds, owns Serenity. First mate, Zoe Washburne, both capable, commanding. Old friends. To be counted on, trusty and true." She shrugged, "No one gainsays Zoe. Capable of riding herd on any man."

"But she's married to the pilot…she doesn't seem to respect him much," The redhead tried to sow dissent but it fell on stony ground.

"Hoban Washburne, pilot, born to fly. Good hearted, loves Zoe. Marriage is private, between the two of them. Kaylee, mechanic, engineering genius." River's smile was genuinely happy as she considered her two friends, "Doctor Simon, experience with emergency surgery, general practitioner. Shepherd Book, wandering away from the abbey, bringing the word to them as needs it."

"And you?" Saffron's eyes were curious, she could use her expression like a mask but the frustration that boiled underneath it was easy for River to sense. She'd been given every name and occupation and absolutely no real information at all. "You seem awfully young to be on a ship like this."

River giggled, "Maybe, but I needed a job." She agreed with a half shrug, "Captain took me on, says I can make a cortex dance and he finds it useful. Treats me like a little girl though, not of age yet." She tilted her head wondering if Saffron would ask about Inara. It would be very telling if the woman didn't, and it would be a mistake. Saffron wasn't the type to make that mistake and sure enough, the woman was on the verge of a question.

"There was a woman in the bay, with dark curly hair, she was so beautiful…" The redhead let her words trail off. "Surely she's not crew?"

"Registered Companion, Inara Serra," River said promptly. "Rents a shuttle, expands client base, very valuable asset." She yawned a little and smiled as if in apology, "Tired. Busy day fixing things. Book made you a room, I'll show you so you can get some rest too." And that would get the jiàn huò away from the upper deck so Wash and Riddick could get to the bridge.

Riddick winked at Zoe as he passed her in the hall, the first mate was on her way to her bunk to hopefully get some rack time before everything hit the fan. Zoe was climbing down into her bunk and shut the hatch behind her when he caught sight of the redhead. She was slipping down the hall behind him and though it went against his instincts he didn't turn any farther to catch her at it, continuing on to the bridge and opening a wall locker to pull out one of the finger games Wash kept there. Saffron used that opportunity to slip down the Captain's hatch and Riddick sighed as it closed behind her.

"Something wrong?" Wash asked quietly as Riddick shut the wall locker, absently juggling a spring toy back and forth in his hands.
"Sometimes Mal defies all sense," Riddick told him with a grimace of annoyance.

"Most times I'd say, but why this time in particular?" Wash was playing with one of his dinos, twisting its leg so it would rest in a new pose.

"Coulda sworn River told everyone to keep their bunks locked an' encrypted. Know mine and hers is and so's Jayne's and Kaylee's," Riddick muttered in irritation, "Zoe locked hers behind her, but I just saw Saffron slipping into Mal's bunk. So she's gonna run a game on him before she comes up here and tries one on one of us."

"Won't that be fun," Wash rolled his eyes and sighed. "Will we get any warning do you think? Because I'd rather not have to explain to Zoe why some hussy was pawing me." The pilot's concern was genuine for all his lighthearted tone.

"Thinkin' she's gonna try for me," Riddick chuckled a bit. "She was makin' noises in that direction earlier. River's been acting like she's 'bout twelve an' 'cordin' to her Saffron's got no clue me an' River are involved at all." He kept the frown off his face with an effort at the thought. Part of him wanted Saffron to make her move; the sooner it was done the sooner he could go back to touching on River. He'd had enough restraining the animal while they were in the Academy to last a lifetime, the situation with Saffron wasn't helping his calm.

"Well River would know if anyone would besides you," The pilot shrugged and when Riddick looked at him sharply he rolled his eyes again. "I don't know the details and until ya'll are ready to share them I don't want to know. But River's talented in ways optimized five senses can't explain. Not unless she could hear a fed ship comin' from eight hours out, back when we found that derelict." He smiled slightly, "I like her. She's saved us more than a bit of trouble near as I can tell. Apart from being useful, she's a nice woman. You're lucky."

Riddick smiled, "Wondered if you'd been playin' dumb for a while now." He admitted. "You're good at hidin' things, and we can't really talk about it yet. If we told you, you'd have to tell Zoe and she'd tell Mal. He ain't ready to know everything yet. Needs a little more time to get there."

"Then I don't know a thing," Wash held up his hands in mock innocence. "Blameless as the driven snow here."

"Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny," Riddick chuckled. "But I take your point."

River's face popped up on the cortex and smiled at him, "Lù duān, Captain is sleeping now. She will come to the bridge soon. No kissing."

"Good night kiss?" Riddick asked with a grimace at letting that harpy near his face at all.

"Yes, Mal fell afoul in trying to fend her off," River rolled her eyes. "Told him to lock his bunk," She added in irritation. "See you soon bàng jiār."

She clicked off and Riddick looked at Wash, "Since we're about to have company… why don't you excuse yourself after a minute. No sense you gettin' hurt, either from the harpy or your wife."

"I am soundly in favor of that notion," Wash laughed and shook his head ceding the controls to Riddick.

"Yeah I figured you would be," The convict nodded with a half smile of his own.

It was only a moment later that Wash turned at the sight of a feminine figure in the doorway, "Well if
it isn't the master chef. Not sleepy?"

Saffron's voice was timid, "Am I allowed to be up here?"

"Well sure, why not?" Wash smiled, "Its not like anyone else will be taking up space. Rick's got this shift so I was just about to head off to bed." His affability stayed on his face like a mask as he left the cabin.

"I've never been off world before," The woman said quietly.

Riddick nodded, "Yeah you said." He gestured towards the window, "It's beautiful isn't it."

"It's like a dream," Saffron stared at the stars in wonder and Riddick nearly sneezed from the abrupt scent of deceit and spite.

Borrowing Wash's history, Riddick lied right back at her, "Planet I'm from, couldn't see a one of 'em, pollution's so thick. Took to the black just to see what the hell everyone was talking about." He shook his head as Saffron shut the door, "Best leave that open. You've got a husband remember?"

Saffron put her hand to his arm and tugged, pulling him out of the chair as he allowed her to manhandle him, "Now we're alone. Just us and the stars. No ship, no bellowing engines, no crew to bicker at each other. Look." She stood close beside him, "Do you know the myth of Earth-that-was?"

"Heard a few," Riddick nodded. "Don't mind hearin' more." The animal was growling, wanting to gut this woman who dared to put hands on him, would try to take him from River, to take what belonged to his mate. He'd long perfected the art of presenting one face to the world while the animal raged inside him and it took all the skill he could muster to let Saffron hang off his arm and rub against him while she spoke.

"That when she was born, she had no sky, and was open, inviting," Saffron's voice was an exercise in seduction in tone and content and were she using it on any man besides him it might have worked, "And the stars would rush into her, through the skin of her. Making the oceans boil with sensation. And when she could endure no more ecstasy, she puffed up her cheeks and blew out the sky."

Riddick nodded slowly, forcing himself to act impressed, "That is a…right pleasin' image."

Saffron's voice continued her vein of seduction and Riddick found himself wanting nothing more than to escape or shut her up permanently, "My whole life, I saw nothing but roofs and steeples and the cellar door. A few days I'll be back to that life and gone from yours. Make this night what it should be. Please? Show me the stars."

Violence wasn't his normal reaction to a woman wanting to seduce him, at least it hadn't been in the past, but that was before he'd met River, before the animal and the man considered himself mated and fidelity was the one thing besides violence at which the animal excelled. His voice was rough with emotion when he spoke, she could interpret that roughness any way she liked, "All the stars you want to see are right there. Not sure you understand what you're askin'. I ain't a nice man. I'm not for the likes of you." He slid his arm out of her grasp, retreating a step.

"I've been too forward," Saffron's voice was hurt.

Riddick shrugged, "A bit, but that I don't mind." He folded his arms and leaned back against the bulkhead, "Just ain't all that anxious to meet the Black without a suit, which is what'll happen iffen I touch you."
Saffron's voice was confused and seductive both and the animal was howling inside him to shiv this jiàn huò that wanted him to be unfaithful to his mate, "I thought you took what you wanted."

The smile he let curve his lips was cold and cruel and from her scent, disturbingly tantalizing to her, "I do. Ain't ever said I wanted you." He let his eyes rove over her body dismissively, truth in every relaxed and disdainful line of his body, "Now I'm gonna open the door back up." He moved to the bridge entrance, "And you're gonna be on your merry." He'd slid the door open when he felt more than saw the kick coming, one large hand coming up as he turned back to grab her ankle and throw her onto her back. "Now that weren't nice," He observed. "Though it had the benefit of honesty at least."

She was gaping up at him when River stepped onto the bridge, "Lù duān." She greeted him respectfully, "I don't suppose she let her game slip at all?"

"No, she played her cards pretty close, stuck to the good girl attracted to bad boys persona mostly," Riddick sighed when it looked like the bitch was going to move and pulled out his gun, aiming it at her. "You just stay right there." He touched River's hair and smiled, "Perdition catch my soul, but I do love thee! And when I love thee not, chaos is come again."

"Hail, wedded love, mysterious law; true source of human happiness," River returned kissing his palm before she sighed and brought her mind back to business. "Simon's reviving Mal," River murmured as she regarded Saffron. "We'll need to deal with her."

"Yeah, before Mal comes to all the way I'm thinkin'," Jayne poked his head in the door as he spoke. "Kaylee an' River fixed the shuttle's oxygen processors. We could hold her in there 'til we get some answers. Getting' 'em could be fun. I ain't got a ear in a while."

"You can't do this…I was just… I mean I don't under—"

Saffron's voice was cut off abruptly as River crouched next to her, grabbed her chin and slammed the woman's head back onto the deck forcefully. River looked up at the two men, one of whom was looking at her lustfully, the other with no little astonishment, "Sorry. Lies were irritating me."

"Jayne would you mind toting her to the damn shuttle?" Riddick asked his larger friend, "I touch her I'm just as likely to strangle her as I am carry her. I'll bring the restraints."

"You got it," Jayne reached down and grabbed the treacherous woman before he slung her over his shoulder like a shapely sack of potatoes. "Don't take too long. I don't wanna be alone with this jiàn huò."

River slipped out of the shuttle and regarded Mal and the rest of the crew with a thoughtful gaze, "She sent a wave on this." She handed Kaylee a small data pad before she continued, "We're going to find out what she intended to do. Plug the coordinates of the wave into the cortex and find out who she was talking to. The three of us will get the rest out of her."

"What are you going to do to her?" Kaylee's voice was small and a little worried.

"Simon you have that cocktail I asked for?" River held out her hand and her brother laid a capped syringe in it. River smiled at him thankfully, "This makes it nearly impossible to lie, while exaggerating sensation. So if I pinch her it'll feel as if she's had flesh torn out. I'll learn everything we want to know."
"How can you say that as if its something to shrug off," Book wanted to know. "You're planning on torturing her River."

"She was going to kill us," River told him softly. "Do you think Riddick and Jayne tied her up for no reason? I know that much for certain. Whatever she intended, there wouldn't have been any witnesses to it before she was through."

"You can't know that," Mal protested faintly.

"Oh yes I can," River speared him with a look and shook her head. "And I do. With absolute certainty. Tell me not in mournful numbers life is but an empty dream, for the soul is dead that slumbers and things are not what they seem."

"River I don't know that I really want you doing this, can't Riddick or Jayne…" Simon protested for another reason entirely, River knew he didn't want his baby sister to torture anyone, didn't want anymore of her humanity lost.

"Jayne won't have a light enough hand," River shook her head. "He's never done this with the drugs. Her mind would break under the strain."

"Riddick then," Simon grasped at the possibility and Wash shook his head at the doctor.

"Rick can't," The pilot said quietly. "If River's right, and I really don't doubt that she is, she can't let him touch that woman. Saffron, or whatever her name really is, was planning to kill River along with the rest of us. Riddick would never allow her to live. He'd kill her after he broke her."

"Precisely," River nodded. "Plus…" She shrugged. "I'm a woman. A man doesn't know how to torture a woman the same way another woman does." She looked at Inara thoughtfully, "I would appreciate you looking her over first, I know all of the house signatures but if she perverted one, I don't know if I'd recognize it. I'd say she's had training."

"So you want me to examine her before you begin?" Inara clarified, "I will, for a fee."

"A fee?" Mal's eyebrows went up but to his credit his voice didn't rise overmuch.

"Yes," Inara nodded coolly. "But that's between River and myself."

"It's all right," River smiled at her captain. It was easy to see that he was upset that Inara wouldn't just help her but he also didn't like being reminded that Inara took money for what she did. But there were few in the 'Verse who gave their trade for free. "I know what the fee would consist of. It's nothing I haven't done for Inara before."

"Thank you," Inara nodded politely. "If you'll let me know when you need me I'll change into something I won't mind being ruined by urine."

"Oh, no that's all right Inara," River grinned. "You're perfect as you are. Let's not let her think she's important or anything."

Inara's wry grin back was accompanied by a roll of her eyes, "Well then I'll just wait here."

"I still ain't easy with you doin' this," Mal shook his head. "You're just a—"

"I'm a grown woman," River snarled at him in a worthy imitation of her mate. "She would have taken him from me. She would taken all of you out of the 'Verse without a second's thought and you're worried about her? Did she actually fuck you captain that you're so concerned for her? Is her
"Ain't no call to use that type a language," Mal's voice had solidified to steel. "And no I didn't. Don't give a damn about her. I'm worried for you, grown woman or not, you're my crew and I don't ask my crew to do what I don't."

"Know you would," River's anger died as quickly as it had sprouted. "But this is something you can't do. And before you object, I can't have you in the room when I do it. Jayne and Riddick… they aren't like the rest of you. The only other two who could help are Zoe and Book. But you're needed here. We couldn't completely track Saffron and I don't know if she got into the engine room. Kaylee and Book will be busy checking Serenity's heart. We're going to have to act fast once we get the information if we want to keep her from doing this again." She paused and looked at Mal, "Unless you just want me to kill her once we've gotten the intel. I had intended to leave her alive."

"Alive is good," Mal was a bit taken aback at her quicksilver mood change and her casual reference to cold blooded murder. "I'd take that as a kindness."

"I'll see it done then," River tilted her head, "Though I will remember your words the next time you assign chores. When's the last time you cleaned out the septic room?"

There was an unnerved silence in her wake as she reentered the shuttle and River giggled happily as she shut the door.

Riddick was looking at her as she walked through the shuttle doors still giggling and River shrugged at him, "Captain called me crew." She smiled and a pleased grin curved his own lips. "Also have the cocktail. Need her placed in the cross position please."

"All right Jayne," Riddick had detected that their prisoner was awake and faking unconsciousness about five minutes into the conversation he'd heard from the hallway. That no one else could hear it was something he was dead certain about. River tilted her head reading him easily and nodded her acquiescence to his mental demand that she stay out of the way and ready for anything. "You remember what I said now?"

"Yeah, no playin'," Jayne was sounding deliberately pouty and River almost giggled again as she drew her gun and clicked the hammer back.

"Got you covered," She said quietly from her position at the closed and locked door. She watched as they wrapped the straps around Saffron's wrists before securing her to the metal ceiling support beams and dragging her upwards so her arms were splayed apart and she was nearly on her tiptoes. Her eyes flew open in shock and River nearly crowed that they'd caught her so easily.

"All right," Riddick had deliberately kept the lights dim and now his eyes were shining in the darkness, "Jayne, I know you'd like to use that big knife a yours to cut off her clothes, but I don't want any of our women to have to clothe this…slag."

"Don't see why we gotta worry 'bout her an' her clothes anyhow," Jayne grumbled. "Had my way we'd just dump the body. Her bein' nekkid would just learn her that she cain't play us like she would that poor old Elder."

"Let him play Lù duān," River spoke softly. "I doubt she's ever been stripped unwillingly. Her body is just another tool she uses to manipulate people." Jayne's chuckle had an evil sound to it as he drew the knife and began to cut the clothing off Saffron's body. He deliberately let his knife scrape her
flesh several times and her fear wound tighter to River's senses each time. "Enough," She said finally and Jayne stopped while Riddick glanced at her curiously.

"Aw, I was just startin' to enjoy myself," Jayne let one rough paw fondle Saffron's hip and River could feel his revulsion at the thought of raping anyone, but the big man was well aware that making Saffron afraid of him was to their benefit.

"Jayne, behave yourself," Riddick's voice was mild, a verbal slap on the wrist.

"I need Inara to come in and take a look at her now," River told the men. "I can't find any marks but I'm not as experienced as Inara in what to look for." She watched as Jayne poked his head out the door and asked for Inara.

The Companion didn't even blink when she saw Saffron hung in chains from the ceiling, her body spread like an X, "River," She greeted the girl. "I'll need the lights a bit brighter, if that's all right."

"I got 'em," Riddick nodded and turned the shuttle lights up, concealing the ache in his eyes at the illumination.

River watched as Inara examined Saffron's body and nodded, tapping her finger to Saffron's upper thigh, "The Fleur de Lis," She explained. "She belongs to House Antoinette, or she did. I'm sure they'd be interested to learn what became of her."

"Must delve into the past and find out what happened," River suggested with a smile. "Thank you Inara. Let me know when you would like to collect your fee."

"Any time that's convenient for you dear," Inara smiled and would have left the shuttle but for Saffron's protest.

"You're just going to leave me here with them? You're a Companion, honor bound to help others of your guild," She argued.

"But you're not of the guild," Inara looked at her disdainfully. "You've forsaken your guild and training and all honor. You use what was taught you to harm, to befoul. I owe you nothing. Less than nothing since you would have killed me as well." She continued on her way out of the shuttle.

River sighed and took out the syringe and uncapped it, "Not sure yet what you were trying to do." She said as she injected Saffron's rear hip with the cocktail of medicine. "Know that we all would have ended up dead," She added dryly. "Don't think I'd care for that."

"Pretty sure we're all against that outcome," Riddick agreed as he dimmed the lights again. "Dunno if you can tell bǎo bǎo but she's real nervous...pretty scared in fact."

"Oh I know," River turned and grinned at he and Jayne, both of them leaning back on the shuttle bench, Jayne with his legs outstretching Riddick's. "And what I gave her will amplify that."

She regarded the woman coldly, "Open your eyes." She poked Saffron in the belly, "You see these two men?"

Saffron nodded and River was gratified to see traces of fear in the woman's expression, "I see them." She stared at Riddick, "He told me you were a child. That you weren't involved."

"Lied," River shrugged. "He's Lù duān, under no obligation to tell a liar the truth about he and I." She looked closely at the woman, "Everybody plays parts." She summarized what the woman was thinking, "Played you. Like you tried to play us." She tilted her head and pursed her lips
thoughtfully, "Large man, Jayne, would like to cut parts off you." She smiled coldly, "Has a fascination with ears, but has always wanted to try scalping someone. My lăng enjoys trophies as well." She reached up and touched Saffron's red hair, "Shorter man...more dangerous of the two. My lăng, wishes to inflict upon you all the pain in the 'verse. Would have endangered his woman, his crew."

"It's not his crew," Saffron was getting more than a little agitated as the drugs began working. "He's not the captain."

"His to protect, his brothers, sisters, lover, friends," River corrected her coldly. "So I will give you a choice. You can tell me now, what your plans were, where you intended to go, what you would have done with the ship and with us. Or I can torture you to warm you up for my Richard's handiwork." She studied Saffron who was having an internal debate over whether or not they'd just kill her once she talked or if she had a chance to live. "You should notice by now that you're having difficulty telling your normal amount of lies. I injected you with a chemical cocktail that will make you amenable to telling the truth, all of it, and it will also amplify sensation. Everything I do to you will hurt you much more than normal. For instance," She reached out and pinched Saffron's breast, making the woman cry out as if in agony. "You see?"

"What do you want?" Saffon moaned, "What do you want?"

"I want to know what you were going to do with our ship," Riddick growled, "Was there any chance we'd live through it?" River regarded Saffron coldly and poked her in the belly to provoke an answer. The conversation that followed was particularly enlightening and uncomfortable for Saffron. River finally left the woman to her gasping, pain and worry and tugged the men out of the spare shuttle.

Mal was standing in the hallway, the only one of the crew left, everyone else had apparently gone about their business. "Well? What do we know?"

"She was planning to hijack us," Riddick's voice was a growl of fury at the thought. "Muck up the navigation after she'd plotted our course, lock us out of the bridge and sail us right into a net."

"And what's the plan to do with her now?" Mal folded his arms with a frown. "Cain't see lettin' her be on her merry. Not with one of our shuttles. Not too thrilled with that net bein' out there either."

"I was thinkin' we might just take her lyin' pì gu back to Triumph," Riddick snarled. "Figured you might want a divorce, seein' as you're married an' all," He smirked at the captain.

River tilted her head, "Jayne had an idea about the net."

"Oh yeah," Jayne grinned. "Once River got the whole story outta that one, turns out she's a spotter for the boys who man the net. She takes over a ship, sends it their way and splits the take."

"We know where the gorram thing is," Mal asked with a frown.

"Got the coordinates she would have programmed Serenity with before she messed with the cortex and navigation. Kaylee's coordinates from the wave should verify," River nodded. "Determining optimal ways to shut down the net."

"And this time I'm gonna get to kill someone," Riddick growled in anticipation. "Right?"

"Planning on blowing up the net so yes," River nodded absently and tilted her head at Mal. "Bride is available if Captain would still like his wedding night." She teased.
"I think I'll pass," Mal rolled his eyes. "C'mon up to the mess, we'll talk about the net."

In the end it turned out blowing up the net wasn't all that hard. They began to head for it as if Saffron had programmed them and watched as it came to bright angry life in the black, a circle of death should they sail through it. Jayne, Riddick and Mal stood in the airlock with the last suit and Jayne got to let Vera play. Then he handed her off to Riddick who joyfully took several shots at the control booth glass, shattering it and sucking the men who'd have cheerfully profited off their deaths right into space.

River looked over her shoulder as the three men trooped up onto the bridge, "He that has light within his own clear breast may sit i' th' center and enjoy bright day; but he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts benighted walks under the midday sun."

"Huh," Mal tilted his head, "Is it weird that I'm startin' to conjure what you mean more often?"

"Getting used to me," River smiled up at Riddick and the animal had to bend down and kiss his woman.

"That he is," He agreed with a smile for her. "So what do we do with the biǎo zǐ?"

"Well I like the idea of puttin' her right back down with Elder Gommen and demandin' a divorce since I didn't know I was bein' married an' I'm fair certain that's against some moral code," Mal told him.

"I really wanna kill her," Riddick growled as he picked River up and cradled her in his arms before taking her chair. He had a powerful need to hold her, to make sure she was safe in his arms. He knew it was just the aftermath of knowing she could have died but the animal didn't care. "And if that Elder had any idea of what she'd do..."

"Could he have?" Wash asked as he set a course for Triumph. "I mean she'd been there for months, what would her game have been?"

River shrugged in Riddick's arms, "Games within games." She said tiredly, "She's very twisty, even drugged. She may have known the settlement was having trouble and would eventually hire a crew to deal with the bandits. Or she may have been running a long con and decided to cut her losses. Can't be certain. Got the impression that the marriage was something she did a lot."

"Well we're gonna have a word or two with Elder Gommen on the subject of divorce and other topics," Mal shook his head. "Mean time, it's been a long day. More like two with all the runnin' and lyin' we've been doin'. Let's all get some rest."

"Hmm..." Riddick felt River's sleepy little purr and kissed her hair, "Would like my mate to hold me... six more days."

"I'll hold you longer'n that," Riddick smiled and stood up. "Wash you call me if you need me to spell you, I'm gonna lay down with River."

"Should be fine for another six hours," Wash shooed them off.
Author's Note: A little bit shorter than the previous chapter but mostly because I cut some of the last two scenes...they were a bit too weighed down. So I didn't want Saffron to hit Wash over the head, mostly because with Riddick around he'd never allow that. The idea that there's a predator on board besides him? I never thought he'd let Saffron anywhere near the people he considers vulnerable. The flip side of that being that he and River have a certain amount of grim amusement in hunting and manipulating Saffron.

Mal I figured would object to torturing anybody, and especially if River was going to do it. He still sees her as someone that should be protected after all. She might not be crazy but she is still young and he's having a hard time making the switch in his head between girl and adult.

Blowing up the net, I figured that was a way for Riddick to let off some steam, part of him is really yelling for blood. So let's hope he doesn't take it into his head to find Saffron's sweet spot. Because they've still got to dump her off somewhere and that's giving Riddick a little too much time to think and play with ideas of what he can do to the fèi wù jiàn huò.

Curious as to what all of you think of this? Did it play out the way you thought? Too predictable? A chapter or two more and then we'll start on Jaynestown which I'm currently working on. It's going to go a bit differently than the episode mostly because our fave duo would never let Jayne get set up like he was in the original. A parade? A speech? Seriously? Its asking for him to get shot.

Chinese Translations:

shuài - handsome/graceful/smart
jiàn huò - bitch/slut
Lù duān , - Luduan, mythical Chinese beast able to detect the truth
bàng jiār - lover/partner
bǎo bǎo - darling/baby
láng - wolf
pì gu - butt
biǎo zi - whore/prostitute
fèi wù jiàn huò - good for nothing bitch/slut

Quote Sources:

Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny - Hamlet - William Shakespeare

Perdition catch my soul, but I do love thee! And when I love thee not, chaos is come again. - Othello – William Shakespeare

Hail, wedded love, mysterious law; true source of human happiness, - Paradise Lost - Milton
Tell me not in mournful numbers life is but an empty dream, for the soul is dead that slumbers and things are not what they seem - A Psalm of Life - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Life is real, life is earnest, and the grave is not its goal - A Psalm of Life - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

He that has light within his own clear breast may sit i’ th’ center and enjoy bright day; but he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts benighted walks under the midday sun. - Comus - Milton
Riddick opened his eyes and sighed slightly, River had been drained from the insane day. Despite exhausting themselves the night before sleep hadn't come easily, mostly due to River's worry over what Saffron had been up to. She'd gotten up before dawn had broken over Triumph to begin her work on the cortex, setting up her encryptions and starting on the mask she'd thought Serenity would need.

Reading Saffron or whatever her name was because that wasn't it, hadn't been easy for her either, and she'd been running to stay ahead of the bitch then entire day. He'd felt like the animal was starving after a day of not being able to touch his mate, it had been as bad as the Academy. Jayne was sitting outside the shuttle guarding Saffron now that they were headed back to Triumph. And he was as eager as Mal to have a chat with Elder Gommen, find out if the man had known what the woman was up to or if he'd been duped as well. It mean more Reading for River so she needed what rest she could get.

"My Riddick is angry," River whispered, her lips rubbing against his neck. "Wishes to kill the spider."

"Yeah, gotta say, the alive thing, ain't somethin' I'm seein' the benefit in," Riddick admitted.

"She'll be useful later," River murmured. "Not sure how yet."

"You're sure I can't just kill her," Riddick grumbled more than a bit angrily. "Startin' to get the itch."

"Wants to do violence," River agreed, "She does as well. Chance will come soon."

"Yeah?" Riddick couldn't help perking up a little bit at the thought.

"Yes, something to do with Jayne. We will have to take steps, Mal won't understand at first," River sighed. "We have rested long enough, time to go to the bridge." She opened her eyes and looked up at him, "Left an old scratchy dress, Richard should give her a good scare."

"Dunno if the animal'll be satisfied with just scarin' her bào bào," Riddick admitted. "She woulda killed us all, woulda taken you out of the 'Verse."

"She's...twisted inside," River pressed a kiss to his neck and shrugged. "Born wrong, they way they said Richard was, but isn't."

"Sociopath?" Riddick tilted his head, "That'd explain a lot."

"I think so, her mind just feels...wrong," River shuddered against him and Riddick pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"We're almost to Triumph I guess," Riddick tugged her up so her face was level with his and kissed her, tasting her mouth, sweet and hot, her lips sucking on his tongue teasingly until he groaned. "Wicked little woman," He gave her one last kiss before he rolled over her and forced himself out of bed.

"Richard is a bad man," River giggled up at him, nude against the sheets and gorgeous to his eyes.
"She will also dress and go to the bridge."

"Gonna leave me alone with the whore?" Riddick blinked, "Head botherin’ you?"

"Trust you to leave her alive," River shrugged as she rolled out of bed and began to dress again, a flirty skirt and boots with a clinging tunic sweater over it. Her hair was expertly braided and coiled like a crown around her head the way Kaylee had shown her. She looked like the queen of darkness to his eyes, alabaster skin, midnight hair and eyes, brows and lashes inky dark against her skin with lips erotically swollen and flushed with blood. She smiled at him, "Riddick has poetic thoughts."

"Lookin’ at you it ain’t hard to wax poetic," Riddick couldn't help smiling at the sweetness of her scent. "She walks in beauty like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes."

"Drink to me only with thine eyes and I will pledge with mine," River murmured the verse, her eyes fixed to his. "Or leave a kiss but in the cup and I'll not look for wine. The thirst that from the soul doth rise doth ask a drink divine; but might I of Jove's nectar sup, I would not change for thine."

He moved towards her without thinking, grabbed her into his arms and hauled her up for a kiss, his mouth slanting hot and hard over hers, need and love tearing through him like a frenzy until she was moaning into his mouth. Riddick shuddered and groaned deep in his throat before he let her go, "Damn Qīng Xiāng I don't think I'll ever get enough of you."

"It is frighteningly mutual," River's hands were clutching at his shoulders as she tried to regain her equilibrium. "My bàng jiār takes away her reason and sense, infuses her with desire and love."

"Yeah," Riddick shuddered and pulled on his shirt. "Yeah an’ if we keep talkin’ on it we’ll never leave the damn bunk."

"Yes," River took a deep breath and visibly tried to quell her frenzied senses. Riddick did the same, though it wasn't easy, not with the smell of honey and caramel and blood along with the silk and steel. He loved her scent and she just smelled better and better. "She will accompany him to see the whore if he truly wishes it."

"Nah, don't want her creepy brain pushin' on your head," Riddick shook his head as he grabbed up the old dress River had left out. "I'll get her cut down, dressed and tied up again. Figure to hog tie her an’ let Jayne carry her out that way."

"He will find that amusing," River giggled as she climbed up the ladder and waited for him before closing the hatch behind him.

"Yeah, that's part a why I figured to do it," He agreed. "Go on, can see Kaylee in there with Wash an’ Mal. Keep 'em from gettin' in any more trouble."

River nodded and headed for the bridge. He took a deep breath inhaling the scent of her before he strode towards the shuttle. The scent inside was fear and pain, calculation and deceit, "Huh." He shook his head as he slid open the door and shut it behind him again leaving the shuttle dark. "See, normal folks they get tied up, stripped an’ mildly tortured they’re scared an’ ready to make a deal. You’re thinkin’; tryin’ to figure your way outa this, like you think you can get the upper hand." She jerked at the sound of his voice and her eyes opened straining to see him in the darkness.

Riddick pushed his goggles up so he could see her face clearly, and found it to be a terrified mask, "Yeah, see that expression you got, like you're terrified. It don't fool someone like me."

"Someone like you," Her voice was hoarse as if she'd been screaming in the silence of the shuttle. "Is
that supposed to mean something to me?"

He chuckled and eased a shiv out of his belt, the rasping sound playing on her nerves, "Yeah. See my eyes ain't the only thing's better than regular folks. I can smell that you're scared, that you're in some pain, but I can smell the lies on you. I know Saffron ain't your name. An' I know that you ain't near as scared as you look." Riddick moved closer and put the thin blade on her cheek, "But now you're afraid." He smiled, "Now there's the threat I might cut your pretty face, mark you up so you can't work your wiles on men folk." He pressed the blade a bit harder against her skin, part of him drinking in the smell of her fear. "Yeah, I thought so, fear, real fear, it smells good on you."

"What do you want?" Her whisper held all the terror he could smell roiling off her skin. "Sex? You could just take it. Money? I can get it."

"See that's what you just can't grasp," Riddick chuckled, a low evil sound that sent shivers he could see over her skin. "There's nothin' you can offer that I want. I got money. And I'd rather take a viper into my bed than you. Least the snake'd be honest. All you can offer is lies. But all I really want from you is pain."

"Then just do it already," Her voice was dull, sounded defeated but underneath she was still thinking, the smell of her calculation and trickery was like aniseed in his nose.

His response was to unchain her and let her fall to the floor in a crumpled heap. The moan of pain was very real this time and he smiled coldly dropping the dress over her head and jerking her arms through the sleeves regardless of how uncomfortable it must be. Tying her up again was vaguely satisfying and he looked down at the woman hogtied at his feet. "See, it goes against the grain to just let you off the boat 'thout makin' you pay for what you put us through somehow. An' Jayne might hold with takin' an ear or the tip of a nose, but my trophies… well I'm a little different."

She was afraid again, deeper this time, something about being tied up like a goat to slaughter touched something deep inside her. "Now you're startin' to get just what you mean to me," He knew his voice sounded cruel and full of spite. That was how he felt and he wanted her to know it. "Nothin' but a rabid animal in my eyes. Those drugs River gave you, they ain't gonna wear off 'til we hit Triumph or after. You're gonna give my captain a divorce. And I'm gonna give you something to remember me by." He grabbed a fistful of her hair and took out his shiv again, setting it against her hairline, "See I like scalps. River says it could be 'cause I got some Iroquois blood in me… but I doubt it. I mean, the old tribes from Earth That Was? What are the odds?" He pressed a little, smelt her blood, just the tiniest bit, and a huge dollop of fear on top of it, "But Cap'n's word is law on a boat. An' he wants you alive. 'Course I could scalp you an' you'd be alive still. Least 'til infection got you."

"What do you want?" There was real fear in her voice now, the sinking feeling that she wouldn't be able to talk her way out of this, wouldn't get another chance to try and play anyone ever again. It was good to know she feared death like any other human being.

"Well this," He shrugged as if they were having a normal conversation. "I want you to be afraid. I want you to understand that if you ever come across us again, you'd best step lightly and remember I got a powerful hankerin' to finish what I started here today." He pushed the shiv further against her scalp and smiled at the scent of blood and fear, "See, I like blood. I like it a lot. And if you see us again… well you ever try to hurt my woman or my family… I will see just how much blood you've got in you."

She whimpered, a small animal sound that gave him no small amount of pleasure and he lifted the knife slightly, "For now, I'm just going to give you something to remember me by. Maybe then you'll think twice about leaving me an' mine to die like you were gonna." She was still, as still as she could be, a mouse under the gaze of a hawk. Riddick allowed himself the surge of lust and satisfaction
from a job well done as he began his work.

River was still on the bridge when he emerged from the shuttle and he strode towards it, his blood still hot. He stopped to wash his hands in the head off the hallway, taking off any lingering impressions of the treacherous biǎo zi in the shuttle before he went to the bridge.

His woman looked up as he entered, a gleeful smile on her face as she saw him and Read what he'd done, "Richard is feeling pleased with himself." He tā mā de loved how wicked her pretty face was, how she appreciated what he'd done.

"Gorram right I am," Riddick grinned and pulled her up out of the chair and into his arms. Her mouth was perfect, warm and wet and he just wanted to sink into her. The animal was riding him hard, wanting her, wanting blood, just filled with plain old want. He slid his tongue between her lips, rubbing against hers, one hand cupping her pì gu and squeezing until she wrapped her legs around his waist. Then he couldn't stop, wanted to devour her mouth, her lips nipping at his, her hands pulling him closer, closer until it felt like the fire would never go out.

"Hey!" Mal's shout was in his ear and from the sound of his voice it hadn't been the first time the captain had yelled.

"Huh?" Riddick knew he had better respond more sensibly but the animal had its blood up and he was reeling with bloodlust and regular lust and the River inspired lust that was more powerful than any other kind and sense wasn't easy just now. "What?"

"Stop doin' that in front of me," Mal was embarrassed and appalled, shaking his head and with one hand trying to cover Kaylee's eyes like she was an innocent child. "You got a bunk for that."

River sounded a little out of breath but she made a lot more sense that Riddick did at the moment. Her voice made the animal want to purr, "Riddick has hogtied the prisoner and frightened her badly enough that she will rethink the mortality her plans likely cause should she ever come into contact with us again." She explained. "Animal needed its mate, bloodlust subsumed by lust for his mate. Didn't wish to run amuck and harm his family."

"Uh, not rightly sure what you mean by that," Mal was blinking, looking confused which wasn't an uncommon look for him. But it was one Riddick found a little irritating seeing as it made River of a necessity pay more attention to the captain than to him.

Wash was chuckling, "Our scary gun hand did his job and put the fear of Riddick into Saffron." He translated for the dim captain. "Scared her bad enough that if she runs across us again she'll rethink any plot that might leave us dead." He grinned at Riddick, "Which I am mightily in favor of, by the way. But it leaves Rick with his blood up."

"Yeah," Mal wasn't getting it and Riddick was starting to think the man was deliberately being obtuse.

"Useta be when Jayne's blood was up he'd go find a whore or a fight, get it all out of his system," Wash reminded his captain and Mal got the look of dawning comprehension on his face.

"And Rick don't go to whores and we ain't anywhere near a bar where he can have a fight," Mal was figuring it out and sighed. "Well sorry for the yellin' then," He addressed Riddick. "Just unsettling some how you two go from grinning at each other to looking like someone's gonna get ate alive."
Riddick grinned wolfishly at the captain before turning his gaze on River who shivered with desire in his arms, honey flaring through her scent. "Someone is, I get my way with her."

"Richard is indelicate," River told him primly. Her eyes were gleaming wickedly still and he kissed her again, quickly this time.

"Yeah, animals usually are," He agreed with a smile. "How long 'fore we're back on Triumph?"

"We weren't that far out," Wash shrugged, "Should be arriving anytime now." He exchanged a glance with Riddick as Mal wrapped his arms around Kaylee and kissed the top of her head, "Captain didn't you know kissing girls makes you sleepy?" Riddick chuckled and took a seat with River in his lap, a warm armful of pretty, delicious smelling girl.

Mal chuckled, "Well sometimes I just can't help myself." He smiled grimly as Triumph's curves came into view of the window. "Now, let's go visiting."

River was breathless from being kissed and more than a little ready to drag her man back to their bunk when Triumph came into view. "Simple folk, simple houses, ordinary lives," She murmured. "Worth makes the man and want of it the fellow; the rest is all but leather or prunella."

Riddick's animal was receding somewhat as he sat with a man he considered friend and his sister in the captain's arms. His expression was thoughtful as he regarded Triumph, "Vice is a monster of so frightful mien, as to be hated, needs to be seen; but seen too oft, familiar with her face, we first endure, then pity, then embrace."

"I ain't gettin' that one," Kaylee said after a moment. "Kinda understood River's but Rick's is past my understandin'."

Mal, surprisingly enough, was the one to explain, "He just means that when a fellow first hears of a bad thing, like theft of a boat per se, it seems awful. But once he gets used to the idea, it becomes more normal to him, until what seemed so bad just don't no more."

"Huh," Kaylee was thinking that one over, "Like us stealin' or dealin' with bandits and the like?"

"Fella gets inured to all sortsa things he shouldn't," Riddick smiled at his sister and River snuggled into his embrace happily. "I always thought the test of a man was where he'll draw the line. Shootin' or killin' innocent folks, hurtin' kids or women…"

Wash nodded, "Yeah, when we took Jayne on I recall bein' a little worried about where that line of his was. But he didn't ever try to get pushy with Zoe, Kaylee or Inara even. About a month of watching him and all he did was sorta leer, cheerfully mind, at my wife and I could relax some about him."

"Jayne ain't ever held with violence towards folks smaller than himself, not lessen they was intendin' violence to him," Riddick felt warm and fuzzy red inside when he talked on his brother, River smiled against her mate's chest. "Unless he was gettin' paid."

"Payment is needful to keep body and soul together," River said quietly. "Mattie is very ill. Jayne's money buys medicines and food."

"Reminds me," Riddick muttered. "Mal we headed out towards Kerry at all?"
"Well we're headed to Beaumonde after this, gonna try to pick up a job from the twins," The captain was thinking and his brain was half on Triumph and half on potential work. It was an odd combination that made River's head feel as if she were seeing double. "You need to go to Kerry?"

"Might be a good idea eventually," Riddick nodded slowly. "Iffen we get work out that way."

"We'll see what we can find then," Mal would give it some thought, River knew that, but he'd forget in the face of more immediate problems if she didn't remind him. River made a mental note about the reminder and settled back into Riddick's arms.

The folks on Triumph were puzzled but pleased to see them until they noticed Saffron hogtied and thrown over Jayne's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Jayne dumped her none to gently at Elder Gommen's feet while Mal stood in front of the township's leader. "Captain, what is the meaning of this?"

The township's leader was staring down at Saffron, bound like a goat to slaughter, her pretty red hair cut off and sticking up in half inch tufts. Riddick had clearly decided some form of trophy was in order and he'd nicked her scalp a few times trying to get as much of her hair as possible. River found that to be oddly appropriate. Mal had just looked at his second gun hand and sighed, and told him there was no way he was letting him off the boat to talk to the Elder. "With the luck I have you'd gut the man and I'd end up with a riot on my hands. You stay put," He'd told Riddick. River had kissed her mate quickly on the mouth before following the captain down the ramp. Riddick had taken up a guard position at the top of the ramp, an ominous figure no one would want to approach.

"Thought it was pretty clear myself," Mal wasn't pleased. River could feel the irritation rising off him like steam from a pot of boiling water. "We weren't an hour off a Triumph when I find this one in my cargo bay. Tells me she's my wife."

"Well you were married in our way, yes," The Elder nodded slowly. "You drank of the wine willingly."

"Dunno how willin' a body could be, drunk as a lord an' unknownin' of what's to pass," River took on Jayne's accent and his anger as she stood beside her captain. "Daddy didn't know he was bein' wed. Ain't fair to a man takes marriage serious, leg shacklin' him to a prairie harpy whilst he's drunk."

"See, my girl here, she's all sortsa bright but none of us knew what a wreath of flowers, a bowl a wine an' dancin' with a pretty girl meant," Mal clarified. "Our Shepherd had to look it up in the Encyclopedia."

"Ain't right," Jayne growled. "An' what she was gonna do to our boat weren't right neither." He looked at River, "Sorry, we was dealin' with the marriage thing first." He was scowling down at Saffron as if she was all the evils in the 'verse rolled into a pretty package.

"Now friend, I comprehend your… reluctance to take on a bride, but taken her you have, you cannot simply give her back," Elder Gommen was at least staying on topic, though he was less helpful than River or any of them liked.

"I haven't touched the woman," Mal shook his head. "I don't want carnal knowledge of someone I ain't willingly wed."

River glared at the Elder, "Daddy ain't married. Ain't legal. Marriage on every world spinnin'
requires consent. Consent implies the man's gotta know what he's gettin' into. Could call the Feds for entrapment iffen we were so inclined."

"I ain't the most religious man in the 'verse," Mal slanted an irritated glance at Jayne when he snorted in agreement. "But I hold that marriage is one of those things taken serious by both parties. It ain't somethin' I'd willingly go into drunk. What she done is just plain wrong. An' to my mind we ain't married."

River pulled out her gun and aimed it at Saffron, "Elder, you can make sure my Daddy's divorced or I can make him a widower…choice is yours."

"Fine," Elder Gommen hurried to agree. "The marriage is dissolved. It's been so short a time we haven't even recorded it yet." He reached down to begin untying Saffron, "Though I fail to understand why you've treated her like this."

"I wouldn't do that," Mal advised drawing his own sidearm. River was gratified to see that Jayne already had his in his hand, and likely had since she'd drawn hers or before. "See it weren't the marriage that had us tyin' her up. It were what she was gonna do to us once she was on the boat."

"Jiàn huò was gonna kill us all; hijack the ship an' murder us," Jayne growled angrily.

River nodded when the Elder stared at them in shock, but to his credit he stopped reaching for Saffron. "She weren't 'board us to see the sights." She agreed, keeping the rim accent. She wasn't sure why but the Elder was deeply suspicious of anything core related. He'd never listen to her if she didn't talk like Jayne. "Found it in her cortex link. Plannin' to hump us hard, steer us straight into a net. Take a shuttle an' head off on her own. Woulda kilt us all."

"Surely not," Elder Gommen was shocked, legitimately shocked. "She's shown nothing of this to us. She's a good, pious, kind girl, always willing to help."

"See, that's what we were wonderin'," Jayne was really mad still. "Wonderin' iffen she had a partner back here, 'sides those at the net woulda cut her in on the score."

"Someone with troubles enough to draw in a ship," Mal elaborated. "Must be hard to keep a township running on what little you have here."

River tilted her head, studying the Elder, his mind, his fears and worries. "No," She shook her head finally. "Ignorance is bliss," She looked at Ma. "He ain't in it. Pious man, worried for his people, worried for Saffron. Not meanin' us any harm, none deliberate-like anyways."

"All right," Mal nodded. "You scoot along back to the boat now, set Rick's mind at ease." River shook her head and Mal sighed, "You're really takin' this Daddy thing serious aren't you little one. How about you take the obeyin' your captain serious too?"

River shook her head, "Cain't. Gotta stay an' keep her from knockin' ya out when the Elder unties her."

Mal blinked at her but shrugged, "Dunno what she'd do against a pistol but all right, suit yourself." He gestured for Jayne to do the untying and the big man warily undid the knots Riddick had used. He stepped back from the redhead carefully when he was done, coiling the rope around his arm.

Saffron's voice was weak and afraid when she spoke, "Elder Gommen, my…my husband…" Her eyes were closed and the Elder knelt at her side to comfort her. River tensed, the attack was inevitable, Saffron was angry wanted to lash out, but even in her anger she would seek to manipulate. "Elder…I think he… he's having… his daughter." Saffron's whisper was weak in
volume but disturbing in its content. "It's unnatural."

"That's just…sick," Mal declared stepping back automatically.

"Not to mention it'd get ya killed," Jayne rumbled. Elder Gommen had helped the supposedly weak and shaky Saffron to her feet. "Rick don't tolerate anyone touchin' his woman."

"He's her captain, she has to obey him," Saffron whispered. "You have to help her Elder."

River tilted her head and regarded the Elder and Saffron thoughtfully, "Sharper than the serpent's tooth." She murmured and sighed slightly, "Got a man a my own, as Jayne said. Ain't interested in the captain that way. An' iffen ya think my Rick'd suffer me bein' abused…I'd like ya to say that to his face. See how quick he snaps your skinny neck for you."

Jayne's chuckle was dark and mean, "He's been itchin' to kill her since he found out what she was gonna do. Might like the excuse to do it."

River nodded her agreement, "My captain would like to get Rick on the comm? Ask him to join us?"

"Uh, no, I wouldn't," Mal shook his head. "Bad enough she accused me a sexin' you. Ain't like we're blood related or anything even if you are young enough to be my sprout. But I'm not havin' Rick come out here an' get what you an' Jayne call shiv happy on her. Elder ain't involved an' that's what we wanted to know."

River sighed, "Very well." She looked at Saffron, "Should remember what my lâng told you. Cross our paths again with lethal intent an' he'll kill ya, sure's there's a special hell. Sure as the spinnin' of the worlds."

Mal put a hand on her shoulder and nodded to Jayne, "Elder. You ever need any help again, we'll be happy to come runnin'. Now you got a good idea of what we don't hold with. 'Spect we can do business without any misunderstandin's."

The elder just nodded his agreement and River was conscious of his eyes on her back as the three of them walked back to the ship. She didn't holster her pistol until they were on the boat and the ramp closing behind them. Riddick had walked deeper into the ship when he'd seen them coming, his mind filled with images that tantalized and teased her. "That went well," She remarked with a shrug, looking up at Mal. "Don't you think?"

"Yeah…" Mal was apparently nonplussed by her assumption of Jayne's rim accent. "You're just filled with all sortsa surprises aren't you little one."

River shrugged, "Took her apart. Put things back in." She went in search of her partner as Mal hit the comm and told Wash to head for Beaumonde.

Riddick was pumping iron while River was in Inara's shuttle. The Companion had, rather delicately, inquired if Riddick and River were seriously considering consummating their relationship and when River had told her yes, Inara had said she needed to speak with her privately.

"What in the gorram hell could she be sayin' to River that River don't know?" He muttered in annoyance. "Got another day 'fore anythin' can even happen."

Wash had wandered down to the cargo bay and was idly levering a free weight up and down slowly,
"Could be she's just having a little girl talk with her. Saw Kaylee go in too."

"What? Like a hen party?" Jayne asked curiously.

"A hen party," Riddick echoed and shook his head. "Dunno what that is."

"It's like a men's bachelor party only for the girls," Wash explained. "They do stuff to their hair and nails and faces I guess. And they talk. From what Zoe told me there's lots of talkin'."

"Great," Riddick groaned. "Long as no one's tryin' to talk River out of it."

"Well you said that you an' River bein' together was like a marriage, right?" Jayne pointed out. "Maybe Inara wanted River to have somethin' normal like a hen party before hand."

"Just wish I knew for sure," Riddick put the barbell down and sat up to give Jayne his turn on the bench. "I mean, we've talked with Inara lots and she ain't always thrilled with me an' River's reactions to things."

"I don't guess Simon would be 'xactly happy with some of the stuff you an' River get up to either," Jayne observed with a smirk. "Why'd you even care? It's you River wants. You're the one she loves. If you bein' yourself ain't talked her out of that yet, no way anyone else could."

Wash chuckled, "Painful as it is for me to say it, Jayne is right. River loves you for everything you are Rick." He switched the weight to his other arm, "You're worrying over nothing." He looked at Jayne, "I am curious about how you got so wise about all this stuff though Jayne. Last time I looked the only romantic inclinations you had were towards whores."

"That ain't romance," Jayne shook his head as he lifted. "That's business, scratchin' an itch an' movin' on." He was scowling fiercely. "I ain't always been a merc Wash. Just like Book weren't always a preacher."

"What were you before you were a merc?" Wash asked curiously. Riddick frowned but Wash wasn't trying to be unkind or poke fun, he was genuinely interested.

"Soldier with Rick, 'fore that, hunter, tracker, ranger type on Kerry," Jayne grunted. "Did what I could, kept my kin fed."

"When you were thirteen?" Wash sounded impressed. "You could shoot that well?"

"Could shoot by the time I was eight," Jayne was pumping steadily now, angry memories fueling his muscles. "Pa was a welder, brought in enough for rent and kept us clothed an' bought some food, but I brought in the rest. Got good at settin' snares, runnin' a trap line, trackin' deer or other critters."

"None of that is very romantic though," The pilot observed. "Did you have a sweetheart?"

"Yeah," Jayne dumped the barbell down and sat up breathing heavily. "Ciara. She got sold as an indenture an' I enlisted right after."

"Sold as an indenture...but who could...the only ones who..." Wash's eyes were wide as he followed the logic to the inevitable awful conclusion.

"Yeah, she was the oldest a three. Thirteen like me. An' her parents sold her off so's they could take care a the other two," Jayne snarled. "An' I've been lookin' for her ever since." He shook his head and stood up looking at Riddick. "You can tell him the rest if you want," The tall man walked off in his quiet way.
Riddick looked at Wash, "River an' me, that's why we pulled the job on Persephone. We're tryin' to find Ciara."

"Jayne Cobb has a childhood sweetheart and he's looking for her?" Wash blinked in astonishment, "Well now I know for sure I have to keep this to myself. No one but Kaylee would ever believe it."

Riddick smirked, "Yeah, but Zoe, Book, Mal an' Inara don't really know Jayne too well."

"But you do, you and River," Wash realized. "And Kaylee has such a big heart she'd understand in a second what Jayne is like. Simon is objective and analytical enough that he'd see Jayne isn't what he pretends to be."

"I know because I knew him when he was Shea Cobh," Riddick shrugged. "And River..."

"River has a talent or two that would let her see right into the heart of Jayne," Wash nodded his understanding. And then he surprised Riddick, "Anything I can do to help?"

"Right now..." Riddick blinked at him. "Don't think so, but if we think of anything, River'll definitely tell you."

Wash nodded, "Well I'd better get up to the bridge." He looked up at the shuttle entrance, "I'm sure they won't be much longer."

Riddick sat down and muttered to himself about women and their damn rituals.

Thankfully it was only a couple of hours later that River came running down the steps to throw herself into his arms, "My Riddick is very patient with his woman." She kissed him enthusiastically. "She thanks you sincerely."

"What in the gorram hell were you doin'?" He wanted to know, sitting on the couch outside the infirmary.

"Stories and information," River was obviously summarizing. "Gossip, and advice," She rubbed her lips over his cheek. "Rituals. Bathed and polished. Inara painted designs on your bride, patterns only for a woman about to be married. Special paint."

"She gave you temp tattoos?" Riddick didn't smell anything, which was strange, even dried, he should smell ink.

"Not tattoos. Special paint, no scent, only patterns, to show for only Richard in the darkness," River giggled at him. "Less than a day left. Inara wished to be sure the girl had all the rituals she could hope for. Rites of passage."

"Yeah?" Riddick loved that she was happy. For a girl who'd experienced so much horror to be looking forward to consummating their relationship with delight... well he'd expected her to be nervous.

"Not nervous," River was reading him again, "Eager. Want my mate. Want him inside me. Nearly lost control a week ago and took." Caramel, honey, blood for truth, her scent was perfect, the sweetness of it, leavened with blood and steel and silk.

"Only a day left zhì ài," He reminded her. "Closer it gets less I'm sure I can wait."
River smiled, "Richard's count is faulty." He could smell tequila mixing with honey, her amusement teasing his senses even as he pulled her closer to his body.

"How's that?" Riddick wasn't sure what she meant but he might just go crazy if it was longer than a day he had to wait. But she didn't smell of cinnamon or citrus so she wasn't unhappy or irritated.

"My mate has been counting days, not hours," River's fingers were tracing delicate patterns on his neck and skull. "Triumph's day has twenty eight hours, and the following days on Serenity were not kept to the regular night and day cycles. One week is one hundred sixty eight hours," She pressed her lips to his cheek before sliding them down his jaw to his chin and then his lips, teasing caresses. "Since the time of the injection, one hundred sixty eight hours and forty minutes have passed."

Riddick felt the animal roar in anticipation inside him and groaned with the effort of holding it back, "River, you're ready. You're sure." He ground the words out. "Qīng Xiāng you know I won't be able to stop. You gotta be sure."

"Yes, ready to be yours. Ready to belong to you permanently," River pressed her mouth to his, sweet fire, hotter than a thousand suns filled him at the touch of her lips. "That's why Inara gave me the bridal rituals, so I could be yours."

"I'll thank her later," Riddick had started to run. Between the effort of holding the animal back and the need filling him from River's kiss there was no way to control what he'd do next. He had to get her to their bunk. He was conscious of pushing past Mal, ignoring Zoe and Wash's chuckling as he pounded up the steps near the galley and down the hall to their bunk. Kaylee's sweet face was confused and cleared as she saw his destination but by that time he was dropping into their bunk and barely had the presence of mind to lock the hatch behind him.

He could feel the animal roaring in the back of his mind, pounding and lunging against the restraints he had it under, but he had to be gentle with her. River's first time with him, he couldn't hurt her, he had to be careful. Riddick tore off his clothing and reached for her, at least his hands weren't shaking, he thought dryly, even if he felt like maybe they should be. River was looking at him with those dark eyes, those gorgeous eyes that saw right into him, and she began to undress.

"Let me do this," River whispered as she pulled off her slippers and trousers, unbuttoning her shirt. One hand reached for the light, dimming it until her eyes began to glow faintly, before she pushed his goggles off his head. Then her hands pushed her panties down her legs, and unsnapped her bra, leaving her bare and beautiful to his gaze.

"So perfect," Riddick muttered and lay her on the bed. "River you're so..." He shook his head as he lay beside her and made sure he had a shiv within reach. He'd need it later, for their bonding but not right now.

"Richard B. Riddick," River murmured. "Please don't hold back," Her hands tugged his head down to hers. "I want all of you, the animal and the man, just as you want all of me. We bear each other's marks, seen everything...I don't fear any part of you. Please my Riddick, have me. Make me your woman finally."

He groaned and knew he wouldn't be able to hold anything back, her kiss was like more fuel to the flames already burning inside him. The animal was rising in him, ready to take over, ready to take River and he had to keep it down. She was so beautiful, her body pale on the bed, faint designs glowing like silver on her skin, flowers and vines blooming over her flesh and Riddick shuddered and bent his head down to kiss her. "River, bǎo bǎo I don't know how long I can..." He muttered the words against her lips and was rewarded with her hands on his shoulders, pulling his body against hers.
"Riddick, just touch me, bàng jiār," River whispered. "I want your hands on me. I want your diǎo in me." Her hand slipped down between his legs and wrapped around his cock. Riddick groaned and gave in, palming her breast in one hand and slipping the other down to cup her pì gu and pulled her tight to his body.

River seemed to melt against him, her breast swollen under his hand, the nipple tight and pushing against his palm. Her mouth was wild under his, River's hot little tongue pushed past his lips, exploring his mouth until he growled and pinned her beneath his body. Riddick slanted his mouth over hers and devoured, lips and teeth and tongue exploring her, sucking on her tongue, nipping at her lips until she was moaning and writhing with need under his body.

She was so small, his woman, slender but strong as steel beneath him, and still so soft, her breasts pressed up against his chest, tight nipples against his skin. He had to taste, had to feel her skin under his mouth, needed so badly to feel her body arching up to his in pleasure. Riddick worked his way down her body, licking and sucking at the soft skin of her neck, loving her moans of delight. Her hands were stroking over his shoulders and neck, palms to his scalp as his mouth found her breasts. "My woman," He growled before he surrounded her nipple with his mouth. He sucked gently and flicked his tongue over her taut flesh, kneading her other breast in his palm. River was moaning, the air filling with honey and caramel, her hands tight on his skull, trying to hold his mouth to her breasts, "Riddick, oh so... please it feels so... so good... Richard..."

Her moans made the animal even crazier to get out, Riddick groaned with the effort of remaining in control, he felt like he was on fire, his cock was aching to push inside her. "Cào dàn River," He groaned. "So good," He shuddered over her, switching his mouth to her other breast. Insane as it made him he still loved the effect he had on her, River couldn't hide what his touch did to her.

"Riddick, please, bàng jiār, my lǎng, please," River moaned. "I need you."

"Not without this," Riddick slid down her body and began pressing his mouth to her belly, her hips and thighs, teasing her legs apart and kissing the sweet skin of her inner thighs. "Gotta have you River."

"Have me then, please, Riddick, all of you...have me," She was shivering, trembling with need, her fingers tracing over his skin as he looked up her body into her eyes. The patterns still glowed on her skin, beautiful and only for his eyes, as she met his gaze. "Please, let go, let the animal out. You won't hurt me."

"Don't know what'll happen if I do," He shook his head. "Won't hurt you River."

"No, you never could," She cried out as he slid his tongue between her yīn chún, licking and tasting her honey. "Oh...yes, please," River moaned the words, low with need, and he felt her parting her thighs for him further.

"That's it," He groaned into her as he began to lick and suck on her nether lips, "Open up for me River." He didn't have any words for what it did to him, that she trust him, a murdering escaped convict, with her body. And when she obeyed, when she spread her body wider for him, god it just made him want to plunge inside her.

"Want that too, please Riddick, please want you inside me," River cried out as his mouth found her yīn dì and began to lick and suck on it the way he had her nipples. "Please, please my Riddick, ohhh..."

She was falling, hard and fast and hot under his mouth, her orgasm taking them both by surprise as she shuddered and shook with it, a scream of his name torn from her lips. Riddick moaned into her
River couldn't stop moaning, she could feel everything, Riddick's need for her, the overwhelming love in his heart, his desperation to make this pleasurable for her and his increasingly tenuous grip on the animal as her pleasure increased his. His hands on her, his mouth, everything combined to drive her towards her fall with shocking ease.

And she felt Riddick snap, his control lost with her orgasm and she was looking into the animal's eyes. Hot silver they stared up her body and met her gaze, "My woman," He told her with a growl.

"Yes," River nodded. "Yours. Today." She shivered as his lips brushed over her clit, his tongue licking her almost delicately.

"Sweet," He observed. "My woman is sweet." He didn't require an answer, holding her hips in his hands and pinning her to the bed while his tongue laved her clit patiently.

"Please...don't you want to be inside me?" River coaxed, "Please?"

"Not ready," The growl was adamant and River blinked in surprise. "Pleasure, my mate, taste her honey."

"Ohhh..." River's moan grew to a shriek as he continued to lick and tease until she was writhing under him, trying to push her clit into his mouth. It seemed as if the man and the animal were in agreement that she be thoroughly pleasured before they were joined. But she couldn't stop her cries, moans of his name, begging for more, for him, for completion, she didn't know for what anymore.

The pounding on the hatch to their bunk was decidedly unwelcome, and River groaned in irritation. Riddick, or his animal, responded with a very loud roar of displeasure. But the pounding didn't stop and her mate had finally had enough. Lifting his body off of hers he stood and stalked the short distance to the ladder and hatch, yanking it open to glare and growl threateningly up at the captain. "Mine!"

"Yeah, uh Rick we're-" Mal was not the brightest man in the 'Verse since he was overlooking all the signs that Riddick didn't want to be interrupted.

"River mine," The animal roared. "My woman. Mate. Mine!" The hatch slammed shut on Mal's surprised face before Riddick turned to look at River spread out for him on the bed.

River couldn't help smiling. "Yours." She agreed gently. "Please, I want to be yours." She held up her arms and was rewarded with his body pressing down on hers, his lips teasing her with the taste of her own honey. "Please, my mate."

"Blood, seed, body," He was still kissing her, running his hands over her body, "My mate, beautiful." He groaned and his hand cupped her mound, "Wants?"

"Yes please," River moaned, her hand wrapped around his ji ba, caressing and tugging on his flesh. "Please my mate, make me yours."

His response wasn't what she expected, a sweet hot kiss, tasting the whole of her mouth, and two of his fingers slipping inside her. "Tight." He groaned, "Hot, wet." His mouth was turning desperate as he kissed her and River shuddered as three fingers pressed inside her now, stretching her body and pushing inside her until she screamed with the pleasure of it, hot and pulsing through her in her fall.
"Riddick, please, please," She moaned into his mouth. "Please come inside me now... I can't stand it. I need you. Please!"

His growl was more of a groan but he slid his fingers out of her body and positioned his diāo in their place, poised to enter her. His hips held her in place as he took the shiv he'd put by the pillow and wrapped his right hand around it. His left held his other scars, the ones for Jayne and Kaylee and she didn't understand why he would use his right hand but he was squeezing his palm around the shiv blade and she could smell his blood.

River wasn't sure if it was correct but she offered him her right hand and was rewarded with a feral grin of pleasure. When she wrapped her hand around the blade as he had she could feel his pride in her, his pleasure that his mate was his equal in all things, could smell her own blood on the blade. His blood palm pressed to hers, fingers laced together, and her arm pressed back over her head as his mouth came down on hers.

"Now," He growled. "Mine. Belongs to me." River cried out in shocked ecstasy as his body invaded hers, wider and longer than his fingers could be, pushing inside her, stretching and filling her deeply until his hips met hers and they were truly one.

"Yes," She could barely speak for the excess of sensation, "Yes. He belongs to me." She moaned as he began to move, a long low wail of bliss. "Ooohhhh..."

Riddick was groaning into her mouth, his body pressing down on hers, his other hand beneath her back, helping her to move with him. "Mine." He growled down at her again. "Blood..."

River shuddered hotly as she felt her pleasure building again. "Blood," She echoed him with a moan.

"Body," His body withdrew from hers and she nearly whimpered in disappointment before he drove hard back inside her and she cried out in ecstasy.

"Body," She moaned the word and screamed as her orgasm burst over her. She'd never felt anything like it, Riddick's body filling hers, her muscles tight and wrapped around him, drawing her deeper inside her until she could barely breathe for the sheer sensation of it.

"Seed," Riddick nearly roared the word as he emptied himself inside her. She could feel his jīng yè inside her body, hot, filling her womb and shuddered as it triggered another fall.

"Seed," She whispered as he panted over her body, his thickly muscled form holding her to the bed. Her thighs were limp, wound around his legs and her hand could barely grip as she clung to his shoulders. "Mine," She murmured. "You're mine now."

"Mine now," His voice was rough and low but his lips were gentle as they brushed over her cheek. She'd never felt so loved as she did with him, her big tough bad man who always expected her to carry her weight, but never hesitated to carry her if she needed help. He considered her his equal, his partner and mate. His lover. Now it was just...formalized.

"Love you my Riddick," River murmured. "My heart is gladder than all these, because my love has come to me."

He didn't let go of her right hand but he lifted his body off hers and cradled her close before he spoke, "My River. Love you." Riddick's lips moved over her cheek, sweet and gentle and she knew when the animal let the man take control again before he even spoke, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety; other women cloy the appetites they feed, but she makes hungry where most she satisfies."
River smiled and tilted her head to look up at him over her shoulder, "I wish I'd gotten the courage to do this sooner." She pressed a kiss to his chin. "My Riddick is pleased?"

His response was a hot kiss and his hand between her thighs, "Yeah." He growled. "Tā mā de right I was pleased," Riddick's clever fingers found her clit and began to stroke and tug on her sensitive flesh. His mouth played with hers as his fingers teased her body until River felt like she'd die if she didn't fall.

"Riddick, Richard, please..." She moaned into his mouth and felt his wicked chuckle vibrate his chest. "He torments his mate with pleasure now?"

"Hmm..." Riddick's mouth didn't leave hers to really answer and the pleasure continued to build until River screamed into his mouth as she fell. His diǎo pushed inside as her orgasm swept over her and River screamed again at the pleasure of it. Wave after wave of bliss crashed over her as Riddick's filled hers over and over again. He felt so good, she'd had no idea his body would feel so good inside hers, so hot, filling her completely until she couldn't do anything but moan and cling to his hand, their blood still mingling. She could feel his own fall was close, how her body was inflaming his the same way his drove hers. "Richard, god... Richard tā mā de dì yù please," She was babbling and near desperate for her fall and his.

"God River," Riddick groaned into her mouth, the hand that wasn't gripping hers held her body tightly to his. "Qīng Xiāng, liàn rén, need you to fall bāo bāo. Fall for me River." He felt so right, so good inside her, she couldn't resist, couldn't stop herself, could only embrace the ocean of sensations that sent her spiraling. So much pleasure she couldn't tell which way was up, could only cling to her lover and his solid body as Riddick's fall overcame him and filled her with his seed.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I really was thinking they'd never get to this point. But then I started to consider it and figured that after this much time, and therapy and really the amount of trust they have in each other, it was time they consummated their relationship. And thus we have ended 'Our Mrs. Reynolds'.

I also knew that I couldn't kill Saffron if I wanted to do 'Trash' (at least without plagiarizing someone else's story) but I really wanted Riddick to scare the hell out of her. And threatening to scalp her would definitely be scary. Plus in a little nod to Pitch Black I figured Riddick would get a kick out of cutting off all her hair. Crowning glory after all, and she won't be nearly as seductive with her hair growing out all crazy. And there's something about having a knife close to your head and face that's freakin' terrifying.

I also figured that Wash being as observant as he is, it might be time to let him in on the secret of Jayne's missing sweetheart. He likes Riddick and River and he's figured out that Jayne isn't quite what he seems.

Chinese Translations:

bāo bāo - darling/baby
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
bàng jiār - lover/partner
biǎo zi - whore
tā mā de - fucking
pí gu - butt
Jiàn huò - bitch/slut
láng - wolf
zhì ’ài - most beloved
diǎo - cock
Cào dàn - Damn it!/Fuck!
yǐn chún - labia
yǐn dì - clitoris
jǐ ba - dick/penis
jīng yè - semen
tā mā de dì yù - fucking hell
liàn rén - lover/sweetheart

Quote Sources:
She walks in beauty like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes. - She Walks In Beauty - George Gordon, Lord Byron

Drink to me only with thine eyes and I will pledge with mine, Or leave a kiss but in the cup and I'll not look for wine. The thirst that from the soul doth rise doth ask a drink divine; but might I of Jove's nectar sup, I would not change for thine.- To Celia - Ben Jonson

Worth makes the man and want of it the fellow; the rest is all but leather or prunella. - Essay on Man - Alexander Pope

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien, as to be hated, needs to be seen; but seen too oft, familiar with her face, we first endure, then pity, then embrace. - Essay on Man - Alexander Pope

Sharper than the serpent's tooth. - King Lear - William Shakespeare

My heart is gladder than all these, because my love has come to me - A Birthday - Christina Rossetti

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety; other women cloy the
appetites they feed, but she makes hungry where most she satisfies. - Antony and Cleopatra - William Shakespeare
Riddick had lost count of how many times and ways he and River had made love. And that's what he had to call it despite the rampant sentimentality of that label. Saying they had sex was too neutral, coitus too clinical, fucking was just plain crude, not that he thought River would be averse to a good hard fuck once she was used to sex in general. So making love was really the only option left to him if he didn't want to use an even worse term. He didn't mind, it wasn't as if anyone but River could read him and she was, after all, a lady and thinking that they'd made love wasn't the worst thing he'd ever thought. It wasn't even the most sentimental.

River was asleep, curled into the warmth of his body. She smelt of honey along with her base scent of blood, steel and silk, as well as caramel and sex. He could smell his seed in her, his scent mingling with hers. Part of him was still amazed that she'd simply embraced the animal, that she hadn't minded the man not being in the forefront for their first time. Most women would have run screaming, not parted their legs and welcomed him. But River had been pretty adamant that the animal wouldn't hurt her. She'd said more than once that she loved both sides of him. Since the man had gotten shoved behind the animal he'd been able to see that the animal was just as protective of River as he was, and flat out adored her, maybe even more fervently than the man.

He rolled his eyes at himself, all that mattered was that he hadn't hurt River, hadn't frightened her and they'd actually succeeded in having sex. Though he did vaguely remember an interruption and Mal for some reason. He'd have to ask River when she woke up. In the mean time he'd better clean the slices across their palms and get that salve on them. Riddick grabbed a clean cloth and dampened it at the sink, gently cleaning River's palm of the dried blood. The animal seemed to grab him by the throat and he gave in to the urge, bending down to slowly lick and kiss her palm. Her eyelids fluttered upwards and those gorgeous dark eyes looked into his.

"Her mate takes care of her," River smiled. "She would do the same for him please." Riddick silently extended his hand and watched as she lazily kissed and licked the blood off his palm until the wound was clean. "She can feel the bond with him, blood, body and seed. Like the silver link," Her whisper was awed.

Riddick nodded, he'd known that the bond would be different with River than Jayne or Kaylee, as it should be. This was his mate, the other half of himself. They'd always have knowledge of each other, know somehow where the other was, if something was wrong. That River was a Reader simply made the knowledge more acute on both sides. He doubted he'd end up Reading people but he wouldn't be surprised if he had a few more insights than normal. And River might find herself noticing her senses were a bit more...fine tuned.

"Heart to heart and mind to mind," He reminded her gently. "You sore at all?"

"No," River shook her head as he smeared her palm with the salve that healed but would allow them to keep the scars and did the same with his own before bandaging them both. "Looking forward to shore leave, would like to borrow Wash and Zoe's idea of a bath with a tub. Play the Companion for my mate, and my mate bathe me."

"Yeah, Beaumonde could be all sortsa fun if we can find a good bathhouse," Riddick conceded with a smile. "Reminds me, did Mal try to interrupt us?"
River giggled and nodded, "Animal roared at him. Captain was very confused."

Riddick groaned and kissed her, "How long we been in here anyway?" He looked around for the chronometer and finally found it half covered with a quilt. "We been hidin' out in here for more'n eighteen hours?"

"Honeymoon," River giggled again, a light happy breeze against his skin. "She would like to continue the honeymoon with her mate please."

"Hmm... O woman! lovely woman! Nature made thee to temper man: we had been brutes without you. Angels are painted fair, to look like you." Riddick cupped her cheek in his hand. "Me too, but we'd better eat something, make sure Mal ain't preparing to pitch us off the boat, and check the bridge." He brushed a kiss over her mouth, "After that, I plan on putting my mouth on every inch of you River."

"She likes the sound of that," River grinned at him. "Riddick is a very skilled lover."

"Well you're all sortsa talented too Qīng Xiāng," Riddick kissed her once more and forced himself to get out of bed and get dressed.

Riddick looked up as Mal and Zoe entered the cargo bay, Jayne right behind them, "Cobh, Mal, Zoe." He nodded as he continued to shift and organize the crates in the bay. Wash had mentioned that the reason they were on Beaumonde was to deal with a set of twins and pick up some work and that having space freed up in the cargo bay would be helpful. Considering that Mal had been trying to get Riddick to join him on the meet when the animal had snarled at the Captain, Riddick figured he could at least get the bay set up.

"Rick," Mal looked at him thoughtfully. "Don't much appreciate you decidin' you weren't gonna do your job today."

"Yeah," Riddick shrugged. "You kinda ran into the animal again Mal."

"How did the animal get out," Mal folded his arms and rolled his eyes as River walked into the cargo bay and boosted herself up onto a crate. "Little one is this something you really need to be here for?"

River nodded, "My mate." She winked at Jayne who just grinned at she and Riddick and went up the stairs. Zoe was frowning at them but she leaned against the stair rail and waited.

Riddick sighed and leaned against the crate between River's legs so her hands could rest on his shoulders, "A week ago, Simon gave River a contraceptive." He told the captain. "We had to wait for it to work. After a week of waiting the animal basically snapped its leash when River and I got to bed. You kinda interrupted us."

Mal looked more than vaguely alarmed and his gaze zeroed in on River's face over Riddick's shoulder, "River are you all right?" He had a hand on his gun, "You need to see your brother?"

River's scent was rife with honey, tequila, cinnamon and caramel, "My mate would never hurt me. True love's the gift which God has given to man alone beneath the Heaven. It is not Fantasy's hot fire, whose wishes, soon as granted, fly; it liveth not in fierce desire, with dead desire it dock not die: It is the secret sympathy, the silver link, the silken tie, which heart to heart and mind to mind, in body and in soul can bind." She pressed a kiss to Riddick's cheek and he grinned up at her. "I am the only one who need not fear the animal. He has never hurt me, not even when he was doped at the
Academy. Remember I told you this."

Mal nodded and his hand eased off his gun, "Why're your hands bandaged then?"

Riddick knew the captain was asking just to ask, to save a bit of face since River had so obviously not needed rescuing or his concern on her behalf. He shrugged, "River an' me bonded. It's a Furyan thing, blood, body and seed. Means we're as good as married."

Zoe was surprised, he could smell it even though she was across the bay, "You mean when you told Wash and I about that you weren't joking?"

"I don't joke 'bout blood Zoe," Riddick told her. "Me an' River, both wanted by the Feds, can't have you marry us Mal. An' we won't have Book do it, that'd be pretty damn hypocritical."

River's sweet voice was gentle, "We're not like you and Wash, Zoe." She explained with a smile that Riddick could hear. "We're not simple. Riddick and I, even if we could somehow get...clear of our pasts... we'll never be normal. Too much has happened to us."

"Right," Mal was a little confused but Riddick could tell he was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he really didn't want the details. "So you an' River are...for all intents and purposes married. And when I interrupted you the two of you were in the middle a consumatin' that marriage." He sighed, "Rick do you think it's likely that this'll happen again? I mean at some point we could have an emergency when the two of you are occupied."

River laughed and Riddick couldn't help but chuckle, "Nah Mal. Pretty sure that this set a circumstances ain't gonna happen again."

"All right then," Mal sighed and hit the comm. "C'mon up to the galley an' have somethin' to eat, we'll talk about the job we got after this two weeks is up."

Riddick grinned and turned to grab River off the crate, tossing her in his arms so he could carry her bridal style, "Never did get to carry you over a threshold."

Her laugh was like music.

River relaxed onto the couch in the lounge outside the infirmary and sighed happily. In the two weeks they'd been on Beaumonde she and Riddick had explored the city, found a bathhouse, and picked up several pieces of cortex equipment secondhand. One of them was an old medical cortex that she was refurbishing for Simon, it would help in the infirmary. Simon was actually quite a help with that one, and he'd asked Kaylee if she'd like to work on it with him.

River got the impression her mate was keeping Simon at a formal distance from Kaylee for reasons other than earning an apology. Riddick had listened to her talking about Simon and his life plan and she'd Read that her mate wanted Simon to be absolutely sure of his feelings before he was allowed to be close to Kaylee again. It wouldn't do for Riddick's mèi mei to have her heart broken regardless of how much Riddick liked Simon. River had simply kissed her mate in response to that thought. Let the rest of the 'verse live in fear of the convicted murderer Riddick, she knew the man who would stop at nothing to protect his family.

Her mate was outside at the moment, talking with Wash and Kaylee about the primary buffer panel, again. Mal was with Zoe discussing the details of the upcoming job since he didn't want to hear about the buffer panel anymore. Simon and Book had gone shopping; Book was attempting to teach
Simon about food and cooking. River wished the Shepherd luck, because she was pretty certain Simon was hopeless in the galley unless the food was prepackaged.

River's eyes flicked over the edge of her book and she tilted her head, Jayne was... worried. He wasn't lifting, wasn't sharpening his blades, he was just sitting on the steps leading to the lounge and worrying. "Jayne?" She called his name softly, questioning. He was a friend, if he was worried, something was wrong.

He turned at the sound of her voice and stood, entering the lounge to sit on the end of the couch. River drew her feet up and rearranged her body so she was sitting up to look at him. The big merc tried to smile, "Hey River girl. Doin' all right?"

River nodded, her eyes fixed on him, "She is well. Very pleased with her mate. But Shea is worried."

Jayne nodded slightly, his blue eyes dark, "Yeah... Jayne ain't... Jayne wouldn't much care but..."

She took a deep breath, breathing in Jayne's scent, oak leaves and gun oil, steel and stone. She didn't have Riddick's strength of smell or sight, but it was easy to label what she felt from Jayne with Riddick's scent markers. Their friend was truly worried, more about what she and Riddick would think than anything else, "But Richard knows Shea. He doesn't wish Richard to know all about Jayne."

The huge man heaved a sigh, "Yeah. Did what I had to but...ain't nothin' I take pride in."

River tried to be reassuring, "She and Richard have not led pure lives, do not sit in judgment of our friend." She reminded him, thinking of the deaths she'd caused in the Academy alone, a doctor, an orderly, guards and other inmates.

"Yeah, but Rick ain't, well, he ain't like me," Jayne shook his head, obviously trying to explain. "Always knew, Rick he don't bend to how other folks think. Us'be I didn't neither but knowin' I got folks at home needin' coin an' tryin' to find my girl..."

She nodded her understanding, "Made choices that were right or practical at the time but now are difficult to stomach when looked back upon."

"Yeah, that's the right of it. Ain't real happy 'bout the job bein' on Higgins Moon. Don't wanna get pinched. But..." He shook his head again words failing him.

River tilted her head and let her mind slip over his, against Jayne's thoughts, felt his worries, the anger at himself, and the fear of old troubles coming back to haunt him. "The thought of his former partner is bothersome," She said slowly. "Stitch took a fall." That was the polite way of saying that Jayne had pushed Stitch. She'd seen it clearly in his memories, Jayne trying his best to keep a crippled shuttle in the air, shoving everything not needful out the door. The gun, holster unsnapped on Stitch's hip, the knife no longer in its sheath on his thigh, a glint of metal mostly hidden behind a grimy forearm, and Jayne's decision to unload his partner. "Would have killed you," She said with certainty.

"I didn't know that for sure," Jayne shook his head. "Wasn't even thinkin' that when I pushed him. Just thinkin' a my own skin." He discounted any notion of self-defense as irrelevant and to a man like Jayne perhaps it was. He'd betrayed his partner and in his mind betrayal was almost unforgivable, "Just...know if Mal finds out he's gonna...well he's gonna be Mal 'bout it."

River gave him a half smile of agreement, "Cap'n can be self-righteous. With too much quickness
ever to be taught, with too much thinking to have common thought. Will not let him be unkind to Shea." But that wasn't what Jayne was really worried about; his blue eyes were still dark with concern as he looked at her.

Finally he almost mumbled the question on his mind, "You don't... you don't think I'd, that I would, you know, to you an' Rick?"

She stared at him, truly surprised that he even had to ask, "Shea would never, ever, betray us." The Reader shook her head, "Never. Our Shea would cut off his arm before betraying his friends, his family."

He nodded, his eyes lightening slightly, "Yeah. Guess I'm not used to anyone seein' that."

River nodded, "Has worn a mask for a long time. The mask wasn't trustworthy. But Shea is."

Jayne tried to smile; plainly her words had made him feel slightly better, "Yeah, but it'll be hard to believe when Mal hears 'bout Stitch."

She shrugged, "Then we will be certain he does not hear. Jayne must stay aboard Serenity. We will find a reason. If Jayne is not seen then no one will know he is here."

He nodded his agreement, his expression thoughtful, something Mal would have been astonished to see on his supposedly dumb merc, "Yeah. An' really, only ones who'd recall me'd be Stitch an' maybe a guard or two. It's been somethin' like three or four years."

River nodded, "Best not to assume. To stay on the boat is best." She tilted her head, "Curious as to why Jayne would think Stitch is problematic. Would he not be dead?"

"Nah," Jayne shook his head. "Weren't tryin' to kill him. Just wanted him off. An' anti-aircraft had knocked us out so we had to fly low enough to ground. He'd a been stunned good, maybe broke somethin' but he'd a lived." He took a deep breath, "But the magistrate woulda caught up with him, we wasn't exactly stealthy in our getaway."

"Anti-aircraft," River grimaced. "Riddick hates those unless he's the one shooting them."

"Don't I know it," Jayne grinned at her. "Lost count a how many times he'd take over the enemy guns an' use 'em to shoot down their own ships."

River couldn't help giggling at the look of boyish glee on his face as he recalled the sight of a young Riddick shooting an oversized gun up at enemy skiffs.

Riddick smiled as he regarded Jayne. His old friend was sitting on the couch, looking absolutely miserable, and for the life of him Riddick couldn't figure out why until River tugged him aside and explained about Higgins Moon. "So you weren't workin' for Mal back then right?" He asked the taller man curiously.

"Nah, hadn't even met 'im yet," Jayne shook his head. "Why?"

"The run a bad luck you had 'tween lousy partners an' anti-aircraft ordnance was thinkin' you mighta had Mal with you," Riddick smirked.

"You ain't..." It was all over Cobb's scent that he'd expected Riddick to be at the least annoyed and at
"Cào dàn Cobh, you really think I'ma hold that against you?" Riddick shook his head, "You ain't done it to me or River. An' God knows you had your chance. I don't care what you done in the past. I know you. You'd never do that now, and even then you woulda never done it to me or to my woman." He was practically chuckling, "For one, you got more loyalty than that. An' two, you know I'd kill you if you tried."

Jayne relaxed, like air leaving a balloon the tension went out of him so quickly and River scolded him gently, "Did she not tell you her mate would understand?" She patted the big man's shoulder, "Jayne should believe her about these things."

The big merc shrugged, "Ain't used to bein' believed River." He reminded her, "But I dunno what to tell Mal."

Riddick shrugged and scooped up his woman to sit her on his lap while he lounged in one of the chairs, "We'll tell 'em you can't go onto Higgins Moon less he wants his merc to get pinched."

"Yeah 'cause Mal's usually reasonable 'bout stuff," Jayne groaned.

"He will be," Riddick wasn't in the mood to deal with a jail break on a privately owned moon, not when it'd be due to Mal not listening.

It took a little bit of doing, but eventually it was decided that Jayne would stick with the boat, do a few chores, while Riddick played the heavy for Mal. River was lacing on her boots and secreting away her knives while Riddick checked his shivs and half listened to the conversation Kaylee was having with Simon in the hallway. Canton was the factory town of Higgins Moon.

"Come on, admit it, it's true," Kaylee was teasing Simon.

The doctor was attempting to refute her statement apparently, "No, I won't, because it's not. I use swear words like anybody else."

"Oh, really? See, I never heard you," Kaylee argued in her smiling way. "So when is it you do all of this cussin'? After I go to bed, or..."

Simon sounded a little nonplussed, "I swear when it's appropriate." Riddick nearly laughed at that especially when he saw River's eyes twinkling in amusement.

"Simon," They'd arrived at the cargo bay stairs and were standing at the top of them. Kaylee rolled her eyes at the doctor, "The whole point of swearing is that it ain't appropriate."

Riddick smiled at Inara as she crossed the cargo bay, pausing to kiss River's cheek affectionately and give him a smile before she began to climb the stairs towards her shuttle. Kaylee smiled widely at her glamorous friend, "Hey, there, Inara! Heading off for some glamorous romance?"

Inara's chuckle sounded like less like tinkling bells and more like a woman who knew how wrong things could go and had decided to enjoy herself anyway, "Let's hope so. See you two tomorrow. Don't let Mal get you into too much trouble while I'm gone." Her gaze was directed at all four of them and Riddick gave her a salute. He'd never seen a Companion roll her eyes before but Inara still made it look elegant.
"Bye, now. Have good sex," Kaylee chirped and Riddick couldn't help the chuckle that burst from his lips at the shocked look on Simon's face. River smiled and Kaylee blinked at Simon, "What?"

Riddick grinned and moved over to his mate, checking her weapons and enjoying the chance to run his hands over her body while she did the same to him. "Don't think Simon's ever heard that particular fare well before méi mei."

"But that's a big part a what Inara does, so of course I want her to enjoy it," Kaylee seemed bewildered that Simon wouldn't want that for Inara as well.

"Oh, that it is," Simon shook his head. "Most women wouldn't be kind enough to express the thought is all." He offered a hopeful smile and Riddick grinned into River's hair. Simon was getting better at covering his gaffes.

Jayne trotted silently down the catwalk steps and took a look at River and Riddick, "Just wanted to say thanks for smoothin' this over with Mal." He offered quietly. "I figure I'll work on cleaning the hold, get everything set for when ya'll get back."

Riddick wouldn't have thought that his little core bàng jiār would take to his old friend so strongly but he could smell the affection River had for the big man, plums filled her scent just as they did when she looked at Simon. River stood on her tiptoes to press a kiss to Jayne's whiskered cheek, "Our friend and brother. He would not expect us to go out if we were on Osiris, would wish to protect us. We do the same for him."

Jayne smiled slightly and looked at Simon, "Doc, if yer goin' out, make sure you gotta knife or somethin' all right? We ain't gone over knife work so much but."

"Don't worry Jayne," Simon smiled. "I doubt my presence will be required." Riddick heard Inara's shuttle disengage and noticed Simon had gripped the railing of the stairs just as Serenity began to land.

Mal came down the steps, Zoe and Wash following him and hit the controls for the cargo bay doors. Riddick nearly groaned at the smell. Simon practically winced, "Canton really...stinks."

The captain nodded, "That's what makes it such a great drop point. No one comes here that doesn't have to."

Wash wrinkled his nose and cast a sympathetic look at Riddick, "I vote we do this job really, really fast."

"Kessler's our man. He's holding the goods we're to deliver," Mal explained. "We go in, make contact. Easy peasy. Zoe, you're holding down the fort. Call ahead to Bernoulli, let him know we'll have his merchandise end of the week."

Wash looked around in confusion, "Don't I usually stay with the ship?"

Zoe smirked, "I outrank you." She kissed him, "Have fun."

Riddick took a deep breath and wasn't sure having a superior sense of smell was a benefit on this particular planet. The smell of the mud was so bad he couldn't smell anything past it, not even River. His mate moved towards him and slid her soft hand up his chest to his neck and jaw. "Thanks," He muttered as the scent of her skin reached his nose, a sharp relief. "I guess I better get used to the stench but I agree with Wash."

"Really, really fast," River nodded.
Simon was at the edge of the ramp, "So, this is a place where they...they make mud."

Kaylee nodded, "Yep. Clay really. You'd be surprised how many things it ends up in. Serenity's got more than a few ceramic parts in her." She grinned at Simon who blinked in surprise.

"Really?" Riddick would have bet money Simon hadn't even entertained such a notion. River's absent nod confirmed that much and he pressed a kiss to her forehead as he followed Mal and Wash out of the boat. The smell did not improve in the fresh air though he was starting to pick up other things, the effluvia of unwashed human bodies as well as the remnants of alcohol somewhere.

"Yeah," Kaylee's grin never faded.

"Huh," Simon was obviously considering that and possibly wondering how he could keep the conversation going.

Kaylee must have had the same thought, "Captain, don't you think Simon should come with us?"

"What?" The doctor blinked, "Oh, Kaylee, I don't, I don't think that..."

Book nodded, "You go on, boy. See the sights. Company moon like this'll be safe enough. If Riddick and your sister can walk about you should be fine."

Simon nodded, "Well River and Rick, they're..."

The shepherd smiled slightly, "Like to need a doctor if there's trouble."

Riddick rolled his eyes as Mal agreed, "I'm not going that far, Doctor, and you might maybe make yourself useful." River looked up at him with a sigh and he mentally agreed with the slight smell of irritated cinnamon, he and River would now have to keep an eye on Kaylee and Simon as well as the deal.

"How're you expectin' Simon to be useful Mal," Riddick did his best to keep the testiness out of his voice though he wasn't entirely successful in that.

Mal moved in a bit closer and lowered his voice, though no one was within earshot even if they had Riddick's hearing. "The management here don't take kindly to sight-see-ers, which is why we're..." He tilted his head as Riddick bent and inhaled the scent of River's hair but forbore comment, "...posing as buyers. There ain't a one of us looks the part more than the good Doctor." He gestured at Simon's clothing and face, "I mean, the pretty fits, soft hands, definitely a moneyed individual. All rich and lily-white, pasty all over..."

Simon rolled his eyes, "All right. Fine. I'll go. Just stop...describing me."

Mal grinned and gave him a salute, "You're the boss, boss."

Riddick shook his head, "Mal if my brother gets hurt, you an' me are gonna have words." He said quietly. "Now can we move this along before my sense a smell is permanently warped by this chòu mǎniào moon?" His mood wasn't helped by Mal's chuckle.

Wash fell in step alongside he and River and offered him a dry smile, "Cap'n don't like to be dirtside too long. That should work in our favor this time around Rick. Don't guess the trick of eucalyptus would do much for you would it?"

Riddick shook his head, "Just boil my sinuses out another way." He shrugged, "More just got an itchy feelin'." He glanced at River, "Qīng Xiāng you gettin' any inklin's 'bout this rock?"
River was looking around, her dark eyes never still as she took in the landscape and shanty town, "This place bodes ill for us. Beware the ides of March."

"That ain't good news," Riddick muttered to Wash. "Keep an eye out all right?" Wash nodded and became visibly more alert as they walked.

It didn't take long for them to get to the work area, and they were almost immediately warned off by a foreman, "Area's employees only! You best be getting back to the landing unless you have business here!"

Simon hesitantly moved forward, "Yes. Yes, I, I'm looking. To buy some mud."

The foreman became all smiles, "Well, then." He chuckled, "Come to the right place!" He clapped Simon on the shoulder, leaving a muddy handprint for everyone behind Simon to see and walked off with all of them following Simon following the foreman, "Of course we can handle any volume here. We have over two thousand workers, mostly indentured. We pay them next to nothing, that way we can pass the savings directly on to you, the customer."

Simon was doing his best but he was clearly out of his element, "Savings? Uh, excellent. That's, uh, because, as I, as I said before, I'm going to, um, I'm going to be needing quite a bit of it. I, uh, I, I'm a buyer."

Luckily the foreman was still giving his spiel and didn't notice Simon's lack of expertise, "Yup, best of its kind. Uh, we mix it, we brick it raw, right here on the premises. Uh, you add the right catalyst, you kiln it proper, this stuff's ten times stronger than steel at half the weight."

Simon nodded, "Yes. Uh, I, I've heard, uh, great things, about the mud."

Riddick turned to hide his smile as he heard Wash whisper to Kaylee, "What happened to Simon? Who is this diabolical master of disguise?"

Kaylee, true to her nature, defended her crush, "He's learning."

Thankfully Mal intervened before the foreman detected that Simon had no interest in mud beyond Kaylee's interest in it, "Excuse me, boss? I'm sure the foreman has things need attending. Why don't we wander a bit, take a look at the operation, then you can figure on whether we get an account here."

Simon seized on that like a drowning man would a lifeline, which in his case was a fair analogy, "Yes? Yes. Yes, we'll, uh, we'll wander a bit."

The foreman nodded amiably, "Fair enough. Come and see me when you're through." He walked off hollering at some worker threateningly and Riddick had to work to keep his shoulders semi-relaxed. He'd done enough hard labor at Slams to hate any sort of overseer or bully.

Mal cast a slightly wary look at him and gestured towards the shacks in the distance, "All right, let's head to worker-town. Find our man Kessler, get this job done."

"So why did Jayne have to stay on Serenity?" Kaylee asked curiously, "I ain't heard exactly."

"He pulled a job here, few years back, an' it went south," Riddick shrugged. "He's not a popular man on this moon."

"Surely they wouldn't recall him after years have passed," Simon protested. "He's not that memorable is he?"
Mal had stopped dead in his tracks and was staring at something near the entrance of the town. Riddick blinked while Wash's jaw dropped and River tilted her head. "I do believe they remember Jayne fairly well," Mal said faintly.

The statue was made of the ceramic, a legend at its base proclaiming 'Jayne Cobb'. It was a disturbingly accurate likeness and Riddick wished there was some way to tell Jayne to keep away from the open airlock of the ship.

It was Simon who succinctly and eloquently said what they were all thinking, "Son of a bitch."

Mal was still blinking up at the statue, "Rick."

"Mal," Riddick was still looking at the statue, vividly conscious of River standing in front of him, her scent blazing with silk and steel as her mind worked. He could almost feel her mind engaging, clicking over the scenarios and stretching out to touch on what could be and what had been.

"You know anything about this," Mal was still sounding a bit bemused. "You an' River were fair strong 'bout sayin' Jayne couldn't come on this job."

"Just know he pulled a job that went south," Rick replied, most of his attention still on River as blood entered her scent and a wisp of apples nearly lost under the stench of the mud around them. "He was pretty worried he'd get pinched if he spent too much time in the open."

Simon was staring as if hypnotized up at the statue, "This must be what going mad feels like."

Wash was considering the thing with his usual humor, "I think they captured him, though, you know...captured his essence."

Kaylee was entranced, "Looks sort of angry, don't he?"

Wash nodded, "That's kinda what I meant."

River tilted her head and as a whistle sounded in the background and the foreman shouted for shift four to start work. Her voice was quiet but clear, "Playing art critic avails us nothing." She leaned back against Riddick and he felt her worry as much as smelt the citrus. "We should remove ourselves."

Mal was still looking at the statue, "I don't know. This here's a spectacle might warrant a moment's consideration."

Kaylee moved slightly, " Everywhere I go, his eyes keep following me."

Riddick growled finally hoping to snap them out of this surprised daze, "C'mon gorram it. We got a job. An' as I understand it, my brother crossed the magistrate here. You cross the magistrate of a company town that's askin' for trouble. They ain't exactly the forgivin' sort."

River agreed, "Let us not do anything more to connect ourselves to Jayne. He is out of sight. Acting as we are cannot help us remain...discreet."

River took a deep breath and did her best to ignore the smell of the mud and the Mudders. Riddick's mind was racing; a busker was on a chair in the center of the bar they sat in, strumming a guitar. They'd taken a table and seats and mugs of something that smelled faintly noxious. River listened as
Riddick thought aloud, trying to reason out the significance of a statue of Jayne in the middle of Mudder town.

"Kinda don't make sense, statue a Jayne," Her mate was muttering. "Qīng Xiāng," He pressed his nose to hair again and she could feel his relief at the brief respite from the stench, "You got any notion explains this? Jayne didn't have a clue 'bout all this?"

"Nothing my Lù duān," River shook her head. "His only worry was 'gettin' pinched'." She left out Jayne's larger concern over what they might think of his loyalty. "Doesn't make much sense," She added with a frown.

"Won't argue with that," Mal was just as befuddled as he'd been outside, and looking at River and Riddick curiously. "I'm mighty interested in the why of it though."

River tilted her head, "Illumination is at hand." She murmured and sighed. "Not sure..."

Riddick's big hand rubbed her thigh encouragingly, "S'all right tiān shǐ we'll figure it out, eventually." He added in a dry voice. He watched in amusement as Wash took a drink.

The pilot gagged and spat out what was in his mouth, "Zhe shi she me lan dong xi?"

River shrugged, she'd refused a mug and so had her mate. Riddick chuckled, "'Cordin' to Jayne they call it 'Mudder's milk'." He smirked as Wash gagged, "All the protein, vitamins, and carbs of your grandma's best turkey dinner, plus fifteen percent alcohol."

River smiled, "It's why Rick and I aren't drinking. Animals don't like it."

Wash had a look on his face as if something had died in his mouth, "It's horrific."

River smiled slightly as she listened with half her attention to the minds around her while Riddick kept an eye out for their contact. Mal was doing the same thing but also drinking so he really couldn't be counted on to be totally observant. Simon was about to say something informative but also completely irrelevant to the situation. "O that men should put an enemy in their mouths, to steal way their brains," She murmured.

Sure enough her big brother sipped the Mudder's milk thoughtfully and remarked, "Well, it worked for the Egyptians."

Wash blinked at him, "What's that?"

Simon elaborated, information and intellect was where he felt the most comfortable, if he wasn't fitting in with his surroundings, at least he could speak of something he was familiar with, "The ancient Egyptians, back on Earth-That-Was." He explained, "Not so different from the ancestral form of beer they fed the slaves to build their pyramids. It's liquid bread. Kept them from starving and knocked them out at night so they wouldn't be inclined to insurrection."

"Wow, Simon. That was so..." Kaylee paused trying to think of something nice to say, "Historical."

River spotted the well-dressed man a bit before her captain, hearing Riddick's speculative thoughts on the man. A moment later Mal was murmuring to himself, his eyes on the same fellow, "What's a gussied-up fellow like you doing in a place like this?"

River felt more than saw someone staring and turned to see a boy behind them, his eyes wide. From the feel of his mind he'd been shadowing them since they'd seen the statue, "Zāo gāo." She muttered and felt Riddick stiffen next to her. "Shuǐhuǒ wú qíng," She murmured to him, "He has heard us
speaking of our brother. Excited, fascinated." Riddick turned and snarled at the boy to find something else to look at and the kid ran. River sighed, nothing ever went smooth.

The nattily dressed fellow moved towards them and stopped at their table, "You wouldn't be looking for Kessler?"

Mal shook his head, "Just having a brew."

"I knew a Kessler," The well-dressed individual announced quietly.

The past tense caught everyone's attention and Mal tilted his head at the fellow, "'Knew'?"

The man nodded, "He was a good middleman. Low profile. Didn't filch." His voice was low, unhurried and wouldn't draw attention, "Last week, the factory foreman and his prod crew heard he was moving contraband through town. Gave him a peck of trouble for it."

River exchanged a look with her partner and they both sighed, change was never good on a job. Mal, in the spirit of optimism surely, asked the expected question. "What kind of peck was that?"

The news wasn't good, "The kind where they hacked off his hands and feet with a machete, rolled him into the bog."

Wash looked vaguely ill and took a drink from his mug before he realized what was in it. He made a face but took another before speaking, "They peck pretty hard around here."

Mal was still intent on closing the deal and River couldn't blame him, even if she'd rather scoop up the crew and haul it back to the ship, "Listen, my client off world is waiting for his delivery. If the goods are gone..."

River nearly cursed as her faint hope for a quick exit was dashed; the overly tailored fellow was shaking his head. "Not to worry. Your man's merchandise is here, safe in Kessler's hiding place. We just got to figure out how to get it across town without being seen by the foreman and his prods. I advise we all just lay low for a moment." He continued on his way, circling the room and leaving just as the busker began to sing.

"Jayne…
The man they call Jayne
He robbed from the rich and he gave to the poor
Stood up to the Man and he gave him what for
Our love for him now ain't hard to explain
The Hero of Canton, the man they call Jayne

Now Jayne saw the Mudders' backs breaking
He saw the Mudders lament
And he saw the magistrate taking
Every dollar and leaving five cents
So he said, "You can't do that to my people"
He said…"

River cursed and covered her face with her hands, the words of her captain emerging from her lips, "It never goes smooth. Why don't it ever go smooth?"

Mal was regarding she and Riddick with raised eyebrows, "Um…Rick?"

Next to River, Riddick groaned, "Yeah Mal?"
"You or River got any light you'd like to shed on this development?" The captain was deeply confused and more than a little irked though now more than ever he understood why Jayne had wanted to stay on Serenity.

"Mal if ya couldn't tell from River's reaction, we don't have a tā mā de clue what this is all about," Riddick growled the words. "We done told ya what we knew. Hell, my brother don't know about this or he woulda told us. Think he'd let us walk inta this blind?"

River almost started laughing hysterically as Simon looked around in shock, "No. This must be what going mad feels like."

The singing went on around them, the entire bar joining in the chorus before the busker took over again,

"Our love for him now ain't hard to explain
The Hero of Canton, the man they call Jayne

Now here is what separates heroes
From common folk like you and I
The man they call Jayne
He turned 'round his plane
And let that money hit the sky..."

River did giggle then, leaning into Riddick as he realized at the same time what must have happened. Leaning towards the captain her mate used her giggling to cover his voice, "Jayne said he pulled a job here, but he got hit by anti-aircraft ordnance. He had to dump everything. He must have dumped the money too. And the Mudders got it."

Wash, more than a little tipsy, looked at all of them with a grin, "We gotta go to the crappy town where I'm the hero!"

The Mudders finally finished singing with one last very loud chorus of, "The Man they call Jayne!"

River looked around at the slightly quieter bar, "Perhaps now would be the time to make a discreet exit?"

Riddick was frowning and River caught his unease, "Seem a bit quiet? Like there's a lot fewer people around?"

Mal nodded, "Lets head back to the boat before somethin' else happens. Last thing we want is them singin' 'bout you two."

Riddick shuddered and River nodded her agreement, "A most disquieting thought." She looked at Wash, Kaylee and Simon, "They will be all right?" She asked Mal.

"For now yeah, Wash'll keep 'em outa trouble."

"Who's gonna keep Wash outa trouble though," Riddick muttered as they followed Mal back to Serenity.

River grabbed Mal's arm and hauled him to a stop before they rounded the bend to Landing, "Excess of people are ahead, demanding their hero come out and play." She whispered. The cacophony both mental and aural was giving her a headache. She swayed and leaned against Riddick, "Hurts."

Riddick was scowling into the darkness his silver eyes easily picking up what she had, "She's right
Mal. There’s a crowd of Mudders in front of Serenity."

"Well we'll have to brazen our way through it," Mal sighed and began to push forward. River tried to straighten up and follow him only to be scooped up and cradled in her lover's arms.

"I've got you liàn rén," He murmured following Mal.

The captain was yelling, "Make way, comin' through. So help me if you don't let me get to my ship I'll have my gun-hand start carvin' pieces offa ya's."

River shuddered and felt Riddick’s hands tighten on her protectively, "Anchor yourself in me River. Remember?"

"Yes," She immersed herself in his mind and took a deep breath.

Thanks to Mal's hollering and Riddick's extremely intimidating looks they were able to get onto the boat without too much trouble. Zoe met them in the bay a frown on her regal face, "I'm thinkin' we got ourselves a little hitch sir?"

"You might could say," Mal agreed. "Where's Jayne?"

"He's workin' on dinner, puttin' a lotta effort into it too, enlisted Book's help and everything," Zoe gave him a half smile. "He just said somethin' about bein' grateful he don't have to go out and risk getting pinched."

"Yeah well we're gonna have to ask him to do just that," Mal was having the beginnings of a plan in his head and River did not like where his thoughts were going.

"Richard, we will need to do work of our own tonight," She murmured in her lover's ear. "Cap'n wants to use Jayne as a distraction. We will need to be certain he is not taken tomorrow."

"All right," Riddick began to stride towards the stairs. "We're gonna break the news to Jayne that he's a hero," He told Mal shortly.

"Don't go to bed or nothin', might need you two," Mal commanded.

"Cào nǐ zǔ zōng shí bā dài," Riddick cursed and looked at the captain. "We been out in that stink all day. I cain't hardly breathe. River's exhausted. If you need the goods moved tonight you call me but if you try to put us to work again after this Mal, you an' me're gonna have some serious words 'bout what you got rights to expect a us."

River heard Zoe telling the captain, "River does look kinda beat up. And with his sense a smell Mal? Bein' out in that stink musta been like torture for Riddick. Give 'em some time to rest up. Ain't like we're goin' somewhere in a hurry is it?"

Jayne was hard at work in the galley, exchanging hunting stories with Book and grinned when they came in, "Hey you're back. We got the goods already?" His grin faded when he took in River being carried and Riddick's grim face, "Shǐniào what went sideways?"

River was settled into a chair before she tried to answer Jayne, Riddick pulling down the teapot and some mugs in an effort to soothe them both, "Jayne dropped the payload on the Mudder town. The Mudders have come to see Jayne as a folk hero. Heard your name, heard you were here. They demand their hero come out to play."

Jayne looked horrified and on Jayne that was something to see. River thought idly that if Mal and
Zoe could see her friend's face they wouldn't be so cavalier about the plan Mal was developing. "I ain't no hero," He was declaring just as Mal and Zoe joined them in the galley.

"No," Mal agreed with a shrug. "But I got a mob a Mudders says different. And for gorram sure there's no way we're gettin' off this rock with the goods 'thout some sorta distraction."

Zoe leaned against the cabinets as Mal sat down heavily at the table, "Cap'n figures we let you go with 'em, live it up at the bar, get everybody in a celebratin' mood. Shifts come off work an' they'll get to celebratin' too. Then we move the goods across town while everyone's with you."

"That don't take care a the guards, or the problem a gettin' Jayne back out again," Riddick pointed out grimly as he gave River a mug of tea.

"That's what I'll be counting on you for," Mal pointed at him. "Between you and River, 'spect you can handle knockin' out a few guards."

Jayne wasn't thrilled, "Hell, iffen I'd known you were gonna want me to go out an'…" He cursed in a low voice, "What if the fuss an' furor don't last until tomorra? What then?"

"An' the magistrate ain't gonna take kindly to Jayne bein' in town," Riddick pointed out with a scowl.

River took a deep breath and thought, "Magistrate will hear rumors today." She murmured softly and felt Jayne and Riddick's attention sharpen and fix to her words while Zoe and Mal weren't quite as observant. "Will take steps late tonight when rumors are confirmed. Probabilities indicate difficulties if Jayne is given a parade and a speech. Avoid if possible."

Jayne nodded seriously, "No parade and no speechifyin', got it."

Mal looked at the three of them curiously and Book came to sit next to Jayne. "What's this about a parade?"

"Public display would push the magistrate too far. He would try to make an example of Jayne," River explained, lying through her teeth. "If the fuss is quieter, he will try to take Jayne quietly, so as not to create a mob."

Mal nodded his understanding and Zoe looked at Jayne thoughtfully, "So we'll need you to stay in the bar tonight. Try not to get too drunk." The first mate admonished lightly. She looked at River and appeared about to speak but a sideways glance at her captain firmed her lips and Zoe just shrugged.

"Try not to throw our names around too much when you're braggin' on your exploits an' thrillin' heroics," Was all the captain said to Jayne. "Now kind as it was a you to cook a meal might be best if you put it all in the cooler and kept it for tomorrow when the job is done."

Jayne nodded, "Book, sorry to do this to ya but if you'll gimme a hand I can get to my part a the job sooner." He looked at Mal, "I guess you're wantin' me to let the crowd a folk outside carry me off to the bar?"

"Yeah, soon's you can, let's get everyone nice an' happy and soused," Mal agreed.

River watched as Jayne and Book put away the meal they'd worked so hard on and stood when he began to leave the galley, "Remember, he is a better man. Better man for Ciara." She whispered as she walked out the door beside him. "Rick and I will make sure that you aren't taken."

"Thanks River," Jayne gave her a sincere smile that was worth more than a thousand words of
Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So here we are in Jaynestown and he doesn't seem too happy about it does he? We're going to see something of a departure from the episode here, mostly because Riddick is not about to let Jayne get pinched by the magistrate and also because the change we saw in canon Jayne has already occurred due to having Rick back in his life along with River and Simon. In my 'verse Jayne was pretending to be the hardcore merc we all saw on the show but without any real friends what he was becoming what he pretended to be. With friends in Rick and River and Simon to an extent he doesn't have to keep his guard up all the time.

I'm curious as to how all of you react and if you like the way I'm changing the episode. We've still got humor and oh dear, River and Riddick are up to something so Mal may start squawking. Oh, and we're going to get a look at River's animal. How do you think she'll behave?

Chinese Translations:

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
mèi mei - little sister
Cào dàn - Fuck
bàng jiār - lover/partner
chòu mǎniào - stinking horse piss
Lù duān - Luduan, mythical Chinese beast able to detect the truth
tiān shī - angel
Zāo gāo - crap/nuts/crud
Shuǐ huǒ wū qíng - Fire and water have no mercy - idiom. forces of nature beyond human control / implacable fate
tā mā de - fucking
liàn rén - lover/sweetheart
Cào nǐ zǔ zōng shí bā dài - Fuck your ancestors to the eighteenth generation
Shǐ niào - shit and piss

Script Translations:

Zhe shi she me lan dong xi? - What kind of rotten food is this?

Quote Sources:
Heart to heart and mind to mind - The Lay of the Last Minstrel - Sir Walter Scott

O woman! lovely woman! Nature made thee to temper man: we had been brutes without you. Angels are painted fair, to look like you. - Venice Preserved - Thomas Otway

True love's the gift which God has given to man alone beneath the Heaven. It is not Fantasy's hot fire, whose wishes, soon as granted, fly; it liveth not in fierce desire, with dead desire it dock not die: It is the secret sympathy, the silver link, the silken tie, which heart to heart and mind to mind, in body and in soul can bind. - The Lay of the Last Minstrel - Sir Walter Scott

With too much quickness ever to be taught, with too much thinking to have common thought. - Moral Essays - Alexander Pope

Beware the ides of March - Julius Caesar - William Shakespeare

O that men should put an enemy in their mouths, to steal way their brains - Othello – William Shakespeare
Riddick looked at River and grinned, she'd made up her face and done her hair so she looked like she was going to a core function, some society do. The contrast between that and her rough work clothes was amusing to him even if no one else would get the joke. The dichotomy that was River Tam, he thought to himself with a silent chuckle.

River tilted her head at him and pressed a soft finger to his lips, "She is River Riddick now." She reminded him, her fingers tracing the scars down her right palm. He pressed a kiss to those scars, twins to his and mentally promised her that when the job was done they'd have a day to themselves in the bunk before they got back to work.

"She will hold her mate to that," River murmured and began to climb out of their bunk silently. Riddick followed her, glad he and Kaylee had worked on his hatch until it moved smoothly and soundlessly. His little sister hadn't understood why until he'd told her he didn't like extra noise if he could do anything about it, that the squeak was painful to his sensitive ears.

That the hatch now made no sound opening or closing made it exponentially easier to sneak out of their bunk when the pair had to. Riddick had been sure it would come in handy at some point and since Mal didn't care so long as they weren't breaking anything no one had gotten in trouble for the repair work. The smooth click of metal wasn't anything someone Besides River or he, or possibly Jayne would hear now.

They hadn't told Mal about their plan to make absolutely certain no one captured Jayne. River had spent a solid two hours meditating and determining where the guards were and where it was most likely Stitch was, assuming the mind burning with anger and vengeance was Jayne's old partner. If it wasn't then no harm done but it seemed likely since River'd been able to see a familiar figure in the vengeful thoughts.

It was a two part plan, the first segment of which was to sneak off of Serenity. Wash had returned to the boat along with Mal, shaking his head and telling Zoe all about the great hero Jayne. That had been a funny conversation…

Wash had all but stumbled onto the ship while River and Riddick were sitting quietly and making their plan in the lounge, "Honey, we're home!"

Zoe had come down the steps, the client apparently was tying up the cortex with waves, "Mal, Bernoulli's chomping at the bit. Says he wants his merchandise yesterday."

The captain had nodded, "Yeah, well, we still got a few wrinkles to work out on the deal."

Wash had other things on his mind, "Did you know that Jayne is a bona fide folk hero? Got a song and everything."

Zoe blinked at him, apparently she hadn't taken Mal all that seriously when he'd told her as much, "You been drinking, husband?"

Mal shrugged as if to say he wasn't responsible for what the pilot did when dirtside, "That he has. Don't make it any less the case."
Zoe was regarding her husband and captain as if they'd both lost their minds, "I thought you were exaggerating before. You really telling me that Jayne..."

Mal nodded, "Wasn't jokin' before. An' we're gonna use it just the way I said we was. It should buy us enough of a distraction to get the stolen goods out from under the foreman and his crew of prods."

Zoe had looked at her laughing husband, "You're really going to have to start again. Jayne's a what?"

The conversation had been extremely humorous as Wash gave a rousing rendition of the song. Riddick had been able to tell exactly when Zoe had gone from disbelieving to taking the whole idea seriously because she'd looked over at he and River and her face had been curiously without expression. Riddick had wondered what the woman was thinking and River had whispered that she suspected the two of them were up to something but since it was likely something that would keep them all from getting killed she was keeping her peace about it.

Riddick tried to put the memory of that conversation out of his head in favor of present circumstances, of course it didn't help that Kaylee and Simon hadn't returned, apparently they were having a fine time watching Jayne. Riddick wasn't exactly easy about that but he didn't have time to play chaperone now.

Unfortunately Wash wasn't in bed and he wasn't on the bridge and Riddick really didn't want to knock the man out. The pilot was getting another cup of coffee as he sat watch and the galley lay right between Riddick, River and where they needed to go. River tilted her head up at Riddick in a silent question and he shook his head, "That won't help none." He sighed and moved into the galley, River at his side.

Wash, to his credit, was growing more used to Riddick's silent way of moving and didn't yell his surprise when he turned around and saw the two of them. He did bobble his coffee cup, thankfully empty, before setting it down, "You're up to something." He remarked keeping his voice down.

River nodded, "Making sure nothing goes wrong with the captain's plan." She murmured.

"Depends a little too much on luck for my peace a mind," Riddick kept his voice low. "So you could call this preventative maintenance."

Wash nodded his understanding, "I'm all for that." His good humored face was sober as a judge, "Just be careful you two. And take an earwig with you. I'll be on watch until dawn."

"Shouldn't take longer than a coupla hours," Riddick nodded. He could tell from the man's scent and River's reaction to Wash's thoughts that the man wouldn't tell Mal where they were unless they didn't come back before Mal came on watch.

After that sneaking off the boat was easy. For all his skills, Book was still older and needed his rest, and Riddick and River didn't make much noise walking even when they weren't trying for silence. If need be they could fight in complete silence as well, the only sound of combat would be from their enemies and thumps of flesh on flesh or steel through skin. It was that particular skill that they'd be putting to work that night.

Riddick took one last breath of clean air before he opened the airlock door and followed River out. "I hate this tā mā de moon," He mutteredsoftly as he shut the door behind them. Clicking on the earwig he handed it to River. There was no way he'd be able to deal with the noise of it in his ear. River's hearing wasn't as sensitive and she'd happily wear the little comm device.
"We're off Wash," She murmured as she affixed it in her ear.

"Take care an' lemme know when you're back, I'll turn off the alarms to the airlock again." Wash's voice was quiet but still easy enough for him to hear.

"Affirmative," River agreed. "Radio silence until then, unless emergency is declared."

"Over and out," Wash's voice declared and the transmitter went silent.

Riddick looked around, checking the fit of the slender pack he'd slung over his shoulders. Stage two required a change of clothing and it wouldn't do to lose the costumes. "All right yì zhōng rén, let's go."

River slanted a grin at him, a feral bloodthirsty expression that should have looked out of place with the formal cosmetics and instead just made her look even more beautiful to his eyes, "Richard must lead the way. She will…bat cleanup." Her eyes were twinkling as if she knew how hungry he was for a good fight, a clean kill. And of course she did, his woman knew him better than he knew himself sometimes.

He grinned, feeling the animal stretch out and fill every part of him, the man and animal combining to work in unison for a truly good hunt. The trick would be to make each kill look as if a madman, someone locked up for years and insane with rage, had done it. The first guard went down with a shiv to the back and a broken spine, a shiv to his jugular finished him off before he hacked at the body with the big knife he'd taken just for this purpose. It was closer to a machete and resembled what the guards carried. When they got closer to the place Stitch was he'd take a blade off a guard and use that, but for now, he'd use the copy for the finishing work.

He was conscious of River watching him, her eyes acclimating to the dark and glowing silver like his own, honey and apples twining with silk, steel and blood. She was smiling as he looked up and moved beside him to look the body over critically before taking the big blade and slashing at the man's palms and forearms. Handing the blade back she shrugged, "To give the look of defensive wounds." She explained softly. "Avoid the sweet spot my love. Too calculated."

"Gotcha," His voice was a growl of pleasure. He loved working with his woman, robbing a bank, murder, or facing off a platoon he wanted her at his side. Her smile grew as she heard his thoughts and plums infused her scent along with honey and caramel. Riddick smiled, he rarely thought about it, the scent was so much a part of her, he wasn't sure when he'd first noticed it along with the blood, silk and steel.

Sometime after the Academy had first doped him up with River in the room he'd smelt plums on her and hadn't known what it had meant. He'd guessed eventually that it was the scent of her friendship with him, and River had never said otherwise. At that point unless the scent went away he didn't worry about it, considering it part of her base fragrance. He hardly bothered to mentally tag it anymore. Whereas blood meant truth and would disappear if she was lying outright, silk was for strength and if it was gone or smelt frayed River would collapse at any moment. And steel, the discipline she used to control her abilities could turn rusted or fade which meant River could convulse or have a babbling fit. The plums were always there though. Riddick's smile tilted wickedly, it hadn't been until recently when he'd smelt plums that he'd realized what it meant.

River was blushing now, sugar threading into her scent even as he located the next guard and sliced his throat. Wounds like River had given the other guard, a deep belly wound and more to the chest and head gave him the look of being savaged by a madman and Riddick grinned up at his woman as she nodded her satisfaction with the work.
She couldn't say anything now without giving away their position but she was blushing fiercely as Riddick thought on plums and how her skin always smelt of them around him. He'd loved her scent from the moment he'd seen her but something about those plums just made him want to surround her with his body and worship. His hands were bloody so he couldn't touch her, and he had blood spattered over his face so he couldn't kiss her either. But he could think about how he'd like to.

One more guard, very close to a metal box and this one Riddick took the big knife from and used it to make what he was mentally calling 'crazy cuts' on the body. Part of him was wondering if they should let the man out and kill him now or do it later, after the second stage of the plan. They'd have to go all the way to a bog, which was clear across town, in order to get rid of the body and that would eat time.

River nodded her voice a whisper only he would hear, "He thinks correctly. Three more guards, then stage two, then back here for Stitch."

Riddick nodded his understanding, 'We'll have to change back into our work clothes after stage two.' He reminded her mentally, 'Don't wanna wreck the nice stuff we bought.'

"Will not be a problem," River nodded. "Plenty of time to change clothing."

He barely kept from chuckling and began to lead her in the direction of the grand house.

It had ended up being four more guards, with River taking out one that had simply stumbled upon Riddick killing another. It hadn't even messed up her hair and he grinned as she dusted off her hands and made an elegant bow towards him, gesturing to the body so he could cut it up more. Then they were at the great house and Inara's shuttle was parked off to the side of the lawn. Riddick could smell the scents of incense and sex and tea and wrinkled his nose. The incense always made him feel like he was about to sneeze.

Out of sight behind an outbuilding he slung the pack off his body and watched as River stripped out of her work clothes. She'd found a gown very close to one of Inara's in style on Beaumonde, something in a color that looked like fresh blood to his eyes, dark and rich over her skin. When she put it on River looked like elegant sex and all he wanted to do was bury himself inside her. Honey bloomed in her scent as she caught his thoughts and she smiled wickedly up at him. "Later," She promised and he grinned. Then it was his turn to strip while she stood guard and he pulled on the shoes and elegant trousers, and finally the dark silk tunic with the standing collar. With smoked glass specs on his nose he looked like the proper escort for a Companion. A little flirting and a dosed drink and the magistrate would be dead. It shouldn't take long at all Riddick thought with a half smirk.

Getting in the house unseen wasn't difficult, the door wasn't even locked. The magistrate was talking to someone in his study, "My son's out there I pray to God losing his cherry."

Riddick glanced down at River as they heard a familiar voice, the foreman who'd greeted them upon their arrival, "There's a problem in worker-town, sir. Jayne Cobb's come back."

Riddick frowned and River whispered, "Cannot let the foreman leave. He will find the dead guards when he goes to release Stitch." That was just what he was hoping she wouldn't say but it wasn't as if he really need a good excuse to kill the bully. He would have done it if he'd run into him outside. River was murmuring still, "If we enter now, Higgins will likely tell the foreman to wait for him outside."
Riddick took that as his cue to knock on the door interrupting Higgin's monologue about how Stitch would take care of the Mudder hero worship and the hero when they let him out.

"Come in," Higgin's voice was irritated.

River opened the door and walked through it, every inch the lady, her curves beautifully displayed in the blood colored gown, pale skin glowing. "Magistrate Higgins?" She waited for Riddick to close the door behind him and dipped her knees in a curtsey.

"Yes my dear," The man's voice was unctuous, his smile oily with lust and feigned joviality. "You have the advantage of me Miss…"

"Déchaînement," River's elegantly modulated tones seemed to float through the air. "If it please you sir, I am Fleur Déchaînement."

The foreman was staring, the lust practically boiling off him. Higgins was a little better, more concerned with what River might want of him than his lusts though he could plainly see and appreciate that she was beautiful. "Well it is pleasant to meet you my dear but you can see I do have…business to attend to."

"This is a delicate thing to speak of," River cast a look over her shoulder at Riddick as if asking for aid.

Riddick stepped forward minutely and bowed, summoning his core voice, "Sir, strictly speaking Miss Déchaînement should not be here. But Miss Serra was…impressed with you earlier…"

"Ah," Magistrate Higgins no sooner heard Inara's name than his lust began to overcome his good sense. "Wait for me by the back door," He told the foreman sharply. "I'll be out in a while."

"Think it's a good idea ta wait Boss?" The foreman wasn't stupid but he wasn't smart enough to shut up either.

"I think you'd better shut your mouth and do what I tell you or I'll find out why you're not," Higgins snapped back. The foreman took his smelly, filthy self out of the study, Riddick politely holding the door for him and locking it silently once it was closed again.

River smiled gratefully, "You are very kind sir." She moved closer to the desk, "You see, I'm Miss Serra's apprentice. This is our manservant and guard, Mr. Fureur."

"As I was saying sir, Miss Serra was impressed with you earlier," Riddick bowed slightly again as he spoke. "Her apprentice would not normally be allowed contact with males who are not contracted to her but she felt Miss Déchaînement would benefit from your company."

"And your presence here is because…" Higgins was regarding Riddick with a small amount of skepticism.

"To ensure her safety," Riddick allowed himself a cool smile. "Also to be certain she performs as she should. In Miss Serra's absence I am the one to evaluate Miss Déchaînement."

River nodded and moved closer to the desk, "If I may sir?" She gestured to his side of the desk and Higgins grinned patting his knee invitingly. "Miss Serra said you were a man of a very…generous spirit. To gift your son with a Companion is no small thing. She assured me that you would see to it my time with you was…memorable." She perched delicately on his knee.

Higgins' hands found her hip and thigh, squeezing lustfully through the silk of her gown, "Well I will
do my best Miss Déchaînement." He smiled genially. "Might I ask what you have on under this pretty gown?" Riddick did his best to not inhale sharply as the man's lust spiked and River's nerves wound tighter to his senses. She might not show it to Higgins but she was steeling herself against her nerves.

"Why nothing sir," River returned his smile. "Please, if we are to be...intimate...would you be pleased to call me Fleur?"

"Nothing would make me happier Fleur, unless it was seeing you out of that gown," Higgins was a bit pink in the face as River's hands touched his chest and shoulders.

"And then sir, may I remove your neckcloth," River's slender hands touched the silk that wrapped around Higgin's neck. Her hands weren't shaking and only Riddick would have caught the sound of her heartbeat increasing, cinnamon in her scent turning burnt as the man's hands squeezed her body.

"If it makes you more comfortable, do it now," The magistrate urged her.

Riddick ground his teeth as he watched the man's hands on River's body, if she didn't do something soon he was going to go crazy and just shiv the ńu niáng ńǎng de. She was his and no one else had the right to touch the way Higgins was touching.

"Such a well dressed man," River cooed as she deftly unknotted and unwrapped the cravat from around Higgins neck. "My...bodyguard...he might grow a little bored. Might I offer him a glass of your port sir?"

"You pour him one and me as well," Higgins directed her and when she slipped off his knee gave her behind a little pat. "Just slip off that gown before you come here back to me." Riddick kept his eyes on the man and mentally checked his shivs again. This wasn't the plan. River was supposed to flirt and dose his drink without any risk of her clothes coming off. According to what she'd Read from Inara manhandling a Companion who hadn't clearly consented to such handling was not done. Higgins was gauche and a cad and very close to death if River gave him the slightest indication she wanted him to intervene.

River's scent spiked with cinnamon and sugar but her face never showed any of her anger or embarrassment as she poured the drinks, one for Riddick, and one for Higgins, dosed liberally with essence of foxglove or digitalis. In small doses it was medically useful. In large ones such as the one Higgins would drink, it would cause heart failure within ten minutes. It was the ten minutes between the drink and death that Riddick was worried about.

She handed Riddick his drink looking up into his eyes and he thought fiercely that all she had to do was say the word and he'd have a shiv in the man's throat. River's dark eyes were warm but worried even as she smiled and turned back to Higgins, setting his drink down on the edge of his desk deliberately before she unknotted the straps of her gown. It slithered down her body in a whoosh of fabric, leaving her with a cloud of blood colored silk at her feet and her body completely nude to the gaze of both men in the room. River picked up the drink and smilingly handed it to Higgins, "Are you pleased sir?"

Riddick clenched his jaw and ground his teeth together to hold back the growl as Higgins tossed back the dosed port in one swallow, his other hand reaching for River's pretty breasts. Pudgy fingers fondled his woman as Riddick's hand tightened on the lowball glass in his hand. River was giggling, cinnamon and sugar in her scent but the cinnamon was twisting, that awful burnt smell in his nose as Higgins pulled her closer to him.

"You were thirsty," She giggled at Higgins. "What else are you thirsty for sir?"
"Hm… gimme another glass of that," Higgins was a bit red in the face but his hands were still caressing River's breasts. He sucked one nipple into his mouth before releasing it with a pop and putting his glass in River's hand. Riddick was lucky the man was unobservant because he nearly snarled and he knew his face wasn't as impassive as it could be.

River nodded, a soft moan on her lips as Higgins let go of her and sent her with another smack on the pi gu towards the port. Riddick was working as hard as he could to keep his face like stone, while inwardly the animal was ready to gut the man for touching River's skin. They only had one dose of digitalis left, hopefully it would work. If Higgins didn't die soon Riddick had no illusions about what would happen when he touched any other part of River.

River swayed back to Higgins and teasingly lifted the glass to her lips before lowering it and offering the glass to the magistrate. The man tossed the drink back without a wince and pulled her into his lap so she was forced to straddle him before lifting her up onto the desk, her thighs spread, "Always wondered what a Companion's yin xué looked like." He muttered a bit tipsily, his face a darker shade of red now.

River's hands touched his hair and shoulders, "Does it please you?" She murmured, her fingers nimbly unbuttoning his collar and shirt even as cinnamon and sugar burnt in Riddick's nose. Her hands had started to tremble and he knew this couldn't go for much longer.

"I'll please me more when I'm pushing my prick deep inside it," Higgins told her standing up and loosening his belt.

"That would please me too," River whispered, "Magistrate Higgins…would you like…my mouth first?" She was trembling, shivering almost violently, and only she and Riddick knew it was out of fear, her scent filled with burnt cinnamon along with her rage. That fat fool Higgins thought it was with desire for him, he was practically drooling over River.

"Yes…" Higgins nearly slurred the word, dropping back into his chair. "Get me ready to plow that tight little cunny." River slipped down from the desk and watched as his face grew to an alarming shade of purple, his hand clutching at his throat and chest. Her hands pulled open his shirt, popping buttons, to place her palm over his heart. Her face filled with satisfaction as she felt the organ pounding under her palm.

Riddick watched as Higgins had the fatal heart attack, the scent of River's fear slowly faded as the man died right in front of her. Greedily he took in the sight, a beautiful naked River, her hand feeling the last struggling beats of a heart and the man's gasps for breath. He'd never seen anyone so beautiful in his life. Even as he had the thought honey threaded into her scent. "You all right?"

River nodded slowly and moved over to her gown pulling it back up her body. Before she'd gotten it over her hips he was on her, his big hands dark on her soft flesh, "If he'd done any more touchin' I woulda killed him." He growled in her ear, nipped the curve with his teeth, "Nobody touches my woman like that but me." He palmed her breasts and pushed her gown off her body again.

Her scent flooded with honey and caramel as he carried her to the desk and put her down in the exact spot where she'd been sitting before, "My Richard, my Riddick." Her voice was soft and sweet, filled with need. "Please, touch, take, get the feel of him off of me." She was still trembling in his hands and damned if he'd let her go another minute without what she needed to feel safe.

Riddick wasn't sure if it was the animal or the man that was in charge at the moment, but seeing River kill a man, standing naked in front of him and watching him gasp out his last breath had sent a veritable tsunami of desire through him. His fancy trousers were distorted by the hard length of his diāo before River's hands pushed them down, pulling it out. He bent and pressed hot wet kisses to
her breasts before he took her mouth and swept his tongue inside devouring her. Everywhere Higgins had touched he kissed. Her skin, so cool to the touch when he'd first held her was hot and silky against his hands. He groaned and bent down, licking up her slit and curling his tongue around her yīn dì before he sucked on the sensitive flesh drawing it up into his mouth and flicking it with his tongue.

Her shriek of pleasure was still ringing in his ears as he drove into her, hot, tight, wet flesh surrounding him, drawing him deeper and deeper inside her. Riddick groaned and fixed his mouth to hers, jerking her body on and off his cock and swallowing her scream of bliss as she fell, throbbing around him. He lost control, pounded hard into her, without mercy, without finesse, grinding his way to his climax as she nearly sobbed with passion, in fall after fall. He groaned into her mouth as his fall tore through him, his seed yanked out of his body by hers, clenching his jī ba in a wet velvet grip.

She was breathing hard, panting under him, and he kissed her again, more gently this time. "I've got you River," The convict promised in a murmur. "Nobody will ever have you but me. I won't ever let that happen to you zhēn 'ài. You're mine."

"Yes," Her whisper was so sweet on his neck. "I couldn't have done it without you in the room. Your mind, your anger was the only thing that kept me from screaming and running away. I knew you would never let him have me...but I...when he told me to take off my gown...should I have flirted more? Teased him?"

"No plan ever goes perfect River," Riddick reminded her, pressing kisses to her shoulders. "You did fine. I ain't ever gonna let anything like that happen to you. I promise baby. You're mine. No other man is ever gonna have you."

She clung to him for several long moments more before reluctantly taking her mouth from his skin. "We must still kill the foreman and Stitch."

Riddick grudgingly pulled out of her body and found a handkerchief in the drawer for River to clean herself up with at least a bit. She pressed a kiss to his lips before wiping his mouth free of the dye that had smeared from her lips to his. He growled softly as she hopped down from the desk and busied himself with pulling his trousers into order to keep his hands from ripping the gown back off her body even as she pulled it back up over her white skin. They were halfway done with the job though, and he hadn't anticipated having River in the middle of it, so that was a bright spot in a crap couple of days, "Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud turn forth her silver lining on the night?" He murmured the question and got a smile of pleasure from his woman.

Once the silky straps were retied over her shoulders, Riddick noticed in amusement that she'd never removed her shoes, no wonder he'd felt her heels pressing into his backside. "All right bāo bāo?"

"Very," River smiled at him and looked around the room giving it a once over before she walked to the door. "If we go out the way we came in, we can change, then surprise the foreman, kill him, get Stitch, lead him off, kill him and go back to Serenity before dawn."
Riddick nodded his understanding, "Side door it is."

River shuddered slightly as she removed the dress. She'd bought it with something like this in mind but putting the idea into practice wasn't the same. If it hadn't been for Riddick being in the room with her she doubted she could have let Higgins even touch her. She'd almost lost control and killed the man when he'd sat her on the desk and spread her thighs. Riddick looked at her worriedly and she took a deep breath, pushing away the mood, "I'll be fine. Need a bath." She murmured wringing her
nose. Putting on her work clothes was a pleasure and she didn't bother to take her hair out of its elaborate updo. It was out of the way and would stay up and that's all that mattered at the moment.

Once she had her boots on and her blades were in their places Riddick shucked his fine clothes and pulled on his blood spattered cargo pants and teeshirt. River kept her mind and ears listening for guards but her eyes were fixed firmly on her mate recalling how he'd looked before he'd cleaned up and put on the elegant suit. She'd never seen anyone look so good with blood spattered across his face before. The only thing better than seeing him put clothes on was when he'd take them off. And watching him slide his knives into place, fingerling the big blade he'd used earlier, was almost as arousing as watching him kill. Maybe the Academy had twisted something in her mind, or maybe she'd always been like this, but watching her mate fight was more stimulating than any erotic film or book.

"What're you thinkin' 天使," Riddick's big hand skimmed down her arm, silver eyes bright as they looked at her in the dark.

"How much I love watching you," River admitted. Her eyes were adjusting to the dark again, more slowly than her mates but with a little time she'd see as well. "How titillating I find seeing you...fight, kill." Her mate's eyes gleamed hotly and she could feel his pleasure that she liked seeing his skills used.

"Like hearin' that," Riddick told her with a smile. She could Read his thoughts that he knew she loved him, knew she adored his mind but he'd never been sure how she felt about his violent ways, his uncivilized joy in a good fight and satisfaction in a kill. That she appreciated his skills was something that pleased him greatly. Hearing that she found watching him fight arousing simply reaffirmed his belief that she was the perfect woman. "Let's get the job done, get back to Serenity," Her mate wanted time alone with her, time where he could let the animal out more and make her scream long and loud for him.

The foreman was disturbingly easy to kill, oblivious to his surroundings and possessed of a glass jaw on top of a soft gut. Riddick threw the body over his shoulder and they carried it back to the detention area. River looked at the other boxes and shook her head at one, the other she frowned at and looked at Riddick, "Should they free the other prisoner?"

"Sedition," River frowned. "He will not stay quiet if we free him." She tilted her head thoughtfully, "Higgins' son, he is not his father...likely will improve conditions and let he man go as a good will gesture. Should not rob him of that." Her frown eased, "Yet I argue not against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer right onward."

"So we leave him then, less trouble for us, and something for the kid to do when he's in charge," Riddick nodded and grinned. "Then let's get Stitch and make like trees."

"Leaves?" River nearly giggled at the bad joke but bent to pick the locks on the box. Riddick grinned at her before giving his attention to their surroundings as she worked on the lock. She pulled the lid open and stepped back as one eye opened in a grimy face.

Riddick stepped forward, "Stitch Hessian?" He growled the words quietly.

"Yeah, whadda ya want wit' me?" The man's voice was hoarse with heat and lack of water.
"Bein' released," Riddick grabbed the man's shoulder and began to manhandle him out of the box. River noted that it was a good thing Richard was so strong, Hessian was a tall man and he wasn't very well coordinated.

Once Stitch had his feet under him River looked up at the grimy smelly person who'd tried to kill her friend. "We will need to sneak through town, have a shuttle landed inconspicuously," She lied. "Unless Stitch wishes to remain?"

"No, wanna get offa this gorram rock," Hessian nodded. "I ain't bein' released though, Higgins he don't release nobody."

"Never said Higgins was releasing you," River grinned and began to lead the way back, diverting from she and Riddick's original path to detour through the town towards the bog.

"So what's alla the hullabaloo?" Hessian muttered the question to Riddick who was walking behind the taller man and steadying him every so often. The town's tavern was overflowing with people and the shouts could be heard from where they were walking behind it.

"Some local folk hero," Riddick lied, "Guess this here was a day he did somethin' shiny. Must be like the Mudder's version of Unification day."

"Morons," Hessian said succinctly and with that River wasn't entirely sure she disagreed. A crowd of people flooded out into the street and the three of them flattened themselves against the back of the bar to avoid being seen.

River blinked as she realized that her brother and Kaylee were on the other side of the wall, she could hear their conversation clearly, Simon was very tipsy and so was Kaylee. She cast a worried look at her mate and knew from his expression that he had realized the exact same thing and couldn't fail to hear the conversation the inebriated couple was having.

Simon was very drunkenly enunciating, "You know, I've saved lives. Dozens. Maybe hundreds. I reattached a girl's leg. Her whole leg. She named her hamster after me. I got a hamster. He drops a box of money, he gets a town." River cast a glance at Stitch but he plainly couldn't hear a thing, his attention on the people out in the street.

Kaylee was telling Simon in a dreamy tone, "Hamsters is nice."

River nearly laughed as Simon made a toast, "To Jayne! The box-dropping, man-ape-gone-wrong-thing."

Riddick's mèi mei was laughing, "You are pretty funny."

Finally Simon said something right, "And you're pretty...pretty."

Unfortunately Kaylee was very drunk and now she was astonished on top of it, "What did you just say?"

"I just said that you're pretty. Even when you're covered in...engine grease, you're..." River's drunk gé gé told his lady love, "No, especially, especially when you're covered in engine grease."

River rolled her eyes and Riddick grinned at her from his position behind Stitch, "Gonna play it casual." Her mate murmured to Hessian, "Just walk across the street like we got every right, should be home free in a bit."

Hessian nodded muttering to himself. Unfortunately for him any chance he had of living went out the
proverbial window as his mutterings about hunting down Cobb and gutting him were perfectly audible to Jayne's friends. River saw her mate's eyes turn to silver steel and nodded at him leading them out into the street and finally out of the town.

The walk to the bog wasn't far, River could feel Hessian's trepidation rising as she led them deeper into it and there was still no sign of a shuttle. "Whadda ya playin' at—" He put a hand on her shoulder and jerked her around to face him, not even seeing the knife in her hand.

It slid easily into his gut, smooth as butter and she smiled coldly up at him, "Not playing."

She felt more than saw Riddick find the sweet spot on Hessian, his shiv plunging into the man's back, the spurt of blood that sprayed upwards, a bright trail across her mate's handsome face. "Shouldn't a tried to stab my brother in the back," Riddick murmured as he pushed the taller man off his blade.

Hessian crumpled like a puppet whose strings had been cut, falling to his knees, blood running out of him into the ground and muddy water. River looked up at her mate and then down at the dying man, "Should have known better." She told him coolly, "No one messes with Riddick's family. Shouldn't have tried to harm Jayne." Riddick moved so that he was facing the man and slowly, with decided pleasure, dragged his knife over the man's throat. Hessian was bleeding out so quickly from the wound in his back that there was barely a spurt of blood when the murderer's knife sliced the jugular.

River licked her lips feeling very warm all of the sudden, her limbs flushed with blood as she watched her mate deliver the final blow and shove Stitch into the bog with a kick of his boot. Her man licked his lips, tasting the blood and turned to grin at her. She knew the moment Riddick realized what was happening to her, his nostrils flared as he caught the scent of honey over the smell of the mud. River moaned slightly, her mind open to his, bloodlust subsumed into lust for her as she stared at the spray of blood across his face. She wanted to kiss him, taste it on him, push his body to the ground and ride him and the need was like a pulsing ache between her thighs.

Stitch's body sank slowly under the water with a blurb and River couldn't wait anymore, launching herself at her mate, her arms around his neck and legs wrapped around his waist. She fused her mouth to his, blood on his mouth still, her tongue pushing past Riddick's lips to lick and suck inside his mouth. She'd succeeded in surprising her mate, shock stilling him momentarily before his hands came up to support her backside as she writhed against his body. His jī ba was hard against her and pressing in just the right place to make her moan into his mouth. Sensation short circuited her brain and she shuddered hotly before pushing against his shoulders and lifting her mouth from his only to have Riddick's lips chase hers back, demanding more. "Ride him," She mumbled in between kisses, her hands cupping his face and smearing her palms with blood over his skin. "Need…Please."

It was rare that her animal rose before his, but when it did, River had learned to not fight it. She pushed at her mate, pulled at his shirt and trousers and finally succeeded, after a particularly violent kick, in putting him on his backside in the dirt, riding him down until he was prostrate beneath her. River heard fabric rip, cool air on her skin and knew, vaguely, that Riddick had torn her t-shirt open. His palms covered her breasts, hot on blood heated skin and she moaned bending down to kiss him again, struggling with her trousers. Her desperation finally reached him and with a skilled flick of his knife she was wearing two separate pant legs, one more careful slice of fabric and the panties she wore were useless but her body was exposed to his and that was all that mattered.

He was panting under her, his hands pushing inside her trousers to feel her thighs and pì gu, and River had the faint thought that for once his hands wouldn't be enough to send her over. She needed him, body and blood and seed to possess her, mark her as his, and pulled his dìāo out of his pants, pumping him with her hand and reveling in the silky hard feel of his flesh against her palm. He was
groaning, muttering something her brain would translate later and River lifted her body over his. The feel of him, a hot thick sword of flesh slowly pushing up inside her body was indescribable, heat and pressure and swelling flesh, delicious friction and she cried out as he slid down his body.

When her hips met his, took him in fully River couldn't move, couldn't breathe for the overwhelming sensation. His hands were hot on her flesh, squeezing her body harder, pulling her down onto him further and her body bowed outward as Riddick pushed her deeper into the ocean of feeling. One experimental swivel of her hips and he was groaning and she was crying out, her fall taking her like a storm. And then she couldn't stop, rising and falling, seeking out the waves, desperate for more and more until she was clutching Riddick's shoulders.

Hips grinding, his body moving in hers, filling and leaving her empty and then filling her again, more and more, until she was shuddering with an excess of sensation and her movements weren't controlled by anything but her need. The animal was pulling him up, fistimg her hands in his shirt to devour his mouth again, reveling in his hands on her. Animal meeting animal until Riddick was pulling her on and off his body, his big hands possessive and desperate on her flesh as she rode him, took him and demanded that he keep up, insisted on his response.

She lost herself. The storm was too much, his mind against hers, the animals in a savage sensual dance for dominance, neither claiming victory or defeat. Blood in her mouth, on her tongue and Richard's skin against her lips. She only wanted more, biting down and shrieking her pleasure as his body shoved deepest yet into hers and erupted. A hot rippling fall, a torrent of heat streaking her insides and turning them out until everything within was pushing against her skin, exploding through her, and she was falling, falling, falling in piece around him, limp and satisfied and still not completely the woman again.

The animal laved the bloody wound on Riddick's nape, kissed and caressed, he was hers to care for after all. Sweet spicy flesh in her mouth, to suck and lick and the coppery tang of blood. Seed, hot and sticky inside her, thighs damp with her own fluids and her mate's rich loving voice in her ear. She looked at him and pressed a kiss to his mouth because he seemed to need it before she went back to cleaning the wound she'd given him.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So I really didn't figure there was any way Riddick or River would let Higgins live. Neither one would care for how Higgins runs his world and it would be easy enough to get their hands on some foxglove and distill it. Killing the guards serves their purpose and creates a good clear path to killing Stitch and also making it easier to get the goods the next day. Fewer guards could only be a good thing.

And I thought it was time that Riddick really understood just how River sees him, that any notion he had of a fragile girl he might be taking advantage of was completely shattered. His nature isn't something she just bears. He's not quite a good man, in that even when he thought he might be taking advantage, he still bound her to him. But I think this little episode makes perfectly clear to him that the innocent girl he met has grown into a woman fully capable of appreciating every skill he has and revels in them.

Of course, with them being on Serenity, nothing ever goes smooth... so...yeah. We have a few wrinkles still. When don't we right?
Oh, there's also a little in joke for anyone who recognizes the meaning of River and Riddick's aliases. Languages are so much fun don't you think?

Chinese Translations:

tā mā de - fucking

yì zhōng rén - sweetheart / one's true love / the person of one's thoughts

gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch

pì gu - butt

yīn xué - underground cave / vagina / female genitalia (in pornography)

diǎo - cock

yīn dì - clitoris

jī ba - penis/dick

zhēn 'ài - true love

bǎo bǎo - darling/baby

tiān shǐ - angel

mèi mei - little sister

gē ge - big brother

Quote Sources:

Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud turn forth her silver lining on the night? - Comus - Milton

Yet I argue not against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer right onward. - Second Sonnet to Cyriac Skinner – Milton
"River?" Riddick knew usually when the animal rose in his mate, though he'd freely admit this had taken him a bit by surprise. That his core-raised, oh so civilized little woman had gone into heat at the sight of blood sprayed across his skin had been a pleasant revelation that couldn't be denied. When she'd said she got hot watching him fight and kill he'd thought River meant she just appreciated his skills. He really hadn't thought she meant that she found it physically arousing. But even with the stink of the mud in his nose he'd been able to smell the sudden swell of honey bursting through her scent when he'd found the sweet spot on Hessian.

Before he'd been able to blink his arms had been full of his woman and she'd been adamant that there'd be no waiting. Her animal had risen and her words had the husky growling undertone he associated with it when she'd demanded to ride him. And when he hadn't gotten the idea quick enough she'd used her legs to take his out from under him. Not that he'd objected, and now he had a better idea of what it was like for her when his animal took over. She'd been desperate and a little innocent still because she hadn't known exactly how to achieve what she wanted and the look of erotic shock on her face when she'd taken him was one he'd treasure for the rest of his life.

But once she got going, she'd ridden him hard, given him the ride of his life until he was sitting up and sucking on her pretty breasts, biting down over her ribcage when an orgasm had arched her back. He'd felt her teeth close on the skin near the base of his neck, felt when the skin had parted and that had been enough to unleash his animal.

Memory was a funny thing, he never forgot anything, no pain or pleasure was gone from his brain once experienced, but viewing and feeling with the animal at the forefront was always strange at first. The man wanted to fight for a control it had already lost while the animal reveled in the freedom it had taken. He'd lost track of how many times River had fallen around his body, felt an orgasm shake his flesh more than once and still hadn't been able to stop. When he did fall, finally and completely, it had been like seeing God, ecstasy filling every vein, staring up at River as she nearly screamed out her pleasure, feeling as if an earthquake had struck them both it felt that profound.

And now his mate, his mei nǚ, was tenderly licking the bite she'd given him, her eyes wide and starry with her night vision, bright silver staring back at him. She wasn't paying attention to her name, didn't give any sign that she even understood him. "River," He tried again, the animal stretching through him, "Mate? Nǚ ren, you feel all right?"

"Riddick worries he has hurt his woman," River's voice still had that growling undertone, a gorgeous husky sound that roused the animal's interest. "Foolish male, couldn't hurt his mate if he tried." She pressed kisses to his neck and scalp. "She wants him again, wants him to take her like wolves out in the air, his diāo pushing into her."

He could feel his body quickening again in spite of his concern, "Want that." He agreed. "But we ain't got a lotta time 'til dawn."

"The leaf man will worry," River's animal appeared to be considering and she shook her head. "But not yet. Her mate will have her as she wishes or he will regret it." She snapped her teeth hard near his ear before the tip of her tongue laved the curve of it seductively. "He wishes this too…" She coaxed him, "Let his animal out to play with her. She needs. Needs open air. Needs her mate. Blood and body and seed."
Part of him was impressed that River's animal was so verbal, his wasn't over much. And another part was roaring awake at the challenge implicit in her tone and words. "No River," He began to argue when she undulated against him and his body, already quickening, came to full, abrupt and painfully hard life.

"Yes," She growled at him and snapped her teeth around his ear, a sharp nip to remind him that she got what she wanted eventually or right away, but she would win. Riddick growled, he was fast coming to believe that River's animal was smarter than his. Or else the two beasts were in collusion. "Yes," She nodded again, before she lifted her body off his and shifted back, her hands sliding down the open seam of her trousers and spreading her yīn chún for him to see her hot wet slit and blood flushed yīn dì before she slid her fingers over it. As he watched River's little fingers plucked and stroked her clit, lying on the ground in front of him she writhed under her own touch until the animal couldn't stand it and the man was no longer inclined to argue.

"Stop that now," Riddick growled back at her and smacked her hand away lightly before he buried his lips between her thighs and set his teeth into her clit gently tugging on it. Her gasping moan of pleasure sent every bit of blood left in his brain to his cock and he dragged her up onto her knees before turning her around and putting her on all fours. "You wanted it liàn rén," He growled into her ear and rubbed the tip of his cock over her táo huā yuán, feeling her moan and try to push back on him. "Now you're gonna tā mā de take it xiǎo lǎng."

He would have made her wait, would have teased her but the animal was more in control than the man and drove deep inside her without a pause. One long deep stroke and he was buried in her, balls deep and groaning over how River felt. She was hot, so hot against his flesh, so wet and smooth and from this angle extremely tight despite how hard he'd just fucked her. She wailed as he drove into her and Riddick stilled but he couldn't smell anything but honey and blood, steel and silk and the plums he'd always thought were just part of her until he knew what love smelt like on her skin. Plums and honey were his favorite now, two things he'd never take for granted on his woman, even as his mind automatically cataloged other scents to gauge her mood and forgot to even name her love.

"More, more, more," River moaned and tried to push back onto him only to be stymied by his hard grip. Her growl ripped through the air as she tried to rear up and take what she wanted, and Riddick held her tight before he plowed into her again.

"Mine," He growled into her ear. "My mate," He pulled out and pounded into her again loving how her body quivered and clung to his. Withdraw and snap forward again and she shuddered and wailed her need and he found the nape of her neck above her shirt. He suddenly hated the cloth that kept her white skin from his eyes and pulled on it with his teeth until it began to rip. Half of her spine was exposed finally and he set his teeth over her that slender curve, loving the skin between her shoulder blades. She was moaning, struggling, her body in his grip growing more desperate until he smelt cinnamon along with the honey.

"Touch," She finally moaned her need. "Touch her," And the animal couldn't tease anymore, let one hand move from her hip to snake around her body and plunge between her thighs, stroking and tugging on her yīn dì until she was meeting every thrust and the scent of honey surrounded him. Her fall swept over her and he cursed as her body tightened around his, began to fuck her in earnest, hard strokes that pushed deep inside her body, rubbing against his River sweet spot and farther.

The animal had left the man to simply watch and appreciate as it took River again and again to the precipice of pleasure and shoved her over. No finesse, no delicacy just his fingers pulling on her clit, his mouth biting down hard between her shoulder blades and his cock plowing her without mercy until she was screaming in her ecstasy and only her flesh between his teeth kept his roar of pleasure from waking any sleepers within hearing distance as his orgasm tore through him.
She collapsed, he ended up sprawled on top of her, still sheathed inside her body before he recovered enough to roll over and take her with him. "C'mon tiān shǐ," He noticed the animal had given the man back his voice once it got what it wanted and wondered if River would be the same or if he'd been talking to the animal the rest of the night.

"Her mate is pleased," The growling undertone was still in River's voice so he just nuzzled her and took it upon himself to put both of their clothing back in order as she spoke to him. "Her mate, her man, likes her animal, doesn't worry?"

"What? 'Bout never gettin' to talk to my woman again?" Riddick glanced at her as he tied the scraps of her shirt together in front hiding her breasts. At a glance no one would notice her trousers had been slit down the middle so they'd do to get back to the ship. Tucking the back of her tee-shirt under the weapon harness to keep it in place he thought about that when she nodded. "Guess not, after all, you ain't worried 'bout the animal takin' over the man. Love River, my mate, don't matter which part I see. Still you right?"

She nodded, that quicksilver gaze wise as she stared at him before a slender finger found a smear of blood and wiped it off his skin. Her fingers slipped into his mouth for him to taste before she sucked the blood off her own fingers, "She loves the blood. Revels in her mate's abilities, delights that he is a warrior, is her wolf."

Riddick looked down at her as the growling tone faded a bit though not completely, "If this is what happens when you watch me kill xiǎo láng I might have to get violent more often."

"It has always happened," She told him solemnly. "From the first, when he killed the man who would have raped her. Knew she had found her mate. The girl was afraid, remembered the pain too well, but she knew. Always knew the Riddick was her mate."

"Yeah?" Riddick zipped up his pants and ignored his ripped shirt in favor of making sure all his favorite bits of River were covered. "You feel like tellin' me 'bout that some more while we sneak back to the boat?"

"Hm… she wants the Riddick's hands on her more, warm water and his hands," River's animal was still in charge, mostly anyway. He grinned and made sure that the pack with their clothes was still on his back, which amazingly enough it still was. Picking up the shiv he'd dropped in the dirt after slicing up River's pants he sheathed it and scooped her up.

"C'mon then," He smelt fresh blood on her and knew he'd have to make sure her bitemarks were clean before they put healing salve on them. "We'll see if the two of us can squeeze in that shower while we're still on the ground. Be plenty a water."

"Hmm…loves him," Her voice was dreamy, the growl fading out of it as weariness drew River's animal back down inside her. "You didn't mind?"

"What? Your animal takin' over an' takin' what she wanted," Riddick chuckled. "I keep tellin' you River, you're my woman and my woman takes what she wants. Guess your animal got the message before the woman did."

Her giggle was sweet even as she flicked on the earwig, "Wash, we're on our way back. ETA two minutes."

He could hear Wash's voice, "Takin' the scenic route are we?"

"Had a couple of stops to make," River admitted. "Anyone notice?"
"Nope," Wash's cheerful voice reassured her. "Mal and Zoe are still asleep. But Kaylee and Simon never made it back to the boat."

"Simon is trying to romance Kaylee," River told the pilot with a smile.

"Huh," Wash didn't sound like he had a lot of faith in Simon's probable success and Riddick chuckled. "Well to each their own."

"Coming up on Serenity now," River murmured tiredly. "Thank you Wash."

"Alarms are off, and airlock is…unlocked," Wash said after a moment's pause. "See you in a few."

"Shower first," River told the pilot via the earwig as she slipped inside the airlock and closed the door behind them.

"I hear Mal comin' up his ladder so you two had better hurry," Wash told her. "Alarms back on in five seconds. Over and out."

Riddick shut the second door and slid the latch down before carrying River to the head off of the passenger lounge. The pack was dropped inside the door and the shower turned on to heat up before he began to divest River of her ruined clothing. Searching out the pins in her hair and watching it tumble down in fat curls was another pleasure and he breathed in her scent as his sinuses slowly cleared of the smell of Canton. Shucking his own clothing was simple enough and though the shower was a tight fit it was worth it to run soapy hands over his mate and watch the woman come back fully into her eyes. Her blush made him laugh and he kissed her again assuring her he'd loved everything she'd done, including the biting.

Then of course he'd had to prove it to her and that had been a bit of fun. By the time they got out of the shower and he'd handed her the dress shirt from his suit to don dawn had come and gone. River shrugged as she buttoned the shirt up, "Work took us very close to dawn. Wash was beginning to worry."

"Work or the animals?" Riddick loved teasing her, her blush was so pretty.

"She was not the only animal playing in the dirt," River reminded him in spite of her blush.

"Yeah but I don't get embarrassed by it," He laughed at her before picking her up to kiss. "We'd better get upstairs and changed before Mal starts askin' questions."

River rolled her eyes at him and nodded, picking up her clothes and weapons. He'd just pulled his stained pants back on for the trip upstairs. It was only the outside of them that were dirty after all. Mal was in the galley getting coffee and raised an eyebrow when they walked in wearing very little clothing, "You two put somethin' on covers all the bits that ain't an' then come explain why you ain't asleep when you done yelled at me that you were bushed."

Riddick rolled his eyes and nodded before he followed River down to their bunk. It didn't take more than five minutes before they were dressed in fresh clothing and back out of the bunk, knives once more distributed about their bodies.

"Coffee my láng," River asked pressing a kiss to his exposed bicep before she went to the cupboard.

"Rather tea if you're makin' some for yourself Qīng Xiāng," Riddick admitted taking a seat and closing his eyes wearily. Opening them again he looked at Mal, "Your plan as it stood woulda gotten Jayne killed Mal."
"You cain't know that for certain," Mal objected. "Usin' Jayne's hero-y type status as a distraction is a new method but the plan is old as time."

"How many times you been shot with that plan?" Riddick retorted focusing his gaze on River as she made tea with graceful hands. How she contrived to make everything look so gorram graceful, like a dance was somethin' he'd never figure.

"Mal takes risks, considers them acceptable, doesn't know all the variables, probabilities of success goes down," River said from the counter pouring tea into two mugs and bringing them over for she and Riddick.

"Then it's your job to tell me all the variables little one," Mal told her in the voice that demanded captainy respect. "I don't do things to get my crew shot on purpose you know."

"Assumes others are as honorable as he," River made a face at the captain and Riddick smiled into his mug as she lectured. "He says 'I do a job, I get paid' but does not figure in that others are reluctant to give up their hard won coin. Would rather shoot than hand over cashy money. Forgets that others don't think like he does."

"Are you sayin' that's the case here?" Mal frowned, "This is just the pickup; the cashy money isn't even on this rock."

Riddick rolled his eyes, "You're bein' too literal Mal." He told his captain, "You sent Jayne out to be a distraction without even thinkin' on how the Magistrate would react. Compound for sins they are inclined to, by damning those they have no mind to."

"And how's he gonna react then?" Mal looked at the two of them as if expecting answers.

River rolled her eyes, "Asks questions and then won't entirely believe the answers. The dà chóng does not explain itself, it merely pounces and bites."

"Dà Chóng," Mal pounced on that like a cat himself, "You two been engaging in sabotage?"

Riddick allowed himself an evil smirk, "Well I'd tell ya Mal, but then I'd have to kill ya."

"Rick," Mal had that warning tone in his voice. The one that said the games were real cute an' all but he needed answers.

"Yeah," Riddick sighed, Mal's tone always put his back up but it was better to play nice, safer for everyone concerned. "So back when Jayne pulled this job he had a partner. When they was unloadin' everythin' from the shuttle tryin' to keep it in the air, the other man pulled a knife on Jayne, was gonna shiv him an' throw him out."

River nodded, "Jayne…does not trust easily. Does not put his back to anyone without solid proof of intent. This man…was not trusted entirely but just enough. When he pulled the knife he went out the hatch. Jayne thought he might have survived the fall. Magistrate would surely have found him."

"So Jayne's old partner would most likely not be pleased Jayne's back," Mal groaned. "Jiàn guǐ, we'd better figure out another distraction. Jayne really don't care for gettin' shot."

"Magistrate keeps his ear to the ground," Riddick added another piece of bad news. "By the time we're movin' the goods through town, chances are the guards woulda surrounded the tavern. We'd never get Jayne out 'thout a bloodbath. Lotta folks could get hurt."

Mal might be annoying about his plans but it could never be said the captain was stupid, "Xuē shàng
"jiā shuāng." He began and then paused, "What did you mean 'woulda'? You an' River do somethin' to make sure that weren't gonna happen?"

"You might could say," Riddick smirked at the captain. "Magistrate has a kid, ain't much like his daddy. He'd run this place decent River says."

"All right, I'm just gonna ask flat out nǐ zài jǐng shén me pì huà," The captain's dark eyes were staring at the two of them.

River sighed and Riddick looked at her, "You wanna tell him?" River shook her head and leaned against him and for a moment he just ignored Mal to take a deep breath of her scent. Some lingering honey, blood, the ever present scent of plums, silk and steel were fainter though and that pineapple of exhaustion was bleeding into her scent. "We're gonna hafta nap some after this Qing Xiāng, I don' like that pineapple smell." Mal was irked at being ignored; he could smell it, his irritation rising the longer Riddick didn't answer.

"Hmm…" River yawned and leaned some more and Riddick sighed.

"Long story short, we took out about five, six." He corrected himself as River held up a finger, "Guards and that foreman before we got Stitch out of his box, killed him and rolled him into the bog," Riddick shrugged slightly as he looked at Mal's shocked face. "Made it look like Stitch had escaped and killed the guards. An' River gave Higgins a heart attack so he's good an' dead. The kid'll likely just let us leave."

"Good boy, will run the moon better and will not care about Serenity or the escaping folk hero," River yawned again. "Busy evening. A few hours until it's time to move the goods. Sleep now my Riddick."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded his agreement and pulled her into his lap. "Any questions Mal?" He was vividly conscious of Mal's astonishment and more than slight unease over what they'd done.

"Uh, no, no go on an' get some rest," The captain waved them off towards the bunks. "I figure four hours'll be enough time for folks to be good and tipsy. I'll wake ya then."

Riddick stood with River in his arms and carried her back to the bunk, rousing her just enough to get her down the ladder and into bed. They didn't even bother to undress, sleep being more important though he did take a minute to pull off their boots before they stretched out on the bed.

River tried to erase her frown as they left the ship again, she and Riddick had taken care of most potential problems last night, and the only issue remaining was Jayne's reaction to the Mudder's worship. Given how he'd spoken with them the day before she doubted that he'd act like a complete idiot and take it as his due. She was more worried he'd offend them somehow and they'd lynch him.

"What're you worryin' on Qing Xiāng," Her mate's delicious voice rolled over her skin and she shivered in reaction before she answered.

"Jayne is the only unknown variable remaining," River explained. "Doubt that he will encourage worship, concerned he will go too far in trying to prevent it."

"Don't think you gotta worry none on that," Mal assured her sunnily as they strode towards the bar; all his worries seemingly faded away. "Jayne's got a strong sense of self preservation. He's still alive ain't he?"
River nodded and concentrated on the crowd most of whom were scurrying around trying to get a
glimpse in the bar before their shift. There were fewer guards thanks to she and Riddick and the
foreman was conspicuously absent but the Mudders were still going about their business.

The bar was extremely crowded, Jayne was at the bar sipping at a mug but not nearly as intoxicated
as his audience, he was talking with a Mudder, an earnest looking young man maybe about Simon's
age, "So, the magistrate, he let you folks keep all that cash?"

The Mudder nodded, "He did. And it pained him, that's for dead sure. When he found out, he sent
his prods in to take it back from us, but the workers resisted."

"Fought the law, huh," Jayne seemed a both disturbed and pleased by that.

If the Mudders are together on a thing, there's too many of us to be put down," The young Mudder
explained. "So in the end, he just called it a bonus."

Jayne's laugh was rueful, "That's one hell of a bonus."

The Mudder nodded enthusiastically, "And then, when we put that statue of you in town square, he
rolled in, wanted to tear it down. But the whole town rioted."

River smiled when Jayne appeared genuinely touched, "You guys had a riot? On account of me? A
real riot?"

The Mudder man smiled, "I can't believe you're back."

Jayne's blue eyes darkened, "How many folks got hurt, when ya'll rioted? Nobody got killed did they?"

"Nah," The Mudder assured him. "Few folks got rattled an' one fella he got his arm broke but he got
fixed up good. Higgins' kid, Fess, he came by and checked on alla us folks, got the fella's arm bound
up an' put him on store duty for a good two months 'til he healed up." He grinned, "More of us was
wishin' we'd got hurt once't we saw that."

Jayne chuckled a bit and shook his head, "Glad to hear that. Wouldn't want none a ya'll hurt on
account a me. Riot's real flatterin' though."

"I just can't believe…you're here, you're back," The Mudder told him his eyes bright with hero
worship.

As River watched Jayne's eyes darkened again and he shook his head with a sigh, "Ya know I cain't
stay. I'm lucky my cap'n he let me off work this long. An' if I stay sure's my eyes are blue the
guards'll be gunnin' for me an' anyone with me."

There were some annoyed mutterings at that and River slid up to Jayne silently. Standing at his
elbow she had a good view of Riddick and Mal approaching Kaylee and Simon, both of them asleep
on a bench in the back of the bar.

Riddick folded his arms and gave a very good big brother glare down at the two of them while Mal
poked Kaylee's foot, "Hey, Captain." Kaylee's voice was very sleepy until she woke up a bit more.
Sitting up she dislodged Simon's head from her shoulder, her voice much more awake, "Captain!"

Riddick leaned down and spoke almost in Simon's ear, mischief in his mind, "Awake, arise, or be
forever fallen."
Simon woke up with a jerk to see Riddick and Mal standing over them, Riddick with a very displeased expression and Mal trying manfully to not laugh in the face of the doctor's obvious panic, "Hey...Mal, uh, Rick... No, nuh-nuh-nothing happened. No, there was, uh, there was some drinking, but, uh, we, no we certainly didn't. No, I would never! Not with Kaylee..."

River rolled her eyes as Kaylee took exception to that, "What do you mean, not with me?"

"Yeah, uh-huh. Where's my hero?" Mal wanted to know. Apparently he had not seen Jayne surrounded by people at the bar. River watched as Riddick nudged Mal and gestured over to Jayne.

River tapped Jayne on the arm as he was trying to explain that much as he liked all of them he couldn't stay.

"Why not?" One of the Mudder women had apparently been lusting after Jayne all night from what River could tell of her thoughts. "There's plenty you could do."

"Well I," Jayne was trying to explain that he had work of his own when Mal came over.

"Jayne, you got another coupla hours with these fine folks an' then I'm sendin' Rick back for ya. If you're lucky he won't bring his little nû ren to get you in line." He warned his merc.

River grinned up at Jayne, "Please do not let my gê ge drink anymore." She put her hand on his arm. "Perhaps any folk who need doctoring could come to see him? No medicine but treatments could be prescribed."

Jayne nodded and beckoned Simon over as Kaylee stalked out of the bar after Mal and Riddick leaving the doctor staring at her helplessly, "What'd I do?" Simon asked in a depressed voice. "All I said was that I wouldn't…"

Jayne rolled his eyes, "An' she took that to mean that you didn't fancy her." He explained roughly and told the barkeep to get Simon some water or something that didn't have alcohol in it.

"Simon, don't think on it too much," River told her brother kindly. "Hungover is not when you do your best deliberation."

Simon groaned his agreement to that sentiment and Jayne patted him roughly on the back, "Go on mèi mei Rick's gonna need someone to watch his back."

River nodded and left Simon in Jayne's more than capable hands.

Zoe and Wash had ridden the mule down through town and with all the fuss about Jayne no one noticed the crew walking along with it. River looked at Riddick and sighed slightly as they came to the sparse stand of trees. Zoe was frowning at Mal, "Do you really think we can get the stuff cross town without being noticed?"

"Got to find it first," Mal frowned back and looked around a bit more before finding the spot, "Here we go." River looked around to be sure there were no eyes on them listening with more than her ears before giving Mal the nod and watched as Riddick did the same, "Let's get it dug up."

River wasn't required to dig, she and Kaylee stood watch while the menfolk and Zoe used shovels and in Riddick's case cursing and a shovel to move all the dirt off the goods. It was a good hour before they'd gotten the cargo loaded onto the mule and another half hour before it was back on
Serenity. Mal looked at Zoe, "Zoe, pack down the cargo. Wash, you heat up Serenity. We're blowing this mess inside half an hour."

Wash nodded and mounted the steps, "Already there."

Mal looked at his three remaining crew, well two and a half, River thought to herself with a smile, since she was still probationary crew. "Well we can't just leave 'em here," He shrugged, "Let's go get our wayward babes."

River tilted her head, "Smells like trouble." She looked at Riddick, "Too bad we can't bring guns."

"Got enough knives to do the job," Riddick gave her a wicked grin and River smiled back.

"Ya'll sure you want me along?" Kaylee asked worriedly looking out the airlock as though an invasion was due any moment.

"Yeah, sometimes a pretty girl is a good distraction," Mal nodded and with that they all trooped at a fairly fast pace back towards the bar.

The mood swelling up from the grimy building wasn't a friendly one. River winced slightly as the mob of minds hit hers, hostility and disappointment like fumes of onion and manure to her senses. They entered the bar to see Jayne standing with Simon in front of a crowd of Mudders, "Look, now I didn't mean to drop alla that money on ya. That were an accident, 'cause it were money I coulda used." He was saying flatly, "Since I couldn't keep it I'm glad as hell ya'll got it but I ain't no hero. I been sayin' that for half a day now an' you ain't gettin' it."

"But you—" A voice tried to argue angrily and Jayne was having none of it.

"But nothin'," Jayne snapped. "I ain't never claimed to be some kinda hero. I'm a merc an' a mean one. I got folks waitin' on me an' I'm leavin'. I been sayin' all along that I can't stay." He gestured at Simon who was looking somewhat the worse for wear and River's eyes narrowed on Jayne's bruised and bloody knuckles. "An' you beatin' on me an' my friend ain't gonna change that."

"I'm thinkin' you're gonna change your mind," A Mudder bigger than the rest stepped forward and let his fist fly toward's Jayne's jaw. Quick as a hiccup the merc's arm blocked it while his right fist plowed into the man's belly. Another man attempted the same trick on Simon who was more ready than he appeared though he did take a fist to the ribs before he aimed his own knuckles at the man's jaw.

"Enough!" River hadn't heard Mal so furious since she'd first been woken up from cryo. She and Riddick moved to flank him, her mate shorter than the captain but twice as intimidating. She didn't measure up to either of them in stature or muscle but the long blades she held in her hands were impressive enough to be menacing. "Jayne, you an' the doc are done here."

"He's ours an' you ain't takin' him," Someone from the middle of the crowd argued.

Riddick growled low and mean and River let a feral smile curve her lips, "Like to see you stop us." She snarled and stepped forward with her mate. "My brothers. Only lent to the Mudders for half a day. Gave you more than you deserved. Who thinks too little, and who talks too much."

"He done owes us," Someone else had a demanding and distinctly whiny tone and Riddick growled in that direction, his voice sounding more and more like a wolf in a man's body.

"My brothers owe you nothin'," Riddick's voice was low and mean and filled with imminent violence. "Now if you wanna see how well your blood mixes with mud then you just try to come at
us. Me an' my woman got no qualms 'bout killin'. Jayne's got a woman of his own indentured somewhere and he owes her. Not you bunch a fools call themselves men and turn on a man ain't ever wronged ya."

Someone attempted to take issue with that and shoved Simon, predictably enough Simon shoved back. Jayne was dealing with an interloper of his own and the brawl that erupted was more organic than organized. River exchanged a glance with Riddick and they wordlessly sheathed their knives. River just had time enough to tell Mal to keep Kaylee out before she and Riddick were drawn into the fight.

Working their way over to Simon and Jayne wasn't too difficult, though River found herself constantly grabbed and hardening her mind against the thoughts that drove like spears into her psyche given half a moment's lapse in her guard. Anybody who thought she was a helpless little thing was soundly disabused of that notion and she was more and more appreciative of how much instantaneous damage a fist to the throat would do. Her brother and Jayne weren't doing badly but Simon was looking very beat up because everyone seemed to think he'd be an easy target.

Jayne was looking a bit worse for the wear and muttering angrily about ever coming back to this god forsaken lè sè moon. River grinned at him, "He that complies against his will is of his own opinion still." She kicked a particularly grimy Mudder in the balls and grabbed Simon dragging him down to duck a wild swing while Riddick began to hustle Jayne out.

Fighting their way to the door was time consuming and more than once she and Simon had to let go of each other to fend off interlopers but eventually they made it. Mal was guarding the exit and keeping too many people from leaving and alerting the other Mudders that their hero was taking off without them. "We near done here," The captain asked as if it was simply a matter of curiosity.

"Yeah Mal," Jayne's weighty fist hit someone's jaw hard enough to crack bone.

"Simon, get out the door," Riddick commanded mildly and River gave her big brother a push towards daylight. One by one the rest of them followed until she and Riddick were last, neither willing to go without the other. Standing back to back they took on anyone who approached until Mal grabbed their collars and jerked them backwards and out of the bar.

"What were you two gonna do? Go down swingin' until there weren't no one left to fight?" Mal demanded to know as he slammed the door shut and dropped a bar down across it. River took a moment to consider why the door to a tavern would need to be barred from the outside and then decided she didn't need to know.

"He which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart. His passport shall be made, and crowns for convoy put into his purse. We would not die in that man's company that fears his fellowship to die with us," River shrugged and leaned against Riddick craving the clarity of his mind.

"This ain't St. Crispian's day River," Mal remonstrated and River grinned her appreciation that her captain had recognized the quote.

"Eh," Riddick had wrapped his arm around her shoulders, "The fewer men, the greater share of honor."

"You ain't Henry," Mal argued and took a look at his senior gunhand and his medic. "And this can wait. Everybody get back to the boat. Inara's appointment should be just about done and we should get goin'."

River nodded, "Shuttle docks soon." She nodded towards the sky and everyone heard the faint thrum
of Inara's shuttle engine.

The captain nodded and hustled everyone onto Serenity just as Inara's shuttle settled into its cradle and slid into the side of the ship. Mal hit the controls for the airlock and simultaneously switched the comm open, "Wash we're on, let's go."

"No sooner said than done," Wash's jovial voice came back over the comms. "Zoe's wavin' Bernoulli to let him know we're on our way."

"Good," Mal nodded and looked at his crew. "You all get yourselves to the infirmary and cleaned up," He commanded, "Kaylee, you give 'em a hand. You're the healthiest outa all of us at the moment."

River began to walk slowly towards the infirmary only to have her mate scoop her up, "Relax and anchor yourself in me, xiăo láng." He murmured, "Just need some salves for the bruises and to relax a bit."

River nodded and let Riddick set her down on the side shelf of the infirmary, "Jayne needs help more than she does. Knuckles require cleansing." She was aware of Book coming to stand in the doorway, watching the three of them and coming in to pull down first aid supplies for them. The shadow man was quietly competent as he did what he could and left them to their business.

Kaylee had not led Simon into the infirmary but down to his room. That didn't stop Riddick or River from hearing the conversation the mechanic was having with the doctor but it did give them the illusion of privacy. The pretty mechanic was trying to lecture Simon about fighting, "You got to be steely. You can't be letting men stomp on you so much."

Simon sounded slightly defensive, "I didn't get stomped on. Jayne and Rick have been teaching me something. Besides, it wasn't exactly a plan..."

She didn't sound terribly impressed, "You ain't weak. You couldn't beat them back? Or 'you would never'?"

River concentrated on Jayne's knuckles as she listened to her brother sigh, "You're never letting go of that, are you?"

Kaylee sounded a little upset but mostly confused and River could understand why, but Riddick hadn't told Simon that he'd earned forgiveness so really Simon was a little stuck. "Well, you confound me some, is all. I mean, you like me well enough, and we get along...and then you go all stiff."

River wrapped a bandage around Jayne's hand and tugged Riddick in front of her to examine his knuckles. She could practically feel Simon stiffening up from where she sat. Her brother nearly stuttered, "I'm, I'm not, um, I didn't..."

Kaylee wasn't stupid; River began to clean the gouges on Richard's beautiful hands as the mechanic confronted her brother, "See! You're doing it right now! What's so damn important about being proper? It don't mean nothing out here in the black."

River smiled, every now and then her brother would get something right, "It means more out here. It's all I have. I mean... My way of being polite, or however it's...well, it's the only way I have of showing you that I like you. I'm showing respect." River dapped antiseptic on Riddick's knuckles and kissed his fingers as Simon continued speaking, "Kaylee, I haven't been given permission to be informal with you yet. I haven't earned forgiveness. If I had been...in any way improper it would
have been extremely insulting to you."

River caught her mate around the waist with her legs and held him in front of her as he heard Kaylee's reply, "So, when we made love last night..."

Simon's voice was a near squawk, "When we what?" River shook her head at Riddick and grinned as she saw his wicked smirk.

Kaylee's laugh was bubbling through her voice, "You really are such an easy mark."

Riddick's low evil chuckle hit River like a fist to the belly and she smeared his knuckles with salve before she wrapped the gauze around them. Then it was his turn to doctor her, big hands gentle on every cut and bruise and his lips brushing over her hands before he bandaged them. 'Sooner or later she's gonna corner him an' he's not gonna have an out,' His dark voice murmured as he examined the livid bruise forming on her cheek.

"He won't do anything the least bit improper until he's earned forgiveness," River reminded her mate. "He loves her but he won't do anything that is disrespectful towards her. He thinks too highly of Kaylee for that."

"Yeah," Riddick sighed and drew her closer, pulling her into his arms and carrying her out of the infirmary. Book was taking a look at Jayne and shaking his head over the bigger man's intention of working out in order to wake up, "Hey Cobh, its time to get some shut eye." The murderer reminded his friend, "We both been up all night, Mal ain't gonna have us start on chores or nothin' right away."

River nodded, "Very busy day." Riddick's hands were soothing on her back and under her legs. She'd wrapped herself around him like a clinging vine, not that her mate seemed to mind that at all. He'd teased her once that if it meant she was touching him he'd carry her around all gorram day. His powerful body barely noticed the slender weight of hers as something to carry.

Book was speaking with Jayne reassuring him regarding the crates and messy cargo bay, "I can get it straightened out enough Jayne. Get some rest and we'll put everything in its proper place later." River smiled to herself, the shepherd had missed a lot of the excitement but that was probably of the good. His heart wasn't a strong as it could be yet.

Zoe met them in the galley as they came up the steps, "Hear you two took a little anti-ambush action last night." The first mate's voice was mild but River could hear in her thoughts that this was one step closer to mutiny, taking unilateral action.

"Cap'n hadn't realized just how pissed of Jayne's old partner was or how vindictive Higgins woulda been," Riddick shrugged. His reading of Zoe's scent must have told him the same thing River had. Read from the woman's mind because he continued, "Ain't like I don't know Mal's in charge of the ship Zoe. An' if I'd been thinkin' a anything 'sides makin' sure the job went smooth an' keepin' my brother from getting pinched an' killed I'd a run this past you. But Mal chose to send Jayne out to be a diversion. He's just thinkin' a the job. He does that an' it's my job to protect my family."

River tilted her head sideways, removing her lips from Richard's collarbone to look at Zoe, "Did not disobey orders. No mutiny. Independent action. No expectation of pay."

Zoe frowned, "You two keep dividin' this crew down family lines we're gonna have trouble sooner than later." She wasn't thrilled though River could tell she understood where they were coming from.

"Mal don't think a us as family," Riddick reminded her. His voice was a little flat, "You, Wash, Kaylee, an' Book even I think. But to the captain we're just crew, us mercs an' Simon. He don't turn
us over but he don't consider us family."

"And you consider Jayne family," Zoe nodded her understanding.

"Jayne an' Kaylee, both of 'em saved my life," Riddick said very seriously. River's hands stroked the back of his neck, "Simon is River's brother, that makes 'im mine, plus he busted us out." He tilted his head towards the bridge, "There ain't a lot I wouldn't do for Wash, and by extension for you, because of him. Man's the most accepting soul on the boat 'sides my brother and sister. Always treated River good."

"So its really just Mal an' me you have trouble with," Zoe was frowning, River could tell and she unwound her legs from Riddick's waist so she could turn and look at the first mate.

"No problems," River shook her head. "Just...aware of the differences." She frowned trying to explain, "Zoe worries we'll bring trouble, has difficulties with trust except for two people."

Riddick nodded his agreement, "Wash an' the Cap'n, they're your world. That's as it should be. You care for the rest of us but we're...not central."

River smiled slightly, "We only react to how others treat us."

Her mate stroked a hand down her hair, teasing the end of the braid with his fingers, "A man is but the product of his thoughts what he thinks, he becomes." Riddick looked at Zoe seriously, "You take your cue from Wash more than the cap'n, but Mal, he..." He looked down at River who continued what he wanted to say.

"Cap'n would have put us off on Persephone again but we are useful," She said quietly. "He will always find a place for what is of use. But we are not his family. We are not trusted like family. We're just crew to him." She saw that they'd given Zoe something to think about and smiled slightly before tugging Riddick away. She could hear Jayne coming up the steps, "Compare how Mal treats Jayne to how Mal treats us and then compare both to how he treats Wash or Kaylee or you." She said quietly. "You will see what we mean."

Riddick had enough of conversation at that point, "Takin' River to bed. Jayne an' Simon are headed that way too. We'll get on our chores an' such after we wake up. Just need a few more hours."

Jayne nodded his agreement as he entered the galley, "There was a terrible brawl." One big hand patted Riddick's shoulder as he passed, "She needs a cold compress on that cheek." He observed and moved towards cold storage pulled out a cold pack before wrapping a towel around it. "Here," Jayne handed it to River, "I keep 'em up here 'cause if I sleep with one on a bad bruise it'll fade out pretty good."

"My thanks," River smiled and held the pack to her cheek. Jayne grinned at her and winced fingerling his jaw before making up a pack of his own. "Matching sets," She giggled. "Good night gē gē."

"G'night," The big merc smiled and continued on to his own bunk. River leaned against Riddick and felt his weary amusement but he picked her up again and followed Jayne down the hall to their own bunk.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: And we've come to the end of Jaynestown. I hope you all liked it. I changed the end mostly because without Stitch there wouldn't be any shooting. But I figured that any mob so set on having a merc as their hero would turn ugly if that hero said 'so long' without doing anything else to help them. The mudders never struck me as having an overabundance of brains either. But then no mob has much of a thought process.

I never thought Mal would be happy with anyone taking action that he hadn't approved, but unless an idea was coming from Zoe or himself, he wasn't exactly welcoming of input. The way he decided to use Jayne's 'fame' was extremely representative of how he'd put people to use as he saw fit. It worked for him when he was a sergeant but he's not at war anymore and River and Riddick have had plenty of time to observe his interactions with the crew.

Curious as to how you folks liked River's animal and what it told Riddick. Our monkey hind brains tend to be a lot more direct about things than our conscious thoughts.

Chinese Translations:

měi nǚ - beautiful woman
Nǚ ren - Wife
diǎo - cock
yīn chún - labia
yīn dì - clitoris
liàn rén - lover/sweetheart
táo huā yuán - vagina - lit. garden of peach blossoms
tā mā de - fucking
xiǎo láng - little wolf
tiān shǐ - angel
láng - wolf
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
dà chóng - tiger
Jiàn guǐ - Curse it!/To hell with it!
Xuě shàng jiā shuāng - to add hail to snow (idiom); one disaster on top of another / to make things worse in a bad situation
nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pì huà - what shit/the fuck are you saying
gē ge - big brother
mèi mei - little sister
lè sè - garbage/trash

Quote Sources:

Compound for sins they are inclined to, by damning those they have no mind to. - Hudibras - Samuel Butler

Awake, arise, or be forever fallen. - Paradise Lost - Milton

Who thinks too little, and who talks too much. - Absalom and Achitophet - Dryden

He that complies against his will is of his own opinion still. - Hudibras – Samuel Butler

He which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart. His passport shall be made, and crowns for convoy put into his purse. We would not die in that man's company that fears his fellowship to die with us, - Henry V – William Shakespeare

The fewer men, the greater share of honor. - Henry V – William Shakespeare

A man is but the product of his thoughts what he thinks, he becomes. - Mahatma Gandhi
He could hear Wash and Zoe talking on the bridge, which meant that River, Reading him, also heard the conversation. Wash admitted to Zoe that he'd helped the deadly duo as the pilot had privately (or not so much) dubbed River and Riddick sneak out off Serenity.

"Why would you do that baby?" Zoe sounded confused and exasperated.

"Well seein' as Rick showed me the courtesy of not just knocking me out, I thought it was only fair to repay the kindness," Wash chuckled a bit. Riddick really had to commend the man on his sense of humor. There weren't many who would find his potential for being rendered unconscious amusing but Wash managed.

"Mal didn't know that they'd snuck out until they came back in," The first mate was still troubled. "He was more'n a little irritated about it."

"River an' Rick went to more than a little trouble to keep Jayne out of sight lamby toes," Wash reminded his wife. "And Mal decided that Jayne would be a great diversion."

"Well he was a great diversion," Zoe made the practical point. Riddick couldn't blame her, it had worked but Mal hadn't even considered another way.

"Yeah but Mal didn't even think of the consequences to Jayne, or Simon and Kaylee who were also in that bar," Wash sounded as if he was surprised Zoe wasn't getting it. "Zoe, if we were in the same situation and Mal suggested I be the diversion Jayne was, what would your reaction be?"

"Mal didn't say use River as a diversion," The first mate was thinking though and Wash pressed his point.

"No, but he didn't bother to look around for any other way than to use Jayne," The pilot sounded a bit disturbed. "Rick considers Jayne to be just as much of a brother as Simon. So what should he have done? Argued and put Mal's back up even more? Mal would have ordered the two of them to stay on the boat."

"Do you know what they did?" Zoe asked her husband, "Wash did you have any idea what they were going to do?"

"I did not know the details no," The pilot admitted. "I didn't ask. It's called plausible deniability."

"That works for politicians baby, not pilots," The first mate had a dry note to her voice. "I checked the cortex after we left. Higgins died of a heart attack but apparently at least six guards, seven if you count the foreman, were killed when a prisoner escaped. No one has found the prisoner yet."

"Well I can speculate on how the magistrate died of a heart attack," Wash sounded amused. "River had her hair and face really dolled up. Looked as fancy as Inara."

"You think she scared him to death?" Zoe had a laugh in her voice.

"Nope," Wash sounded as if he was stretching. "No I'd be willing to bet that in the pack Rick was carrying River had a slinky dress of her own. Wouldn't be too hard to pose as a Companion and
"poison someone."

"You really think a girl with River's history could manage that?" The first mate seemed doubtful.

"If Rick is with her I'd be willing to bet River could tolerate a man just long enough to dose him with something that would cause a heart attack," Wash speculated. "That woman is as strong as you are in her way Zoe."

"I'm still not easy with what they did," Zoe sounded as if she was unbearably tired.

"Lamby toes, they're trying to protect their family," Wash reminded her. "Rick and River, they're close to Jayne. And Mal didn't even try to think of another way to get the goods across town. If he'd gotten all of us together, we coulda snuck out with River, Jayne and Rick taking point. We could have gotten the goods in the dark and back through town. It would have taken longer but it could have been done."

"Without gettin' pinched?" The first mate's voice was incredulous and then eased, "Well with those three, it's possible. But it would have been tricky."

"If it was you or me or Kaylee who was wanted, Mal woulda done it the tricky way," The pilot muttered.

"You think they're right. Mal treats 'em different," Zoe's voice wasn't accusing but it was coolly factual.

Wash's voice was tired, "I know Mal doesn't trust easy. He's never trusted Jayne because of how he came on the boat. But Jayne's got problems of his own, his own reasons for keeping to himself."

"Like what?" His wife wanted to know.

"Jayne has a sweetheart," Wash's voice was quieter. "They took her for an indenture when Jayne was thirteen. Apparently he joined up right after and he's been searching for her ever since. Rick and River have been helping him look."

"Jayne has a childhood sweetheart?" Zoe's voice held a lot of shock. "The way he goes to whorehouses I would never have guessed."

"River mentioned something about that," The pilot sighed. "Apparently he'll scratch an itch now and then but mostly he pays the girls to keep an eye out for his girl. That's why he's so gorram popular. River kinda laughed, said Jayne was accounted to be pretty good in bed but mostly he just drinks and keeps his ears open."

"Shǐniào," His wife said succinctly. "And Mal's been treating him like..."

"Like he's a gǒushǐ duī," Wash agreed. "So the man Mal makes it plain he don't trust, and doesn't treat nearly as well as the rest of us, is someone who saved Riddick's life. Has, along with Riddick, been teaching Simon hand to hand and guns. And was a member of the Dà Chóngs."

"And to Riddick he's family," Zoe finished. "River calls him big brother same as she does Simon."

"We're not even gettin' to how Mal treats River, Rick an' Simon," Wash had a sigh in his voice. "This could go really bad lamby toes."

"Cap'n trusts 'em as crew, he's made that plain I think," Zoe sounded a little perturbed but she didn't really have much of an argument in her voice. "But if it had been Jayne that'd gotten shot when they
first came aboard 'stead a Kaylee, I think Mal'd have been a lot more welcoming."

"That seem a little hypocritical to you?" The pilot didn't sound happy, "Seein' as Jayne's been shot more than once while workin' on this boat?"

"More than a little," Zoe was obviously making some comparisons in her mind. "I gotta say, since we got those three aboard, things have been both easier and more complex. But none of 'em have ever knowin'ly brought any danger down on us. I just don't like the whole doin' somethin' without orders."

"I know it makes you twitchy, but I can tell you that those two wouldn't have done it if Mal had ordered them not to. Rick's got respect for chain of command," Wash told her quietly. "But he don't obey blindly. Apparently he never did, not even when he was part of the chain of command."

"Whadda ya mean?" Zoe was getting tired, her words were slurring together a bit.

"You didn't catch that?" Her husband sounded a bit surprised. "The way Jayne defers to Rick, I'd be willing to bet that our Richard B. Riddick was at least a sergeant."

"Đà Chóngs never wore ranks, least that was the rumor," Zoe mused. "But I did get that Jayne looks to Rick for his cues just as much as he does Mal or me."

"Jayne knows who he can count on to watch his back," The pilot had a shrug in his voice. "He knows the chain of command but he also knows who values him more. And it isn't you or Mal."

"Yeah," His wife sighed. "I gotta say, I don't see Jayne quite the same as Mal does. Man's been loyal for goin' on two years now? He ain't turned on Mal once't. Mal just gets somethin' in his head and he don't budge."

"I noticed," Wash's voice was dry. "C'mon, I got autopilot set to alert us if something goes wrong. Let's get some shut eye so we're fresh for the meet."

"Husband you read my mind," Zoe chuckled.

Riddick turned the conversation over in his mind thoughtfully, considering all the angles and looked down at River, awake and doing the same in his arms. "So I guess we just need to win Mal over a bit more," He mused.

"Needs more time," River said softly. "We will consider it more after some rest. Sleep now my love."

"Yeah," Riddick pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head before he let his eyes slide closed. River's body relaxed against his and he felt the tension drain out of him.

When he got to the bridge the next morning Wash was sitting there, "You look a little worse for the wear Rick."

Riddick rolled his eyes, grateful Wash kept the lights dim so he didn't have to wear his goggles, "Been a bit since I've been in a bar brawl. Not since Santo. Fightin' with River an' Jayne ain't like takin' on all comers. Good exercise though." He took his chair and relaxed slightly into it, "I been hurt worse. I'll be all healed up in time for the meet."
"How's River?" Wash tilted his head towards his co-pilot, "Didn't hear her come up after you."

"She's still sleepin'," he gave the shorter man a half smile. "We had a full day, she needs to rest, meditate some, dance and do katas. Get alla the garbage she picked up cleared out."

"Kinda like your nose I guess," the pilot chuckled. "Well we got a good twenty hours before we'll be meeting Bernoulli. Charming fellow."

"Lovely," Riddick groaned. "So what have you been up to, 'sides recovering from the hangover?"

"Oh, flyin' the boat, hearing all about the thrillin' heroics down at the tavern, admiring Simon's bruises," Wash told him drolly. "Apparently River really impressed Jayne. Simon didn't do too badly either."

"Yeah he did pretty good for somebody ain't ever been in a fight before this," the convict agreed. "You need a break? It'll be a little bit 'fore River's awake."

"Might get a cup a coffee... like some?" Wash offered as he got up.

"Long as it ain't what Simon made," Riddick grinned tiredly. "Dunno how that man's hands stay so steady."

"No, I made the coffee," Wash called back in a normal voice, knowing Riddick would hear him. Riddick took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair, hearing heavier footsteps than Wash's coming toward the bridge. "Mal," he greeted the captain without turning around and smirked as the taller man cursed in startled reaction.

"Wǒ de mā," the Browncoat swore. "Rick one a these days you're gonna give me gorram heart failure."

"Mal I'm sittin' in plain sight," Riddick reminded him and gave Wash a smile of thanks as the pilot brought back two cups of coffee.

"Rick you're like one a them tigers or wolves from Earth That Was," the captain leaned against the bulkhead with a shake of his head. "'Til you say somethin' or move ain't nobody sees you."

"Learn to look," Riddick advised his captain after taking the cup from Wash. "When I hide nobody finds me."

"Wouldn't a thought you'd be one to hide," Wash chuckled slightly and Riddick offered him a sly grin.

"You've never seen me work at night," he reminded the pilot. "Jayne's the only one 'sides River ever been able to keep up with me."

"That'd be somethin' to see," Mal mused.

Riddick shot him a sharp look, "No Mal." He rose from the chair, "I have been one acquainted with the night. So that ain't somethin' you wanna see. An' you better pray that if you ever do I'm not comin' after you." He stalked out of the room aware of how uncomfortable it made the captain that he still moved without a sound.

"Sounded like a threat," Mal seemed slightly affronted. Riddick nearly snorted in his irritation and a half grin tilted his lips as Wash chuckled aloud.
"Mal, when Richard B. Riddick is threatening you, you'll know it," The pilot laughed. "From how Jayne talks, Rick doesn't make threats, he makes promises." Wash's voice sobered slightly, "That bein' said Mal. I wouldn't go wishin' that you could see Rick workin' the dark. I don't think it's somethin' we'd ever wanna see."

"Wash after the war, I really don't think there's much can shock me," Mal was saying as Riddick dropped lightly into his bunk, burnt cinnamon filling the room.

The rest of the conversation wasn't anything he cared about, not when he'd heard River's sweet voice crying out his name. She was sitting up in bed panting, her eyes staring straight ahead, not quite focused yet. When his hands touched her shoulders she flinched and he realized she was still asleep. A gentle shake didn't wake her up and neither did him saying her name. Finally he kissed her, the one thing she'd told him hadn't happened in her nightmares and she woke with a moan of his name.

"Too much in one day 清香, Riddick drew her into his arms as she drew in a shaky breath.

"No meditation yesterday," River whispered. "Much to do, and then Higgins..." She burrowed into his embrace. "Know it was my idea but... you're the only man who's ever touched me. The only man I ever want to touch me my 亡. I don't know if I can do that again," She admitted.

"Then we won't," Riddick kissed her again. "Ain't sure I could take it anyway," He admitted quietly. "I was ready to kill him for touchin' you 保 bǎo."

"Maybe in a few years," River was leaning against him as if she was exhausted. "But not anytime soon." The scent of burnt cinnamon was fading as her fear slowly eased. "Have you eaten?"

"Wash brought me some coffee but then I caught your scent," He didn't need to say anything else. River knew just how much he hated the smell of fear on her skin. "I'll grab my cup from the bridge and we can go through our routine before we eat," Riddick pressed a kiss to her hair.

"Yes please," River climbed out of bed and turned to look at him, her midnight eyes solemn. "My Riddick...have I ever thanked you?"

"For what?" He really didn't have a clue what she was talking about. He hadn't done anything that deserved thanks. She was a good, kind, intelligent and beautiful woman and he knew just how lucky he was that she loved him.

"For saving my life, back at the Academy," Soft hands stroked over his skin, touching his neck and scalp. "I would have died long before Simon came if you hadn't helped me. If you hadn't taught me," Her lips brushed over his face, sweet caresses that seemed to seep into his skin like fire. "I know you think you're the lucky one my Riddick. But I know how fortunate I am that my Furyan saw me and loved. That your animal recognized mine."

"I couldn't...not," Riddick admitted. "Had no idea what I was doin', why the animal...what it saw in you beyond that you needed me. I just...you were..." He shrugged helplessly, he didn't have the words to explain what it was that he'd seen in her, why she was so important so immediately beyond what he'd already told her. The animal had wanted her immediately, had just...known. And now...it was like trying to define why he needed air to breathe. The scientific explanation sufficed but it didn't really answer anything.

"I know," River's words were a whisper against his skin. "It doesn't matter why. We belong together. But I couldn't not...thank you. You've saved me so many times my Riddick. Your strength... it makes me strong. You have to know that. Without you...I'd be a broken mad thing, I'd be what Simon feared I'd become. Please don't ever think that I could live without you."
He pulled her into his arms and kissed her and wondered when rampant sentimentality had taken over his brain. When had he stopped being the murderer, the convict all the time? When he'd met her, he realized with a half-smile, when the animal had found someone it valued above its own freedom, its own survival, "Spiritual relationship is far more precious than physical. Physical relationship divorced from spiritual is body without soul." The ancient words made her smile but her eyes were bright because she could feel that he meant them.

"My Riddick, my zhàng fu, mate, beloved," Each word contained a kiss, pressed gently to his face until her lips met his.

"Gonna be all that, an' more," Riddick promised her as he returned the kiss. "First though, let's get goin' with the meditation and katas. That'll settle us both. The meet is today apparently."

River nodded, "Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep. She hears them all. Must get my brain in good order."

He chuckled and kissed her again, "Well let's do that then River."

The meeting with Bernoulli went decent enough, Riddick flat out told Mal that no way was River coming along with them. She'd done too much on Canton and needed the rest. Mal hadn't been pleased to be told his business even if one look at River, heavy eyed and sporting a bruise that spread across half her face made it obvious that she was in no shape to work.

"She don't gotta do much more'n stand there with Zoe," Mal argued. "And I'll remind you that she's the one who wanted to be crew."

"And it's because of her that you've got the goods and two gun hands instead of none," Riddick retorted angrily.

"Why none?" Zoe had asked curiously.

"If someone had shot our brother, nothing would have stopped us from taking vengeance," River's voice was soft as she leaned against her mate. "All three would have been injured, at least one near mortally wounded. Thus none."

Book had eyed River critically and with a few pertinent questions revealed just how little sleep she'd gotten and how little she'd eaten the day before on top of that. River had shrugged, "Zhàng fu's method of ignoring discomfort does not work correctly if she has eaten well. Stomach rebels with mental distress. Best to not eat if there are to be difficulties. Concentration is key to doing the work well."

Riddick had been cautiously pleased when Zoe'd stuck up for River, "Really Mal, how many gun hands we need?" She'd asked, "Jayne ain't lookin' a hundred percent an' he likes brawls. Him an' Rick should be fine 'long with you an' me. That's one more than Bernoulli's used to anyway."

Mal had grumbled and muttered but he'd capitulated to Zoe's superior reasoning. By the time they'd gotten back River was looking better. Riddick could tell she'd spent time in a meditative state after she'd had a light meal. Unfortunately that hadn't put Mal in a good mood, taking it as he did that she would have been fine for the job. Between Riddick giving him an argument and Zoe supporting him, he wasn't in a receptive mood when Kaylee had again asked him about replacing the catalyzer on the compression coil. "Gorramit Kaylee we're not exactly swimming in cashy money here," He'd snapped. "We have to make do with what we got."
Riddick had taken one look at his little sister's upset face and got ready to offer her a catalyzer or whatever other part she'd wanted but Mal had gotten in his face, "And you're not gonna go out an' buy her whatever she wants either Riddick. This ain't your boat. I don't want your gorram charity."

The captain had stormed off and River had looked at him and Kaylee and shaken her head. Cinnamon and burnt cinnamon had suffused her scent and she'd gone very pale. "River," Riddick had moved towards her. "What's wrong Qingxiang?"

"Fire," River whispered. "Fire and darkness." She'd stared up into his eyes. "Fire...darkness...and then the cold and blood." Steel and silk and blood were overwhelming every other note of her scent, fear and anger lost as she saw a glimpse of the future. "I don't...I can't...know...it can't be quantified...it's all tangled."

"We'll figure it out," He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, relieved when he could smell plums on her again. When River Saw things instead of Reading them it was as if the truth became a force in her brain and the only thing that could contain it was the discipline and strength of her mind. It overwhelmed every other part of her scent and he hated that he couldn't smell plums or honey or even apples on her when she Saw things.

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He was on the bridge with Wash, River in his lap working on her cortex when a fresh warrant came up. He hated the warrants mostly because of the irritating font they used. "Hey Wash?"

"Yes oh co-pilot of the silver eyes and intimidating reputation?" Wash was in one of his silly moods.

"Take a look at the cortex," Riddick leaned over and tapped a few keys bringing what was on River's screen on Wash's.

"Huh," Wash chuckled. "They are not very complimentary are they?"

Riddick laughed along with the pilot in spite of himself, "I swear it's like they spend time thinking up new things they can say I done." He heard River's soft giggle, "How about we let Kaylee know, Qingxiang?"

River nodded, "Simon's birthday is in a couple of days." She smiled at Wash. "He must pass the word."

The pilot grinned, "I'll do that liang nü."

Riddick gave a mock growl, "You tryin' to make time with my woman Wash?"

Blue eyes twinkled at him humorously as Wash continued to work, "Sure Rick, 'cause I want my innards on the outside and my wife stomping on what's left of me."

He had to admit Wash had a valid point, Zoe was very possessive and while she adored her husband she'd never tolerate anyone cheating on her. And anyone trying to get with River would have to go through him. Barbaric probably but she was his and the man wouldn't tolerate any poaching much less the animal's reaction. River's giggling was like tequila and caramel in his nose and he grinned.

"Richard thinks he is uncouth and barbaric but he at least admits his thoughts to himself," River's soft mouth pressed against the pulse in his neck. "Most men will not admit to being possessive. Zoe and Riddick are honest with themselves and others."
Wash was still chuckling, "I wondered about that. River was fresh out of the box and you were threatening Jayne for looking at her legs. How do you deal with the fact that most of us saw her naked?"

He growled, low and mean and River kissed his cheek and her teeth nipped at his neck in remonstrations, "Tries not to think of it." She explained to the pilot who'd merely blinked at the growling. "His woman, not for others to see. Exacerbated by years of Academy experimentation. The man and girl were often stripped naked. Very familiar with each others bodies even before intimacy."

"Well that's kinda..." Wash paused as if he couldn't think of a bad enough word. "So in addition to raping you River, and cutting into your brain and experimenting on both of you and torturing you, they'd strip you down whenever they gorram well pleased?"

"Accurate statement," River nodded. "Also made us fight. Each other, others, other...things." She looked down and it was Riddick's turn to kiss and nip at her flesh to remind her that they could triumph over Reavers.

"And I thought a POW camp was bad," The pilot muttered. He turned in his chair and looked at them thoughtfully. "How are you doing with all of that?"

"You mean PTSD," Riddick shrugged. "Flashbacks ain't as bad." He wasn't one for talking on his feelings with anyone besides River. Talking to Inara was needful because it was for River, so he'd done it. But he'd never liked it. River was his mate, his other half, his woman, wife, whatever they called themselves they were bonded.

"When she is very tired and then something, verbal or visual reminds her...then there is difficulty," River explained. "Then I do not sound sensible and the captain thinks I'm chī xiàn."

"We both got triggers," Riddick admitted quietly. "We been workin' on breakin' 'em down."

"You need help, you lemme know right?" Wash offered, "You're a good friend, both of you are. Zoe takes a while to warm up, but she likes you too."

Riddick smiled as he looked down at the slender woman in his lap, "Might take you up on that. Once we get a line on Ciara, it's gonna take some persuasion to get Mal in the direction we need."

"Well with the job we picked up we'll be headed to Greenleaf," The pilot shook his head. "Just gotta get the particulars on what we'll be doing."

River tilted her head, "Ninety nine percent probability that we will take the long way 'round." She murmured softly.

Wash slanted a grin at her and nodded, "Mal don't like the regular space lanes much."

"Creative navigation," River slipped out of his lap and Riddick wrapped his arms around her before she left completely, pressing a gentle kiss to her collarbone. "She must talk with Kaylee about cake."

"Well if you gotta," Riddick grumbled. There was nothing he liked better than River's body against his.

"My greedy zhàng fu," She bent and kissed him, her scent blazing with plums through every other note.

"My měi nǚ, my nǚ ren," He smiled and mentally promised her a massage later for putting up with
his foolish possessiveness.

"Not foolish," Her whisper was like a song in only his ears as she drifted out of the room. "She will kill anyone who tries to take him from her, regardless of their method."

Wash was looking at him with a half-smile and Riddick realized that River's whisper had reached the pilot's ears. "So of the two of you, which is more bloodthirsty?"

"Depends on the situation," Riddick shrugged. "We protect each other. River's got some crazy notion that she's weaker than I am because when she gets tired she has trouble. But I don't gotta deal with as much as she does."

Wash nodded, "I'm guessing her trouble has something to do with her abilities." He tilted his head, "When did the real trouble start?"

He frowned thinking back and rubbed his eyes. The light on the bridge was dim but sometimes the console lights irritated his sensitive pupils, "River, she'd turned seventeen…a few weeks, maybe a month later they took her outa our room. Put her in a dress and took her away. She came back…worse than I'd ever seen her. They'd been showing her off for some quán guì. She's never been able to talk about what she…I just had to keep telling her she didn't have to look. Didn't have to see it."

"So whenever she has trouble…" Wash frowned. "She talks about blue hands sometimes…is that related?"

"Might be," Riddick sighed. "I get the idea that Blue Hands are actual people that are after us. Articulating it isn't easy. But the root of all the trouble is whatever she saw that day I think." He looked out at the stars before he looked at Wash again, "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart?"

Wash shook his head, "Does Simon know?"

"He doesn't know all of it," Riddick shook his head. "Most though, and what River can do, yeah. But neither of us know what makes her go a little sideways when she's exhausted."

"I'd be willing to be that's when her guard against that memory weakens," Wash said quietly. "She's a strong woman if she's not having nightmares each time she sleeps. God knows I still have them. Sounds like she's sorta got it walled off and its when she's tired or something reminds her that she has trouble."

"There's a reason neither of us sleep alone," He admitted quietly. "If she's not with me I don't sleep. I just don't. And she won't, not without me. I can let her sleep on after I wake up but neither of us go to sleep without the other one. To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause."

"So when you three got on the boat and River was in cryo…" The pilot turned to look at him incredulously. "We were in the black for a good day and a half nearly, you didn't sleep at all?"

"Don't need much," Riddick shrugged. "Was more interested in scouting out the boat and figuring out what Dobson was up to."

"So you didn't sleep until after the whole thing was over…Rick that was almost three days by the time we were in the black," Wash sounded incredulous and Riddick nearly smiled.
"Napped a bit in the infirmary with River; 'course Mal came in and woke us up, talking to Kaylee. Only got tired once we were done," He shrugged at his friend. "Me, River, Simon an' Shazza went for near four days without sleep once. We'll tell you all about it some time."

"Since you're in such a generous mood, mind if I ask you somethin' else?" Wash tilted his head curiously. Riddick shrugged again and waved his hand for the red haired man to continue, "You tend to, normally, speak a lot like Jayne, more Rim. But now and then…you don't. Like now. Like you're…relaxed or something."

Riddick chuckled and shook his head, "Shoulda known you'd pick up on it. Simon has, he just doesn't care. As long as I make River happy he really could care less about where I'm from."

"I take it that means you're not from Shadow or Kerry or Beylix or somethin' like that," Wash surmised.

"Nope," The escaped convict shook his head. "Nope. Grew up in the slums on Londinium. It's not proper but it's closer to Core than Rim. Learnt me ta talk Rim durin' the war." He smiled slightly, "Glad I did too. If I'd gone to Slam talkin' like Simon I'd have had to fight off so many bèn dàn tryin' to get with me I'd never have gotten any sleep."

"Uh, Rick, you're a fairly intimidating fellow. Surely that would have impressed your fellow inmates," The pilot wondered.

"Not if I was talking like Simon," Riddick shook his head. "My language wasn't perfect but it's better than Jayne's, grammatically anyway. My eyes had settled and I was pretty muscular but nobody knew me as Richard B. Riddick or feared that name. It wasn't 'til I'd broken out of a few Slams, killed a few more people that the rest of the inmates started to give me respect or fear or whatever."

"What a lovely ending to the war that must have been for you," Wash mused with a frown.

"Well to be fair they didn't catch me immediately," He sighed slightly. "I was doing a job, just a regular job, got caught up in a riot and collected with every other person. Massive amount of gas knocked out the whole crowd, me along with it, just long enough. And when I woke up I was in restraints. Horse bit gag, chains and all."

"How long did it take you to break out?" Jayne's voice was curious as he entered the bridge.

"Oh, about six months," Riddick shrugged. "Woulda been less but it was hard to make a shiv. Lousy material to work with." Jayne's chuckle echoed the pilot's at the sound of disgust in his voice and he grinned. Who would ever have thought he'd find that time of his life humorous. "You think I'm jokin' but they had crap metal there. All this bendable garbage. Took forever to find a decent five inches of steel." The two of them kept chuckling and he shook his head again, "You two are crazy you know that right?"

"Says the man complaining about lè sè metal in Slam," Wash teased. "C'mon I'll buy you two a cup of lousy coffee."

"Long's Simon didn't make it," Jayne placed his condition. It was now common knowledge that if you wanted coffee that could stand up, walk and talk back that Simon was the one to go to. Apparently he'd learnt to make it strong when he was in MedAcad and never got out of the habit. Kaylee had gotten a cup of it once and she didn't stop talking or jittering for almost eight hours. That had been a memorable day. Simon was no longer allowed to make the coffee but they all took precautions these days.
River leaned happily against her brother. Simon was less worried today than he'd been in a long time. Mal hadn't been nosy or nasty with his comments and questions and Kaylee had spent a couple of hours with him that morning. Granted it had been while he'd been cleaning the infirmary but she'd sat on the table and kept him company and that always made for a bright spot in his day.

Riddick was on her other side, she could feel his mind and emotions, always touching on her in some way while the rest of him evaluated the crew their surroundings, instinctively searching for advantages should something go wrong. They'd both been in a state of semi-alert tension since she'd had that flash of Sight with fire and blood.

Shepherd was telling a funny story, but the captain's attention was only half on Book, another part of Mal was thinking of when he'd first gotten the boat. He'd brought his old friend to see it, offering her a job as first mate, knowing she needed freedom from the heavy hand of the Alliance as much as he did. River let herself drift into the captain's memories.

Dusty light, sun streaming through open cargo bay doors, and Zoe standing beside the Captain as he asked, "Well?"

Zoe wasn't impressed, "You paid money for this, sir? On purpose?"

The captain, as he was wont to do, reacted in surprise though not as much as usual, River could see that Serenity looked really bad, "What? Come on, seriously, Zoe. Whaddya think?"

And as was her wont, Zoe didn't pull any punches, "Honestly, sir. I think you got robbed."

River nearly giggled aloud as she followed the memory. Mal was honestly shocked now, "Robbed? What, no. What do you mean?"

Zoe had the same tone in her voice that she'd had when she said the captain had a problem with his brain being missing. River seriously loved that tone of voice, "It's a piece of fei-oo."

Again Mal was surprised, but men in love never did immediately see the flaws in their objects of affection, "Fei-oo? Okay. She won't be winning any beauty contests anytime soon. But she is solid. Ship like this, be with ya 'til the day you die."

The potential first mate's voice was flat, "'Cause it's a deathtrap." River had to stop herself from giggling again.

Mal was almost, but not quite lost for words, "That's not... you are very much lacking in imagination."

Zoe didn't seem to find that to be much of an insult, "I imagine that's so, sir."

The captain was still enthusiastic, "C'mon. You ain't even seen most of it. I'll show you the rest. And try to see past what she is, and on to what she can be."

"What's that, sir?" It was not an entirely figurative question though Mal treated it as such.

"Freedom, is what," The captain hadn't lost his tone of enthusiasm.

His old friend was now pointing to something on the ground, "No, I meant what's that?"

River smiled as Mal looked at it and sort of shrugged, "Oh. Yeah. Just step around it. I think
something must've been living in here." He was still moving through the bay, expounding on the potential of the scheme and the ship, "I tell ya, Zoe, we find ourselves a mechanic, get her running again. Hire a good pilot. Maybe even a cook. Live like real people. Small crew, them as feel the need to be free. Take jobs as they come, and we'll never be under the heel of nobody ever again. No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get, we'll just get ourselves a little further."

Zoe was following him as she always had, at his side and moving with him deeper into the ship, "Get her running again?"

Mal's enthusiasm dimmed slightly, "Yeah." He admitted.

Flat reality was what River could hear in Zoe's voice, "So not running now?"

"Not so much," Mal shook his head. His oldest living friend made a noise that she comprehended but somehow implied she didn't understand this madness that had taken hold of him. The captain was regaining his enthusiasm as Zoe didn't slap him down for his idiocy. "But she will," He began to move up the stairs towards the lounge. "I already know what I'm gonna call her. Got a named all picked out…"

River gathered her thoughts and smiled as Riddick's hand tugged on the end of her braid, his palm warm against her spine and smiled up at him. "Captain was remembering when Zoe first saw Serenity. Was not impressed with the boat," She whispered the explanation to him of what she'd been hearing from Mal. Riddick smiled and his lips rubbed against her temple as they both tuned back in to the conversation around them. Everyone but Wash had gathered around the galley table for dinner and Book had gotten to the punch-line that had them all in stitches with laughter.

Zoe was laughing uproariously, River had never seen the stoic first mate so relaxed and filled with humor. She shook her head at Book who was telling the tale, "No! That is not true. No."

The shepherd nodded emphatically, "I swear it is!"

Inara was bubbling with laughter, still regal and elegant but there was a sweet softness about her that few but Kaylee, River and Riddick got to see, "Surely one of you must have told him!"

"No! Not one among the brethren had the heart to say anything," Book explained still chortling. "He was so proud!"

Wash came down the hall from the bridge as they all started laughing again. "What?" The pilot asked as he took a seat, "What was he proud of? Who he?"

Book shrugged at the rest of them, "Looked rather natty, truth be told, you know!" River grinned along with her mate as everyone else exploded into laughter.

Wash still didn't understand the joke, "What was natty?" He looked around, "I want to hear about the natty thing." He reached for the serving bowl and found it empty as Book finally got control of himself and took a drink, absently waving off any questions.

Kaylee smiled at Wash, "Shepherd Book was just tellin' us funny stories about his life at the monastery."

Wash didn't quite pout though it was clear he was disappointed to miss the joke. Pilot man liked humor River knew, he also liked food and would be more put out if he didn't get to eat something. "Monastic humor. I miss out on all the fun," He commented absently and checked another bowl, "And all the food, too, apparently..."
Zoe shook her head, a smile curving her lips, "Just who do you think you're married to?" She produced a plate and took the napkin off it, revealing a pile of food. "Voila!"

Wash’s relief and pleasure was obvious, "I love my wife." He kissed her firmly on her smiling mouth before he began to eat. River grinned, she could feel the wash of affection between the pilot and the first mate whenever they were near. It might have been overwhelming during their more intimate moments if she hadn’t had Riddick teaching her about how to handle her senses and providing her an anchor as she’d learned.

The captain took advantage of the lull in hilarious conversation to ask a more businesslike question, "So we got a course set?"

Wash nodded as he chewed and swallowed. River appreciated that, she’d never liked looking at partially masticated food regardless of the person speaking. When he’d finished his bite the pilot actually answered, "We do. Took a little creative navigating, but we should make it all the way to Greenleaf without running afoul of any Alliance patrols. Or a single living soul, for that matter."

Mal nodded in satisfaction, "Good. Way it should be."

Wash shook his head as he made a salient point, "Course, what should be an eighteen hour trip’s gonna take us the better part of a week by this route."

The captain just smiled, "We're in no rush. I like an easy, languorous journey."

Kaylee stood and picked up a few plates with a smile, "Oh, gee, I wonder what that would that be like?"

Simon, ever the gentleman started to stand and assist her with clearing the table, "Let me help you with that—"

Kaylee stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder, "It's your turn."

River grinned when her brother was clueless, "My turn...?"

Kaylee nodded, "Shepherd told a funny story 'bout bein' a preacher. Now you tell a funny story about being a doctor." She instructed firmly before moving behind the counter to the food prep area.

River could see Kaylee getting out the cake she'd made and a bowl of frosting that had required some time to set before it could be smeared lusciously over the cake. Simon was frowning to himself and trying to think of a story, "A funny story..."

Jayne wasn't convinced the story would be any good no matter what but he loved to tease Simon. The big man didn't hate her brother anymore and even liked him most days but he still treated Simon like a younger brother and teasing was part of the job, "Yeah, 'cos sick people are hi-larious."

Simon nodded, a tentative smile curving his lips, "Well, they can be... uh..." He chuckled, "In fact, I remember there was this one time I was working the E.R. and this, this, uh, fellow, this very upright sort of citizen, comes in complaining of...pain in his..." He paused a moment to take in his audience and chose a polite word, "Hindquarters."

Jayne blinked, "He was complainin' his pì gu ached? What'd he do ride too long?"

Simon shook his head and grinned, "Uh, not quite no." River grinned and motioned for him to continue, anticipating the joke. "Maybe I should start by explaining that with a teaching hospital the nursing staff is told they should always follow up patient information with a question. The idea is to
draw the history out for the doctor. I had three nurses with me, two of whom were students." He slanted a glance at Jayne who seemed about to interrupt. "One of them was pretty sarcastic and she'd been slapped on the wrist for it more than once. But she was very good at her job."

"So what was wrong with the guy?" Jayne wanted to know.

Simon shook his head, "He had been…drinking. Probably a mistake. Then he mixed the alcohol with a stimulant. Second mistake." He chuckled, "His third mistake was his curiosity. It took him an hour to tell us what he'd done and by that time my nurses were all losing patience with him. We couldn't treat him or move on until we'd gotten the history you see."

"So ya stood there for an hour trying to figure out what he'd done to himself," Jayne shook his head, "I'd a shot him 'fore I was that patient."

"Yes my student nurse was of the same opinion," Simon sighed. "We finally found out that he'd sat upon a shot glass bottom up and it had lodged in his rectum." He saw everyone's blinking face and, "And of course, my student nurses were required to question him after this bit of information. He'd kept saying it was an accident."

"Yeah 'cause that's usually where a shot glass ends up accidentally," Jayne was chuckling and Riddick was shaking his head and grinning across from him, "What'd your little nurse say?"

"We finally got him to admit he'd done it on purpose once I removed it," Simon rolled his eyes, "He'd put a condom on it." Everyone began to howl with laughter, even Inara, and Simon shook his head again a helpless chuckle on his lips. "When I asked why he had done that, he said he wanted to see what would happen."

"What'd your sarcastic little nurse say to that?" Riddick wanted to know.

"She just snapped at him, 'Well did you find out?',' Simon was chuckling. "He got out of there as fast as he could once he was recovered. And then she was so worried because she'd snapped at a patient. But I couldn't reprimand her because I could barely keep a straight face." He pushed a hand over his face as if to hide his current grin, "The senior nurse sent the two younger ones on and then we made the mistake of looking at each other. I don't know who started laughing but then we couldn't stop for ten minutes." River looked over her shoulder and saw that Kaylee was working on the cake and candles, a few more minutes' distraction would be needed.

River giggled next to him and smiled, "She has a story. Even Richard hasn't heard it." Her story wouldn't be long but it would keep them occupied and most importantly, Simon's attention on her not Kaylee.

"Yeah?" Jayne grinned at her, "Let's hear a story 'bout bein' a genius then."

River shook her head at him, "That would be boring. This is about a boy I knew at school. Rich boy. Had servants." She grinned at her brother and then at the crew and captain, "We'll call the boy George."

"And what did George do now," Mal asked curiously.

"Came to school, fifteen years old when I was twelve," River explained seriously. "Told us all, 'I have to tell you this!'," She put her fingers up in quotations. "This was important information, we all paid close attention."

"Uh oh," Wash grinned. "That never bodes well."
River pointed her finger at him, "Pilot man is very wise. It did not bode well." She wrinkled her nose, "George began to tell us, the day before he'd come home from school and went up to his room." She looked around, "Boys and girls in the group, much like this one, but younger." She explained, "Told us all he took off his clothes. Girls all giggled but still, 'he had to tell us',' She made the air quotes again, "So we continued to pay attention. Told us how he lay down on his bed and put in his headphones on, listened to music. Began to touch his jī ba."

Inara exchanged a glance with Book and interrupted, "He told girls this?"

River nodded and made the finger quotes again, "Yes, he 'had to tell us'. Very adamant about it." She shook her head over George's stupidity. Jayne was trying to figure out the joke and River grinned at him. "Told us how he took care of himself, reached for a tissue when he was done. Opened his eyes," Her mouth twitched. "Saw on the bureau next to the tissues, full tea service, brought in by the housekeeper while he had his eyes closed." She wrinkled her nose as everyone realized the extent of what had happened. "Yes, while he pleasured himself, housekeeper walked in and saw him."

"Eww…" Jayne shook his head, "Really?"

River pointed her finger at him, "Yes!" She said excitedly, "Exactly. Could have gone my entire life without hearing that story. Housekeeper seeing him whack away like a little monkey. He did not 'have to tell us' this." She shook her head, "We did not need to know. Would have been happier if he'd kept it to himself. You all agree?" There was a groaned chorus of assent from the crew and her mate.

"Well dì yù River, why'd you tell us then?" Mal wanted to know, his nose wrinkled in an unconscious imitation of hers.

"She has had to live with the story since she was twelve," River told him reasonably. "She no longer wished to suffer with it alone," She grinned at him wickedly at his astonished face and began to giggle. Riddick and Simon then Jayne began to laugh along with her as they realized they'd been had, the rest of the table joining in in dismayed humor.

Jayne shook his head and looked hopefully at Inara, "Now Inara, she's gotta have some real funny whorin' stories, I'd wager. If River's done makin' us wanna lose our dinner." He sent a mock hard look her way.

Inara nodded her agreement with a smile, "Oh! Do I ever! Funny and sexy. You have no idea." Her smile dropped, "And you never will." Zoe snorted her amusement and Inara slanted a half grin her way. "I don't discuss my clients."

Jayne was now trying to tease Inara, with slightly less success than Simon, "Aww, come on, Inara. Who'd know?"

"You," Inara told him reasonably, "A Companion doesn't kiss and tell."

Mal asked, with an air of having discovered secret information, "So there is kissing?" When Inara sent him a look meant to be repressive, he just smiled. River nodded her satisfaction. Mal was coming along nicely, enjoying Inara as a friend, no malicious intent in his words and the Companion could relax a bit more in the captain's company.

Zoe caught Simon's attention, "Hey, doc?" The first mate nodded towards something behind Simon, "I think Kaylee may need your help after all."
Simon turned around and blinked in astonishment to see Kaylee carrying an obviously homemade cake with mismatched candles. "Care to make the first incision, Doctor Tam?" The mechanic teased and set the plate before him, "Happy birthday, Simon."

There was a chorus of birthday wishes and River smiled as her gê ge looked around in astonishment. "Well this is... How, how did you know?" He glanced down at River, "River, did you—"

She shook her head and smiled at him before leaning against her mate, "'Day' is a vestigial mode of time measurement based on solar cycles. It's not applicable." She tilted her head, "I didn't get you anything besides the equipment we've been working on for the infirmary."

Mal explained, "Seems a fresh warrant for your arrest come up on the cortex. Had your birth date attached right to it."

Simon looked slightly worried, "Really?"

Riddick chuckled, "Wash an' me were on the bridge when it came up. So we just had a word with Kaylee 'bout usin' her cookin' skills on somethin' properly celebratory."

Kaylee gestured towards the cake, "Hope you like it. Couldn't get a hold of no flour, so it's mostly protein. In fact, it's pretty much what we just had for supper. But I tried to get the frosting as chocolaty tasting as possible, so..."

Simon blinked and River knew he was surprised but so very pleased that Kaylee had gone to the trouble, "Thank you. I'm really, I'm very deeply moved. Thank you."

Jayne was not so very sneakily trying to swipe some frosting with his finger and got his hand smacked by Kaylee, "Well deeply move yourself over there and blow out them candles so we can try a slice."

Kaylee grinned her encouragement, "Come on, Doc. Give a good blow."

River watched as Simon nodded and leaned forward to blow out the candles. River stiffened as something sounded from the back of the ship near the engine, a deep ugly grinding noise. The power flickered and dimmed and she could feel what she'd seen about to come true. The engine stopped and everyone seemed to freeze then the engines began to hum again. She could feel Riddick stiff with tension next to her, she smelt like steel, silk, blood and burnt cinnamon in his nose.

Jayne blinked, "What the hell was that?"

Kaylee was worried now, "Maybe just a hiccup. I'll go check it out." She began to move towards the door.

Wash stood, putting down his napkin, "I'll take a look at the helm."

He headed towards the bridge and River couldn't stop staring at the cake, her hand clutched at the edge of the table, white knuckled. "Fire..." She whispered and felt Riddick's tension increase beside her.

Simon glanced at her and then at the cake, "Okay, right." He leant in to blow out the candles as Kaylee got to the door. The explosion from the engine room took everyone by surprise even Riddick who'd been tense and waiting for some disaster. Fire seemed to explode towards them, towards Kaylee, even as Zoe jumped to her feet and lunged for the little mechanic, Riddick farther away and only a half-step behind her. Kaylee was shoved into Riddick's arms as the ball of fire burst at the doorway, and Zoe was thrown backwards. The concussion of the blast threw her body off the dinner
table before slamming her into a wall. Wash came running back to the galley calling for his wife, "Zoe!"

River grabbed Kaylee from her mate and held her with Inara as Riddick shoved his mèi mei out of the way. Another fireball belched towards them as he forced the big metal door between the galley and engineering closed. Just as he got it latched the fireball hit and knocked him backwards so he ended up prone on the floor.

River let Book and Inara take care of Kaylee and crawled towards her mate to verify he was all right. "Fire," She murmured the word. Putting her hand on his chest she absorbed his heartbeat before she stood and moved quickly towards Jayne.

Simon had gone to Zoe, Wash at her side, trying to talk to his wife, "Zoe, honey, talk to me, you gotta talk to me, baby..."

River grabbed Jayne's hand and began to tug him below decks, as Mal ran for the bridge shouting, "Seal off everything that leads below decks. Do it now!" Thankfully there were only two doors and Riddick had closed one. The other was at the top of the stairs that came out next to the galley. It took all of Jayne's muscle even with River bracing herself against the wall and using her legs instead of her arms to close the doors. It had just been that long since they'd been closed. The latch to seal them still worked though, thank the uncaring God for that, River scowled to herself and followed Jayne back to the galley.

She could feel Mal on the bridge, his fingers quick on the console, pressing buttons and switches that would open the airlock. Wash was close to panicking because Zoe wasn't waking up, and River shuddered under the weight of it, the pain of it. Citrus in Riddick's nose, she knew he hated the smell.

"Is she gonna be okay?" Wash wanted to know.

Simon moved towards the aft deck, almost stumbling in his hurry, around Riddick's slowly rising form towards the door, "I need my med kit."

Kaylee shook her head at him as she stood in front of the door that led to engineering, "Not this way. We got fire."

River watched her brother move towards the foredeck only to have Jayne stand in the doorway, "Where you think you're going?"

Simon looked past him, "Zoe's badly hurt. I need my medical supplies."

Jayne shook his head, his regret was genuine but he stood firm, "Sorry, Doc. Nobody leaves. Everything's sealed up tight."

River watched silently as her brother persisted, "If you don't let me through, she could die."

Jayne wouldn't be moved, "I let you through-"

"And we all die," River finished his sentence moving to help Riddick stand, her shoulder under his hand for a moment while he shook off the last of the dizziness.

Her mate stood completely upright and wrapped his arm around her shoulders before he agreed with Jayne, "Sorry Simon, it'll be at least five minutes."

River looked towards the bridge, "Captain purges Serenity of fire." She murmured, "Out the airlock
into the Black. The Fire dies."

"Now comes the Darkness and then the Cold and Blood," Riddick remembered, his voice a murmur for her ears only.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: The funny story Simon told is something that happened to a nurse friend of mine. And River's story is stolen from Ricky Gervais. (Love that man.)

I hope you'll like the episode, I really had to mess with it because the way the script is written is so different than how it happens chronologically. It's fun to watch but it's a bitch to turn into a story.

Chinese Translations:

Shǐ niào - Shit and piss

gǒushǐ duī - a person who behaves badly - lit. "a pile of dog shit"

Wǒ de mā - My mother! Mama mia! Similar to "Oh my God!" in usage

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

láng - wolf

bǎo bǎo - darling/baby

zhàng fu - husband

liàng nǚ - pretty girl

chī xiàn - crazy/insane

měi nǚ - beautiful woman

nǚ ren - wife

quán guì - government officials/bigwigs

bèn dàn - fools

lè sè - garbage/trash

pì gu - butt

jī ba - dick / penis

dì yù - hell / infernal / underworld

gē ge - big brother

mèi mei - little sister
Script Translations:

fei-oo. – junk

Quote Sources:

I have been one acquainted with the night. – Robert Frost

Spiritual relationship is far more precious than physical. Physical relationship divorced from spiritual is body without soul. – Mahatma Gandhi

Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep. – Paradise Lost – Milton

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart? – MacBeth - William Shakespeare

To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause – Hamlet - William Shakespeare
Riddick helped the other men besides Simon carry Zoe into the infirmary and placed her on the examination table. Simon was getting right to work absently pushing Jayne and Mal out of the way. Riddick could smell Kaylee's fear, River's concern, Mal's worry. Jayne was stoic as always in an emergency while Wash was very close to panic and anger. Riddick was feeling a little angry himself when he recalled Mal's idiocy about engine parts and charity. Book and Inara were with River and Kaylee in the lounge and he saw Jayne go out to join them, his big hands rubbing Kaylee's shoulders comforting.

Simon was frowning over Zoe, "There's no sign of burning. It must be internal. I'll have to do a scan."

Wash was entreating his wife to wake up, something Riddick could have told him was useless, "Baby. Zoe, can you hear me? Zoe. Come on, sweetheart, talk to me. Zoe. Come on, talk to me. Look at me, sweet—"

Riddick helped Simon start hooking Zoe up to the equipment half his attention on Zoe and the rest on River in the lounge. Every now and then he had to nudge Wash out of the way but the pilot was nearly glued to his wife's side.

Mal had drifted out of the infirmary towards Kaylee and River, both of them hovering outside of the infirmary door. River looked up at Mal, "The Sunshine is clouded. Mother doesn't move and the strawberries lose their taste."

Mal, to his credit took the gist of her words and ignored the actual phrasing to focus on Kaylee, "Kaylee. Kaylee, look at me." When she looked up Mal continued, "I need you up in the engine room figuring out what caused this."

Riddick could feel Kaylee's eyes, her blank stare. River's scent and the lack of vibration underfoot told him what Kaylee already knew. "She ain't movin'," Kaylee murmured her sweet voice haunted. A moment later she clarified her reference, clearing up the confusion Riddick could smell in Mal's scent. "Serenity's not movin'."

Mal's voice wasn't loud or angry, he was calm and almost cajoling. That was probably what Kaylee needed, "I know it. Which is why we need to suss out what it was happened so we can get her going again, right?" Kaylee must have made some motion of assent because Mal continued, "Think you can do that?"

Kaylee's normally cheerful voice was small, "Yes, Cap'n."

The captain's voice warmed, approval shading his words, "That's a good girl, River you give her a hand. Anything that needs doin', needs more muscle than you got, you come get one of us."

"Li shí," River agreed. The two girls hurried off towards the engine room and Riddick could smell River's worry, toasted cinnamon, over what she might find.

Riddick could almost feel Mal's attention coming back to the infirmary as Simon worked on Zoe. Wash was still a bit panicky, speaking to his wife. It was probably the best thing he could do for her
but the panic wasn't helping anyone's nerves. "Come on, baby. You're strong. Strongest person I've ever met. You can do this."

Jayne was a quiet presence, like a rock of calm in the doorway, "She gonna make it?"

Simon was concentrating on Zoe and had no time for questions, "Please. I need to work." Riddick took a deep breath and appreciated just how calm Simon was. Give the man an emergency and, like Jayne, he was preternaturally calm.

Mal stood in the doorway watching for a moment before he spoke, "Wash." The pilot wouldn't look away from his wife, determinedly ignoring his captain. Riddick nearly groaned over the captain's stupidity, "Wash, I need you on the bridge."

The normally verbose man was terse, "Zoe's hurt."

"And the doctor's gonna do everything he can," Mal was being reasonable, calm and everything that Wash was not. Riddick knew that it wasn't going to help much but the effort was nice, "Meantime, I gotta have you on that bridge. We need to know how bad it is."

That got Wash turning away from his wife for a moment, "How bad? It's bad, okay, sir? My wife may be dying, here. So my feeling is it's pretty damn bad."

Riddick sighed, "Mal, I can go to the bridge. Jayne's just as good as me in here." For his efforts he got a scowl from the captain and a half grateful look from Wash.

"Wash..." Mal was ignoring him now, focusing on his pilot rather than the convict.

Wash ignored him stubbornly and Riddick took a deep breath getting ready for the inevitable, "I'm not leaving her side, Mal. Don't ask me again."

"I wasn't asking. I was telling," The captain's voice had gone flat and implacable and Riddick cursed to himself.

"Chur ni-duh," Wash retorted just as flatly

Riddick stiffened and held Zoe's legs to keep her from being jostled as Mal grabbed Wash by the shirt and swung him around to shove him up against a wall. The captain gave a very credible snarl, "You're gonna get to the bridge and get us on our feet." After a half a beat Mal eased off and Wash started for the bridge fury in every line of his body.

Mal looked at them for a moment before he left the infirmary and Riddick sighed, "Cobh, get in here," He commanded.

Jayne nearly snapped to attention and moved inside the bright room, "Where'd you want me Rick?"

"Simon, her heart's not soundin' right, its slowin'," Riddick told his brother flatly. "Jayne go in that drawer behind me, I'm startin' compressions."

Simon caught on as the monitor started to beep its alert, confirming Riddick's call, "He's right, her heart has stopped."

Book and Inara were watching, helpless and Book ventured the suggestion, "Maybe someone should get her husband down here."

Mal was standing nearby, "No." Simon was issuing rapid orders to Jayne and Riddick, as he grabbed
equipment, "What do you need, doc?"

Simon grabbed a vial and Jayne tossed the syringe he'd grabbed on Simon's orders over to the surgeon, "For you to shut up Mal." He snapped at the captain. The very large sterile hypo was torn out of its package unceremoniously as Riddick continued the compressions.

Jayne moved over to Zoe's head and bent, forcing air into her lungs taking over that part from Riddick as Simon readied the syringe. "What is it?" Inara's worried voice asked.

Simon answered her as he positioned himself near Zoe's chest, "Pure adrenaline." He waited until Jayne stood to take a breath of his own before he addressed Riddick, "All right Rick, when I say now, move your hands."

Riddick nodded and kept his eyes on Simon who was checking the needle for bubbles. Once it was ready he looked at Jayne, "She's gonna seize after this goes in. Hold her so she don't break anythin' else." To his credit, Jayne looked at Simon who simply nodded his confirmation.

"He's right Jayne. Just keep your hands on her shoulders," He cast a glance over at Mal, "Mal you hold her legs, I can't strap her down yet." The captain came in and put his hands on Zoe's calves. Riddick tensed, it felt like a half an hour since Zoe's heart had faltered but it was less than a minute, Simon was ready, he could smell it on the young man. "Rick, Now!"

Riddick snatched his hands back from Zoe's chest and watched in fascination as Simon found Zoe's heart unerringly and slammed the huge needle down into it, flooding the organ with adrenaline. Almost immediately her back arched and her limbs began to shake. Jayne and Mal held her and he could feel Inara flinch away from the sight of that ghastly needle and the aftereffects.

He looked at Mal and then at Jayne and Simon, "Her heart's calmin' can't hear anythin' arrhythmic in it. No heavy sounds like too much blood." He narrowed his focus to Zoe's heartbeat, her lungs and shook his head, "You'll wanna check, obviously Simon, but I think she's good for now." Simon was already listening, his stethoscope and scanning equipment isolating bodily functions.

"It's a little slower than I'd like but its improving," Simon nodded and gestured for everyone to file out of the infirmary.

Riddick leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. The air was getting thinner, he could smell it, an overload of carbon dioxide. The scrubbers were off line and so was life support. Mal was in the infirmary, taking a moment with his best friend when Kaylee came into the lounge. His mèi mei was afraid, worry and fear stinging his nose. River's slender form walked in the shadow of the mechanic and leaned against him as Kaylee spoke quietly from the door of the infirmary. "Cap," Riddick hadn't ever seen Kaylee look so pale or worried, not even when she'd been shot. Mal turned and walked towards them taking Kaylee's arm and tugging her into the lounge near River and Riddick, "Zoe gonna be okay?" Kaylee asked worriedly looking past her captain at the unconscious first mate.

Mal took a deep breath and didn't quite answer, "You let the doctor worry about Zoe. Come on. Tell me what you know."

Kaylee and River exchanged glances and Kaylee nodded beginning her explanation, "Catalyzer on the port compression coil blew. That's where the trouble started."

Mal shook his head, "I need that in Captain Dummy-Talk, Kaylee." Riddick nearly scowled and forced his face to impassivity. It wouldn't help for Mal to get pissed at him now.
River's voice was soft, for only their ears, but her words were blunt as an anvil, "We are, in common terms, dead in the water."

Mal looked at the two of them and then at Riddick, "Can you fix it?"

Kaylee sighed, "I could try."

Mal seemed slightly relieved, that Kaylee wasn't brightening up meant there was more bad news yet, and Riddick braced himself even as the Captain said, "Just get us to limpin'. That's all I need."

Kaylee just looked at Mal and Riddick felt like killing the man for the look on her face, the look that he and River could have kept from his little sister if Mal hadn't lost his temper. That was ignoring the fact that he and the people he called family were all in this situation because of Mal's pride and his stubborn refusal to listen. River winced slightly and Riddick took a deep breath to calm himself down and forced his mind away from those thoughts. He and River would need every bit of their brains to figure a way out of this. Kaylee exchanged a pained look with River and shook her head at their captain sadly.

Mal seemed to finally get that the bad news wasn't over yet, "What? What is it?"

River spoke then, Kaylee's voice just died when she opened her mouth, "It is worse than just the coil." She said in her precise quiet voice.

The question begged to be asked but it wasn't something Riddick had ever found to be helpful. Asking it usually just meant more bad news, "How can it be worse?" It figured that Mal would be the one to voice the worst question in the 'verse. Mal did have the poorest luck.

River tilted her head, "Main life-support is non functional due to the engine being dead."

Mal nodded his understanding, "Right. But we got auxiliary life support-"

"No. We don't," Riddick shook his head. "It ain't even on. Explosion musta knocked it out." He rubbed a hand over River's back, "I can smell the change in the air Mal. We're getting a buildup of bad air."

Mal looked at the three of them, "So what are we breathin'?"

Kaylee regained her voice and shrugged slightly, "Whatever got pumped into the atmo before the explosion shut it all down."

Jayne's ears were sharp and his steps almost silent as he came down the stairs to join them, "Most of that oxygen got ate up by the fire on its way out the door." He leaned against the wall next to River. He didn't seem surprised, Riddick wondered absently if his old friend was just used to things going badly wrong on the boat.

"Well, whatever's left is what we got," Kaylee said quietly.

Mal looked at them and then back at Kaylee, "How long?"

Riddick could feel the tension on his woman as Kaylee answered Mal, "A couple of hours, maybe. We'll start to feel it, and then we won't feel nothing at all."

River leaned against her lover and relished his warmth in the rapidly cooling ship. Mentally
cataloging their supplies, the equipment available and the time and effort it would take she came to a rapid conclusion. She could feel Richard watching her, his enjoyment of her even in this situation. Her big man liked to feel her brain working. She looked up at him and her lips tilted wryly, "Survival one oh one on planet is coming in handy." She told him in a dry tone.

"Jaye you give her a hand will ya," Riddick said quietly. She could feel his need to have someone he trusted with her, someone he could count on to help her. He wouldn't trust Mal with her safety ever again. Not after this. He might give lip service to the thought, but deep down, her mate would always be waiting for Malcolm Reynolds to let him down.

"Just let me know what to do," Jayne nodded and Mal stared at the two of them.

"What are you up to now?" He demanded to know, his voice not quite calm. He was worried, irritated and feeling as if he wasn't in control, appropriate since he very much wasn't. River kept herself from sighing barely; she didn't have time nor was she inclined to make an effort to go step by step through her thought process.

"Making scrubbers," River shrugged and began to list what she'd need, Jayne nodding and asking about alternatives. The conversation was over Kaylee and Mal's heads and by the time Jayne had started off to gather what she'd need and the empty plastic crates Mal was irritated and Kaylee bemused.

"I'll get goin' on gettin' what we need," Jayne moved off purposefully and River looked at Inara and Simon sitting together quietly.

"Should keep them busy, Simon can work on a scrubber for the infirmary. He knows how to make one too," She told Riddick.

"Me an' Kaylee are gonna have another look at the engine," Riddick said quietly. "I think Book went to his room."

River nodded and watched as her partner moved towards Simon and Inara before she walked purposefully towards Book's room. He was sitting at his little table reading the Bible. "Don't be afraid," River said quietly from the doorway. Book's eyes jerked towards her, his body jumping slightly in surprise as she spoke. River nodded at the book he read, "That's what it says. Don't be afraid."

Book nodded and River got the impression that he really wasn't sure what to make of her, what she wanted with him, "Yes."

"But you are afraid." It wasn't a question, she knew it for a fact and it showed in her voice.

Book nodded again, "Yes." He admitted quietly.

River smiled slightly at him and leaned against the doorway, "When you come to the end of all light that you know, and it's time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things will happen: Either there will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught to fly."

Book looked at her, "River you've said you hate God. Don't you think it's a little hypocritical to lecture me about faith?"

River shrugged, "Hate implies belief, told you as much. That deep emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God."
The shepherd shook his head, "But you don't have any faith in Him River. You can't believe in God and not have faith."

She stared at him for a long moment, "Before the throne of the Almighty, man will be judged not by his acts but by his intentions. For God alone reads our hearts."

"River, God isn't something you can pick and chose about," Book persisted. "You either have faith in God or you don't."

River rolled her eyes, "A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows that faith does not prove anything."

"This is pointless," The Shepherd sighed. "I don't understand how you can believe in God and hate him. How you can believe and have no faith in him."

"Not believing in God is like not believing in gravity," She retorted. "God enters by a private door into every individual. What does it matter to you what or how I believe? The faith that stands on authority is not faith."

"Its not faith when you pick and choose, God isn't a menu at a street stall," Book protested.

"Faith is deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time," River shook her head at him, "I believe but I have no confidence. It doesn't make your faith less Shepherd. I don't claim to understand; I know there is a God. Book, my faith isn't in Him. Faith is not simply a patience that passively suffers until the storm is past. Rather, it is a spirit that bears things - with resignations, yes, but above all, with blazing, serene hope."

"So you understand faith but you don't have it in anything?" Book seemed more shattered by that idea than any other.

"Shepherd, I have faith but not in God," River leaned against the doorjamb and tilted her head curiously. "Why is my lack of faith in God such an affront to you? You already know I believe in Him. But faith is a form of trust after all. And I don't trust God."

"But God is the only one you can trust," Book was very obviously was trying to make her see. "He is infinite and only He is infallible. Everything else is subject to change and will fail you."

She shook her head, "You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty." River's smile was cool as it curved her mouth, "My faith is in Riddick. In the love we have between us. In my brothers and my sister and my own intelligence. Doesn't your bible say that God works through man? Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

"Won't do no good to argue with her Book," Jayne advised as he walked up. "River, could use your help."

River nodded and gave Book what she hoped was a reassuring smile, "Book, if it helps, there are some things I believe. And if He is with us as you say, then you don't need to worry about Richard or I, or our lack of faith in God. Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart." She left to follow Jayne and hoped that the preacher would at least take some comfort from her words. His shadowy heart gave her a headache when he was afraid.
She could hear Wash and Mal on the bridge; Mal was hugging his captainy authority to himself as if it would keep them safe. It was all he could do, take responsibility for their situation. In the engine room she could hear Riddick and Kaylee talking quietly. Her partner was promising Kaylee that he'd find a way for his family to live through this. Riddick didn't make promises unless he intended to keep them.

She and Jayne were working in silence, readying five different half tubs of chemicals. They'd decided that they'd keep two separate for now in case they needed the shuttles later but three of the tubs were already filled with half of what was needed. The measuring for the second part of the procedure was tricky and she was distracted by Mal and Wash's conversation. Jayne had his ear cocked towards the bridge as well and she exchanged a silent irritated glance with her big friend at the tenor of the conversation on the bridge.

She could feel how upset Wash was as Mal entered the bridge, "You get that beacon sent?"

"Yeah, it's sent," Wash answered flatly.

"Good," Mal was turning to leave but Wash's voice stopped him. River shook her head as she listened.

"Pointless."

"What was that," Mal's tone hardened.

"Nothing, sir. It's a brilliant plan," Wash's voice nearly dripped with sarcasm and River rolled her eyes up at Jayne. "I'm sure we'll all be saved."

"I'm getting a little weary of this attitude, Wash," Mal wasn't quite snarling but he was giving it a good try.

Wash wasn't having it, "Are you? Well, I'm so very sorry, sir. I guess the news that we're all gonna be purple and bloated and fetal in a few hours has made me little snippy."

River sighed slightly as Mal tried to argue, "It's possible someone might pick up that signal."

Wash made a very good point, albeit in a pissy tone of voice, "No, Mal. It's not possible. No one's gonna pick up the damn signal. You wanted us flying under the radar, remember? Well, that's where we are: out of range of anyone or anything."

"Then make it go further," Mal snapped back at him.

That apparently got both Wash's attention and confusion, "I—What?"

"Make the signal go further," The captain repeated impatiently.

"Can't make it go further," Wash's tone was now one of exasperation. Not that River blamed him, Mal was making rather unreasonable demands.

"Not if all you're gonna do is sit here and whinge about it, no," Mal prodded his pilot.

"What," Wash was getting really annoyed now, "Do you expect me to do, Mal?"

The captain's voice was clearly irritated, "Whatever you have to. And if you can't do it from here, then get a suit on and get out on the side of the boat and—"
Wash was almost shouting now, "And what? Wave my arms around?"

Mal's tone had a clear yes in it as he snapped his reply, "Wave your arms around, jump up and down. Divert the nav sats to the transmitter. Whatever."

The pilot seemed to think Mal had lost his mind, "Divert the...? Right. Because teenage pranks are fun when you're about to die."

"Give the beacon a boost, wouldn't it?" River sighed as Mal's question was nearly spat into the air. Beside her Jayne was shifting uneasily. The faster someone's heart beat the more air they used up. And Jayne had no intention of dying because of two idiot men.

"Yes, Mal. It would boost the signal," Wash was more than a little irked and his tone showed it. "But even if some passerby did happen to receive, all it'd do is muck up their navigation."

In contrast the captain's voice had calmed considerably, "Could be that's true."

Wash's angry voice snapped back, "Damn right, it's true! They'd be forced to stop and dig out our signal before they could even go anyplace!" River knew the minute Wash realized the potential in that suggestion though his words were no less furious, "Well, maybe I should do that, then!"

The captain lost a little bit more control and his own words became more than a little snippy, "Maybe you should!"

"Okay!" Wash's voice was still rising and Jayne shook his head and started for the bridge, his quiet footsteps over laid by the bickering pilot and captain.

"Good!"

"Fine!"

Jayne's voice was harsh as he reached the doorway, "Hey!" River smiled as the big merc caught the attention of the angry men. "What do you two think you're doing? Fightin' at a time like this," Jayne demanded to know in a calm stern voice. River could feel the two men calm, ease back from their aggressive posture. Then Jayne, lest someone think he actually cared or that he was becoming, God forbid, nice, added, "You'll use up all the air!" He strode back down the hallway and into the galley. "Morons." He muttered succinctly.

River grinned at him and continued to measure out the chemicals. Jayne nodded and began to pull out the second set of bottles in preparation for activating the scrubbers.

Mal came into the galley and stopped dead short, "Ai yâ, what is that smell?"

Jayne rolled his eyes but didn't reply and River shrugged as she continued to measure out the first set of chemicals and mixed them in the containers, "To augment the air supply." She said simply.

"Killin' us with stench ain't gonna help," Mal shook his head and River groaned.

"Do not have time or oxygen needful to make you understand scientific method or chemical combinations and reactions," She kept her voice and breathing even, though her tone was blatantly disrespectful. "Jayne and I are making carbon dioxide scrubbers."

"How?" Mal wanted to know and River shook her head.

Jayne was still a little irritated with Mal and it showed in his voice, "Chemicals Mal, the stuff we
keep around for cleanin' an' other stuff... things Simon had in the infirmary. But we ain't got the air
to explain it."

River nodded her agreement, "The captain's presence is distracting. He was planning to go and
bother Kaylee and Riddick. Should do that now." That put Mal in a little bit of a snit but at least he
left the galley. River sighed and looked down the hall to engineering, "Richard wants to throttle the
captain." She remarked softly. "Jayne should not let him."

"Right," The big merc patted her shoulder gently and followed Mal to engineering, his footsteps as
quiet as Riddick's ever were.

Riddick looked up from his work on the catalyzer and scowled as Mal's shout for his engineer
echoed through the engine room, "Kaylee!" Riddick could hear Jayne walked softly down the hall
after Mal, the man's footsteps were lighter than a cat's but nothing could hide his heartbeat from
Riddick's sensitive ears.

"Mal shut up," Riddick growled as he winced away from the volume.

The captain, as usual with anything he didn't want to hear, ignored him and approached Kaylee who
was holding half of the broken, twisted and melted catalyzer. The other half was on Riddick's
workbench as he used his muscle to force the twisted metal into shape.

"Kaylee, what are you doing?" Mal's voice was, to give him some credit, gentler with his mechanic
than it was anyone else.

Riddick hated how Kaylee smelled, misery and fear wound around her like a miasma, "Sorry,
Captain. I'm real sorry. I shoulda kept better care of her. Usually she lets me know when something's
wrong. Maybe she did, I just wasn't paying attention..."

Mal was being patient, Riddick hadn't really seen him exhibit that towards anyone but Kaylee, but
his newest family member did bring out the best in the captain. His words weren't the kindest but his
tone wasn't sharp or cutting as he spoke to the girl, "I cannot be having this from you right now. We
got work to do. Đồng ma?"

Kaylee was still looking sadly at her half of the catalyzer, the twisted metal shell masked the burnt
out wires and blown out machinery on the inside. Riddick really wasn't sure why he was futilely
attempting to bend the pieces back into place; Kaylee had seemed happier attempting to fix the boat
so he'd gone along with it. Her voice though, in spite of his efforts it was without hope, "Catalyzer's
broke. Gonna need a new one."

Mal shook his head, "There is no new one. You gotta make do with what you got."

Kaylee shook her head again, "It's broke." She was still sitting on the bump out of the hull as if she
was broken too.

Mal took her arm and got her standing at least, which was more than Riddick had managed, "Come
on. This the part?" Riddick watched Kaylee nod and the captain continued, "It don't hardly seem like
nothing. All right. Where's it go?"

Kaylee pointed out the spot on the engine, "Here. But it don't fit no more."

Riddick watched as Mal tried to press his half of the part into the engine, it worked about as well as
grease on boot heels for traction. "Well you gotta figure a way to make it fit," The captain said finally.

Kaylee offered the very painful and factual truth of their situation, "Sometimes a thing gets broke, can't be fixed." Riddick didn't much like hearing that. By all accounts he and River had both been broken beyond repair by what had been done to them. He didn't really like the thought that they'd never get better. Still he and his bǎo bèi weren't machine parts, no matter how the Academy saw them.

Mal took a deep breath, "Without this, engine don't turn?" Kaylee shook her head in a negative and Mal nodded, "Engine don't turn, life support won't function. We don't breathe. You want to keep breathin', don't you?" Riddick watched as Kaylee nodded slowly and Mal agreed, "So do I."

The twisted metal caught his palm and Riddick cursed as his skin parted next to his thumb, "Jiàn guǐ!" He growled and found a tube of adhesive he'd been keeping for that purpose, this not being the first time he'd cut himself. The all-purpose glue had worked in combat and was cheaper than medical supplies. Cleaning off the cut as best he could he smeared the glue over the skin and then held the flesh together.

"Rick what are you doin'?" Mal's voice was incredulous and Riddick looked up to see the captain regarding him and his hands in astonishment. Most of his fingers had suffered the same fate as his palms so his hands were held together by the super glue until they healed.

"I'm performin' the ballet Mal, what's it look like," Riddick grumbled as he began to muscle another curled piece of muscle into place.

"It looks like an exercise in futility," The captain observed.

"Yeah well you wouldn't let me buy a new one remember? So I'm trying to fix what we got," Riddick snarled. "Now go the fuck away if you're not gonna be helpful."

"You'd better watch—"

Mal didn't get more than three words out before Riddick surged upward and stared him in the eye. The animal was raging, chomping at the bit to take a piece of this man who'd put them all in danger because of his pride. "I'd better watch what? My tone, my words? What Mal?" Riddick snarled up at him uncaring that the captain was taller. There was only one alpha male per pack and Mal wasn't it. "Your gorram pride put us in this mess and it's huǐ zhī yǐ wàn. My wife, my family, we're all stuck with what you decided. So I'll watch my tone when you figure a way out of this mess."

"Well you can start watching your tone and your mouth right now," Mal snapped back at him. "Because I've figured a way out. Get your woman and bring her down to the lounge." He stalked out of the engine room past Jayne who'd been leaning quietly against the wall.

Kaylee didn't collapse in tears as he half expected, she simply drew herself up and followed the captain. Her hand patted his arm as she passed and Riddick shook his head at his own loss of control. "You didn't make a move," He observed to Jayne.

"River sent me to keep you from killin' Mal," Jayne shrugged at him as Riddick discarded the half shell of the catalyzer and moved towards the door. "Weren't no danger of that as far as I could see so I just waited."

"Sorry we're in this mess," Riddick offered his friend a twisted smile. "But except for River, there's no one I'd trust to be in it with more than you."
"Yeah, we always do seem to end up in these crazy places don't we," Jayne smiled and Riddick looked at River as she joined them from the galley.

"We will need to move a scrubber into each shuttle," River said quietly as they descended the steps. "Two for Serenity, one for each shuttle. I have one scrubber activated now."

"Nice work," Riddick praised and let his hand rub her back as they arrived in the lounge. River was chilled, even with the jacket she wore over her shirt. "What're the odds we could send a wave to Shazza?"

River tilted her head, "Could send it now." She looked up at Riddick, "Captain will not like it."

"Go do it anyway, between your sourcebox and Serenity's systems, should be able to get a wave through," Riddick nodded. He and Jayne stopped on the stairs downward and waited as River ran back up. "Mal's gonna be pissed but I'd rather him pissed and we're all alive than otherwise."

Jayne nodded, "His plans usually...well you've seen how they go."

Riddick nodded grimly, "Yeah. River knows what Mal's gonna say. And I got a good idea. I won't need you to do anything, but we'll need your help after."

"You know I'm with you Rick, whatever happens," The taller man shrugged. "You ain't steered me wrong yet."

River came back with a coat for Riddick and a sweater on under her jacket, "Wave sent, one hour delay to reach Shazza. Trip from Persephone takes ten hours at full burn assuming she can find a ship immediately."

Riddick nodded, "You told her we'd wave back if there was no reason for her to come?"

"Did," River nodded and looked down the stairs, "Captain grows impatient. We must attend the meeting." She didn't say what she and Riddick already knew. Her cortex equipment ran on its own power cell and with the slight boost of Serenity's signal it would reach Shazza. They weren't close enough to Persephone for a live feed but the short wave would be enough to let Shazza know where they were and that if she could come, they needed help. If nothing else, Shazza would make sure Simon and the others were found. Riddick made a mental note to put instructions on the cortex for Shazza to help Jayne find Ciara if he and River didn't make it out of their plan alive. He'd bet on them but if their luck ran the way Mal's did it would be a close thing.

River looked around the common area. Everyone was bundled up, Jayne wore one of his mother's cunning hats and had deliberately remained standing next to Riddick. Her mate had his back to the wall and had pulled her back against his chest, five degrees warmer than she was as usual, he had wrapped his arms around her waist to keep her warm. Simon and Kaylee were pressed hip to hip on the couch with Inara sitting on Kaylee's other side, Wash and Book were standing nearby. River evaluated their position relative to Mal and nodded her satisfaction. In order to address the bulk of the group he would have to give she and Riddick his profile. Mal wouldn't mind that, he felt more kindly towards Kaylee, Simon and Inara than he did she and Riddick. She'd figured out on Higgins Moon that Mal still felt a deep uncomfortableness around she and her mate.

She leaned her head back against Riddick's chest and let her mind drift while Mal gathered his thoughts. Her mind worked quickly enough that she could concentrate on the memories she'd found of the crew before he began his speech. She found Wash's method of finding Serenity to be almost
dull, he'd come for a job interview, more of an audition really, Mal trying to court the brilliant pilot into flying for him. Wash's appearance had been very amusing, his hair all flat and an awful mustache on his lip. He'd looked like he was trying to be a cortex action hero. And Zoe hadn't liked him, had been bothered by him. River did her best to not giggle to herself as she compared her reaction to Riddick to Zoe's reaction to Wash. Some similarities though due to her situation she'd gotten over her bothersome feelings quickly. She wondered how long it had taken Wash to get Zoe to change her mind.

Riddick could smell the tequila of her amusement and was wondering what was so funny. River rubbed her cheek against his chest and sighed. Maybe it was because of how their relationship had begun, or maybe it was due to the fact that they seemed to go from on disaster to another. But she never took for granted how wonderful it felt to have Richard B. Riddick holding her.

She turned her thoughts to Mal's memories of Kaylee, they'd come unbidden to his mind when he'd gone to talk with she and Riddick about repairs. He'd remembered a time he'd walked down that same hallway hollering someone else's name.

"Bester!" River followed the captain's viewpoint as the engine room was half filled with dusty yellow light. He was not a happy man, River wondered if Mal was ever happy? Or was he happiest when he was complaining about something. In this case though he was right to complain, "What's this I hear 'bout yet another delay?" The captain barged into the engine room, not even hearing the erotic moans, as he continued his rant, "You were supposed to have that engine fixed and us up and —"

River could feel the captain's mortification and aggravation as he walked in to see his mechanic's pants around his army boots, obviously having very energetic sex with some female. The moaning had gotten a lot louder and River nearly grinned as the captain spun around, averting his eyes. "What in the name of suo-yo duh doh shr-dang?" He took a deep breath, "Bester." The sex sounds didn't cease, the moaning got more enthusiastic actually. "Bester," Mal repeated the man's name louder. "Bester!"

The mechanic climbed out of wherever he'd been, yanking up his shorts, his bare chest was adorned with intricate tattoos, "What?" He had the innocent look of a man who had done nothing wrong to his mind.

Mal's voice was irate, "You do realize we been parked on this rock a week longer than we planned?"

Bester, the mechanic River presumed, didn't have nearly a good enough answer in her opinion, nor in Mal's apparently, "Yeah, but... uh, there's stuff to do."

The captain began to turn around, "As for example that job we got waitin' for us on Paquin. When we landed here you said you needed a few days to get space worthy again...and is there somethin' wrong with your bunk?" He stared at Bester's bare chest and barely held up pants.

"What?" The mechanic wasn't very bright, he didn't get it. His captain stared pointedly at Bester's state of undress until the younger man did get it, "Oh! No, Captain." He leaned forward with the air of one imparting a confidence, "She like engines. They make her hot."

River rubbed her face against Riddick's chest to hide her amusement as Mal lost his patience, "Bester. Get your prairie harpy off my boat, and put us back in the air."

The boy nodded amiably, "Okay. But... can't."

Mal wasn't too thrilled to hear that, "Whaddya mean 'can't'."
Bester shook his head, "No can do, Cap. Secondary grav boot's shot."

River half smiled as she heard Kaylee's cheerful voice in Mal's memories, "No it ain't." She popped up from under the engine, putting her clothing to rights, "Ain't nothing wrong with your grav boot. Grav boot's just fine." She smiled a little sheepishly at Mal, "Hello." She dropped back out of view as Mal glanced at Bester.

Bester was more than a bit flustered, "She doesn't... that's not what..." He looked back at Kaylee, "No it ain't!"

Kaylee popped back up again, still putting her dress in order, "Sure it is. Grav boot ain't your trouble. I seen the trouble plain as day when I was down there on my back before." She indicated the spot with a wave of her hand, "Your reg couple's bad."

River was able to appreciate just how brilliant Kaylee was when contrasted with how dumb Bester was as the mechanic sputtered, "The... red... what?"

Kaylee lay down near the engine and pointed, "Reg couple. Right here. See?"

Mal was watching his mechanic remain clueless as Bester waited a minute, "No."

Kaylee pointed again, "This." She shook her head and her voice turned dry, "I'm pointin' right at it." She rolled her eyes, sighed and reached in to break off a part of the engine.

Bester objected, "Hey!"

But Kaylee ignored him to put the part in his hand, "Here." She reached back into the engine and began to tinker with it. After a half a moment she looked at Mal and indicated a nearby wrench, "Hand me that, will ya?" She smiled as Mal gave her the tool and began to do something to the engine, confidence and purpose in every line of her body. "Don't really serve much of a purpose, anyway. Just tends to gum up the works when it gets tacked. So I figure, why even have one? Better to just take your g-line, plug it straight into the port-pin-lock, and that should, uh..." She smiled as she finished and the turbine began to turn. "There."

Bester stared at her as she stood up with Mal's help, "What'd you do?"

Mal slanted a dark glance at his idiot mechanic, "She fixed it."

Kaylee was smiling with a shake of her head, "Well, it wasn't really broke."

Bester was still looking at the part in his hand as Mal spoke to Kaylee, "Where'd you learn to do that, miss?"

Kaylee shrugged, "Just do it, that's all. My daddy says I got natural talent." Her sunny nature was apparent as she smiled up at Mal, happy to have helped. River could see why the captain was so gentle with her. Kaylee was like the kitten with sunbeams Jayne had named her. It wasn't right to make her afraid or yell at her.

"I'll say you do at that," Mal agreed with a half smile.

Bester was still looking at the engine part, "Don't we need this?"

Mal was more interested in Kaylee than the part, "You work for your daddy, do you?"

The girl shrugged, "Well, when he got work, which ain't been too often lately."
The captain continued his spur of the moment interview of a prospective employee, "You got much experience with a vessel like this?"

Kaylee shook her head, "I ain't never even been up in one before."

Mal grinned at her, "Wanna?"

Kaylee gave a little gasp, "You mean...?" The look on her face was like the sun. River concentrated on Kaylee's face in Mal's memory, that look of rapt joy as she understood the captain's meaning.

The captain cleared his throat three feet away from her and River was brought forcibly back to the present where Kaylee's face was worried and afraid. That wasn't right. It was as wrong as the lines of strain on Simon's face and the lack of a smile on Wash's lips. Inara's innate calm was cracking and Book's serene demeanor was very hastily assembled. No one looked as they should. She and Riddick and Jayne were the only ones who were unchanged. Jayne because he habitually expected things to go wrong. She and her mate because it was rare that their lives were not endangered in some way. Living with scientists and on the run as fugitives gave them a slightly different definition of relaxed.

Mal began to talk and River tilted her head reading his intentions and nodded to herself. She could feel Riddick thinking over their decision, the course of action they'd decided upon, he in his mind and she in agreement with him, affirmed by her lack of objection to his plan. Mal's voice was calm and matter of fact, showing none of the fear she could feel in him, "As you're all keenly aware, we've run into a bit of a situation. Engine's down, life support's on the fritz, and I got ten people here all wanting to breathe. Truth is, ain't got a whole lot of options at this juncture. And that's in spite of River and Jayne making air scrubbers. Though that is appreciated."

He nodded at River and Jayne and River shrugged, settling back into her lover's arms. Everything would be in chaos soon enough and she was going to enjoy the calm while she could. Mal took a breath and continued to speak, getting to the crux of his plan, "So... instead of focusing on what we don't got, time to talk about what it is we do. And what we got are two shuttles. Short range. Won't go far. But each got heat, and they each got air. Last longer than what's left in Serenity."

Simon asked the pertinent question, "Long enough to reach someplace?"

"No," Mal shook his head.

Book looked at Mal in some confusion, "So... where will we go, then?"

The captain's answer wasn't very comforting, "Far as you can get. We send both shuttles off in opposite directions; betters the chances of someone being seen, maybe getting picked up." He looked at them, "Shepherd Book, Kaylee, Jayne will ride with Inara in her shuttle. Doc, you, Riddick and your sis will go with Wash and Zoe, seein' as how Zoe still needs some doctorin'."

"What about you?" Kaylee asked in a small voice.

Mal shook his head, "Evens the odds the way we split up, I'm staying with Serenity."

Kaylee shook her head, "Captain."

Mal cut her off quietly, "We sent out a beacon. Even managed to boost it a little. By some chance, we get a response, someone's gonna have to be here to answer." River looked at the faces of the crew, she didn't have to read them to know that no one believed that would happen. "Let's get those shuttles prepped," The captain instructed quietly. Wash stood and started towards the stairs, "Wash, shuttles are that way." Mal pointed out towards the bay.
The pilot paused in his upward climb and nodded, "I know. But like you said, someone might answer the beacon. And when they do, I want to make sure that you can call everyone back. Won't take but a minute." River watched as Mal nodded and Wash continued up the stairs.

"Jayne, you get shuttle number two ready," Mal commanded. "I'll see to Inara's." He looked around, "Let's get moving. Take only what you need."

River looked up at Riddick as Mal walked out towards the stairs to the catwalks and the shuttles; Inara followed him, still stunned. "Wait until the shuttles are prepped? Get everyone ready to go?"

"Yeah, then we'll let 'em know who's goin' with who," Riddick agreed. "I'll go up and get the scrubbers for the shuttles."

"She will help, carry the chemicals for mixing," River was only half concentrating on what was going on around her, listening to Mal as he spoke with Inara and remembered when he'd first met her.

He'd thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and one of the most preternaturally calm females of his acquaintance. The captain had been instantly attracted and like a small boy had wanted to get a reaction from her. He'd done his best to crack the calm facade and hadn't gotten anywhere. But she'd taken the shuttle and she'd stayed for more than a year now and he still thought she was beautiful.

He loved her, Mal really did love her, but it wasn't any sort of love a woman not a Companion would understand. River shook her head over her captain's foolishness, "Mal is an idiot." She murmured. "Loves an ideal, not the woman. Doesn't even know what's beneath the mask, in love with finding out."

"He's a man River," Riddick reminded her. "Just a regular guy. And he's carryin' a lotta pain. He met her he was ripe to fall in love with what he couldn't have. Easiest way to keep from getting hurt. Problem was, Inara, with her own problems, let herself feel a little too much back."

River nodded, "Her mate is wise." She put the covers back on the crate halves so Riddick could carry two at a time without chemicals sloshing onto him. Picking up the jugs of the mix she looked at him curiously, "He knows a great deal about this for a man who said he didn't know anything about love."

"I know about falling for someone out of your league," Riddick told her with a half smile. "Fell for you didn't I?"

"Now her mate demonstrates he is indeed a male of the species, just as foolish as the captain in his own way," River teased. "Surely he knew that her heart was not her own from the first moment he held her at night?"

"Nope," Riddick smiled. "Didn't have a clue. Didn't know what all your scent markers meant Qīng Xiāng." He reminded her. "And as I recall it took me listening to you shiver in your sleep before I was even allowed to hold you at night."

"Didn't fear going to sleep," River led the way to the shuttle Jayne was prepping first. "Feared waking up. Was afraid to be in your arms, afraid I would panic if I felt your body against mine. Didn't want to offend the man who was so kind to me, didn't want to damage the friendship we were building." She heard Riddick sigh as he put one of the containers down. He hated that terror had controlled so much of her actions for the first three months they'd known each other. "And then Mathias drugged you and your animal came out. Knew then you would never hurt me. Never do
anything that would frighten me."

"And there I was convinced the animal would scare you off faster'n anythin' else," Riddick chuckled as he followed her out of the shuttle and across the catwalks to Inara's shuttle.

Inara was entreating Mal to come with them still, River could have told her it was a fruitless effort but she understood the Companion had to try. "Mal, you don't have to die alone."

They were walking into the shuttle when Mal told Inara, "Everybody dies alone."

River sighed and winced away from the emotions in the atmosphere of the shuttle. Mal still had hope though it was faint, while Inara believed they would all die of the cold. She shook her head, "Inara, we need a place to put the scrubber."

"How is it you have these prepped already," Mal asked curiously. "Why make so many?"

Riddick snorted at him, "My woman is a genius Mal. Weren't a huge leap a reasonin' to figure we'd end up in shuttles eventually." He shook his head as he put the covered crate down on the floor Inara had bared. "River wrote instructions on the lid for how to mix the scrubber," He told the elegant woman.

Mal was looking at River thoughtfully, "So you made how many a these?"

"Simon did one for the infirmary," River shrugged, "And Jayne and I did four while Rick worked with Kaylee."

"One's active now, gives us a little more time," Riddick said quietly as he and River left. "We'll be on the bridge with Wash."

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

Lì shí - right away / quickly / immediately
mèi mei - little sister
Āi yā - interjection of wonder, shock or admiration
Dòng ma? - Understand? Got it?
bǎo bèi - treasured object used for "darling," "honey," etc
Jiàn guī - curse it! / to hell with it!
huǐ zhǐ yǐ wǎn - too late to be sorry
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

Script Chinese Translations:
Chur ni-duh, - Screw you
suo-yo duh doh shr-dang - all that's proper...?

Quote Sources:

When you come to the end of all light that you know, and it's time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things will happen: Either there will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught to fly. – Edward Teller

That deep emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God. – Albert Einstein

Before the throne of the Almighty, man will be judged not by his acts but by his intentions. For God alone reads our hearts. - Mahatma Gandhi

A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows that faith does not prove anything. - Friedrich Nietzsche

God enters by a private door into every individual. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

The faith that stands on authority is not faith. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Faith is deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time. - Oswald Chambers

Faith is not simply a patience that passively suffers until the storm is past. Rather, it is a spirit that bears things - with resignations, yes, but above all, with blazing, serene hope. - Corazon Aquino

You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty. - Mahatma Gandhi

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. - Philippians 2:12-13

Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart. - Mahatma Gandhi
Riddick looked at Wash and then at River. His woman was standing quietly at the navigator's station while he helped Wash deal with his button. He had to admit it was a good idea. Wash could always be counted upon for a practical solution to a problem. Mal was coming down the hallway and Riddick kept his seat in the co-pilot's chair as Wash moved to the doorway.

The pilot waited until Mal was on the bridge before he spoke, "Everything's set and ready."

Mal nodded as he looked down at the console, "Good."

Wash pulled his coat tighter, a dull thing without pattern that Riddick couldn't help but feel was wrong on the shorter man. "I linked the nav systems of both shuttles into the helm, here." He pointed out the big button in some color that seemed to be bright but just looked shiny to Riddick's eyes, "When your miracle gets here, you just pound this button once. It'll call back both shuttles."

Mal nodded again and Riddick watched as Wash looked like he was about to say something. Before he could Mal's voice sounded quietly, almost gentle, "Go see to your wife."

The captain turned and looked at Riddick still sitting in his customary chair and seemed about to speak but Jayne showed up in the doorway, two duffle bags over his shoulders, "I went ahead and closed off all below deck vents. Diverted what's left to the bridge. Ain't much. So my advice is, seal off everything tight below you. Might buy you some time." Mal nodded almost absently and Jayne continued, "And I prepped a suit for you. It's hanging in the foredeck. So when the time comes, you can-"

Mal cut him off then, "I won't be needing it, but thanks."

Jayne nodded, "Okay. Well," He paused and Riddick nodded at him knowing his old friend wouldn't go far. Five paces down the hall perhaps, but no further. Just out of Mal's sight.

Riddick looked out into the Black and nearly smiled, "My pathway lies through worse than death."

He remembered the lines he'd learned a long time ago. He'd found the book in a half ruined building during the war. It had been one of several and he'd made sure he'd kept them safe at least until their position had been blown all to hell. But by then he'd read and memorized every readable page. He could smell River's curiosity about the poems, what she'd Read in his memory had intrigued her. She was probably resolving to find copies when they had power again.

"All right Rick, time for you to collect your girl from wherever's she's got to and be on your way," Mal said quietly motioning for Riddick to get out of the chair. Riddick smiled slightly. Mal had respect for him, for his abilities but he didn't even realize that Riddick had taught his woman the same bloody skills. The only difference between the two of them was he was bigger and stronger and River was more graceful and just a touch faster than he was. Mal hadn't even seen her, standing in the shadows, silent and still. But then the captain did seem to waver between wanting to protect what he thought was an innocent abused child and making use of the skilled and occasionally deadly woman.

"Well that's the thing Mal," Riddick didn't move, "I'm not leaving." River flowed like the water of her name out of the darkness behind Mal and whirled once, her boot heel striking the back of the
captain's head. Mal crumpled and Riddick sprang up to catch him before he broke his skull on the console. "You are." Riddick smirked down at River who was looking mighty pleased with herself.

"Safe for Jayne to be seen," River called their friend. Riddick couldn't help grinning as his woman's face split in a smirk similar to his own.

"C'mon, let's get him to Inara's shuttle," He told Jayne as the bigger man appeared in the doorway. "We're gonna need to rearrange some folks since me an' River are staying."

"Right," Jayne nodded and slung a duffle crosswise over his body before he grabbed Mal's arms. "River could you get my other bag?"

"Aye-firmative," River was so amused she was almost giggling and the tequila scent was heady in his nose.

The reaction of the crew was more than a bit surprised, Kaylee rushing up to them, "Oh my god what happened? Will he be all right?"

Inara was more controlled but still concerned, "What in the world- Did he hit his head?"

Wash and Simon were carrying a stretcher with Zoe on it to the second shuttle and Riddick nodded at the two men as he and Jayne did pretty much the same thing with Mal and Inara's shuttle, without the benefit of the stretcher. When they were done River handed Jayne his duffle and Riddick pulled her gently to his side before everyone who was able to walk joined them on the middle catwalk.

"Change in plans?" Wash asked mildly. Riddick had to give the man credit, faced with what could very well be called mutiny against Reynolds, the pilot was remarkably calm.

"Yeah," Riddick looked at all of them. "River and me are staying on the boat. We got a wave sent to an old friend. She should be gettin' it about now. If the beacon don't work, chances are she'll get here before we run out of air."

"She's at least..." Wash came to the correct conclusion, did the math and looked at them in horror, "It's at least twelve hours at hard burn from Persephone."

Riddick nearly smiled as Simon relaxed slightly at that and leaned against the railing, "Yeah that's about what we figured."

"What happened to Mal?" Book asked in a deliberately level tone.

"He hit his head," River shrugged and when every eye turned upon her she shrugged again. "Truth."


"I should stay with ya'll," Jayne said quietly. "Let me at least get another suit prepped for ya."

"I can do it," Riddick shook his head. "Zoe's out, I need you to defend the shuttle while Wash flies. Simon's good in a pinch but they need a man who knows fighting."

"Who's gonna do that for Inara's shuttle then," Jayne wasn't precisely arguing but he was concerned, Riddick could smell it on him.

"Book will," River's voice was quiet but it brooked no arguments. "A fine warrior in his own right," She speared Book with a glance and the shepherd simply sighed his agreement.
"Rick, why are you an' River stayin'," Kaylee was really worried now, almost in tears as she looked at him and Riddick sighed.

"River and Rick don't need as much oxygen," Simon explained gently. "But if we're going to go we should go now."

"For those that fly may fight again, which he can never do that's slain," River kissed her brother's cheek and that was everyone's signal to go. They watched as everyone filed into their shuttles and Riddick took a deep breath. River smelled of citrus and slightly burnt cinnamon. She would worry about their family until all of them were safely back on Serenity.

"C'mon, lets get to the bridge, I'll get another suit prepped," Riddick wrapped an arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head.

River looked up at Riddick, "The wave to Shazza will reach her in approximately five minutes. Shazza may respond, will turn my cortex on in one hour, any wave sent will reach us by then. Cannot rely on Mal's distress call. Though..." She frowned and tilted her head, "Potential for rescue is decent, but it will end in blood. Ours and theirs."

"Well then you'd best be captain, Read what's comin' and dodge it," Riddick's smile was grim, "Alone on the boat. I'll be the big evil in the dark." He knew even if he argued and wasted his breath that River would end up playing the captain. He didn't have to like it but fighting about it wouldn't do him a bit of good.

"It is what you do best," River half smiled and moved up to the bridge.

"Let's get to making another scrubber," Riddick suggested when River had turned on the cortex. "Gonna need all the help we can get. Air's thinner than on planet."

River nodded and they moved to the galley, wordlessly righting chairs and gathering the supplies needed to make another scrubber. And finally they moved into the bridge, Riddick reclined into the pilot's chair and gathered River into his lap, covering them both with a blanket against the cold. "Best to nap, use less oxygen," River whispered and kissed his cheek. Riddick nodded his agreement and closed his eyes.

"Zhàng fu, did we do right," River whispered the question after a moment and Riddick gathered her closer in response.

"Mal would be dead in twelve hours, the rest of 'em, includin' us, would die in the shuttles within twenty four," He answered in just as quiet a voice. "You an' me, we'll last longer'n Mal would. We're their best chance to live." His eyes opened and met hers, "You an' me, we had the same thought. It's what we've been thinkin' since the power went."

"Yes," River nodded. "We are ones acquainted with the night. We are grey. We stand between the shadow and the darkness, between the candle and the star. The ones who do what must be done, not what is right, or what is easy. We can be the monsters."

"Long as we're together on whatever it is, I don't care what they call us, don't care what we are," Riddick's grip tightened on River's body and he kissed her temple. "Mal can throw us off the boat. Long's our family is alive..."

"Yes. May not have been lawful, but it was the only choice," River agreed. "Thank you. For being of one mind with me."

"Gimme a set of odds and I'll pick the one best for our survival every time River," Riddick reminded
her with a gentle growl. "Now let's get some sleep. If there's gonna be blood we'll need our rest." River sighed and nodded her face against his shoulder.

Riddick leaned back and tightened his arms around her, slowing his breathing and decided that if he had eighteen hours left of life he was going to just enjoy holding River. She was warm and tired and smelt of plums, steel, silk and blood and she was no more asleep than he was. He deliberately didn't think about the lack of response from Shazza and what that could mean.

It was very gorram cold, was his first really clear thought. Riddick blinked at the cortex screen and looked out the window. The air was almost as thin as it had been in the skiff, by his mental count it had been almost twelve hours. River was chilled, almost motionless against him, her heartbeat slow and her scent filled with steel and silk. She was doing deep meditation, forcing her body to use its reserves, to use as little air as possible.

He felt her take a slightly deeper breath, her heart increased minutely and River looked up at him. "Time for the last scrubber," She murmured. "Won't be long I think."

Riddick nodded and tucked the blanket around her before he left her in the pilot's chair and moved to mix the air scrubber. A burst of slightly fresher air had them both taking deeper breaths for a moment until they both disciplined themselves to breathe shallowly again.

Then the cortex screen flickered again, the light that had drawn him out of his doze flashed against his eyes and Riddick looked at River, "Time to play captain Qīng Xiāng." He drew back out of the screen's view as it came to staticky life, "Firefly Serenity... This is the private salvage S.S. Walden. Receiving your distress beacon, do you read?"

River studied the screen and said nothing staring out into the Black and narrowing her eyes. "We wait, immediate response is suspicious," She said softly. "Must let them believe death is nigh."

"Gotcha," Riddick nodded his understanding from where he stood. "You got this River." He watched as she slumped in the pilot's chair and made sure he was out of the window's view should the other ship use floodlights to see onto the bridge. The message continued to repeat and crackle on the cortex as River waited and pretended to doze. Finally another ship rose up in front of the bridge, it was twice the size of Serenity. The cortex flickered back to life and River, to all appearances, finally woke.

"This is private transport Serenity," She rasped out sounding for all the world like a girl who'd gone without water for more than half a day. "Come in, S.S. Walden."

"S.S. Walden here, Serenity, got your distress call. What seems to be the trouble," The captain sounded cautious but not unfriendly.

River coughed in the bad air, "The catalyzer on the port compression coil blew. It knocked out life support. A fire knocked out the auxiliary. Breathing fumes." She explained pulling the blanket more tightly around her body with a not entirely faked shudder. Riddick listened as she explained about her injured crew and how she'd sent them off in the shuttles to survive as long as they could.

The Walden's captain nodded, "I'm sorry for your troubles, Captain. They sound many. But you do understand that I can't invite you aboard my vessel. I don't know you."

River nodded her understanding, "I don't want a ride Captain. Just a little push is all."
"Right. Your mechanical trouble," The other captain said thoughtfully. "Your compression coil, you say?"

"It was the catalyzer," River specified. Riddick as quietly as he could inhaled and caught waves of hot cinnamon and citrus along with the steel and silk of her scent. Blood and plums and honey were buried under her rage and pain as she Read the captain's intentions for her and the ship.

"Not even the coil?" The enemy captain was surprised, "Catalyzer's a nothing part, Captain."

River shook her head, "It's nothing until you don't have one." She said quietly, "Then, as with all little things like horseshoe nails, it appears to be everything."

The captain nodded thoughtfully, "Well, it is possible we might have something that could do you. We just come from a big salvage job off Ita Moon."

The girl playing captain offered a half smile, "I'd appreciate it."

The man who'd made himself their enemy wasn't through though, "Trouble is... how can I know for certain your story's true? Ambush could be waiting for me and my people on the other side."

River shrugged at the screen, "You can plainly see my shuttles've been launched, just like I said. And by now you've scanned me. You know I have no life support."

The captain, for all appearances, seemed to agree, "I don't expect to see any weapons when we board."

River nodded, "And I do expect to see that engine part before I open the door."

The captain smiled and Riddick smelt River's fury grow, the air was redolent with cinnamon now. "I feel like maybe we can do business."

River nodded and clicked the cortex off, "Plans on bringing three with him, all armed. Four others on the boat. Pilot and three more. None of them are very concerned about anyone but themselves and their crew. Don't care about us." She rose and left the blanket on the chair, "My Riddick knows how to hide in plain sight. She will acquire weapons from the enemy."

"Gotta be careful bàng jiār," Riddick growled the words, he didn't like this. Neither of them were at their best after breathing the stale air for so long. "Anything happens to you I'll be pretty pissed."

"Same goes," River slanted a glance at him as he took his place under the stairs, the crates and darkness easily concealing him. Breathing shallowly, she moved to the airlock door controls. She felt the bump of the seal as the Walden connected with Serenity and the enemy captain appeared at the airlock doors. The catalyzer thumped against the window and River nodded. Riddick watched as she hit the button for the airlock doors.

The rush of air invading Serenity was almost intoxicating; Riddick could feel River savoring the oxygen. He could tell it was only her absolute need to keep her gaze on the enemy that kept her eyes open, rather than closing them to savor breathing fully again. It was tempting to do so himself, but taking greedy gasps would have alerted the crew to his presence. It was just as well River didn't close her eyes, though she did sway a bit, deliberately as though dizzy, and the captain and his four crew aimed their guns right at her. Riddick bit back a growl of rage and watched as River put her hands up.
The captain gestured to the female, "Check her."

Riddick watched as the woman moved in and began to frisk River as the captain continued speaking to another lackey, "Search the ship. Start in the cockpit, work your way down."

River regarded the man coldly, "Would this be what you meant by ambush?"

The captain's smile was equally cold, "We're just verifying your story." He looked at his crew, "You find anyone on board not supposed to be, you shoot 'em."

The lackeys went one of them right over Riddick's head without seeing him and he smirked inwardly. He'd also noticed that while the woman was frisking River she hadn't come up with any shivs. His woman hid her weapons well.

River regarded the captain, "I thought we were going to be reasonable in regards to trade?"

The man nodded, "We're just makin' sure what you said is true. You're alone here, like you said, well then, no one gets hurt. If you were lyin', well..." He shrugged, "Lies cost lives."

River nodded coldly, her expression reflecting none of her anger. She stayed unmoving as the enemy crew ran through the ship. Riddick concentrated on figuring out who was where and exactly how hard it would be on he and River to take these no good pieces of à fèn.

It didn't take long for the others to return to the cargo bay, one of them passing right over him without notice, again. The captain hadn't moved his gun barrel away from River though and that didn't bode well. "Ship's clear, Captain."

Without removing his gaze from River the captain asked, "You check the engine room?"

The crewman nodded, "It's like she said. Catalyzer's blown. That's all she needs."

River took a deep breath, "Anything of worth is here in the cargo bay. Please look around and decide what is a fair trade. No intention of cheating on a deal." She was losing her pronouns and that meant the animal was close to taking over. Too much of a life or death situation. Riddick thought as clearly as he could for her to hang on a little longer, don't give the game away. Her gaze steadied slightly though her cold stare never wavered from the captain.

The man holding the gun spoke then, "Already decided." His gun barked once, and even Riddick, fast as he was, could not get to River fast enough to prevent the bullet from tearing into her body. She'd tensed minutely when the man's words had left his lips and thrown herself to the side, but instead of a glancing blow the bullet had hit dead center. Her slender body was thrown backwards almost beneath the workbench even as the captain kept speaking, "We're taking your ship."

Riddick lost his temper and his hold on the animal, River's blood in his nose, only peripherally aware that she'd grabbed the gun from beneath the workbench. They didn't see him until he was behind the one called Jesse, and with a quick wrench of his hands her neck was snapped and she was falling to the ground. The captain stopped mid instruction and shot at him. Bullets hit, shoulder and left side, grazing his ribs, no vital organs, and Riddick stopped caring. He had his shivs and the captain was no match for the animal, even as River's gun barked and a bullet wound appeared between the captain's eyes. River's scent was anger and fear and pain, the hold stank of citrus, stinging his nose and he felt more than heard a bullet zip past him to bury itself in another enemy crewman's forehead. The last one tried to run and River's bullet found a new home in the man's shoulder just before the animal growled its satisfaction as he found the sweet spot and blood gushed.

River's voice was faint, but steel and silk had replaced some of the citrus as he turned to her, "The
others have heard the shots. They come to help their captain. Pilot stays on the bridge. Three more. Take his gun and her shivs. Go to meet them on board the Walden. Cannot wait for them to come to us, tactical advantage in pressing the attack."

Riddick growled, the animal was taking over, he could feel his hold over it slipping, but even the animal understood the advantage River's plan. "Keep you safe River," He promised furiously and stormed over to the enemy ship.

River kept her gun trained on the airlock. She might not be able to move much, the belly wound made walking a bad idea, but she could guard the ship while her partner defended it. The air moving into Serenity was helpful in keeping her mind clear. It brought with it screams, gun shots and the scent of blood and bowel as Riddick delivered death to the people who would have killed her without a second thought.

She'd known this would happen, had hoped she could avoid it, but even she couldn't account for chance and a gun that shot crooked. Jayne would have taken one look at the barrel and known which way to jump. She would have to talk to her adopted gē ge about what to look for. River frowned, the pain and the blood loss was making her muzzy. She had to concentrate.

Riddick didn't stumble into the hold but he did walk without his normal grace and complete silence. He was covered in blood, "My mate." He moved towards her with a frown of worry and River could read that the animal was predominant. Her injury and the need to kill anyone from the enemy ship had taken her partner's reason for the moment. "Nǚ ren," Riddick bent to scoop her up and she stopped him.

"Leave her for a moment," She grabbed his arm. "Have to fix Serenity and call the others back. Simon can fix us. Keep the blood inside." He was reeling and she frowned revising her plan, "Riddick. Please." She cupped her bloody hands to his face, "Please. You need adrenaline. We'll both die otherwise."

His growl was more like an enraged roar as he picked her up and carried her to the infirmary. Her hands had started to shake from blood loss but she managed to get the needle dosed with the right amount. Handing it to him she nearly dropped it and gasped as she jerked to keep it in her fingers. The pain that sliced through her was some of the worst she'd felt in her life.

"Give it to me," Riddick's voice was still overlaid with the animal, the man not in complete control. She'd seen him do this before, the man working in tandem with the animal towards survival. He took the syringe from her trembling fingers and positioned it over his heart. The shout of agony and shock that tore from his lips as he slammed the needle home and depressed the plunger was one of the worst sounds she'd ever heard.

Helplessly she watched as her lover convulsed, his entire body, so beautiful and powerful, shuddering with the effects of the drug. It took much less time than Zoe for his body to absorb it, to deal with the shock of the adrenaline hitting his system. When his eyes were mostly clear River spoke and was shocked to hear her voice was faded to a whisper. "Catalyzer is on the floor by the dead captain. Have to plug it in, call the others back. Simon will fix us," She pointed out the door towards the cargo bay. "Please. Belly wounds take hours. I'll be fine. My Riddick is bleeding. Bandages for the holes and blood. Catalyzer and Wash's miracle button."

He nodded and moved out to the bay. River tried to sit up and groaned involuntarily as her stomach protested. The good news was that she didn't seem to have an exit wound which meant her spine
was intact or she wouldn't have been able to move her legs, which were functioning well, if on something of a delay. Before she could do more than attempt to sit up again Riddick was stalking back into the infirmary with duct tape slapped over his wounds, the catalyzer in his hand. "Stay lyin' down 清香," His voice held the tone of a threat if she didn't. "I'll be right back."

Serenity was trying to warn them of imminent doom, the red emergency lights were flashing and the cortex was repeating its emergency phrase, 'Jeoshung yong-jur goo-jang. Jin-chchia yong-chi gong yin.'

Mentally she tracked him through the ship, keeping one hand pressed to her belly, painful though it was, the pressure would help keep her from bleeding to death. He had lost a lot of blood, and the bullets were still lodged in his shoulder and leg, he'd taken a through and through to his side and his ribs ached. Her mate never let pain stop him though, she could feel him channeling it, using it as fuel to keep going, feeding his rage. The catalyzer was pushed into place, smeared with their blood still, and Serenity's main turbine began to turn. Light and vibration filled the ship and she could feel him turn from the engine towards the bridge.

The walk seemed endless, blood dripping from his fingers down the hall and smearing the big button Wash had rigged as he pressed it down. She could feel the weariness in him, blood loss, pain, the lack of oxygen and then battle immediately upon getting access to clean air again all taking its toll as he bent and picked up the blanket. River felt when he stumbled, his injured shoulder hitting the wall painfully and his painstaking descent of the stairs to the lower deck.

"My 郞," She got the words out through the fog that seemed to be surrounding her. "Lie with me, rest." She tried to reach for him but everything felt so heavy. A dull angry throbbing agony in her belly roared to life and she screamed without meaning to. Riddick's voice, choked and dark, something hard pressing down on her belly and then easing. His presence, warm skin growing cooler, pressing to her side, blood. She could smell their blood, it filled the air, seemed to darken her vision.

He wasn't certain what to expect when they were called back to Serenity. He couldn't be sure how much time had elapsed, hadn't wanted to think on it really. He couldn't do much to help, beyond attempting to soothe his companions who were all worried, angry, hurt or terrified. They didn't take it too well but that was to be expected. No one was in a mood to be soothed.

When they'd gotten the signal to return to their home ship it had been a relief. But he'd been dreading what they'd find there. If someone had pushed the button it meant that they knew what it was for. That hopefully meant it had been Rick or River who'd pressed it. If not, he didn't want to think about what that meant. A trap most likely.

When they'd gotten into communication range with the second shuttle the news had been passed back and forth. Zoe was stirring but still unconscious yet. Mal was awake and furious. Medical instruction had been passed along to those that needed the help and everyone had been glad to hear friendly voices.

But coming up on Serenity had struck everyone on both shuttles silent. A huge salvage vessel was attached to the Firefly, both ships parked nose to nose for all the world as if exchanging Eskimo kisses. And even stranger they were being hailed by yet another ship.

"This is Serenity Shuttle two," Wash responded to the hail as they approached Serenity. "Please identify yourselves."
"This is the Captain Cross of Huntington's Bolt, we're a courier ship coming outta Persephone on an emergency run," The man who replied was as well-spoken as Simon. "My passenger got a wave from some folks on Serenity requesting a part. They said it was an emergency."

"Well it would be, and I'd be happy to confirm that if you can tell me what part it is she brought with her," Wash was being cautious, that was a gorram good thing considering all the space pirates out in the Black.

"She's got a catalyzer, type that goes on the compression coil," Cross replied promptly. "That what you're looking to hear?"

"That would be it," Wash nodded; the relief in his voice was obvious. "It looks as if someone else docked with her, but there's an airlock on the hull, offside opposite the observation window. You'll be able to see it behind us when we dock. Can you connect to that?"

"Just about our size," Cap'n Cross replied with a smile in his voice. "Though from the lights on and all I'd guess you already got a coil."

"Yeah, ya'll might wanna stay on your boat until we're sure we only have friendlies aboard," Wash cautioned the captain. "Two of our crew stayed behind. If they're not the ones answering the door… well, let's just say we'll have bigger trouble than no lights."

"We'll wait for your all clear then," The captain nodded. "Let us know if you need a hand though. My passenger is chompin' at the bit to get on that boat."

"I imagine she is," Wash nodded. "You tell her we said hi and we'll get this figured out as soon as we can." He cut the connection and flipped over to Inara's shuttle, "You get all that?"

"I did," Inara's cool voice was slightly relieved, reflecting the mood of everyone else in Wash' shuttle. "It seems like River and Rick kept an ace up their sleeve."

"Yeah," Jayne leaned over Wash's chair and spoke to the screen. He didn't like this, didn't like it one bit, lights on, no one hailing them, the ships below utterly silent. "You all stay in the shuttles and let me do a sweep. Rick an' River didn't go to the trouble of keepin' us all alive to have us get dead outa sheer stubborn stupidity." He shook his head as he heard Mal's voice, "You sit on him or have Book knock him out. But don't let him out of that shuttle."

He turned to see Simon standing directly behind him, "I'm coming with you." He said quietly.

"Doc," Jayne sighed. He didn't have the time to argue. His gut was telling him there was something really wrong and he weren't no Reader like River but he'd learned to trust his gut. "I ain't got time to baby you along."

"If they're hurt, they'll need a doctor. If there's trouble you'll need backup," Simon was firm. "I'm not as good a shot as the rest of my family but I'm good enough to lay down covering fire if you need it. I'm not staying here safely while my family is in danger. I went because I knew if I stayed I'd just use up air they couldn't afford."

Jayne nodded and looked at Simon critically before opening one of his duffle bags, "All right, put this on over your coat. It ain't much but cloth armor'll do ya in a pinch. You got your pistol?" When Simon patted his hip Jayne nearly grinned. He loved it when folks actually listened to what he taught. "Good, take this, and this one too, and keep 'em handy. And for gods sake don't shoot me in the back accidentally." He handed Simon another couple of guns and was pleased to note the doc distributed them in safe places on his belt.
"If I ever shoot you Jayne it won't be by accident," The doctor told him firmly. The shuttle slid into its cradle and the slight thud and jolt was their indication of the air lock sealing shut.

"All right, lets go," Jayne looked at Wash. "Lock it behind us and don't come out until we call you. Password is Callahan. Ask for it and if we say anything but that, you take off."

He led Simon off the shuttle and shut the door behind him. Leading him from the catwalks to the upper decks was a bit nerve wracking especially when there was no sign of either River or Rick. They came up the stairs near engineering and Jayne poked his head out to see no one. But there was blood on the floor and smeared on the walls, about shoulder and waist height. Jayne frowned and pointed to the blood so Simon would see it but the doctor already had his eyes fixed on the drying red turned to brown.

Jayne fell into his scouting and tracking mode following the trail to the bridge. When he saw the red button smeared with more blood he scowled and looked at Simon. "We're headed down to the infirmary, quick as we can. If they're in there and not passed out along the way you go in, seal yourself in and I'll keep scouting. Password is the same. You don't open the doors until I give it to you, got me?"

He was pleased to see Simon nod and led him quickly but as quietly as possible down to the lower deck. The cargo bay had blood and bodies all over the floor, and the airlock was gaping open to the attached ship. Jayne turned and looked at the brightly lit med bay and saw both River and Rick on the exam table. He could see the blood on Riddick's skin even from where he stood on the landing. "Go Doc," Jayne nodded. "And remember what I said."

Simon nodded and ran for the infirmary. Jayne took a deep breath and forced himself to not think about his two friends maybe dead of their wounds, concentrating on the hunt, tracking the blood and following what turned out to be a trail of bodies into the other ship. Four more dead bodies later he returned to Serenity and went to the infirmary door.

"Simon, password Callahan," He told the shorter man. It took Simon a moment to open the doors, busy as he was, but he finally came over and unlocked them.

"I need you to go and let the others know to come aboard. I need more hands and I need blood. They've both lost a lot," Simon began to issue his own commands. "Rick has three separate bullet holes, two of the bullets are still in him. River has a belly wound."

"You got it doc," Jayne took the stairs at a run and pounded on the door to the shuttle, "Wash, Callahan. Get Book and bring Zoe down, Rick and River are hurt bad. Doc needs help."

"On our way," Wash's reply was succinct and Jayne ran back down stripping off his guns as he did and leaving them on the counter inside the infirmary as he washed his hands.

"I can pull the bullets out," Jayne offered as he scrubbed down. "I done it with Rick in the army."

"Can you get him to the side so I can work on River on the table?" Simon was getting all of his instruments ready as he spoke, and pulling on gloves.

"Yeah," Jayne went to lift Riddick and got a nice jolt when the man started awake and held a shiv to his throat. The only way to react was to freeze into place and remind Rick of who he was. "Hey, Riddick, it's Shea." He let his voice fall into his old way of speaking, the rhythms and lilt of Kerry, the accent he'd had when he'd met this dangerous man as a boy. "River's hurt Riddick, I gotta move ya now," He tried to soothe his friend, half of him amazed that Rick had come out of his near comatose state.

"Simon's seein' to her now," Jayne kept his voice even, as reassuring as he could make it, even as the rest of the crew arrived in the lounge. Mal had woken up and had the look of a bear with a sore head, but he and Wash were carrying Zoe's stretcher. "C'mon, we're movin' ya over here. Simon's takin' care a your woman Rick. I'm to take out those bullets you got lodged in ya."

"Shea," Riddick let Jayne manhandle him off the exam table and over to the side of the infirmary. Kaylee came in and quickly moved everything off the counter. "River, gotta…" His voice was fading, the last of his phenomenal strength used up in his effort to secure help for his woman.

Jayne looked at Mal but his words were for Simon, "They both need blood.

"River is type AB negative, Riddick is A negative," Simon was concentrating on River's belly wound. "Anyone compatible with either of those?"

"I'm type A negative," Jayne offered, "But I'm a little busy." He carefully cut Riddick's clothing away from his injuries, the shirt was a dead loss but he could save the pants, make them into shorts.

"I'm B negative," Kaylee offered.

Wash was already rolling up his sleeve, "And I'm type O negative, so I can donate."

Jayne nodded, "Kaylee grab a chair," He looked over at Simon, "Doc, how's it goin'?"

"Mal I need your hands," Simon commanded, "Inara, go help Jayne. We need to run lines from Kaylee and Wash to River and Rick. The two of you do that. Jayne, if you get into trouble let me know. Field surgery was a while ago."

"What can I do to help?" Book wanted to know and Jayne shot the dark man a half grin, "Go up to the bridge and let the Bolt know that its safe for them to dock. No unfriendlies aboard except Mal." He looked down at the man he was doing makeshift surgery on and grimaced. "Get 'em down here and find out how they was to get paid. Guessin' they didn't make the trip for free."

Book left and Inara came up to him. Kaylee had taken a seat in a chair and the Companion with a deftness that surprised Jayne managed to get an tube running from Kaylee's arm to River's and then did the same with Wash and Riddick. "Thanks," Jayne nodded as he grabbed a squirt bottle of saline and began to irrigate the wound, "Gorram." He muttered to himself, "What'd you do Rick, jam your shirt in there to staunch the blood?" He shook his head and began to pull pieces of fabric out and a lumpy bullet along with them. The blood spurted up a minute and he cursed violently, "'Nara I need some sponges or somethin', he's nicked somethin' in there good."

"Jayne you need help?" Simon's voice was steady and calm in remarkable contrast to Jayne's cursing and muttering.

"The bullet nicked an artery," Jayne called back. "Got it packed off and pressure on it but I ain't good enough to sew it shut."

"All right," Simon called, "Keep the pressure on it, and start on his leg and side. If you can get everything cleaned out and packed I'll do any stitching you can't."

"That'll work," Jayne looked at Riddick's leg, "Leg looks like the bullet's just buried in muscle. His side's a through an' through, gonna need to check his ribs didn't splinter is all."
"No bubbles in the blood," The question was worried though Simon's tone never varied.

"Nah, didn't penetrate the lung. Looks like the gorr-am thing slid against his ribs an' kept on goin'," Jayne took a close look at it and nodded. "Shoulder looks to be the worst of it."

"All right, yell if you run into trouble," Simon bent over his work, quiet murmurs to Mal about instruments and pressure the only sounds while Jayne concentrated on Riddick.

Jayne took his time, painstakingly cleaning the wounds, sewing muscle and tissue back together delicately, with stitches that had Inara staring. He smirked without looking at her as he tied off the stitches in Riddick's leg. "Who'd you think mends my clothes 'Nara? Mal? Ma taught me how ta sew a long time ago. Man on his own has to know how to fix his things. Can do buttons and seams too."

"A man of many talents," Book's voice was amused and respectful both. "How is he?"

"Doc, gonna need you to stitch his shoulder," Jayne said in response. "The ribs aren't splintered near as I can tell but I left 'em open for you to take a look see."

"If I tie off the bleeder will you be able to do the rest of his shoulder?" Simon asked and Jayne turned to see the doctor's hands covered in his sister's blood.

"Yeah, I can stitch fine on flesh, just don't have the trick of arteries and whatnot," Jayne took a deep breath. "Is she worse than Kaylee was?"

"Well its the same general area," Simon answered and handed Mal an instrument. "The problem is they'd been lying here for hours. Her system tries to heal the damage, the same as Rick's so I'm trying to make sure there isn't any scarring. It takes longer. But I want my sister to have the option of children someday." He looked at Mal. "Can you keep the wound irrigated? I need to see to Rick's shoulder. It won't take long." He looked at Wash and then over at Kaylee, "We'll need to unhook these two soon."

"I got it doc," Mal said quietly and Jayne wondered what the man was thinking as he stared down at the little girl who'd taken his bullet. Jayne had no doubt that it hadn't mattered to the men in the hold who was holding the ship, they'd have shot anyone got in their way.

"All right," Simon stripped off his gloves and pulled on a new set, "Jayne if you'll grab the retractors... and Inara, just keep the packing sponge in place..." He reached in and deftly began to work on the artery smoothing a patch over the slice and cautiously letting it go after the material had set. "I think we're good," He looked down at Riddick's leg and nodded his approval before probing the wound near Riddick's ribs. "He was incredibly lucky, or just good at dodging, there's only one cracked rib and its not even fully snapped. It's still in place." He did something to the wound and pulled back slightly. "I've put sealant on the fracture. You should be able to sew him up now. I've got to finish with River."

"Thanks Doc," Jayne nodded and looked at Inara, "Now that we got that bleeding stopped, better stop drainin' Lil Kaylee." He suggested.

"Does he need more blood?" Shazza's voice was quiet, "I'm A negative. I can give either of them blood."

"And we got a crew member who's type O positive," Captain Cross' voice said from the doorway. Jayne looked from his work to Kaylee who seemed exhausted. "Inara I can finish this, can you get Kaylee something to eat? She needs something like juice an' some protein chips or somethin'. Same thing with Wash."
He was only vaguely aware of Simon speaking, concentrating on the stitches and making scrupulously sure the wounds were clean before he finished closing them, "Simon I'm good over here. You need anything from me?"

"You need to sit down," Simon advised. "Before you fall down," His voice was stern and Jayne collapsed into the chair Kaylee had vacated.

"How's she doin'," He asked as Simon straightened from his bent position over River.

"I've gotten rid of the scar tissue, and managed to stop the bleeding, the bullet had stopped in a very bad place," Simon shook his head. "But she was lucky. It tore through a lot but there weren't any fragments. No splintering the way Dobson's bullets did in Kaylee."

"So it hit her intestines, her womb an' her stomach," Jayne surmised. "Stopped before it got to the liver at least. Mighta never gotten the bleedin' stopped."

"Well she'll make a full recovery," Simon sighed and busied himself with closing the wound and putting the weaves on over the stitches. "We're incredibly lucky we had compatible donors. Without the blood, she'd have died on my table." His voice had grown rough and he took a deep breath, "I'm going to put the weaves on Rick, and then we'll worry about getting them into clean clothing."

"Yeah, you'll want Inara to help you with River for that one," Jayne shook his head. "I'll grab them some gear but no way am I helpin' to strip Rick's woman down. He's still irritated we all seen what we did."

Wash chuckled and shook his head and Jayne watched him curiously, "Just thinkin' River an' Rick are gonna have to tell us how there came to be eight dead bodies between two boats."

Jayne sighed, "Yeah. Knowin' them, it took alla ten minutes if that." He pushed himself up from the chair. "Simon I'm gonna grab their gear. Kaylee, come sit next to Rick. He wakes up you'll reassure him some."

It didn't take him long, which was how he liked it. The last thing he figured Rick and River needed was Mal hangin' around and loomin' over them. Mal was sooner or later gonna get pissed about River knocking him out. It wasn't like she'd doped him or something, but he knew those two and River had probably kicked Mal in the skull.

He managed, with Simon's help to get Riddick out of his filthy blood stained clothes and into a clean pair of shorts and cargo shorts. He left while Simon and Inara got River into the soft waisted exercise pants and sweater. Taking a seat near Rick, Jayne sighed and rubbed his face, "This has been a gorrarn long day."

"It ain't over yet," Mal was leaning against the doorway, Wash had gone to sit next to Zoe who was starting to wake up and Mal's eyes were on his oldest friend. Jayne knew just how he felt, sitting vigil in between River and Riddick.

Simon washed his hands after putting the dirty clothing into the cleaner and shook his head. Jayne looked at him curiously, "Doc? Somethin' wrong?"

"No, it is just, as you said, a very long day," The core man replied and sat down at Riddick's feet. Jayne watched as Shazza came in and patted his arm before she moved to River's side and gently began to finger comb the knots out of River's hair.
Author's Note: So was this what all of you expected? We had a Jayne POV in the last section because I wanted to show everyone's reaction to the results of what River and Riddick did. I wanted for them to make a decision and follow through with it regardless of what Mal ordered. These two are always going to take their best chance for survival and going to sit meekly in a shuttle while someone else waited on the boat didn't suit them at all. Besides sooner or later they were going to do something to piss Mal off again. This seemed to be the right time.

I hope you all like this. Be patient with me...I think I might slide 'Dead or Alive' in before 'Ariel'. And I've got a fun twist for Ariel that hopefully you'll like.

Oh, and if anyone gets the horseshoe nail reference...Congrats I don't know many people who've read the same books as I have or even are aware of what River refers to when she talks about it so good luck folks. And no cheating!

Chinese Translations:

Zhàng fu - Husband

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

bàng jiār - lover / partner

dà fèn - human excrement / night soil (human manure traditionally used as agricultural fertilizer)

gē ge - big brother

Nǚ ren - wife

láng - wolf

Script Translations:


Quote Sources:

My pathway lies through worse than death. - Conquest - Gloria Douglas Johnson

For those that fly may fight again, which he can never do that's slain, - Hudibras - Samuel Butler

We are ones acquainted with the night. - Robert Frost (paraphrased)

We are grey. We stand between the shadow and the darkness, between the candle and the star. - The Grey Council - Babylon Five (not sure of the writer, yes I'm a nerd, haven't you folks figured that out by now?)
He woke slowly, the darkness leaving his vision until he was able to open his eyes and squint against the glare of the infirmary lights even through the goggles someone had pulled over his eyes. He closed them again until he could get his bearings a bit better. The animal, his own instincts were still ruling him, he wouldn't let them know he was awake until he knew what was going on. Though waking up not in cuffs argued that he wouldn't be thrown in Mal's version of a brig at least. He could hear the crew's voices, all of them talking quietly and mentally began to identify them.

Inara and Jayne were talking, Inara's elegant murmur was soothing, "I feel like maybe we should do something about all the blood. I don't think it's something they should see when they wake up."

Jayne wasn't terribly concerned, "They seen blood before. Lots of it."

Inara wasn't so sure, "Yes, I'm certain that's true, but sometimes it seems different when it's one's own blood."

"Well I didn't shoot 'em, so don't look at me for the scrubbin' of it," Jayne muttered rebelliously. Riddick knew that tone, Jayne was more upset by all of this than he was letting on.

Inara didn't seem to get that, "No one's asking you to scrub anything. Although a bath wouldn't kill you."

"Aw, ya keep on like that an' you'll hurt my manly feelin's; you know, all one of 'em," Jayne retorted.

Zoe was awake; he guessed she was feeling better, talking to someone, "I guess it's a fair bet to say I missed birthday cake."

She must have been talking to Wash because the pilot answered her, "It's okay, honey. Nobody got to have any. It's still on the floor and some of the walls upstairs, though. If you want I'll run up there and scrape up a piece."

Zoe had a smile in her voice, "You'd do that for me?"

The man's voice was utterly devoted, Rick spared a moment to wonder if he sounded like that when he talked to River, "I'd do anything for you. You know that."

Riddick decided he'd heard enough. He didn't hear Simon, or River, though Mal's voice was coming from a greater distance and he could hear Shazza talking quietly, her distinctive accent a comfort. He shifted slightly, adjusted his goggles and Zoe's eyes darted towards him, "Welcome back, Rick."

"River." He felt like his throat was a desert and Jayne grabbed a cup and straw giving him some water. When he could talk without setting his throat on fire he asked again, though he could see River lying asleep on the exam table, tubes in her arm. "River?"

"She'll be fine," Simon walked into the infirmary followed closely by Shazza and Mal. "You're both going to be fine." He came over and began to look under the bandages Riddick felt on various parts of his body, "Jayne did a very good job of stitching you up while I worked on River. I'm pleased to say that this surgery went better than the last I performed on her."
"That's good," Riddick turned his head as he heard his woman's breathing quicken. "She's wakin' up." Burnt cinnamon hit his nose and he shuddered, "She's..." He shook his head and pitched his voice for River's ears. The last time she'd woken in this kind of pain from a surgery she'd been in the Academy, "River, it's all right. We're home. It's safe. This ain't..."

Her eyes flew open then, her head jerking towards the sound of his voice and every line of tension in her body relaxed, "Richard is well?"

"Yeah, few holes but that ain't anythin' new to me Qing Xiāng," He soothed. Shazza went to stand by River's bed and he watched as their friend took his woman's hand and held it for comfort.

"You scared me good mèi mei," Shazza reprimanded her gently. "Thought we talked about not doin' that anymore?"

"She ain't stopped pacing since she got here," Mal told River quietly.

Riddick frowned as Simon poked his side and looked at the doctor, "Ribs are fine doc." He shrugged. "Gimme a bit an' I won't even feel 'em. End of the week, shoulder and leg'll be fine too. I'll sleep more but that'll be about it."

"I'm putting you on a broad spectrum antibiotic," Simon told him. "Every morning for the next three days you'll get a shot. Same thing with River, so both of you come see me." He frowned over at his sister, "Every now and then it still amazes me what the two of you can survive."

"But she's gonna be fine," Riddick pressed him. "We don't gotta watch for any problems?"

"I got rid of any scar tissue," Simon nodded. "If she has discomfort in the next month it'll be important that you tell me, but we got here in time. There's no lasting damage."

Riddick felt his bones go to water in relief and let himself breathe, "Shazz, your ride still around?"

"Yeah, they're gettin' itchy though," Shazza looked over at him with a half-smile.

"Jayne, you go on up to our bunk, get River's portable cortex for me? We'll get payment put in his account," Riddick looked at his oldest friend. Jayne grinned at him, that lightning fast expression that brightened his entire face before he hurried out of the bright white room.

"So exactly what was the plan," Mal finally asked the question that both Riddick and River had been waiting on.

"Lemme get Shazza's ride paid off an' on their merry before we get into that," Riddick pushed himself up as Jayne came back in with River's cortex and ground his teeth against the pain movement caused. He really was exhausted or he wouldn't even be feeling it. But the adrenaline had run out and he could tell he was still a little low on blood. River would be even worse off, with her smaller body mass and a killing wound.

The man who'd given Shazz a lift out to the middle of nowhere matter of factly quoted his fee and typed in his account number when Riddick asked for it. He watched the transfer of funds go through and nodded before taking his leave and wishing them all well.

Shazza grinned down at River, "Hope your captain doesn't mind if I ride along for a spell? Not inclined to let you out of my sight just yet, especially considering the situations you get yourself into." Riddick watched as she and Simon exchanged exasperated and humorous looks, the two normal people attached to the crazy couple that constantly risked their lives.
"Got more'n enough to pay your fare," Riddick nodded and looked at Mal. "Less you got a problem with Shazza taking space in a dorm?"

"I don't mind a passenger, though boredom's always a factor," Mal warned a hint of a smile on his face though his eyes were dark and more than a bit displeased as he looked at the wounded couple.

"Great. I grabbed a bag on the off chance I'd be staying," Shazza left with Captain Cross and Riddick sighed and looked at Mal.

"You wanna get the yellin' over with now that she's gone for a few minutes," He asked quietly.

As if that was all the invitation he needed, Mal let loose with a torrent of cursing and hollering that should have woken the dead, to the effect that River and Riddick had committed mutiny, they were in big trouble and what in the name of all that was holy and unholy were they thinking? Mal was the captain and it was his job to stay with the ship and they didn't have the right to take that decision away from him regardless of what they thought.

Riddick looked at River and then at Shazza who was standing wide eyed in the doorway and sighed before he looked at Mal. "Get that you're pissed an' you don' like what we did," He said quietly. "But it ain't slid past my notice that we were in that situation because a your pride Mal. Now you're captain and we're under your rule. But when you endanger my family…that's where I draw the line."

"Now you wait just a—"

Mal didn't get any further than that before Riddick interrupted him, "Me and River, we're a danger enough. An' we've been good and careful 'bout putting this crew in harm's way 'cause a our past. More sorry than we can say 'bout the Fed an' Kaylee gettin' hurt. But this ain't like a job Mal. This was your stubbornness put us in this spot."

"And it was my place to deal with it," Mal snapped back. "You don't get to knock me out and sacrifice yourself to my stupidity. The captain stays with the ship. That's how it is. How it's always been."

"Captain would have died before we returned," River whispered from her prone position. "Did what must be done. Kept us all alive." Her voice was heavy with exhaustion and her eyes closed wearily.

Riddick looked at her worriedly before he nodded his agreement. "Now if you don't want us on this boat, give me an' River twelve hours to rest and we'll go. I can pilot that scrap heap and we'll be on our merry."

"Might be best," River whispered, "We endanger the crew by being here." Out of the blue she added something that made no sense to anyone but Riddick, Simon and herself, "For if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them."

"I didn't say—" Mal was getting irritated but Riddick could tell he didn't want them to leave. Or at least he didn't want them to leave if it wasn't his idea.

Simon spoke up then, a calm reasoned voice, "Captain, the wounds Rick took might have killed you. The belly wound River has would certainly have had you bleeding out before we returned. I counted four bodies in our hold and Jayne tells me there are another four on the other ship." He looked at his little family and sighed, "I'm not happy they were hurt, but I can tell you that they were outnumbered and wounded."
Zoe's voice, her presence almost forgotten she'd been so quiet, sounded in the momentary silence that followed Simon's remarks. "Mal, we've all seen some of what Rick and River can do, what they're capable of. I don't know when the other ship got here but would you have even been alive at that point? And if they got hurt that bad, capable as they are what would have happened to you?" She had a shrug to her tone, "They got Serenity running again, would have done even if no one had responded to the beacon since Shazza brought another catalyzer."

River was sleeping again; exhaustion had claimed her even as resignation was filling Mal's scent. Riddick kept his eyes on his woman as he spoke to the captain, "Had to get you all off the boat. River pretended she was the captain. I hid in the bay. The minute the airlock opened, could smell there was something wrong." The lie was easy to say, the omission of River's Reading abilities long held habit. He tore his gaze from River and looked at Mal, "We protect our family Mal. And if that means me or River's gotta hit you over the head to keep you out of harm's way, then that's what we'll do. We weren't gonna let you or anyone else die, not when we could..." He sighed and elaborated, "Not when we could survive what you wouldn't."

"They did last an awful long time without a lot of oxygen," Wash was doing some complicated math in his head. "How'd you do that? You should have run out an hour before you called us, two hours with two of you breathin'."

"River made oxygen scrubbers, just like she did for the shuttles," Riddick shrugged. "An' she an' I... well we've got some experience with low oxygen atmospheres. It's one of the qualities the Academy... experimented with. I got the ability to adapt...deal with something long enough and my body works to overcome it, it's why pain don't...well it don't bother me like it does anyone else."

"The girl was altered to have this ability," River had woken up again, though her voice was close to a whisper. "Not as strongly as her mate, genetic manipulation will never compare to nature's bounty, but they tried. My eyes, my ears, lungs... they changed me, changed everything. Time on planet with little oxygen, helped them adapt for low oxygen levels in the shuttle and on Serenity."

"Yeah, when I stole your shuttle an' near passed out from lack a oxygen, sorta completed the process," Riddick barely restrained himself from shrugging. "It ain't perfect, but it worked long enough for someone to come."

"What did you mean you weren't gonna let me die, not when you could," Mal demanded to know.

"Monsters," River whispered. "Two of a kind, killers, assassins, monstrous creatures who like the smell of blood." Her eyes met Riddick's in a moment of perfect accord before she looked at Mal again. "Wanted our family safe. Willing to die to keep them safe. All of them, even you."

"Don't wanna die," Riddick sighed as the scent of River's exhaustion washed over him. "But we ain't worth much without each other. An' we know what we're worth to you. Lot we can survive that you cain't Mal. River an' me, I put us first, always have, always will. Took our best chance to survive, an' keep alla you alive too. But we know what we are."

"We are what they made us," River's voice was fading. She needed to sleep, to rest in a room where she wasn't instinctively afraid. Riddick mentally dismissed the captain to figure out how he could move her without causing her more pain.

Simon shook his head over that but didn't argue, he knew better, "I'd like the two of you to rest. I'll make up a bed in one of the dorms. For the rest of the day at least Rick, I don't want you to strain your shoulder or leg any worse."

"I'll carry River," Jayne said quietly and scooped her up before Riddick could object. Simon hurried
out to see about the dorm and Riddick frowned before nodding at Jayne and following the doctor more slowly than he liked. Shazza moved to his side and slung his good arm over her shoulders.

"I figure Simon can show me where to put my bag and I can give River a hand if she needs it," The dark haired woman said quietly. "Seems like those folks have things they should talk about 'thout me bein' there." Riddick nodded his agreement. The discussion was already starting.

Behind him the convict could hear Mal talking to Zoe, "Kinda takes all the steam outa my argument when they say stuff like that."

"They ain't monsters," Kaylee objected. "How can they even think that?"

"That's what everyone's always thought of Riddick," Book's voice was quiet, resigned even. "The reports on the cortex bear that out. The Alliance doesn't like things or people they can't control. I'd wager more than a few of his escapes have been just ahead of assassinations. It's a wonder he was ever captured alive for the Academy. And River... Those two see...and hear...everything I suspect. And neither of them has been treated as if they were valued. Mal you treat them almost as you do Jayne. Not in your words mind."

"Mal you do make a point of...well you are nearly always on alert with them," Wash pointed out. "I've never seen you entirely relaxed while they were in the room. You make a point of calling them crew but..."

"Yeah," Kaylee's voice had tears in it. "You don't treat 'em like you do me. You hug me and kiss my head. But River and Rick kept Saffron from hurtin' Serenity an' you never even hugged River."

"'Cause I don't want my arms ripped off so's Rick can beat me with 'em," Mal yelped.

"Aw c'mon Mal," Wash sounded almost bored. "I've hugged River, I've even kissed her cheek. Riddick knows when someone is acting wrongly towards her. We all know it."

"I thought I was gettin' better," Mal frowned. "Treatin' 'em like they're crew. Ain't even pickin' on the doc for all that he's gorram annoying at times."

"You trust 'em on jobs, and you trust 'em to do what they're paid for, but you're not treating them like family," Zoe's voice was gentle. "Sir, sooner or later you're gonna have to decide with those four, do you trust 'em or don't you. Because I don't think Rick was joking about taking the other boat and sailing away."

Jayne had rejoined them and his voice was gruff, "No they wasn't." He sounded well and truly pissed, "How many times over does a body gotta prove himself to you Mal? What're you gonna make 'em give before they're your family? Because none of us is really good enough for you. Doc's a sissy core boy, River's a fugie who ain't right in the head, Riddick's the murderin' escaped convict and I'm a merc. You don't even touch us Mal, like we've got dirt gonna rub off on ya."

"Surprised you didn't stay with 'em Jayne," Wash had a half grin in his voice. "Sorry you missed the fight?"

"If I had been here, prolly wouldn't a been much use, 'cause a the oxygen levels," Jayne sounded as if he was shrugging. "But maybe they wouldn't a been so hurt. I asked to stay. Rick an' River said no, that Wash's shuttle would need me. They needed a warrior on each boat, 'case some'at went wrong."

"Who was the warrior on Inara's shuttle then," Mal seemed confused. Riddick rolled his eyes as he climbed into the bed beside River and carefully gathered her into his arms. Simon turned out the
lights and Shazza kissed both of them on the cheek before they slid the door shut behind them. Riddick dragged his goggles off and set them on the nightstand before closing his eyes wearily to listen to the rest of the conversation.

"They said Book were a fine fighter, and he would protect Kaylee and Inara until you woke up," Jayne's deliberately heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. "Figure it out soon Mal, or they will leave. An' I'll go with 'em."

"Well that's an argument for kickin' 'em off right there," Mal's mutter wasn't quiet enough and Kaylee objected while Wash and Book began to remonstrate with the captain.

Riddick chuckled a bit as River's tequila smell of amusement tickled his nose, "Mal does make a habit of putting his foot in his mouth." He observed to River.

"Chronic case, worse than Simon," River agreed tiredly.

Mal was trying to defend himself and finally snapped, "Bi zuǐ." There was a pause as if he was taking a deep breath, "Maybe I ain't entirely at ease with three trained killers on the boat, four if you count Simon because he ain't helpless no matter how he acts. But I'm not deliberately treating them differently."

"It's worse 'cause you aren't sir," Zoe's voice was quiet but firm. "Dunno what those two are doing for Jayne but he's ready to do anything either of 'em need. Man's actin' like he's alive instead of existing for the first time since we've known him."

"River might be a cortex genius and a killer woman but she's a girl," Kaylee pointed out. "She loves dancin' and playin' jacks with me and sometimes she just likes being a kid. She ain't even eighteen yet."

"Riddick is studying," Wash offered. "He's working on an advanced degree in history and anthropology. He and River both love literature. He's said half their bunk is shelved with books."

"I don't know what else they're doing but Jayne has been learning to read and write better," Book said quietly. "River began teaching him but I heard him tell her he'd rather she work on her 'other project' since she was the only one who could. Simon had been teaching Ruby and you know Jayne was there for the lessons. Simon continued to teach Jayne. From what I've gathered, unless it's to do with numbers, Jayne has a hard time reading. He seems to be dyslexic."

"Dis what?" Kaylee was confused.

"It's when letters mix themselves up or turn backwards when you look at them, like being drugged but all the time," Wash explained to her. "It requires special teaching for someone to learn to read and write if they're dyslexic."

"I've seen Simon with Jayne, River and Riddick and you Shepherd, all working out or lifting in the cargo bay," Zoe's voice was her normal calm tones. "Riddick treats Kaylee like a little sister and he's been...I dunno what he's doing but he's running interference between her and Simon."

"Oh, that's what he calls makin' Simon earn forgiveness," Kaylee had a shrug in her voice. "Simon was kinda mean on Jiangyin an' when Rick made me his sister, Simon asked Rick for permission to earn forgiveness. Means Rick's sorta supervisin' Simon when he's 'round me."

"He takes it pretty serious too," Wash chuckled, "Back on Higgin's moon, he was glarin' at Simon 'cause Kaylee got tipsy on Mudder's milk an' Simon fell asleep with her."
"Like Simon coulda stopped me," Kaylee's voice was cheerful. "Point is Cap'n, them four's family. You're the only one ain't seein' it."

Mal's voice was slightly on edge as he replied, "I'll think on it. But ya'll are forgettin' one pertinent point." There was a pause as if the captain was looking at all of his crew, "It ain't escaped my notice that River and Rick can do an awful lot a things ain't readily explained. Now maybe part of that is what was done to 'em. But they aren't ones to volunteer information and if I don't trust 'em like family entirely? They made it obvious they don't trust me either. How much do all of you know about them? More than me in some ways and just as little in others."

There was a heavy pause as everyone took in that thought and Mal continued, "Something else goin' on with those two. And it's more than just bein' experiemented on or Rick bein' Furyan. Goes both ways. I can only trust them as far as they trust me." There were murmurs, thoughtful and quiet as everyone dispersed on that note. Rick sighed, he hated in depth conversations and it looked like they were gonna have one with Mal eventually.

River's hand traced his jaw, "Sleep now my Riddick." She murmured, her voice was filled with affection. "Time enough to worry tomorrow."

"Yeah," He sighed and wondered exactly what it was that would happen next.

River stretched slightly and winced at the pull on her belly. The wound could have been worse but she wouldn't be doing anything strenuous for the next few days. Simon knocked on the door of their makeshift bunk and came in when she invited him.

"I've got your antibiotics here," Simon held up his hypo spray. "Shazza is still sleeping. Mal is making noises about the other boat. I thought you two would want to have some say in it, seeing as the two of you captured it."

"S.S. Walden," Riddick muttered with a frown. "Yeah got a few ideas about that." He pulled on his goggles and turned on the light. "Let's have 'em," He invited Simon to give him the shot and helped River to sit up so she could get hers. Pain seemed to roll over her in waves as her belly compressed and she shuddered. Deep breaths seemed to help but not much. She was sweating with effort by the time Riddick helped her lie down again.

"How's the shoulder and leg?" Simon began a quick exam and Riddick shrugged while River's fingers traced the wounds in his side.

"Fine," Riddick said and River made a face at him. She'd known he would say that.

"Pain in both, and his side," She murmured. "Bearable, but irritating. Food, liquids, quiet required for full recovery." Her big man was angry with himself because she'd been hurt. Part of him was mad that she'd talked him into letting her play the captain instead of him. "She had to be captain. Confronted with big scary man, fifty percent chance that the enemy would have shot my bàng jiār in the heart. Couldn't bear it." She felt his anger fade slightly and forced her eyes open to look up at him, "Please don't be angry. Couldn't take the risk. The night has a thousand eyes, and the day but one; yet the light of the bright world dies with the dying sun. The mind has a thousand eyes, and the heart but one; yet the light of a whole life dies when loves is done. Can't survive without you."

His anger twisted slightly and faded a bit more, it would take time and her being healed fully before
his rage would die to his normal every day fury. His hands were gentle as they stroked her hair back, "That's twice you put yourself 'tween me an' harms way River. You gotta let me have a turn one a these days."

"As soon as my Richard B. Riddick promises he will not die," River retorted stubbornly. She frowned hating the weakness in her voice, "I have a good eye, I can see a church by daylight."

"Yeah," Riddick sighed and she could tell his shoulder was paining him some. He seemed disinclined to move from her side, his hands touching her hair and skin for reassurance as to her continued existence.

"Well we've got the bodies dumped and the galley cleaned up," Simon smiled and River grinned at him. "You shouldn't walk around just yet mèi mei."

"Bed rest for another day at least," River frowned as Riddick began to push himself upwards. "No fun to stay in bed without her zhàng fu."

"Aw, Shazz'll keep you company an' I'll bring your cortex so you can work still," Riddick kissed her cheek and River sighed. "An' if Mal wants to talk I'll tell him we gotta talk in here so you're part of the conversation. Just gonna go and see when I'm on the bridge next and bring you something light to eat."

"Dì yù," Her partner sighed and cupped her cheek with his big hand. "You feel up to eatin' and talk if Mal wants it?"

"Can stomach very little food at the moment," River frowned. "Mental acuity is compromised by pain. Methods of suppressing pain do not allow for adequate consumption of protein."

"How about some juice? And some of that hot cereal you like? Got some dried apples we can put on it," He coaxed and she could feel his worry. Her partner wouldn't feel right, wouldn't feel whole until the two of them were both on their feet and in fighting trim.

"She will try," River nodded and caught his hand, "Did what we must, stayed alive. Kept crew alive too."

"My poor body, madam, requires it: I am driven on by the flesh; and he must needs go that the devil drives," Riddick said wryly. "I'll grab your cortex first, get you set up with a tray table and then we'll work on breakfast or whatever meal is next." River watched him go and sighed, she would talk with Simon later about how quickly she would be up and about.
She'd slept for half the day it seemed, waking now and then to do work on her cortex and eating when Riddick insisted on it. Riddick had crawled into bed beside her after they'd eaten something, exhaustion claiming her partner again for a full five hours. When he'd woken Simon hooked her up to an IV even though she hated the thought. Riddick had frowned but she could tell the lingering citrus in her scent prevented him from arguing too much. "What's the IV for Simon?"

"It's a nutrient drip," Simon answered him absently. "It also has plasma to help replace the blood she lost. Your levels are improving but you didn't lose as much blood as River did." He started the drip and his smile was affectionate as he looked at them both. "Though we really do have to talk about this habit you have of using duct tape and super adhesive as salve and bandages."

"Use what works," Riddick grunted the words. He'd positioned himself so his head was pillowed on her thighs and his arm wrapped around her knees. His legs were half falling off the bed but it was the only position he could sleep in and hold her while she was hooked up to the IV.

"How're they doin' Doc," Mal's question came from the doorway and River looked up to see the captain standing there, more than a little worry on his face.

"River has trouble eating when she's working to suppress her pain sensors," Simon explained. "So it's hard for her to consume enough to rebuild her blood and strength. Hence the IV. Rick is just tired, as its been explained to me he'll sleep a regular eight hours and a bit more as he's recovering for the next few days. Right now…” Simon looked down at River and she shrugged slightly.

"Needs his partner, needs skin privileges, doesn't feel safe without her near, too close to losing everything," She explained and clicked a few keys of her cortex to hide her work from Mal. "Captain wants to talk about the Walden." Her hands gently petted Riddick's scalp and her partner sighed and sat up.

"Yeah Mal," His voice was weary as he put his back against the wall and leaned on it, his bulk squeezed into the small space next to River.

"Was thinking you could sail it to Beylix," Mal suggested, "We'll meet you there, should be easy enough to sell."

Riddick shook his head, "Actually was thinking we'd keep it." He shrugged, drawing River's feet into his lap.

"Whadda ya mean keep it?" Mal frowned.

"What makes you think we wanna sell it Mal?" Riddick asked with a frown. "We might need it someday. For sure having a boat no one knows about would be handy."

"And we must visit an old friend of Richard's," River said softly. "Do some husking work, get the boat cleaned up. He will keep the ship for us. Until we are ready for it."

Her partner looked at Simon, obviously smelling the same thing she'd Read, "Don' worry Doc, we don't have it in mind to leave. Just feel better havin' a backup plan is all."

River nodded her agreement, "Can take the salvage off the ship once we get it to the moon. Use that for repairs to Serenity. Have Kaylee look it over then." She began to work her cortex, "When I have been awake, was working on transfer of ownership." She turned the screen to show Mal, "See?"

Riddick was looking her over critically even as her hand lifted to touch the bandage on his shoulder, "I'm thinkin' it's time for some rest. You lost a lotta blood tiān shě. Need to build that up again."
"Just need plasma and protein," River muttered rebelliously, already tired of sleeping. "Heal quickly like my wolf."

"Injectin' adrenalin ain't somethin' to shrug off," Mal reminded her. "You relax, Rick tell Wash what course you need set. We'll figure out who's gonna pilot what so we can get your boat where you want it."

"It ain't far," Riddick shrugged. "Just need to—"

"No," River shook her head, "Riddick needs rest. She will nap if he does," She bargained coaxingly. "Rick will be up and around sooner if he sleeps beside her. Must also discuss aliases and crew of the new boat. And talk to Richard's friend. Must confound the hands of blue and their greedy minds."

"Uh huh," Mal was back to looking at River as if she was crazy for whatever reason. "Why don't I just send Wash down to you and ya'll can have a confab about where to go."

"Give us a coupla hours," Riddick requested. "I'm gonna sleep with my woman for a bit. See if I can calm down some more."

"I'll let Wash know," Mal nodded and left.

River looked at her mate and closed her cortex setting it aside and putting the tray table on the floor, "He still wishes to talk, but is willing to wait until you are not so worried and I am in less danger of bleeding with sudden movement."

"Great," Riddick grumbled in annoyance, settling down next to her and kissing her neck. River slid over on the pillows a bit and was gratified to have her big man rearrange himself so that his arms encircled her shoulders and his legs tangled with hers.

"Love my láng," River whispered tiredly as she felt sleep overtake her. "Won't ever leave you." His growl of agreement was the last thing she heard before she fell into sleep.

Riddick woke to hear Shazza's voice out in the hall, he'd been sleeping more deeply than usual, trying to build his strength back up. He figured it was the mental exhaustion more than the physical that was wearing him down. It was for him to take bullets and bleed, it was River's place to dance and dodge and wreak havoc on them shooting. He hated it when she got hurt protecting him. He'd hated it in the Academy when they'd tortured her, he hated it on planet and he despised it now.

Simon had spoken with him, elaborating on what he'd meant by scar tissue and just where the bullet had traveled. The wound itself wasn't any worse than Kaylee's had been, but the way the Academy had tweaked River's genes, imbued her with healing like his, had made things worse, not better. Scar tissue on the side of the womb would impede pregnancy. If he and River ever wanted children Simon had made sure it would still be possible. For once he hadn't known what to say. He'd grabbed Simon and yanked the man into a hard hug that had left his brother gasping. But he still had been without words.

He wasn't sure he wanted children at all. He knew he didn't want them right now, not when River was still fragile in her mind. She was the strongest woman he knew but he didn't see any reason to make things harder on her when they didn't even have a true place yet. He could say the ship was home and he knew River loved it but they weren't part of Mal's family yet. They were lucky he hadn't put them off when the shuttles had come back.
Mal hadn't and Riddick had figured it was because even though he couldn't admit it aloud, Mal knew Riddick and River were right. It was because of him they'd been put in that whole mess. And maybe his plan would have gotten them out of it. Or maybe they would have all been left drifting in those shuttles with no hope of getting picked up out in the Black. Either way, Mal hadn't tossed them off the boat. And that was a good thing. But the captain would be pressing them for more answers, for the things they couldn't talk about yet.

Riddick sighed, when River was feeling less woozy from trying to function through the pain they'd have to put their heads together and come up with some sort of distraction. In the mean time River was stirring slightly, her cheek rubbing over his bicep and chest as he lay beside her in thought.

"Big sister waits to speak with us," River whispered. "Wash comes down to talk about where to go."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded. "Hey Shazz, we're awake if ya wanna come in," He called with a half smile on his lips. It took less than ten seconds for their friend to slide the shoji door back and enter the room.

"Was startin' to worry about you two," Shazza looked at the two of them and Riddick smiled wondering what it was she saw that always made her smile. "How's the belly River?"

"Aches but recovers," River sighed. "She is grateful to have such a skilled brother, but annoyed with herself for zigging instead of zagging." She shrugged and Riddick chuckled slightly.

"Maybe next time you'll let me play captain and you can ambush folks," He teased her with a kiss to her forehead.

"Would prefer there not be a next time," River frowned at him.

"That would be good too," Riddick pushed himself up and looked around for the extra pillows. "How's sitting up a bit more sound?"

"Would like that," River's hands stroked over his neck and shoulders, gentle on the white bandage that even he could see contrasted with his skin. "Ribs do not pain my mate. Leg is negligible, only the shoulder truly pains him still?"

"Ribs are an irritant, 'cause any movement just makes me feel 'em," Riddick concentrated on moving her without jostling her belly. It wasn't hard, he was just paranoid about that citrus smell he felt was the worst in the gorram 'verse. "But they're nothing to really worry on." He looked at Shazza as he got River propped up against pillows and the wall, "How'd Badger take your emergency leave?"

"He an' Ruby were all for comin' along but without him there we'd lose all the territory he's gained over the years," Shazza shrugged. "I send 'em waves lettin' 'em know how things are goin'," She shook her head as she regarded the two of them. "Wasn't it bad enough on the skiff when we started runnin' out of air? Ya'll had to get a bigger boat to pull the same trick on?"

"Wasn't really our idea," Riddick shrugged again. "How are Badger an' Ruby doin'?"

"She's real happy I think," Shazza smiled. "Those two flat out adore each other. Badger's gotten her this little flat screen that talks when she types into it. So she can make herself heard to folks that don't know sign. And he's gettin' all his crew to learn sign right along with him. Says it's dead useful."

"So Ruby likes him back? Like she's got a Bà ba," Riddick grabbed the tray table and River's cortex after she checked his bandages for swelling or redness. "She seemed taken with him and all the waves we get sound good."
"She treats him like a daddy, tries to get away with stuff, gets caught and given a tap on the nose and 
an extra chore when she's been naughty," Shazza chuckled. "But every night she climbs up next to 
him to look over the books with him. He got her a little book of her own to keep track of her 
coppers. Says that a body can never start learning a trade too young. Half the time she falls asleep 
next to him."

River was turning on her cortex but as the screen came on she looked at Shazza, "Badger never 
thought to have children of his own. Knows what women think of him, that he isn't good enough for 
marrige. Black sheep of the family but he still loves them."

"Yeah, Badger left Dyton and made his own way but word trickles back and he's carved out his 
niche." Shazza sighed a bit, "Problem is the carving isn't somethin' folks back home care for. Badger 
likes a woman knows how to be a lady now and again. He's got this..." She shrugged. "I dunno what 
you'd call it. But the women who'll have him, he'll have none of them. And the ones he 
admires...they'll have none of him."

"He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that 
is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him," River quoted 
wrily.

Shazza chuckled, "Badger's in a similar state." She cast a sly glance at Riddick, "Guess your man 
had better get to shavin' hadn't he?"

River's giggle was like a cool breeze on his skin and Riddick smiled, "She knows I can't stand alla 
this hair on my head. Just didn't have time to shave what with gettin' shot and nearly dyin'."

"And adrenaline makes hands shake," River added. Then she asked the question Riddick had been 
wondering on, "Has Mal asked you yet, how all of us met? How we know you? Or has he been 
polite and circumspect?"

"He's been polite," Shazza was watching Riddick ready his shaving equipment and slowly draw the 
flat blade over his skin. "I get the idea there's plenty that he wants to ask but he isn't. Didn't figure 
him for a shy one."

"He's not generally," River shrugged.

Riddick elaborated as he continued shaving, "Mal'll ask question after question, repeatin' himself to 
catch ya in a lie but he don't believe anything until he sees something changes his mind." He began 
to shave the hair off his scalp and smelt teasing little tendrils of honey from River. His woman loved 
to watch him shave even if they couldn't do anything about that at the moment. "If he's not askin' you 
questions he's trying to figure out what he wants to know most."

"Or he wants to sleep with you and doesn't want to scare you off," River added nonchalantly. 
Shazza sputtered and Riddick chuckled, grateful he wasn't shaving his throat when she said that.

"River I haven't been widowed a year even," Shazza reminded her. "I just..."

"It's a hard life," River looked at her. "Richard and I learned, take what happiness you can. So long 
as you don't hurt yourself or others in the taking of it."

"Sometimes it's not that easy mèi mei," Shazza's smile was melancholy. "Though I'll admit to an 
attraction. He is a handsome flirt."

"Oh he's an interesting man all right," Riddick agreed. "You'll get to know him a bit better now that 
you're traveling with us a spell." He mopped off his face and knelt next to the bed for River to run
her hands over his face and scalp. "Gorram I love your hands xiǎo lǎng," He kissed her palm. "I miss anything?"

"Smooth and perfect," River kissed him gently. "A pleasure to touch," She grinned wickedly, "Though Richard's whiskers in the morning are enjoyable as well, tickles sometimes, rough on her lips at others...good feelings."

"That's enough of talkin' on that," Riddick kissed her back a little harder. "Bad enough I can't touch on you without it paining your belly. Let's not tempt the beast."

"Silly Richard," River dismissed that thought with a flip of her fingers. "His animal is not interested in carnal matters at the moment. Only wants skin privileges, to touch and be touched. To be assured that the girl is his and she is well and protected. Carnal thoughts and desires are for when the girl is healed. Waits on Simon's word. Will break the leash then."

"Yeah," Riddick really couldn't disagree, though often now when he referred to the beast he was referring to the man's baser instincts, not the animal's needs. River slanted a little smirk at him at that thought and he shrugged. He was impatient for her. They hadn't been having sex so long that he was willing to take it for granted. Not when he'd been convinced for almost two years that she'd never see him as more than a friend. He smiled when she looked at him with those soft dark eyes and her lips tilted affectionately, "Yeah, but for now...we'll be good."

"Very little choice in the matter," River sighed. "Grateful her mate is intelligent and determined enough that he finds ways to hold her in sleep."

Shazza regarded the two of them with a half smile, "So the two of you finally got to that point. And never made mention of it in all your letters and waves River?"

"Didn't seem the thing to put in a wave," River shrugged dryly. "Dear Shazza, bought a new dress, killed a magistrate via poison, Richard and I had a mutual seduction and consummated our relationship."

Shazza's laughter rang through the room and she shook her head, "Damn if that don't sound just like you." She grinned, "When Rick has his shift on the bridge, you an' me'll get the other women together and we'll have some girl talk. Make the men worry."

River grinned at her, "To no purpose." She shook her head, "My Riddick does not worry. Knows she would never withhold her company from him without medical necessity. And cannot complain of his abilities or actions. Always very good to her."

Riddick shook his head, "You're gettin' into topics I'd rather you address when I'm someplace you ain't." He told her with a grin, "I don't mind you talkin' 'bout me. Just rather I weren't in hearin' distance when you do. Least if you an' the ladies are gonna be gigglin'. Like to pretend I dunno why."

"Typical man," Shazza laughed at him and Riddick shrugged. River knew that to hear Shazza and her laugh together he'd take a little talk about his bedroom habits. He wasn't truly embarrassed by anything she might say, it was more that hearing the talk would get his blood up and he'd intrude on the girl time to carry her off and have his way with her. She smiled at him and Riddick shrugged again, his lips tugging upwards in a wicked grin.

"Wash is done with his shift on the bridge," River said after a moment. "Come to talk about setting a course. Must be decided upon soon. Job cannot be delayed much longer."
Riddick nodded, "Won't take long." He agreed. "Don't think we're far from an old friend of mine."

Wash seemed a bit nervy...Riddick regarded him thoughtfully as the pilot leaned against the doorway. "Wash, ya all right?"

"Mal's chompin' at the bit to get moving again," Wash explained. "He's still a little irked with you though you sorta took the wind out of his sails." He shrugged, "Of course having Shazza aboard he's less inclined to air any dirty laundry in front of her. Crew problems don't get dealt with in front of non crew."

"Yeah, figured that much from the way he was sorta close mouthed while I was on the bridge a while ago," Riddick nodded. "Place I wanna take the other boat is this little moon near Qing Long system. Got an old friend holed up there. He'd let us park the boat. Might even let River use his equipment once he's been introduced."

"Here is the location," River took her datapad and handed it to Shazza how passed it to Wash. The pilot blinked, "Uh, not to be nosy Rick, but how do you know this guy?"

Riddick tilted his head, the pilot was shocked, truly shocked to be given that location, "Knew the guy when I was a kid, met him right before I joined up. Scrawny guy, years older'n me. He got in a little trouble and I got him out of it using my fists and shivs. He wasn't much good at fighting but he forged my papers so I could enlist as thanks. Said if I survived the war to look him up."

"Have you seen him since then," Wash was a little more relaxed now but still curious. River was smiling as if she'd heard a joke and Riddick nearly grinned at the scent of tequila.

"Just once," Riddick shrugged. "Before he moved out to the place he has now. He was pickin' up some things, and I played hired muscle for him. Told me where he'd be an' let me know he wouldn't mind if I showed up on his doorstep. Him an' me, we send waves back an' forth, right up until I got stuck in the Academy. One a the first things I did when we got out an' somewhere safe was to let him know I was alive still."

Wash had been nodding, "He say what he'd been doing? You know, while you were uh, enlisted?"

"I don't ask much about what he gets up to," Riddick folded his arms as he regarded the pilot. "My concerns are mostly about Feds. And I haven't seen him in person since after the war. Wash what's the deal here?"

River giggled and Wash looked at her with a sigh, "Yeah, of course you laugh." He looked down at the datapad, "These co-ordinates are the location of a guy I know. He likes to be called Mr. Universe. He and I were in Flight school together."

Riddick grinned, "Lemme guess. He beat you out for the top spot?"

"By husking the cortex and the records," Wash scowled in irritation and Riddick began chuckling. "It's not that funny. I could have graduated top in my class. Instead I'm second. The man could barely fly."

"I know," Riddick chuckled. "He told me what a hard time he had getting all his equipment out to his place in one piece. Apparently landing is a problem for him."
"Should wave him, let him know we'll be on our way soon," River suggested turning her cortex so they could use it.

"Yeah, we're in range," Riddick took the cortex and set it on the dresser so the camera would show most of the room, including River. Typing in the address he sat down on the end of the bed to wait for it to go through.

It wasn't long before the man himself was staring out of the cortex screen, "Rick! As I live and breathe!" Riddick barely kept from grimacing, it had slipped his mind how manic the man was. "I'm glad to see reports of your demise have been greatly exaggerated."

"Hey U, how're you doin," Riddick was conscious of River within the man's sight and Wash standing leaning against the bureau.

"Well I've been having a bit of fun playing with the system," The man Riddick called U and who everyone else who knew him called Mr. Universe chuckled. "You've been a very bad boy Richard. Trying to rival Houdini for your escapes?"

"Well last time they caught me an' kept me for a while," Riddick admitted. "They were just paranoid enough that it took some help to get out." He shrugged, "I hear tell that you and me got a mutual acquaintance." He gestured towards Wash, "Man flies the boat I'm working on these days."

"Ahh..." Universe grinned widely, "Two people I never thought I'd see together. This is a surprise. But you are known for those Richard." His sharp eyes took in River's face beyond Riddick's, "And this lovely flower...who is this? Richard Brandubh Riddick what have you been up to?"

Riddick sighed, "If you'd shut your mouth five minutes U I'd be able to get a word in." He reminded the man. He liked U okay but the man never shut up, twitchy as a faulty cannon and worse than Kaylee on Simon's coffee for running his mouth. "You know Wash. And I expect if you've been yourself you've been looking me up, finding out where I've been held for the past few years."

"I have..." U nodded uncharacteristically somber, "Do you have any idea how hot the Alliance is to get you back? What you're running from Richard?"

"I've got a damn good idea," Riddick growled. "What have you found?"

"Officially you're dead," Universe's fingers were dancing over the screens. "And someone with a very light touch has been dancing over your files. I took the liberty of husking the main databases and rendering the same changes. I assume that was you?"

"Nah," Riddick grinned, "You ain't been introduced to my bàng jiār." He took River's hand in his, squeezing her chilled fingers, "This is River Diaochan Tam."

"Ah," Universe was doing more tapping. "She's the reason you're still hunted even though you're dead." He told Riddick, "I noticed the same light touch on other files, some of your crew I guessed but her file is among them. I'm replicating my efforts on her main file. I took the liberty of husking the main databases and rendering the same changes. I assume that was you?"

"Nah," Riddick grinned, "You ain't been introduced to my bàng jiār." He took River's hand in his, squeezing her chilled fingers, "This is River Diaochan Tam."

"Planned to ask when we saw you if I could use your equipment," River smiled her thanks. "Still other factors to be dealt with but this is one less thing to worry about. I thank you."

"Anything to help an old friend and his... bàng jiār," Universe tilted his head. "Rick, old friend, exactly what are you involved in? The traffic on her files is insane."
"Military?" Riddick frowned as he felt River's hand tighten on his and wisps of burnt cinnamon began to rise off her skin. "Or private?"

"Private, definitely," Universe replied with a frown. "Rick this isn't anything you want to be involved in," He sounded alarmed so what he was seeing had to be fairly worrisome.

"Mr. Universe, the reason for the wave is we've come across a boat, we'd like to leave it with you, in case Rick ever needs a ride of his own," Wash spoke up concerned, and rightfully so, that the man on the other side of the wave would piss Rick off before they got to the point of the call. "We're maybe a day out. Think we could park a ship with you?"

"Well if it's Rick's boat sure. It's not like I don't have the room," U grinned in pleasure. "And that means I'll get to see all of you in person."

"U, do me a favor, them other files you saw River's touch on, do the same to them as you did to mine," Riddick looked at the electronic image of his friend. "The folks I'm traveling with, they don't deserve to have hell come down on them because of me."

"Will do," Universe nodded. "I'll see you in a day or so then." He cut the wave without any further farewell as was his habit and Riddick switched the cortex off before lying on his back and sighing in exhaustion.

"That man could tire out a cup of coffee," Wash sounded equally tired. "I'll go tell the captain we've got a destination."

"I'll come with you," Riddick groaned. "And I'd better take a look at the bridge of the Walden. We shouldn't have any problem flying it but you never know. Wanna come with?" He looked at Wash curiously.

"Yeah, always nice to see what's available," Wash grinned. "It's like flirting with another woman. You don't want her really but it's nice to see if someone else responds."

"I'll leave that to you," Riddick chuckled as he pushed himself up and grabbed River's cortex so she could have it back on the tray table if she liked. "I'll be back soon love," He kissed her cheek. "Try not to worry. Between you and Universe we'll get everything cleaned up."

"Yes," River nodded and he could still smell worry. Mentally making a note to ask her later Riddick followed Wash out of the dorm.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: And we have Mal and his little…tantrum? Blowup? Misbehavior? Whatever we want to call it Mal had it. What did you all think?

I did want to show that these two can be hurt, they aren't paragons of grace and strength. They're (mostly) human and have weaknesses and flaws, like River having a very good idea of what would happen when she pretended to be Mal but doing it anyway because if she didn't it meant Riddick might die. And him being pissed about that.

I wanted Riddick to have these funny little connections all over the 'verse. People you wouldn't think he'd know that are happy to see him. I haven't decided if he and Jayne
know Monty yet, I don't think so but I'm always open to suggestions. Something to confound Mal's expectations would be fun so I'm trying to figure a few things out.

Chinese Translations:

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

mèi mei - little sister

Bì zuǐ - shut up

bàng jiār - lover / partner

zhàng fu - husband

gǒushǐ duī - a person who behaves badly (lit. "a pile of dog shit")

láng - wolf

dì yù - hell / infernal / underworld

tiān shǐ - angel

Bà ba - Dad, pops, daddy

xiǎo láng - little wolf

Quote Sources:

For if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them. – Utopia – Thomas More

The night has a thousand eyes, and the day but one; yet the light of the bright world dies with the dying sun. The mind has a thousand eyes, and the heart but one; yet the light of a whole life dies when loves is done. – The Night Has A Thousand Eyes - Francis William Bourdillon

I have a good eye, I can see a church by daylight. – Much Ado About Nothing – William Shakespeare

My poor body, madam, requires it: I am driven on by the flesh; and he must needs go that the devil drives. - All's Well That Ends Well – William Shakespeare

He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him. – Much Ado About Nothing – William Shakespeare

Reports of your demise have been greatly exaggerated. – Mark Twain (paraphrased)
She really hadn't been certain what to expect of Richard's old friend Mr. Universe, the man her mate simply called U. In the day of travel to his isolated little moon, surrounded by an ion cloud, River had given it a lot of thought, supplemented with Reading the crew and her mate in order to determine what sort of person U was. The result was a widely varied lot of opinions crowding her head and she'd sighed and rested her forehead against Riddick's neck and gave any hope of prediction up as a bad job.

Luckily Riddick had persuaded Wash to fly the Walden and he flew Serenity with Mal supervising, so she didn't have to go without his familiar mental presence. Wash had been talking enthusiastically about Riddick flying the Walden and showing Mal exactly how good a pilot the convict was when he'd caught sight of River's face. Between her worried expression and Riddick's frown at the thought of being away from her while she was injured neither of them looked welcoming of the separation.

Simon had come in to sit and check on their injuries and had looked at Wash with an incredulous expression, "Wash, I don't know that proving Rick's skills to Mal is worth the trouble." He'd said in his quietly firm voice.

"But this would be a great way for Mal to see that Rick can—" Wash began.

"Fly well enough to take the ship wherever I gorram well please? Chart a course and follow it without the cortex and autopilot? Show Mal that I'm even more dangerous because I'm not an unthinking thug," Riddick interrupted in the accent of his childhood, the phrasing and tones he used free of all rim or border speech. River sighed in delight, it was only recently that her mate had realized that he didn't need to hide how he spoke from she or his friends. He could truly be himself with she and Simon and Shazza and that meant he could discard the rim accent if he liked. "Yeah Wash, I'm not sure that's the best way to reassure Mal that I won't do something…untoward."

Wash had sighed and shaken his head looking at Simon and Shazza for help but Simon had simply shrugged, "Wash when was the last time River and Rick were separated at all? And now she's injured and not recuperating as fast as he is. Mind you, River is doing much better than Kaylee at this stage, your healing really is accelerated," He'd remarked to River. "But given their natures…I don't know that putting space and another ship between the two of them is a good idea."

"I didn't think of that," The pilot had admitted. "I suppose I was hoping if you were even more useful Mal might…"

"Problem isn't that we aren't useful," River had told the pilot softly. "Problem is that we are too useful, too everything and we are frightening. Can't be helped."

"She's right," Shazza told the jovial man in her matter-of-fact voice. "If they hadn't saved my life, kept me sane and safe...well I might be afraid of them. As it is, I'm only afraid of what would happen if someone tried to harm one of them or someone they love. Really the crew of the Walden is lucky they weren't strung up by their entrails and carved on before they died."

"Didn't have the time or inclination," Riddick's chocolate coffee voice rumbled. "River'd been shot, so had I. Otherwise...yeah I can think of more than a few things I would like to have done."
River considered Riddick now and wondered if he had any idea how Mr. Universe would react to her. It was obvious that there was no way the skinny man wouldn't let them simply park the boat and leave without satisfying his curiosity about the two of them.

The ion cloud wasn't hard for pilots like Wash and Riddick to navigate, and without much time they were settling on the landing pads. Her partner had come down from the bridge to scoop her into his arms, her cortex in its satchel slung over his shoulder, and she could feel his caution and determination that should movement cause her any pain that she would be staying in bed. As far as her mate was concerned, Universe could come and meet her on Serenity if moving hurt her. River rolled her eyes, her brother was a very gifted surgeon and she'd had more recovery time than Kaylee. Riddick was being overprotective.

"Qīng Xiāng what are you worryin' on," Riddick's gorgeous voice rolled over her skin and brushed her ears.

For a moment she simply cursed the stupid bullet that had restricted both of them from having any form of sex since she'd gotten shot as his voice seemed to ignite her nerve endings. It wasn't an entirely physical reaction, her body was devoting its resources to healing not manifestations of desire but that didn't mean her mind wasn't willing to entertain the hope of physical affection. Sighing as she mentally stuffed that wistful thought into a corner River shrugged slightly against him, "He is not a stupid man. And he is your friend. Of longer standing than any of us. I am concerned regarding what he will think of me." Admitting as much was far less insulting than implying she wasn't worrying (she was), or brushing off the worry (not effective). Riddick always knew, just like he always knew when something was wrong in the Academy.

Part of her wondered if it was really his sense of smell that gave him all this information, or if it was his brain recording information and passing it to his consciousness as a smell for interpretation. It didn't really matter and it seemed more like some thing the Academy would wonder about so she discarded that thought almost as soon as she'd had it. Riddick was a little annoyed wondering if he hadn't made it clear enough that she was his priority and old friend or not U could go hang if he didn't like River. Riddick loved River and liked her a helluva lot too and that was what mattered.

"I do not doubt your loyalty or affection for me, my mate," River spoke into the silence as Riddick considered and discarded his own theories. "But it is often uncomfortable for a person if two people he likes do not get along." She didn't want to think of how bad it could get if Universe actively disliked her or she him. She'd learned in such cases that the friend of longer standing inevitably won every skirmish. She doubted Riddick would ever reprioritize her importance in his life but she found herself actively hoping she wouldn't offend Mr. Universe. The man was someone Riddick valued enough to communicate with. She didn't want him to lose his friend because Universe didn't like her. Her mate could smell her worry though, toasted cinnamon in his nose, tendrils of citrus as thoughts stabbed at her. His lips brushed over her hair again, she could feel them, gentle as he inhaled the scent of her hair, pleasure in the silky feel of it under his mouth.

"We'll figure somethin' out," Riddick shrugged and looked the rest of the crew. The captain was the only one not present, everyone else had gathered in the cargo hold of Serenity. Wash bounded out the airlock of the Walden and practically bounced onto Serenity, to grin at Riddick and River.

"River, you're not gonna get used to him carrying you around are you?" The pilot teased cheerfully, "He seems to have taken a liking to it."

"Richard has always been thus," River let her head rest against the side of her mate's neck. "Finds it reassuring to keep hold of his woman. Especially when she has been injured. Wash has done this with Zoe often enough."
"Touching yeah, but I draw the line at carrying her around," Wash was still grinning. Zoe's injuries were healed up, and she was moving without pain, so his mood was much improved.

"Manly as you are husband, you might have trouble with that," Zoe's dry voice as she descended the stairs. "Haven't met a man in the 'verse could tote me around in anything but a fireman's carry."

"Rick could," Jayne was chuckling over the thought. "So could I, iffen ya got the urge to be carried over a threshold."

River giggled as Riddick's animal perked up mischievously. Zoe's scent was disbelieving and Riddick had a mind to prove it to her, "He's right Zoe. Me an' Jayne, well, you're a dainty thing to the likes of us."

"Dainty?" Zoe almost started laughing and River giggled again. This was the sort of silliness that would relax her mate; feats of foolish strength, teasing the normally stoic soldier. "Even Wash hasn't had the nerve to call me dainty."

"Well ya are Zoe," Jayne argued with a smirk. "Tinier'n me an' Rick. Reckon Wash could carry ya like Rick's doin' River even. He just don't try it. Likes his warrior woman."

Wash was outright grinning over Jayne's words, "Well Jayne I do thank you for the vote of confidence in my manly strength. You're right too, I like that Zoe isn't delicate looking."

"Sorry, Jayne I might could believe you could pick me up but Rick? No," Zoe shook her head. "And no Jayne that ain't an invitation."

"Wasn't takin' it as such," Jayne grumbled, more than a little humor in his voice. "Heck even the doc can pick up Kaylee an' he ain't much taller'n her."

"Could prove it to you Zoe," Rick teased, his lips twitching into a half smile.

River grinned at Jayne, "Larger of her two gē ges must hold the girl for her mate." When she was safely cradled in the arms of the big merc, Simon stifling a chuckle at how tiny she looked compared to Jayne, Riddick grinned wickedly at Zoe.

"All right First Mate, c'mon put your money where your mouth is," He invited.

Wash was laughing outright as his wife reluctantly moved towards Riddick, "Oh lamby toes, you have gotten yourself in it now."

"Careful husband, you don't wanna dig yourself into a hole," Zoe cautioned him, though her lips were twitching humorously. She stood in front of Riddick who simply grinned at her and scooped her into his arms just as he had River.

"Wash I think I see the attraction," Riddick grinned, "She smells good and she don't feel breakable."

"Enough a that," Zoe was laughing and shaking her head. "Put me down."

Riddick smirked at her and passed her to her husband who happily cradled her in his arms for a moment before setting her on her feet again. "See?" Wash kissed her happily, "Good to know right?"

Book had been watching from beside Kaylee and Simon, a quiet presence, his shadowy mind brighter with amusement at the teasing camaraderie. He still hadn't figured out she and Riddick yet, their absolute faith in each other but distrust in God confounded him some.
Jayne was gently handing River back to her mate and tugging her long hair out from under Riddick's arm on her back when Mal finally spoke from where he'd been watching them since the crew had gathered in the bay. "All right, let's not keep the man waitin'," The captain suggested as he walked down the stairs.

Inara descended the stairs opposite of the captain and River noted the discipline with which she was carrying herself. "Inara isn't feeling well," She murmured to her mate and Riddick nodded.

Jayne was teasing Shazza that he could pick her up just as easy while Shazza laughed and told him she didn't doubt it. Simon was talking to Kaylee, smiling and gently reassuring her as to her beauty and how he'd like to pick her up but no doubt Riddick would send Jayne as a proxy to beat him down for over-familiarity. River could feel her mate's brain figuring and discarding scenarios to help Inara until he looked at her and she tilted her head towards Zoe.

"Uh, just a thought," Riddick said as Mal reached the rest of them. "Any a you ladies been around U before?"

Zoe nodded grimly along with Kaylee, but Inara, and Shazza shook their heads. The first mate exchanged a glance with the captain.

River could feel Riddick's amusement over how easily those two communicated; no words, a look, an eyebrow arch, a tilt of the head and a course of action was decided. Mal nodded and addressed the women, "Mr. Universe is… well he's hard to describe."

"Lenore," Riddick offered when the captain seemed to fall short of words.

"The Lovebot," Wash seconded. "He's antisocial, to say the least."

Inara's expression actually showed her distaste, and Kaylee wrinkled her nose in disgust while Shazza tilted her head and frowned. The captain shrugged, "Just sayin', he ain't demanded meetin' everyone on the boat. Iffen you don't wanna make the trek up to his ivory tower no need to."

Riddick looked at Inara, "Considerin' he's earned a black mark on the Companion's registry just for havin' Lenore don't think you'll care for the man much."

"Perhaps I'll simply rest for a while," Inara nodded. "Kaylee, Shazza, I'm going to have some tea. Would you like to join me?" The other women nodded with ill-concealed eagerness and Zoe looked after them with a resigned sigh as the trio moved towards the shuttle.

"Well we'd best get goin'," Mal led them all down the ramp and into the building that served as Mr. Universe's base of operations.

River tilted her head as the doors to the elevator opened onto a large dim room dominated by cortex screens. The skinny man who sat in the chair before multiple keyboards wasn't unhandsome. His manner more than his looks caused folk to dislike him she guessed. His mind was a whirlwind, touching on a million things at once, no pattern or order to it. If her Riddick's mind was an elegant crystalline labyrinth this man's was a tangled wood with no discernible paths. "Wǒ de mā," She murmured and did her best to shut her mind to him. But thoughts were flying at her, from the moment he spotted her in Riddick's arms Mr. Universe wondered about her, saw the resemblance between she and Simon and began speculation.

"Nǚ ren, you all right," Riddick's murmur was like a lifeline in the manic sea of Mr. Universe's
thoughts and she anchored herself in her mate's mind.

"Using you as an anchor my zhàng fu," She replied. "Lest I be drowned." Her cryptic words weren't lost on Mr. Universe.

"We have a newlywed couple?" He stood eagerly. "I simply must kiss the bride," The skinny man descended upon them, his gaze greedily fixed upon River only to be brought short by Riddick's growl and River's shiv, drawn from a place he hadn't seen and pointed right at his Adam's apple. His forward momentum halted just in time for the tip to poke his throat but not draw blood. "Or perhaps not," Mr. Universe grinned. "Wouldn't want to make Lenore jealous."

"U, ain't you ever sick a these games?" Riddick's dark voice rumbled in irritation. He wasn't angry, part of him had been expecting something of the sort.

"Games are what make life worth playing," Mr. Universe grinned, "Now, be a good sport and introduce me. I see three faces I don't recognize."

"My woman, my nǚ ren," Riddick pressed a kiss to River's hair, his lips gentle and loving. "River Diaochan Tam. This is Shepherd Derrial Book, he's sailing with Mal for a while. And Simon Carnegie Tam, my nèi xiōng."

Book nodded politely to the man but was summarily ignored; apparently he wasn't interesting enough for Mr. Universe. But Simon extended his hand to shake and was a bit disconcerted to have it disregarded in favor of being stared at. "I've seen you before," Mr. Universe grinned after a moment. He scurried back to his spot in front of the cortex and looked at them all impatiently. "Well c'mon, don't hover in the doorway. Come in. Wash, you and your sultry minx of a wife, good to see you again. Even if you must bring those two philistines with you." He rolled his eyes at Jayne and Mal neither of whom appeared pleased to be lumped in with the other.

"Watch it U," Riddick warned him. "Jayne and me know how to take you apart faster'n Simon can put you back together."

"And you would do," Universe didn't seem terribly worried, at least not until Simon gave him an evil grin of his own.

"I am perhaps less civilized than my appearance would lead you to believe," The doctor warned him. His expression was chilly though still amiable. "I've been learning from Jayne and Rick after all."

River giggled from her spot in Riddick's arms, "It is a truth well known among all worlds. The ones who put you together...also know how to take you apart."

Universe offered an uneasy half smile and a slight nod of his head, "That is a universal truth, I must agree." He continued to type on the cortex and pulled up a recording. River shivered and leaned her head against Riddick's neck at the sight of the Academy, of her strapped to the chair, needles in her forehead. Riddick's growl of fury was loud in the suddenly quiet room.

"U, what are you playin' at," He demanded to know. River could feel his anger, how much he hated the idea of what they'd done to her when they took her away from him back then. He'd known it was bad, had been able to guess at what they'd done based on the marks but seeing it brought all the rage and helplessness back again.

"This is the footage from your breakout," Universe told him. "You had to know that if there was a record I'd find it." He looked at River as if finally taking in that she was being carried, "She can sit with Lenore on the couch if that's more comfortable."
"Please," River nodded, "Better to sit and my Riddick will feel better with his hands free." She was vividly conscious of Mal behind her, shocked at the easy familiarity between Mr. Universe and her man. Richard could smell it too, one more thing to deal with for her mate. He still wasn't easy with what was playing on the cortex. This could go badly very fast if she couldn't keep him calm.

"Captain is surprised," She murmured to Riddick as he set her gently down on the couch. The Lovebot turned and regarded her with its empty eyes and blank smile before giving its attention back to its eccentric master.

"How is it you two know each other again?" Mal looked at the men in question, "And why does it seem like I have to ask you that an awful lot Rick?" River rolled her eyes; it was as if Mal thought Riddick had lived in a vacuum before he came to Serenity.

"Met on Londinium," Riddick shrugged as he stood near River, his body slightly before hers though only she, and perhaps Jayne, would be able to tell just how braced for an attack he was. He didn't truly expect betrayal from Universe, but he didn't like unfamiliar ground and there were a lot of different variables in play. River darted a glance at Book, he too could see that Riddick was prepared for things to go sideways in some way.

"Rick saved me a very painful experience," Mr. Universe seconded and whistled as the recording continued to play and Simon came on screen. "Oh my… how did you keep them from knowing who you were?"

Simon shrugged uncomfortably, "I'm not particularly memorable in the Core and that's where they were being held."

"Doc you said that you'd paid folks to get River out," Wash was looking at Simon with new respect. "You didn't mention goin' in after her."

"None of you took me seriously as it was. Saying I'd gone into retrieve River personally… didn't seem believable, so I didn't tell you that part. But I didn't know what they'd done to her, or how much she would trust a stranger," Simon shrugged, uncomfortable as always with attention that wasn't medically based. "But I believed River would trust me. If she didn't, I knew enough to render her unconscious and carry her out for treatment."

"Probably handy that you didn't hafta," Jayne rumbled in amusement as he watched the recording. He chuckled in appreciation as River hotwired the door controls and got Riddick out.

"Well as I said when we met, I wasn't expecting Rick," Simon shrugged, "Though he's handy to have around at times."

River grinned at her brother and felt Riddick's amusement at the faint praise, "Kept the girl sane." She murmured for her mate's ears, "Kept her warm. My love was warm for that I crossed the mountains and the sea..." Her lover mentally finished the verse and she heard him promise himself kisses and a nap with her later while she recovered.

Mal and Wash drew in a sharp breath at the sight of River and Riddick taking on the guards while Simon held the door to the lift. The captain uttered an awed curse while Wash simply tilted his head at the two of them and asked, "So, the bar fight…mostly just for exercise?"

"Pretty much yeah," Riddick shrugged. "U, River was wonderin' if she could use your cortex for a moment or two. She's been workin' off a portable and your set up is a bit..."

"Better," River finished with a grin.
Universe tore his gaze away from the screens and regarded her in shock, "You mean you been working off that little piece of zá wù and the only tracks I found were those little prints?"

"She has been husking since she was a child," River shrugged and opened her cortex. "Open network?"

"Yeah," Universe was staring at River in something like awe as he rattled off the code for his system. "What kind of a setup have you got?"

River was conscious of Riddick's amusement over Mal's irritation as she and Mr. Universe descended into a technological conversation far over the captain's head. Her mate was still far too tense, her injury, unfamiliar ground, Universe's manic attitude and overfamiliar manner were all combining uncomfortably for the animal. Oblivious to the undercurrents, Universe was extremely impressed with her abilities and within a few minutes of connecting her cortex to his system she'd finalized her work. "You have an identity search program? Based on visual confirmation not ident cards," She looked up at Mr. Universe questioningly.

"Yeah, that's how I've been going in and taking Rick out of the databases," Universe nodded. "You need to run a search on someone?"

"Yes," River nodded. "Can't run a complete search from Serenity. Not enough information. Have to wait until I'm within range of each planet," She explained seriously. "But your backup of my identity changes saved me a lot of work. If you've reached the main cortex of law enforcement then the only accurate visuals they have on all of us will be the hard copies."

Simon chuckled, "They might not even have those." He continued when River looked at him curiously, "I've been tracking a few things on the cortex myself. That group that helped me get you out, they've been working to retrieve others. Whenever they can they destroy files, both hard copies and cortex files. So the little reports about property damage or accidental destruction of Alliance property...those are our friends most likely."

"You realize that if they get people who rely on their eyes 'stead of the cortex id's the whole plan is humped to dì yù," Mal spoke finally.

"Yeah, ya ever really wanna track someone, gotta use your eyes," Jayne agreed. He looked at Mal and shrugged before he looked back at River and Mr. Universe, "Course ain't many in the Alliance actually use their eyes for anything. 'Til they hire on a bunch a rim boys like me, you're safe enough."

River grinned, "No one like Jayne. Only Jayne." She teased her newest brother gently, "Please check my parameters Jayne, verify accuracy?"

"You mean you're..." Jayne blinked and moved almost as quickly as Riddick to bend over her shoulder and look at the images she was putting on the screen. "Yeah, that's... I mean I don't know for sure but..." He took a deep breath and his hand on her shoulder tightened almost desperately.

River patted his knuckles in reassurance, "Not completely accurate, Jayne is right. But better to cast a wide net and discard what is not needed." She looked at Mr. Universe who was fascinated, "You will not mind a background search? It will not take much cortex space and this must be done."

"I'll send you regular updates if you'd like, or you can log in remotely and check for yourself," He offered with what he probably hoped was a charming smile. His emotions were more straightforward than his thoughts, lust and respect twined together when he looked at her along with the sense of the attraction being quashed due to Riddick's presence.
Riddick noticed it too, his goggled eyes glaring at Mr. Universe; he folded his arms and tilted his head so that the curly haired man could have no doubt of his look. His voice was a rumbling growl, "U, you'd better stop thinkin' on my woman like you are." He warned the other man, "Know you like brains but you touch her an' she'll kill you faster'n I will."

"I have no doubt," Universe was uncharacteristically sober. He slanted a grin at River, "You wouldn't be interested in settling on one world? All the data and cortex equipment you could want?" He was ignoring Riddick's growl of displeasure to focus on River, "Come live with me and be my love and we will all the pleasures prove."

River laughed and shook her head, "Once his offer might have been intriguing, but the...experience and experimentation has made her a match for only one man. Blood and seed bind us. Universe cannot offer her what her mate does, brilliance and physicality combined." She put a hand on Riddick's thigh, feeling the muscle stiff with anger and tension, "She is happy to have it so. Her zhàng fu, her láng. He is..." She shrugged, "I have no words to describe all that he is to me. More needful than oxygen. More necessary than food or water. Richard is mine. And I am his. Would you like to live with your soul in the grave?"

"Wuthering Heights," Simon murmured thoughtfully and cast a half amused glance at his sister. "River you can't compare Riddick to Heathcliff," He remonstrated.

"No?" River tilted her head, "Why not?" She could feel Riddick relaxing slightly under her hand as she compared him to one of the most popular romantic heroes. He still wasn't entirely at ease, but the talk of book heroes was something the man could concentrate on, distracting the animal somewhat. He knew the reasoning behind her comparison but Simon didn't and she could tell her mate was interested in Simon's reasoning.

"Riddick is a better man than Heathcliff," Simon had actually succeeded in surprising her lover. "Heathcliff was..." He shook his head, "He says he loves Catherine but he's malevolent. He is unbelievably cruel to his wife. He's not a good man. Passionate yes but he isn't good. His only redeeming quality is that he loves Catherine but he does nothing that is virtuous in regards to it. Love itself isn't a virtue when someone behaves as he does."

River shrugged, "My Riddick's passion is what reminds me of Heathcliff. Need never fear him the way Cathy loved and feared Heathcliff." She rubbed her hand over the back of Riddick's thigh, tension was gripping him again, "But you see Mr. Universe, why I cannot accept your offer? Regardless of the poetic manner in which it was proffered."

"Didn't have any real belief that you'd take me up on it," Universe was grinning. "Lenore is the love of my life but she's not much of a conversationalist." He shrugged as he looked at Riddick's still hard and set face, "Relax Rick."

"U, if you ever try somethin' like that again..." Riddick's hand was suddenly holding one of his shivs, his voice a growl building to a roar of possession. "I tolerate a lot 'cause we're old pals but you don't ever-" The anger was still building in him, fury at the idea of anyone taking River from him, the animal ready for blood. It was too soon after her injury, after they'd both nearly died, for anyone to joke about courting River away from him.

River pushed herself to her feet, her belly wound pulling but she had to stand next to him, had to remind him that there was no chance of her ever leaving him. The pain and worry in her scent would turn his attention to her, his mate, his highest priority. "Richard," She knew he was far gone as his nostrils flared at the scent of her pain but he didn't turn his gaze from Universe. "Richard, remember, plums, caramel, honey." She coaxed him with words and the touch of her hands, standing at his back, pressing her breasts to his spine. "My heart is gladder than all these, because my love has come
"River," Her name was a snarled warning for her to sit back down before she reinjured herself but she pressed herself to his back and ignored it. The animal was getting the upper hand, anger still hot in side of him, the man and animal in agreement that she belonged to him and it would be proven in blood if need be.

"He must listen," River pressed her lips to his spine, her hands splayed over his abdomen as she spoke. "And the bonds between us strengthen with our strong supernal hope, for oh, my friend, my dearest, how God's love halloweth this love that, unaffrighted, look is in the face of Death!" She shuddered as the animal rose and turned in her arms, his hands gentle on her face even as he aimed a killing look at Mr. Universe.

"River," He wasn't as angry now, her words reaching the animal, her scent, pain and worry for him threaded into it along with all the other scents he loved about her, combining to make him frown. But his eyes were still brighter through the smoked glass, his voice a low rasping growl, very obviously different and it didn't go unnoticed by Universe or anyone else in the room. Jayne stood up straight but other than that didn't react much. Mal stiffened and his hand drifted closer to his gun while Zoe and Wash simply stood together, Wash's head tilted thoughtfully. Book's expression sharpened with interest, he'd never met the Animal truly. Simon shook his head and actually seemed to relax while Mr. Universe's eyes went wide and he moved towards the couple again.

"I wouldn't," Simon advised the reclusive genius. "Not unless you want to meet the Animal under less than ideal conditions." Jayne nodded his eyes on River and Riddick, she could feel his concern for the both of them, that she was standing with her belly wound, that Riddick became so wound up with worry and anger that the animal had taken over.

"What are you talking about," Mr. Universe did stop though he stared at Simon and then Riddick speculatively. "You act like he's...well suddenly more dangerous than usual."

"Because he is," River murmured keeping her eyes fixed to her bàng jiār. "My mate, my lover. Surely you saw the footage of my Riddick's other side?" She lifted her hands to soothe her big man as she spoke to Universe, reassuring the animal that her attention was on him. Her hands cupped his face, fingers gently stroking his cheekbones. "They tranqed him, put Riddick to sleep and the Animal woke without the man."

Universe blinked in surprise and regarded the large man whose attention was still fixed on River, growls vibrating in his chest even as he scooped her up, cradled her in his arms, and pressed kisses onto her face and neck. "Well I'll be a ǒu niáng yǎng de," Universe muttered with a shake of his head. Moving back to his cortex screens he began to continue what he'd been doing earlier. "If you think it'll help, I retract the offer," He called over his shoulder. "I also happen to have some work for you Mal, if you think you can stomach taking money from me."

"Always lookin' for work," The captain had kept a wary eye on Riddick and River but turned his full attention to Universe. River sighed slightly; the captain was an odd combination of naive and cynical. Whenever she thought she had him figured out his mind took another twisty turn and he confounded her again. "What've you got?"

"Just a small shipment of goods to be picked up on Greenleaf, your current destination and dropped on Verbena," Mr. Universe gave Mal an unctuous smile. River decided to ignore everyone but her mate, wrapping her arms around his neck and stroking his scalp and shoulders.
"Sounds doable," The captain nodded pleasantly. "I'm thinkin' we'd better be on our merry though. Fun as it's been," He added somewhat insincerely.

"Yes, take my old friend and get him back to himself," Universe regarded Riddick with a half smile. "Rick, try not to worry too much. You know I don't mean half of what I say."

"He'll be all right," Jayne had taken it upon himself to pack up River's cortex and slung it over his shoulder. "Just needs some rest and to know River's safe 'fore he tackles anythin' else problematic."

"I imagine maintaining a rational mind and being worried sick about a loved one simultaneously could be disorienting and more than a little counterproductive," Mr. Universe agreed. "Miss River I'll send you any search results I get on a daily basis. Just expect regular bursts and don't be alarmed if I send along any news or information I find that could be useful to you two."

"Very much appreciated," River nodded before leaning her head against Riddick's neck and pressing her lips to his skin. "Thank you."

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Once out of Mr. Universe's presence the animal retreated slightly, and Riddick took a deep breath before he looked down at River's sweet face, "I scared him didn' I?" He asked roughly.

"Not overmuch," River shook her head. She smiled up at him, "Knows that you are different. Always knew that. Now knows that joking about taking Riddick's woman away is not tolerated. Glad to have the boundaries established."

Mal was looking at them with a frown and Riddick glanced over at him. The captain jerked his head at the ship they'd parked. "You wanna take a day to go over the Walden? Move anything salvageable over to Serenity, see if we can sell some of it for you?"

Riddick sighed and thought for a moment before he looked at River, "What'd you think bǎo bǎo?"

"Will have to make repairs when we set Serenity down again," River murmured. "Backup life support still non-functional. Best to move what we can, sell it so that Serenity has the funds for repairs."

"All right," Mal nodded and looked at his first mate. "Let's not presume on Mr. Universe's hospitality any more than we gotta. Everybody except River head over to the Walden, get to movin' their cargo, as much as we safely can." He looked at Simon, "Doc, you go through their medical supplies, anything that spoils you take it to Serenity, same with food. Jayne'll set you up with a cart." He looked at River, "If your belly can stand it, you take the bridge and sit up there, keep an eye out for any trouble comin' our way."

River nodded, "Should ask Shazza if she will help. Very good at repairs, will be helpful when Kaylee is not available." Riddick cradled her against his body and took deep breaths, reading her scent and mood easily. Blood, silk, steel, a bit of citrus but not much, and a touch of honey. Plums underneath it all, a constant to her scent ever since they'd become friends. He breathed in again, felt River smile, and knew she found it amusing and sweet that once he'd realized that plums meant an emotion, he never took that scent note for granted again. He might have taken a while to figure it out but once he did, he never forgot.

"Well if she's willin'," Mal nodded and looked at Rick. "You gonna be all right with leavin' River alone on the boat while we scrounge some?"
"Inara will be with her," Riddick nodded slowly as they arrived at Serenity. "I'll take her up to the bridge an' let the ladies know we're back an' there's work to be done." He looked at his woman, "You gonna be all right sitting on the bridge by yourself?" He didn't like it but it was needful, without the salvage Serenity couldn't be fixed proper. They'd end up going through the same thing again, or worse if the boat wasn't repaired well.

"She will be fine," River pressed a kiss to his jaw and Riddick felt heat roll through him. It was a simple affectionate kiss but combined with everything else, the reaction it inspired was anything but simple. "Some work of noble note, may yet be done."

"You need me you get on the comm and call me," Riddick told her sternly. "No movin' around on your own yet."

"No my Riddick," She agreed and kissed him again. "She will be careful, will only sit in the chair he puts her in."

"Yeah," He nodded roughly and promised himself that he would wait until River was fully recovered before he gave into temptation and took her the way the animal wanted. Neither the man or animal wanted to hurt her, so the desire was, as River would say, more of the mind than the body at this point. But when she was healed he was all too well aware of how badly he would want her body under his. The last time she'd been badly hurt they hadn't been intimate yet. It had been both easier and harder to wait. Now he knew the delights in store, knew how River sounded, felt, tasted and smelt in passion and he had little confidence in his control once her wound was fully healed.

"He is very hard on himself," River kissed his cheek again. "She wants him very badly. Hope to be recovered in another day or two. Simon's work is excellent and she heals faster than Kaylee." He could smell tendrils of honey in her scent, her own desire for him stronger than the pain she was feeling. Neither of them were accustomed to going without the other since they'd consummated their relationship. Touching while they slept kept the animals semi-content but sooner or later the hunger would get the better of them.

Riddick groaned, a shudder going through him, "Yeah, glad we got cold water for showers until then though." It wasn't much, but it was something, and until she told him she was ready, until he didn't smell citrus when she moved, he'd be taking cold showers and working himself into exhaustion to keep from taking her before she was ready.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Sorry, this chapter was a bit shorter than the last but this seemed like the best place to stop. And...Universe was his normal charming self. Big shock, Riddick isn't handling River being injured very well. I'm actually surprised, Mal is behaving himself so far. That'll change, at least a little bit, though I have the feeling he'll still surprise us.

I did want to have something semi-normal about River and Riddick's relationship and really what's more normal than the girlfriend worrying her lover's friends won't like her? And Riddick's animal is getting to be a little touchy isn't he. I hadn't planned for him to make an appearance but with Universe running his mouth... yeah for some reason the Animal took exception. I think it worked out all right but I'm not sure how well it reads. This was a very transitional chapter.
The next one...well... you'll have to wait and see. Anyone have any ideas as to what Mal will do next? I think he'll surprise you but he's still going to be a little Mal-ish. Cant' get away from that completely.

Chinese Translations:

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

gē ges - big brothers

Wǒ de mā - My mother! Mama mia! Similar to "Oh my God!" in usage.

Nǚ ren - wife

zhàng fu - husband

nèi xiōng - wife's older brother

zá wù - junk / items of no value / various bits and bobs

dì yù - hell

láng - wolf

bàng jiār - lover / partner

gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch

bǎo bāo - darling / baby

Quote Sources:

My love was warm for that I crossed the mountains and the sea. - My Love Was Warm - Robert Louis Stevenson

Come live with me and be my love and we will all the pleasures prove. - The Passionate Shepherd To His Love - Christopher Marlowe

Would you like to live with your soul in the grave? - Wuthering Heights - Emily Brontë

My heart is gladder than all these, because my love has come to me. - A Birthday - Christina Rossetti

The kiss in his eyes haunts me night and day. - The Look - Sara Teasdale

And the bonds between us strengthen with our strong supernal hope, for oh, my friend, my dearest, how God's love halloweth this love that, unaffrighted, look is in the face of Death! - Remembered - Katharine Conway

Some work of noble note, may yet be done. - Ulysses - Alfred, Lord Tennyson
He took it as a good sign that Mal was willing to wait for River to be ambulatory before he took on that particular scent that always put the animal's back up. He didn't have words to describe it, but the captain always smelled of that strange spice or grain when he had questions on his mind. River shook her head at him and Riddick frowned slightly. Ship's light was dim enough that his goggles were pushed back on his head, and she read his expression as easily as she did his mind.

Leaning towards him her hand rested on his forearm, her lips against his neck as she murmured, "Captain wishes to ask questions of Shazza, why she would charter a ship and come all this way? What are we to her and she to us."

Riddick looked at Shazza sitting between Inara and Simon, across the table from he and River and caught her eye. Shazza looked from he to River and Riddick saw out of the corner of his eye, River's head tilting significantly towards the captain. It wasn't much, and Simon caught the whole exchange, a slight tightening of his lips the only indication of his displeasure with the coming interrogation, but at least Shazza had some warning.

They got most of the meal in them, simple enough fare, protein flavored like chicken, some rice and canned vegetables that had lost most of their taste when they'd been processed. River was picking at her food, her belly wasn't constantly painful, she'd recovered mostly, but when she got wounded she lost her appetite to the pain suppression technique she'd learned from him at the academy. She was better but until she made the move to give him an all clear he wasn't going to push her recovery. And she was dropping weight she couldn't afford to lose, which he did not like.

His wounds were almost completely healed, he wasn't limping or favoring his shoulder though Simon had scolded him for lifting with Jayne and Book. Riddick had shrugged and let Simon examine the wound for swelling or streaking before throwing his hands in the air and cursing fluently about foolish men and their machismo. That had gotten Jayne laughing because according to him there wasn't a more dangerous but less macho acting man in the 'verse than Riddick. The result debate about strength verses machismo had drawn, River, Shazza and Zoe from the lounge. It hadn't been a bad afternoon all in all.

But now Mal was frowning and getting that expression that never boded well for Riddick and his little family. "Seems to me we got a few mysteries," The captain said quietly. "Rick, you an' River, been mighty close-mouthed, 'bout damn near everything. Ain't sayin' I blame you." Riddick found himself slightly surprised by Mal's next words, "Anyone been through what the two of you have, torture an' the like, ain't somethin' I'll press you to speak on 'fore you're ready. Had 'bout enough a that myself, well meanin' folk, thinkin' talkin' somethin' out makes it better."

"It's taken you some time to get to this point of understanding," Simon's voice was calm and even as he addressed the captain. "You were demanding answers from them a short time ago. What exactly has changed?"

"You forget I'm the one helped you with River? Helped Jayne with Rick," Mal tilted his head. "The girl isn't even eighteen but she..." His voice almost cracked and he took a deep breath to clear it. "Got no doubt they both got scars that I can't see. The ones I saw are bad enough. Ain't gonna make it worse by forcin' 'em to talk on what they been through. Seems I've done enough of that." He looked at River and Riddick, a frown tilting his lips downwards, "That isn't to say I'm pleased that
you knocked me out and almost got yourselves killed. And if you ever pull a stunt like that again we are going to have a serious discussion of the 'get off the boat' or 'what were you thinking' variety."

"Weren't really plannin' on it," Riddick shrugged. "But I'm sure Simon has told you, and I've mentioned it more than once myself. My woman is my priority. Her life an' mine, that's what I think on first. It's the same for her. Now happens most often keepin' the rest of you alive falls in line with keeping her and me breathing."

River shifted slightly beside him and her soft voice was clear as a bell in the silence that followed his words, "Care about this crew, about this boat, but caring should not be mistaken for weakness." For all the gentility of her voice and phrasing, the animal was in her words, in her tone despite her core enunciation, "Willing to take risks for the sake of family. Not willing to die for foolishness."

"For each other yeah," Riddick clarified. He looked at Mal, "That bein' said, don't regret what we did. An' we won't apologize for it."

"Guessin' that'd be too much to ask," Mal sighed in irritation. He lifted his cup and took a swallow of tea before he continued, "Would like to hear a bit more on how ya'll know each other."

"That's what family does," Shazza said with the quiet dignity she'd first begun to display on the Rascal Puff. She was sarcastic at times, dryly funny and, despite the vein of sorrow that ran through her, very sharp in her observations. Riddick hadn't forgotten that on planet she was the only one of the survivors to even notice his interest in River.

"Ya'll ain't related," Kaylee smiled at Shazza. "But you're family Rick says. Calls me an' Jayne family too. Know there's gotta be a story there."

"Might be that's why they don't wanna tell it," Jayne was eating steadily but he put his chopsticks down to look at Kaylee. "He calls me his brother an' yeah, it's a thrillin' tale, but it ain't...ya know, a happy one."

"Oh," Kaylee, to her credit, got the point.

It was Shazza's turn to ask questions though, "I'm guessin' Jayne an' Rick been through enough in the war to call themselves brothers." She looked at Kaylee curiously, "But last time we met, you an' Rick were friendly but you weren't close. How'd the two of you come to be related?"

Kaylee laughed, "I still think Rick made too much a what I did. Woulda done the same for anybody." She shook her head at Riddick.

He wasn't going to have any of that, "Ain't many that would though mèi mei. You had the wit to understand what was wrong an' the guts to put yourself 'tween me an' Mal's gun. You weren't scared even when I was outa my head and the animal was the only part of me functioning."

"Jī dū," Shazza was one of the few people in the 'verse outside of the crew who knew what that meant. She'd gotten a good look at the animal a few times on the skiff, days when River's touch was the only thing keeping him calm, her fever driving him mad. "What the hell happened?" She looked from Riddick to Kaylee and back. He could smell her concern, like soft mint tea, rising off her skin.

"Job on Jiangyin didn't go smooth," River's voice was still quiet, but no less loaded for its lack of volume. "Simon and Riddick's mate were kidnapped by hillfolk. Shepherd was shot. Needed
medical attention. Serenity had to leave Simon and the girl, go find help for the Shepherd."

"And left you and Simon on the moon with Rick aboard the boat still," Shazza looked at Mal in amazement. "How in the name of all that's unholy did you survive what he did to you?"

"Well before he could do more than pick me up by the neck and growl at me Zoe pumped him full of smoothers," Mal shrugged. "'Course that didn't quite have the effect she was hopin' for."

Riddick did his best to push back the dread he could feel coming off Shazza, "Tranqs tend to knock out the man, knock me unconscious but when I wake up, the man don't wake with me. The animal side is in charge. I went crazy. They'd cuffed me an' put me in Simon's room. I gāi sī near broke my wrist but I got out of the shackles and to the spare shuttle."

"Unfortunately Rick had no way of knowing the spare shuttle needed its filters and life support overhauled," Wash took up the tale. "So he took a craft that was going to kill him with lack of oxygen. And when I tried to tell him that all I got were growls and some language I'm pretty sure would translate to curses if I understood it."

"By the time we got Book fixed up and caught up with Rick, he was almost unconscious for lack of oxygen," Kaylee said quietly.

"Kaylee figured out why I was goin' crazy, put herself between me an' Mal's gun. Way I'd been actin' he'd a shot me an' been right to, man had no idea what was wrong with me," Riddick shrugged. "Cap'n had no way of knowin' I'd killed someone for leavin' River an' Simon behind already."

"You'd what?" Mal's eyes nearly bugged out of his head and Riddick smirked at him.

"The fèi wù jiàn huò got what she deserved," He told the captain. "An' we'll tell you 'bout it, iff'en it's all right with Shazza."

"Why wouldn't it be?" Mal, to give him credit, did look concerned as his eyes were drawn to Shazza's still face. "Don't seem like there's much rattles you."

"Go on Rick," The woman in question nodded. "Might be good to clear the air. Maybe folks'll understand a little better after." She thought a moment, a wry half smile quirking her lips, "Though I am glad I didn't give in and let Ruby come along on this trip. Not the sorta tale I'd like her to hear."

"Huh," Jayne frowned and stood fetching a bottle from a high cabinet. It was the whiskey he'd shared before. "Thinkin' if it's that sorta story, we're all gonna like a bit a this 'fore it's done." He poured everyone but River and Riddick a hefty shot and nodded to Simon as he recapped the bottle.

"I suppose it begins when I broke River and Rick out of the Academy," Simon began to speak. "We couldn't take the route the people I'd been working with arranged for us, not with Rick along."

"And I wasn't exactly plannin' on goin' back," Riddick agreed with a grin. "And while we're looking for a boat, one the folks helped break us out recommended…ran into an old enemy."

"How many a those you got anyway," Mal interrupted. "Seems like the 'Verse is full of people you know."

"Not really Mal," Riddick shrugged easily. "B'fore I met River an' Simon, I had Cobh as my brother an' that was pretty much it. Knowin' Universe that was just lucky and he's not someone I'd trust with River's life. Information yeah, he loves it, but people?"
"Mr. Universe lives in a cerebral world, very little human interaction, finds it messy and uncomfortable," River explained. "Likes my Richard well enough but does not wish for much contact besides waves."

"Yeah, he's an odd one," Riddick kissed the top of River's head. "But the enemy we run into, he didn't realize I was with River an' Simon."

"How'd he get the drop on you?" Jayne wanted to know. "I've never understood how you kept endin' up in jail. Ain't a body in the 'verse could take you down you don't wanna be taken."

"First time...he killed three people around me just to get to me," Riddick scowled. "Normal folks, standing in the market. He took 'em out. An' he sold me to the Academy." He shrugged, "Half the time that's how I wind up in lockup. Lawmen willing to risk and deal out collateral damage in order to take me in. 'S why I jumped Dobson. Didn't want anybody hurt on account a us."

"For all the good that did," River made a face. "Dobson is an idiot."

"Is?" Simon's face was a study in confusion. "I thought Rick and Mal had killed him?"

Riddick sighed as River shook her head, "Alive when we left him for the crows. Swearing vengeance upon Malcolm Reynolds and all he holds dear."


"Yeah, well the gōu niàng yǎng de who sold me to the lovely folks who introduced me to River didn't know I was with her an' Simon. An' rather than have him start shooting and maybe hit one of them I let him cuff me," Riddick scowled. "And since we were right in front of a boat headed out to the rim, he bought passage."

Simon sighed, "The Hunter Gratzner was a converted cargo ship, using cryo systems to transport people along with goods. We found out, too late unfortunately, that it was a slave ship. Once you were in those tubes you could not get out again."

"So what happened?" Kaylee was caught up in the story in spite of her trepidation, "How'd you escape?"

"Didn't," Riddick smiled down at River, "You wanna tell 'em?"

River smiled up at him and her voice took on his tone and cadence as she spoke, "They say the brain shuts down in cryo sleep. All but the primitive side, the animal side. No wonder we were still awake," She looked around the table and shrugged at them. "Transorting us with civilians. Heard an Arab voice. Some hoodoo holy man. Probably on his way to New Mecca. But what route? What route? Smelled a woman," She grinned over at Shazza as she spoke the thoughts that had run through his head before they'd begun to speak to each other. "Sweat, boots, tool belt, leather. Prospector type. Free settlers. And they only take the back roads. My girl, cinnamon, blood, steel and silk. Oh she's plenty pissed. My brother nearby; asleep like the others. And here's my real problem: Mr. Johns, blue-eyed devil. Planning on taking me back to slam...only this time he picked a ghost lane. A long time between stops. A long time for something to go wrong."

Simon chuckled, "You see those two, they don't sleep through cryo. You may have caught that when you broke River's box Mal; that she told me she was already starting to wake up? I'd put her deeper under than the Hunter Gratzner had but she and Rick just burn through those drugs. So about those two were awake from half a day into the trip until we ran into trouble."

"That was about two or three weeks out?" Riddick looked at River and got a nod of confirmation, "I
had chains on my ankles and wrists, blindfold and a bit gag so I couldn't talk, but River could. She an' I, we worked out a plan. Anywhere we ended up, she an' Simon would try to cut me loose, but other than that, she wasn't going to act as if she knew me. And she was going to pretend she was a lot younger, maybe about thirteen or so, young as she could contrive. It'd give me an excuse to be nice to her. Johns knew that I don't hurt kids, nor women if I can help it. Not less they hurt me first."

"If you was gagged, how'd you talk to her?" Kaylee tilted her head as if she was confused and Riddick was aware of Shazza's twinkling eyes and Simon's half smirk. Of course those two would find it amusing, him trying to explain River's mental gifts without actually telling anyone she was a Reader.

"Gagged means his usual eloquence was curtailed," River's hand crept up his shoulder and cupped his jaw tenderly. "But he could make enough noise, yes, no, to convey his meaning, communication was crude but we managed."

"And then of course, we ran into trouble," Riddick sighed. "And of all the lousy planets to crash on. We just had to pick that one."

"Too tā mā de right," Shazza shuddered. She looked at Mal, "It was a dead moon, three suns, a huge ringed planet, a crashed ship and then…"

"Yeah, then," Riddick slowly began to tell the crew of their time on the rock of hell. Some parts of the story Shazza hadn't heard. She'd been unaware at the time, and then on the skiff there hadn't been oxygen to spare for long stories. By the time they were in comfort they'd also had an audience.

When she heard what Logan had said to River, and River's decision to give Riddick space to decide if she was what he truly wanted Shazza burst out laughing, "Mèi mei, you truly thought this man wanted you because he didn't have any alternatives?"

River shrugged uncomfortably, "The girl was not aware of the entirety of Richard's feelings at the time." She shook her head, "To give him opportunity to sow wild oats made sense. The girl was unready for intimacy as it was. She had never even been kissed. Two beautiful women among the survivors. No way of knowing it was herself that he wanted and not simply a female."

Riddick gently lifted her into his lap and let his big hands rub over her skin, "Well we got it straightened out." He shrugged, "Of course that happened after River nearly got killed by that hún dàn when he half pulled her underground."

River spoke then, her voice quiet as she described how they'd all come running at the sound of Zeke's screams and Logan's shouts. How Riddick had tried to staunch the blood and keep the man alive. That he'd had to retreat because Johns was coming but that Logan had stepped to close to the burrow and been dragged in, pulling her after him until she'd had to shoot the man to loosen his grip. How Johns had kept Riddick from coming to her aid by beating him until he was dizzy and blind with the sun.

"And that man, Zeke, he was your husband," Mal asked Shazza gently. "I'm sorry for your loss nǚ gōng zǐ."

Shazza nodded, a sad smile on her lips, "Only good thing to come of his death was that Johns an' Fry had to believe us that there were things underground."

"For all the good it did," Simon rolled his eyes. Explaining the result and Johns' actions got sympathetic eye rolls of disgust from their audience. The trek through the desert and Riddick's subsequent fake introduction got them all laughing again.
Riddick grinned evilly as River explained about the skiff and how they'd all begun scavenging through the settlement, meeting Riddick in private. "Liked kissing my Richard even when he could not touch me," She rubbed her head against his collarbone like a cat wanting attention. "But for the first time, felt his arms around me, was embraced. So safe and loved. Felt like I was home. Finally."

"But of course things went downhill from there," Simon shook his head and explained how he and River made bombs. Johns' deteriorating mood and subsequent abuse of River before he went to shoot himself full of morphine again.

"And then I had a little word with Fry in private," Riddick's smirk was pure wickedness. "Thought I'd drown in her stench before I could get out of that damn skiff."

"She smelt that bad?" Wash didn't quite understand and beside him Zoe's face was a study of impassive confusion.

"I tell people's mood by their scent," Riddick summarized. "Like I know River's scent, all the notes that make her moods backwards and forwards. But I can generally always tell when someone's afraid, angry or lustng. Adrenaline shoots through your system, heart rate speeds up and it's like your body shouts at me what you're feelin', what you want or need."

"He nodded at Wash, "When you get nervous, you smell like ginger soda. It's a little weird, but it ain't awful. River, when she's really afraid it's like burnt cinnamon in my nose."

"So some scents smell better to you than others?" Zoe tilted her head speculatively.

"I used to always love when I knew someone was afraid of me," Riddick drawled. "Fear smelt good to me. It meant people'd leave me alone. This woman though..." He shook his head, "Ai yā, women usually either lust after me, or they're afraid. The two don't normally mix together, 'cept in little amounts, nervousness like." He made a face, "Fry was somethin' else. Good as River always smells to me that's how bad Fry smelt. Like bein' overwhelmed in overripe mint and dill, Scotch on her breath...tryin' to work her nerves, keep her from totally joinin' forces with Johns."

"My Richard did not care for the experience," River's hand slipped up his neck and tugged his face down to hers for a sweet kiss that did more to clear his mind of Fry than a thousand baths could. "But his aim was accomplished."

Shazza explained about the water reclamation unit, about the Shepherd's child becoming the third survivor lost to the monsters underground and how Fry had finally figured out what River had known since she'd seen the suns. The eclipse would come, and it would come too soon.

Simon took up the tale then, of how all of them had secreted things aboard the skiff, River her scrubber, Riddick the quilts, Shazza any medical supplies she could find and that he'd hidden his medical bag and water aboard. "We wanted to be sure that when we came back there were enough supplies that we'd survive long enough to get to a space lane," He explained. "And it didn't seem like anyone else was capable of planning that far ahead. Everyone was concerned with the immediate."

He continued to speak, sharing how the sand cat had gotten them back to the wreck but that they'd run out of time.

Shazza explained about the creatures bursting out of the spires, about River and Rick caught outside and the joint effort to get them into the shelter of the hold. The madness of being closed inside a container and the eerie sounds of the creature's calls and clicks of their claws and teeth outdoors.

"Unfortunately it seemed they could see in the dark, just as Rick and River do," Simon said dryly. "And that their sense of smell was just as acute."
"Well I imagine none a ya were fresh as daisy by then," Jayne shook his head. "Them things musta thought you were a banquet."

"Wanted an appetizer before the main course," River whispered.

"Yeah, and it weren't like Fry were behavin' as a captain should, despite her takin' on the title," Riddick grumbled.

"But to my mind—though I am native here, and to the manner born—it is a custom more honored in the breach than the observance," River shook her head over Fry's behavior. When everyone around her looked confused excepting Shazza and Simon she elaborated. "Fry claimed the rank of captain. But did not put her passengers first, did not display any concern for them beyond the most base. Could not be trusted with any information regarding my status."

"See them creatures, they was real good at one thing," Riddick rubbed River's arms gently. "They could smell blood. Like them sharks on earth that was, blood in the water and they were on it. Same with these things. An' River's time was comin' on."

"Wait," Inara looked at him and then at River. "You mentioned…" She paused and Riddick knew from her expression that she was thinking of their talks and that she knew he'd made River fall when they'd been private; there'd been no mention of blood then. "How many days were you on that planet? Before the eclipse?"

"Can't rightly be certain," Riddick shrugged. "Had to be at least two, two an' a half maybe?"

"Semi-accurate," River nodded, "Time is not a fixed construct and the planet was not conducive to accurate measurement of the hours."

"When did you sleep?" Inara sounded horrified, "Or eat?"

"Weren't much of either to be had," Riddick admitted. "Don't think I did, less you count moments of bein' knocked unconscious."

"I don't," Inara frowned and Simon shook his head.

"We didn't," River shook her head. "Adrenal glands working overtime, kept us awake. The animals could not sleep with predators surrounding us."

"I had wondered," Simon sighed. "You two really need to talk with me a little more about these things."

Riddick shrugged and explained about the shot Simon had given River and how they'd all begun scrambling from container to container. The bombs and how River had used her blood to bait the creatures, the death of another boy, and finally the plan Fry had come up with.

"It wasn't a bad plan," River shrugged. "But the constant stopping and starting and then Johns wanted to kill me…"

"Why'd he wanna kill you?" Mal wanted to know and was roundly seconded by the rest of the crew.

"Did you do somethin' creepifyin' to him," Jayne grinned at her.

"Didn't like him," River wrinkled her nose. "He needed no encouragement to dislike me back. Uncontrollable, bleeding, the youngest one left. Wished to leave her like bait on the end of a string, make my Richard kill me, single handedly break the spirit of everyone remaining, cast Richard as the
villain and remove the source of his irritation all at once."

"Yeah he was a real piece of work," Riddick shook his head. "Needless to say, wasn't havin' that. So I jumped the gǒnshǐduì, managed to get the upper hand and I sliced him open. Left him for the creatures. Figured to use him the way he wanted to use my girl."

"Of course that's when Fry panicked," Shazza put in dryly. "She and the shepherd took off running. Simon an' River grabbed me, kept me with them and the cells, kept us in the light while Riddick went after the other two. Probably saved my life."

"After we got them, we still had to get through the valley, the presence of which had started the whole mess in the first place," Simon shook his head. "And wasn't that a fun ride."

"Would prefer to not repeat the experience," River shuddered and Riddick caught a whiff of burnt cinnamon in her scent and wrapped her closer in his arms.

"The damn valley was full of those things," He explained with a frown. "So after Imam offers to bless us and me an' River turn him down. Then he goes on and calls River a little witch. She weren't thrilled 'bout that; but Imam wasn't mean, just misguided. And I made a deal with Shazza that she and Simon will keep River 'tween the two of them while I pull the cells."

"A good thing too," Simon nodded. "Imam was wounded and while I was tending him and Riddick was dealing with the cells, one of the creatures tried to take River. Shazza fought the damn thing off of her until Rick could get there and gut it."

"But we lost two of the lights," Shazza said quietly, "Then it started to rain." She giggled in spite of the somber nature of the story and pointed at River and Riddick, "And those two, start cursing God and calling Him all sorts names."

Simon chuckled, "Considering I'd never heard River cursing before, to have her suddenly shouting at the sky is humorous in retrospect."

"But we couldn't go any farther," River said softly. "The light was all that kept the creatures away. Without it, meat for the beasts." She sighed, "My Richard found us a little cave. Got us safe inside so he could take the cells the rest of the way. Get the skiff ready and then he'd come back for us."

"Fry didn't care for that," Shazza said dryly. "And the minute she got her chance, she figured a way to get more light and she took off. Left the three of us in the cave by ourselves."

River nodded, "Quoth Hudibras, 'I smell a rat; Ralpho, thou doest prevaricate'."

Riddick scowled fiercely, "Heard her comin', only her." He growled the words, "Smellin' a lust an' lies. Cowardice has its own scent." He looked at River and shook his head, "I knew. Knew she'd just left my woman and brother there to die. Left Shazza who'd never done a thing to her, who'd helped every way she could." He sneered, "And then she told me she'd promised that we'd go back with more light."

"Like we believed that for half a minute," Simon rolled his eyes. "She dumped every cargo container but ours, killed over two hundred people to save her own skin but we were supposed to believe that she'd come back through that hellscape for us?"

"The odds were not good that she was telling the truth," River shook her head. "But when she left it gave Simon and I time to talk, and to explain to Shazza exactly why I trusted Richard B. Riddick."

"Of course that was also when I found out that River and Rick had agreed to courtship," Simon
sighed. "It was not my best day ever. Though it did turn out well in the end," He nodded politely at the man he now called brother.

"So you killed Fry," Zoe surmised, her voice stoic as ever. "Did you have any proof that she'd really left them for dead?"

"If she'd had any intention of goin' back for my family Fry woulda smelt more afraid, less satisfied with herself," Riddick said quietly. "And I asked her. Asked if River an' Simon an' Shazza had believed her when she'd told 'em that." He inhaled deeply, River's hair a tantalizing scent on its own, sweet and musky with her own personal perfume. "That was when she started to smell more afraid." He began to repeat the conversation, word for word, ending it with his knife in her belly. "So I left her as a snack for the creatures," He looked at Mal and Zoe. He knew he looked cold and implacable, every inch the unrepentant murderer. "Couldn't trust her with the skiff, she'd a left us all. Couldn't trust her at my back, she'd just betray us. And I would not risk River's safety for hers. I killed her, no mercy, and I'd do the same again if it meant the same result."

"Only regret on the entire planet was Zeke, the children, and her injury," River whispered.

"Was that how you hurt your leg River?" Book spoke for the first time since the story had begun and Riddick nodded. He told them about the run through the darkness and the last bomb's explosion knocking them off their feet.

"Simon and Shazza had reached the skiff," River said softly. "They were safe. Richard and I, thrown to the ground, my mate's light was smothered in the mud. Threw the bottle of light to him, attacked the creature coming for us. Fought. Won."

"Damn near gave me a heart attack," Riddick scowled. "My slender little woman, dancin' around this damn thing with claws, teeth that'd break a bone before they tore off a limb and a tail more whip and barb than anything else. Then it got claws around her leg, just when I get my feet, she stuck her hand in its mouth, rammed her sai right into its brain."

"After that, got onto the skiff," River was petting his chest reassuringly as she spoke. "Simon worked on my leg while my Richard got the skiff started up."

"How long were you in the Black before you got picked up," Wash asked with a frown of concern in his voice. "A craft like that is little more than a life-raft, it wouldn't have had much in the way of life support or supplies."

"No," Simon agreed. He looked at Shazza, "I think we figured out that it was around five days. Which meant that when River and Rick managed to finally sleep they slept for a while. By that time we'd been on planet nearly for about four days. I don't think they slept or ate the whole time."

"Stayed hydrated, that was all we really needed," Riddick shrugged. "Until you brought out that protein bar on the skiff hadn't even felt hungry."

"But River's wound was infected," Simon's voice was somber as he recalled his sister's fever and chills, Riddick's desperate need to take care of her. "I'd given her antibiotics but she wasn't getting better."

"We were out past the Blue Sun system," Shazza explained. "Had to set a course around Reaver territory or we'd have been signing up to be another sort of hot lunch."

"Got picked up by a search and rescue boat called Rascal Puff," Riddick said after a moment when everyone took in just how lucky the four of them had been. "They agreed to take us to Persephone."
And you know the rest."

"And they didn't recognize you?" Mal was a little surprised by that apparently and River giggled.

"Mal I ain't well known among folks who ain't mercs or convicts," Riddick chuckled. "They were more worried because they had a big dangerous lookin' hún dàn whose woman was hurt. If River didn't start gettin' better they weren't sure what I was gonna do."

"Speakin' from personal experience I don't guess they were wrong to be worried," Mal shook his head.

"No, they weren't," He shrugged. "But 'tween Simon an' the doc they had on board, got River's wound cleaned out and properly stitched on. Her fever broke the day after." He was vividly conscious of River's soft body against his, her sweet scent, gentle hands on his skin. "Good folks, kept us busy, kept us from thinkin' on what had happened. 'Course they didn't know three of us were fugitives."

"But that's why when River sent a wave saying Serenity was in trouble and to please come if I could, and bring a catalyzer. I dropped pretty much everything and grabbed the first fast ship I found," Shazza smiled at the girl and Riddick watched as Simon wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "River and Rick saved my life, but Simon kept me from goin' mad with grief afterwards. Held me when I needed it, made me talk about Zeke. Explained to me about grief and its stages." Shazza's grin was affectionate as she looked at the doctor, "He acts all stiff an' proper but he don't back down. He wouldn't let me wallow in anything, anger, pain, denial, just kept me goin'."

"You saved River's life," Simon said simply. "I was too far away, Rick was tangled up with the cells, but you charged right up to that thing and shone a light right on it. You kept it from getting to her. I wasn't going to let you hurt for a moment longer than you had to jiě jie. And from a more practical standpoint with Rick almost crazy because of River's wound, helping you made me not feel completely useless."

"Glad to oblige," Shazza grinned at him and then looked at Mal. "You see now Captain, why we don't talk much about 'on planet'. We've all got...things we don't like to talk about."

Riddick watched as Mal nodded. The captain had been surprisingly quiet during their tale. "It occurs to me," The Browncoat began slowly, "That there's plenty you still ain't told. Plenty that you're keepin' back." Riddick didn't wince in dismay outwardly but inside he was cursing the air blue. That was the most dangerous part of telling any piece of their past. Sooner or later an intelligent person would notice that things don't add up. He slanted a warning look at Simon who didn't let on by so much as a blink that he'd even understood what the captain was saying. Mal wasn't done speaking however, "I won't press. Reckon if all your tales are as...harrowing as that one it'd be more a cruelty than is needed to push for information."

"That's...unexpected," Simon spoke into the silence. "You've never hesitated before this. Why the change?"

"In part because a what I said earlier, them scars on the two of 'em," Mal nodded at Riddick and River. "And it ain't lost on me that there are times...not often mind you, and not for long, that River gets a little unstable. And Rick goes a little mad. Those times seem to come more often, come at 'em harder, when I'm pushing for answers."

"Captain has finally seen the Animals, seen them truly, understood it is not controlled, not simply lack of discipline, but an innate part of us," River spoke quietly into the hush of shock that followed Mal's words. "Does not wish someone dead because he pressed too hard and too fast."
"I do need to know a thing or two, so I'll ask right now," Mal aimed a hard look at Simon and then at Riddick and River. "The things you're not telling me, do they make you more of a danger to us? To my boat and crew?"

Riddick felt fury swell inside him, as if the rage was a living breathing thing, a growl in his chest and throat bursting from his mouth. The hand on River's hip moved to the table and balled into a fist and it was only luck that he hadn't picked up a knife. River's hands cupped his jaw firmly and jerked his gaze down to her, "Stop. It is not a threat. Reasonable question. Are we more dangerous because of our secrets?" She stretched upwards and kissed him, soft and sweet, her sweetness drowning the rage in honey and plums. When he'd calmed she turned and looked at the captain, "The simple answer is that we are far more dangerous than you realize. Far more deadly than anyone here. But we do not know everything that was done to us."

"Why'd you think River asked to use Universe's cortex?" Riddick growled angrily, "She's running searches. Trying to figure out what they done to us. What they wanted to make us do."

Simon nodded, "The aims of the Academy were very vaguely defined." He explained calmly. "We know that River was schooled on combat. And we know that they cut into her brain. But apart from that, we could never find concrete evidence of what they wanted to accomplish."

Riddick found within him room to be amused at how well Simon twisted the truth. He was lying in intention, if not in words. And Mal was buying it. "It ain't a question can be answered simply, an' you knew that when you asked," He growled. "Rape and torture weren't enough. Experimentin' on children, that weren't enough. Throwin' her up against men twice her size an' makin' her fight 'em..."

"Mal, they are animals, wolves, if you will," Simon's elegant core voice was cool and calm as he spoke. He had the singular ability to not be affected by Riddick's rage. It probably helped that Simon had never threatened Riddick or River, would sooner die than hurt either of them. "A cornered and abused animal is always more dangerous than you or I, or even they know. I'm afraid that your question has no easy answer."

Riddick was entirely too conscious of how close he was to ripping the captain apart but River's gentle hand and soothing presence were keeping him calm enough for now. His woman's soft voice spoke into the silence after Simon's words faded, "Time is the school in which we learn, time is the fire in which we burn."

"Well gorramit," Mal sighed. "That's what I get for askin' I guess." He shook his head, "Thanks for at least tryin' to explain. We're comin' up on Greenleaf in twelve hours. Gonna need all hands then so get what rest and recreation you can. Rick, I want you and Wash on the bridge in eight hours. I've got the helm until then."

"I'll take care of the dishes," Simon volunteered. "Rick, if I'm not mistaken, you and River need some time to yourselves. You're both fully recovered. You shouldn't have any trouble with the ladder to your bunk." It was a not to subtle hint and Riddick nodded, standing up and carrying River down the hall to the hatch leading to their bunk.

River shivered as Riddick lowered her to the bed and began to strip her clothing off her body. The animal was rising, she could feel it, see his eyes starting to burn bright silver but he was still painfully gentle and careful with her healing body. "My Riddick, my mate, please...have, take, what you want," She was almost begging as she pulled at his clothes, trying to strip them off of him.
"Gotta be careful with you," He muttered, the animal side's growl in his voice, dark, rumbling like coffee and chocolate in her ears. "Need you so bad."

"Then have me," River managed to push his pants off and the shorts with them. His body was still held off of hers though, not pressing her down to the bed in the way she loved. He was still trying to not hurt her. "Please, please Riddick, I need you."

Something in her voice, or her scent, must have convinced him, "Mine." His voice was a demand before his mouth came down on hers. River moaned as his lips slanted against her own, hot and demanding her response. She couldn't help opening to him, parting her lips for his tongue as it pushed into her mouth to taste her and rub erotically against her own. Slowly his body began to press down onto hers, hot and firm and wonderful. His chest rubbed against her breasts, his hands sliding up her ribs to stroke and tease the sides of her curves. She moaned into Riddick's mouth as he caught her lower lip between his teeth and gently nipped at it.

River shuddered, she wanted to wrap her body around his, feel him fill her up with his diǎo and then his seed. He was pressed against her, his cock rubbing over her clit, silky hard flesh teasing her body with just enough pressure to please but not enough to fall. "Please, please fuck me Riddick," She wrapped her legs around his hips, spreading her body open for his and felt his groan vibrate through his chest. "I need you, inside me, please..."

His mouth pulled away from hers as she spoke, bent to her breasts and pulled his lower body away from hers as he repositioned himself to cup her breasts in his hands and hold the tips to his mouth. Long, slow, hot pulls of pleasure tugged from between her thighs as his mouth worked her breasts. River moaned and her hands clutched at his shoulders, she didn't know what she was saying except to beg and plead with him to take what he needed.

Riddick looked up at her and his bright silver gaze was hot and greedy, desire giving him a satyrlike expression as he gazed up her body into her eyes. The animal was in control now, the man had given up and given over to what both the man and animal wanted. She could feel him, the man, watching, now and then a thought would flash through his mind but it was the animal at the forefront, the animal who needed so badly to possess her. She shivered under his gaze, feeling all that power, that need and love focused on her and only her, it was a heady feeling, knowing she was the only woman in the 'verse for him. "Please," She whispered the words. "Take her."

"Let Her out," He was moving down her body to nip and kiss the scar on her belly, his tongue laving it lovingly before he dipped his lips down between her thighs and gave her core a long slow teasing lick. "My mate," He added before he began to lap at her body, his tongue relentlessly patient as it stroked over her yīn dì. River moaned desperately as pleasure built upon pleasure and knew that soon she wouldn't have a choice. Since the two of them had become intimate they hadn't gone a day without having sex, without somehow renewing or reaffirming their bond. They hadn't been together sexually since before Simon's birthday party and even that had been rushed and desperate. She could feel the animal inside her, like a physical presence demanding freedom.

"She is..." River tried to nod, tried to explain, and her words turned into a scream of pleasure as her fall burst over her body. Her mate surged up over her and before the tremors had even completely died she felt his body pushing into hers, sliding deep inside her, and she screamed again, ecstasy and the animal overwhelmed her.

She woke to Riddick kissing her lazily, his lips moving over her face and neck, and sighed in pleasure, "He feels better...so does she."

"Hmm..." He was smiling as he kissed her, "Didn't expect your animal to come out xiǎo lǎng."
"Wasn't sure she would," River kissed the top of his skull when it presented itself near her lips. "He liked it?"

"Tā mā de loved it," He kissed her again and she grinned against his mouth. "You know I love your animal. Love how she claws up my back, bites my lip, growls and screams so good when she falls around my cock."

River sighed happily, "Hmm...He growls when he falls and his fingers squeeze her tightly and she loves how it feels when his body pounds into hers." She stroked her fingers down his back and let them linger on his excellent muscular pì gu. "She loves this too, loves his body, how powerful he is," She writhed under him as his kisses teased her skin.

"Yeah," His voice held a laugh. "And I thought you loved me for my mind." He shifted over her, his body still joined with hers, hardening again inside her and River moaned. "But if this," He rotated his hips slowly until she moaned again. "If this is all I'm good for...better make sure I do it well."

"Richard laughs at her but she could not decide," River gasped the words out. "Don't know what I love most. His mind, his body..." A choked shriek cut off her words as he moved more firmly inside her and set off tremors of bliss. "His heart is..." She shuddered as he kissed her neck, the soft skin over her pulse before his mouth found the bite marks he'd given her weeks ago, laving them with his tongue. "Please Richard, please, fall in me again."

"No choice," He was groaning over her skin, his mouth hot, his hands firm as they gripped her body. She could feel him, how close he was to his fall, her body under his driving him mad with pleasure until they were both lost to it. His hips slammed into hers, his huge body covering her, every inch of skin sensitized and desperate until she was screaming his name, begging for more and more until Riddick was roaring over her, his body stiff with ecstasy. She lost herself, couldn't find the scraps of consciousness, didn't care anymore as his body pushed and pushed hers, no mercy, no quarter, demanding her pleasure.

Her last conscious thought was echoed in his mind, completion, bound together they were finally complete again. They were both shuddering, trembling with the force of what they'd found in each other. She could hear his thoughts plainly, the idea that each time was more exquisite. That he'd never thought to find what he had with her with any woman. If Johns hadn't sold him to the Academy he could have gone the rest of his life without knowing her. If she hadn't wanted to learn so badly, she might never have met him.

"It's worth it," She whispered. "Everything they did to me there. I'd do it all again to be with you my Riddick." River kissed his shoulder, his temple and his skull, everywhere she could reach, "To be yours is worth any pain they inflicted. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it."

"I know," Riddick was in agreement with her. "Knowin' you're waiting on the other side of it, I could do a hundred years of the Academy."

"Don't have to though," River kissed him gently. "Rest now my Riddick, my lǎng, Lù duān, my mate. Rest." She felt him close his eyes and cradle her more tightly to his chest before she did the same and slept.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: So Mal finally knows how our little group met Shazza. Think his curiosity will be satisfied? I'm not sure. I do think he'll leave well enough alone for a bit. But we know how Mal is...the minute something changes...all reason could go out the airlock. We'll see won't we?

Chinese Translations:

mèi mei - little sister
Jī dū - Christ
gāi sǐ - damned
fèi wù jiàn huò - good for nothing bitch / slut
Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng - Fire and water have no mercy - idiom. forces of nature beyond human control / implacable fate
gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch
tā mā de - fucking
hún dàn - bastard
nǚ gōng zǐ - noble lady
Āi yā - interjection of wonder, shock or admiration
gǒushī duī - a person who behaves badly - lit. "a pile of dog shit"

hún dàn - bastard
jiě jie - older sister
diǎo - cock
yǐn dì - clitoris
xiǎo láng - little wolf
pì gu - butt
láng - wolf
Lù duān - Luduan, mythical Chinese beast able to detect the truth

Quote Sources:
But to my mind—though I am native here, and to the manner born—it is a custom more honored in the breach than the observance - Hamlet - William Shakespeare
Quoth Hudibras, 'I smell a rat; Ralpho, thou doest prevaricate' - Hudibras - Samuel Butler
Time is the school in which we learn, time is the fire in which we burn - Time Is The Fire In Which We Burn - Delmore Schwartz
If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it. - Wuthering Heights - Emily Brontë
He always found it amusing that even the people who knew him well forgot how good his hearing was. Shazza was in the galley, from the clink of ceramic she was making tea, and chatting with Mal. There was something very amusing and a little surreal about lying in the bunk with River in his arms and hearing one of his friends talk about he and River. "So, how do you get any sleep," Shazza was asking. "I mean isn't your bunk right next to them or something?"

"Yeah, barring a few reinforced steel walls and pipes," He heard Mal answer. "They ain't normally that bad, well, that's not…"

"You mean they weren't, until they actually started having sex," Shazza sounded teasing. "Those two were making eyes at each other on planet Mal. I don't believe they were sharing a bunk and chaste as little children until recently."

"How'd Rick manage to make eyes when he was wearing goggles?" Mal tried to distract her from the question.

"Dunno," The Dyton native had a grin in her voice though the memories tinged it with sorrow. "Maybe because River talked to me a little, spent some time with me after Zeke was killed, could be I saw it more. But he was always protective of her. And his attitude wasn't close to the way he acted towards Ruby now that I compare the two." She chuckled, "It's a wonder no one else figured it out, but they were all worried about living through the day and night."

"And you weren't?" Mal sounded surprised.

"I wanted to but…" Shazza took a deep breath that Riddick could hear even in the bunk. "I was sorta numb. Wanted to live but everything felt really detached, unless there was an immediate threat, like the thing that tried to take River, I just…"

"Everything's sorta distant, you know what to do and you do it but its like part of your mind is just watching, takin' everything in," Mal's voice didn't have as much of a question in it as it could have and Riddick recalled that according to River, Mal knew quite a bit about loss. "So you see what other people don't. That kinda how you felt?"

"Still kinda how I feel sometimes," Shazza did something that made more clinking. "But I saw how she looked at him, when no one was paying attention. She was… she did her best to act like an innocent child, but she was so competent at everything. Even when she nearly got pulled into that hole she saved herself more than we saved her. She shot Logan so he'd let go of her, and then we were able to pull her back. With a dislocated shoulder she had the presence of mind to shoot the man. She gave him mercy and saved herself."

"I don't guess Riddick took her getting hurt too well even if he was tied up," The captain had a frown in his voice. "He's so damn protective of her now. But at the same time…"

"Yeah I know what you mean," Shazza sounded amused again. "Those two…its rare that you really see a man and a woman in a relationship and still be complete equals. But neither one of them gives the other any quarter. Sure if one of them is hurt they take care of each other but after that its… business as usual I guess."
Jayne's quiet steps sounded on the metal flooring and his voice was irritated, "Mal you gossipin' bout River an' Rick again? Keep tellin' ya it ain't a good notion."

"I'll discuss who and what I like on my own damn boat, thank you Jayne," Mal was snappish as he usually was with Jayne and Riddick sighed. "But Shazza was simply givin' me the benefit of her insights into the two of them."

"Yeah?" Jayne sounded amused, "Figured out that one is just as dangerous as the other obviously." He was pouring something into a cup, tea or coffee most likely, "You figure out that Rick's got just as shiny a genius brain as River?"

"Well I started out asking if River and Rick were always…well exuberant when they were in their bunk," Shazza chuckled. "Seemed to embarrass your captain a bit."

Jayne's laugh was pure humor, "They ain't that bad. Little vocal now an' then but it ain't anythin' bothers me."

"Yeah but you're a lǎo píao," Mal shot back.

"You ain't had to bunk next to Wash an' Zoe," Jayne shot back. "Them two don't 'xactly worry 'bout anyone hearin' 'em through the walls. Or seein' onto the bridge neither." He paused, probably sipping whatever he'd poured in his mug. "Least River an' Rick go into their bunk before they start sexin' each other."

"That's probably a good thing," Shazza still had a laugh in her voice. "When you consider how possessive Rick is of River and she of him."

"Dì yù yeah," Jayne was back to sounding amused, Shazza's humor contagious apparently. "All I did was look at her legs an' Rick was threatenin' to put my eyes out. And I was his oldest friend still."

"You've known him for a while then," Shazza sounded speculative. "That mean you think you understand him best?" Riddick heard Mal's chair scrape a bit as if the captain had changed positions to pay Jayne closer attention.

Jayne's voice was thoughtful and a little subdued when he answered, "Don't get me wrong, we been through a lot, and he's my brother. But I know that there's parts a Rick he ain't showed anybody but River. I known him since he was just past bein' a boy an' I still don't know everythin' about him. He's damn loyal to family though. An' give him a chance, there's nothin' he cain't do or learn. He's like River that way I guess."

"I get the impression it goes against the grain for him to talk so much as he does with us," Mal prompted and Jayne chuckled.

"Considerin' we'd got for weeks on scoutin' missions an' barely talk the whole time yeah," The big merc was doing something at the counter, there was a rustle of plastic wrap and the clink of more ceramic and metal. "Him an' River, they talk but they's quiet, and when him and Simon talk it's more…civilized? I dunno, it's hard to explain."

Shazza's voice was more thoughtful, "I'll admit, Riddick scared me pretty good, right up until I saw him holding River. He made me nervous even then, but…” She sighed, "There was something about seeing him, with this girl, she looked so fragile, feverish and exhausted, wounded, and he just held her. He'd recite poetry with her, stories, all manner a things I'd never heard, until he was hoarse, just to soothe her. Her cup clinked again before she continued speaking, "I'll admit I wasn't outright afraid of him but more…wary. Like I would be with a new gun or machine until I knew the ins an'
"Smartest way you can think a Rick 'til you know him," Jayne sounded approving and Riddick found himself smiling. Shazza was cautious because she wasn't a stupid woman and she hadn't had Simon's hold on him back then to keep her safe. She hadn't been part of their family until he'd made it clear she was part of it. "River or Rick were here, they'd tell ya so too."

"But when I'm all sortsa worried an' wary you gimme grief about it," Mal sounded irked and a little hurt.

"Mal they're workin' for ya," Jayne in contrast sounded exasperated. "You're payin' him, them, to do what they do. Ain't like Shazza who hadn't got no ties. You got ties to 'em. But you still treat 'em sorta like they're gonna misfire 'round you."

Shazza was chuckling loudly, that musical laugh of hers that never failed to make River and Simon smile, "Well he ain't the only one," She admitted. "Up 'til Rick started askin' Cap'n Jack 'bout gettin' me to Persephone an' askin' me real close questions 'bout my cousin an' if I'd be all right, weren't sure the man gave a rats ass about me. But he was real...concerned I guess, insisted on walkin' me down to Badgers, asked Badge all sorts questions 'bout the type a work I'd be doin'."

"Made sure he wouldn't be leavin' ya anywhere you'd have more problems than when you started," Jayne sounded approving and Mal actually made a sound of agreement.

"Yeah, and then they were all makin' noises the whole time we were traveling about havin' my address an' writin' to me. River an' me, we played with each other's hair, that sorta thing," Shazza's smile was in her voice again. "You all seen that yet?"

"What you an' River playing with hair; nope, cain't say that I have," Mal sounded amused.

"Not what I meant," Shazza sounded dismissive. "You'll know it when you see it."

Riddick felt River stretch as she woke up and looked down at her, "Hey Qing Xiāng." He greeted her with a kiss to her lips. "Been listenin' to Shazza talk to Mal an' Jayne 'bout us. We're in for some teasing 'bout how much noise we make."

River giggled, "And my mate must brush my hair. Solidify his sense of completion." She rolled out of bed without concern for her nudity and he grinned. He loved that she wasn't shy about her body around him, not anymore.

He pushed himself out of the quilts after her and began to dress after the two of them had completed their morning scrub. "Let's have some tea an' we can see about sparring and katas afterwards, see how you're feelin'," He suggested after he'd pulled on a pair of cargo pants.

"Hmm... katas at least, and meditation, need to stretch," River agreed with a sigh. He grabbed her brush and hair ties while she pulled on her slippers and watched appreciatively as she climbed up the ladder. Her giggle let him know that she'd Read and appreciated his lustful thoughts about her legs and ass as she climbed.

Riddick chuckled as he emerged from the bunk after her. Shazza, Jayne and Mal were still in the galley, all of them nursing mugs of tea. River found the tea and poured them both a mug of it, setting his before him. Riddick put the brush and ties down on the table and turned a chair so it faced him. River straddled the chair and put her back to him before he pulled it closer so their bodies were nearly touching.

Shazza laughed as Riddick picked up River's brush and began to work on the ends of her hair, "Rick
"how often you do this?" She teased as she picked up a piece of breakfast bread and popped it in her mouth.

"Every mornin'," Riddick smiled slightly. "You saw me do it often enough on the Rascal Puff."

"Guess I figured you'd let her groom herself after a while," The dark haired woman shook her head. Jayne laughed and brought a plate of bread over to the table for them, "You kiddin'? You know how many times I come to say g'night to 'em on the bridge an' he's brushin' her hair?"

Wash entered the galley tiredly and rolled his eyes when he saw River and Riddick, "Again? You got some sort of fixation Rick?"

"Soothes the animal," Shazza, River and Riddick spoke at the same time and exchanged grins when Jayne chuckled.

"It does though," Riddick bent forward to nuzzle the back of River's neck and kiss it before he continued. "River thinks it's 'cause it helps me get her scent on my hands. And it's repetitive. Calmin'." He was aware of Mal's surprised gaze on him as Zoe, Simon, Kaylee and Book walked into the galley. Book was the only one whose eyebrows went up and even he wasn't nearly as surprised as the captain.

"Rick," Simon threw something towards him and Riddick's hand snapped up to catch it. A small bottle, vitamins, presumably to augment the food so the two of them would continue healing.

"Thanks," He nodded at his younger brother and paused to take a sip of the tea. Inara walked into the galley and he looked at her thoughtfully. She wasn't feeling well again today, muscles stiff and spine aching. "Hey 'Nara, was thinkin', maybe you an' me an' River, we could have one of our talks today."

He was conscious of Inara's surprise that he'd mentioned such a thing in front of the entire crew but better to get it out in the open. By the time the ship cycled towards night Inara would need a massage and he wasn't comfortable enough with everything that had happened in the past to let River massage Inara on her own. Even knowing that River would never allow Inara liberties and being certain Inara would never presume, he couldn't do it. He wondered absently if it was the man or the animal that was more insecure and abruptly decided it didn't matter.

"If we could make it this afternoon, I'm sure we can arrange something around your tasks for the ship," Inara was gracious enough to simply agree.

"This somethin' new?" Shazza was muttering to Mal as if she didn't know Riddick could hear every word.

"Nah, River an' Rick, they're close with Inara, 'cause a…well, ain't mine to talk on," Mal replied just as quiet. "Now an' then, well, after what happened recent, its good they get their footing again."

"You mean because of the Academy and what they did to River," Shazza wasn't asking, that much was clear by her voice. Riddick smiled as the latecomers took a seat at the table and began to get themselves some sort of breakfast. Jayne stuck the coffee in front of Simon without being asked and his eyes narrowed on Inara. Riddick could smell the mug Jayne put in front of her, a finger of whiskey in the bottom of it. Never let it be said that Jayne was unobservant.

"They told you about that?" Mal sounded surprised, "Rick didn't want to tell me, hell they didn't even tell Simon until they'd been on the boat near a month."
"You haven't heard those two when they've had nightmares," Shazza's voice was just as quiet but unfortunately it fell into one of those pesky lulls in conversation so her words sounded louder than she wanted.

Mal looked at Riddick with a slightly apologetic expression but before he could speak River's soft voice chimed through the air, "To sleep; no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause."

"Yeah," Riddick shrugged. "Shazza's been around when one or both of us has woke up sudden like," He slanted a glance at Simon who hadn't even blinked. "It ain't a good idea to put hands on us if you wanna wake either of us up."

"Gē ge that goes for more'n half the folks on this boat," Jayne shrugged. "Now iffen you're done playin' around with River's hair, you two plannin' on sparrin' or workin' out anytime soon?"

River laughed as Riddick's hands finished brushing and her nimble fingers braided the silky stuff into a long plait that reached the small of her back, "We are coming. She may not spar but you and my Richard will enjoy a tussle." She poked Simon, "Come along and continue your lessons."

Simon grumbled but gulped his coffee down as Riddick rose and took the empty mugs to the cleaner, "River's given lessons in martial arts to Simon." He explained when Wash gave him a confused look.

Jayne was rolling his eyes still, "Yeah, you can't beat it for entertainment." He commented with a grin.

Riddick sighed, "C'mon Cobh, I might even let you land a punch this time." He led the taller man out of the galley even as Jayne protested his phrasing.

Verbena wasn't ugly, River considered what she could see of the planet. It seemed to be a typical Border or Rim world, a mix of high technology and simple machinery. She hadn't seen as many horses as she had on Jiangyin but they'd landed on the docks and not in a wood this time. The areas she could see were dressed up with bunting and colorful flags, tents pitched in empty lots around a large central building. She could see the stripped tops of the more colorful canvas and smell a plethora of fried foods. The factory built here was opening early and was due a celebration.

Undoubtedly Mal would have chosen to be later if he'd known it was an Alliance celebration. But they were here now and she could hear the rest of the crew buzzing about, discussing the potential for R&R while they were on Verbena.

River watched as Mal finished the sale of Mr. Universe's goods to the Alliance clerk. The captain wasn't pleased to be doing business with the Alliance but he did like to get paid. Especially since he'd done the job and everything. It was just as well that Mr. Universe hadn't mentioned who would be buying the goods at the time they'd picked them up.

The cashier finished counting out the bills, "Nineteen. Twenty."

Mal nodded, "And done." River watched from her place on the stairs near the airlock as the cashier handed the captain a wad of bills. Mal began to count it with an offhand remark, "Not that I don't trust you... but I don't trust you." He reached the end of his pile and determined what River had figured out while the cashier was counting. He'd shorted the captain by two bills. The captain was
giving the cashier The Look. It was the 'I do the job, I get paid' look that he gave to everyone at one

time or another. The cashier sighed and capitulated, grumbling and handed over the last two bills

before ambling away.

Zoe walked down the ramp and slanted a look at her captain, "Ever full with the customer relations,
sir."

Mal shrugged, uncaring that he'd been semi-rude and unlikeable, "He works for the Alliance."

His first mate's expression was amused, "And we worked for him which would technically mean we

also worked for the Alliance."

In a complete turnaround from his vocal and unnecessarily loud objection to the destination of the

goods four hours earlier the captain smirked, "Yep. Have to say not unhappy to be makin' a buck off

'em." River rolled her eyes and shook her head. Never let it be said that Mal couldn't be a hypocrite

when he wanted to.

Zoe seemed to be of the same opinion, "Ah, change is good. The crew?"

Mal pretended to misunderstand what she was asking, "Like the makin' money off the Alliance bit,

but really don't want to push it by takin' part in their celebratin'... Makes me all twitchy." River

grinned to herself when Zoe just kept looking at him. She had the expression that River loved on her,

the 'Captain don't be an idiot and make me correct you in public for your own good' look that Mal

always capitulated to. And capitulate he did, "Fine, but-"

Kaylee had been waiting out of Mal's sight with Jayne and Book. When the word 'fine' came out of

Mal's mouth she went running down the ramp, followed by the two men. "We're goin' to the fair,"

The mechanic announced.

Sounding much more like a parent than River was certain he would like Mal nodded and began to

pay the trio, "An hour. Sixty minutes. Nothing more, nothing less, Miss Kaylee."

Kaylee nodded happily, "No need to do a flippy-hiss, Capt'n. We gotcha."

"Don't spend it all in one place," The captain admonished.

River grinned as Kaylee looped her arms around Jayne and Books' arms, "You can win me stuff."

The shepherd seemed on board with that suggestion, a smile lighting his dark face, "My pleasure.
Always have enjoyed guessing games."

Jayne was another story, "I dunno Kaylee. Was thinkin', could win a few baubles, fun things, send

'em back with Shazza for Ruby. Don't want her to forget us now."

"That's a good idea," Book nodded. "Let's see how well we do." River smiled and waved as Kaylee

turned to wave goodbye to her and the ship.

Wash descended the stairs next to her and smiled, "Not planning to partake of the fair's delights?"

"Status as a fugitive makes the retrieval of funnel cake and teriyaki broccoli problematic," River

shook her head. "Too many feds and purple bellies around for my comfort."

"Well if the cap'n lets Zoe and me go I'll bring you back some," Wash smiled. "What do you and

Rick like? And Simon too?"
Shazza grinned as she came out of the lounge and down the stairs to stand near River, "My guess is that Simon wouldn't know what fair food he cares for."

"No," River agreed with a grin. "But anything that is not his own cooking will be received with delight."

"We all feel that way about food that isn't Simon's cooking," Wash reassured her. "But I'll bring you back some treats. You three have earned them."

River smiled as she watched Wash join his wife, "Very nice man." She murmured to Shazza, both of them listening to the conversation as Mal handed Wash and Zoe their share of the job.

"Let's go get us some of those curly carrots. Love 'em deep fried," Wash suggested as he wrapped an arm around his wife.

He'd almost gotten her away from Mal when Zoe stopped and like any good officer, checked with her superior before leaving, "Capt'n?"

River sighed as Wash dropped his arm, he was irritated that she felt the need to ask, "Yeah, dad. Can we go? Promise to be home before midnight."

Zoe was giving her husband a Look now and River shook her head. Mal thankfully wasn't choosing this time to exert his captainy authority, "Go. Wouldn't want to be responsible for cold curly carrots."

"Thanks, sir," Zoe nodded.

River poked Shazza, "Escort awaits. Bet five credits he nearly gives you money."

"No bet," Shazza grinned down at her. "I'll bring you back some fruit if I find it. Or sweets."

"Best big sister in the 'verse," River grinned back. "Go, have fun." She watched Shazza go and rubbed her forehead. Riddick was up on the bridge with his own work, running diagnostics on the systems since they'd be sitting for a little while at least. She could feel the various members of the crew moving throughout the fair even as her eyes focused on Shazza walking down the ramp towards Mal.

The captain was turning with money in hand to the next person walking down the ramp and paused a bit awkwardly, "Guess I'm not giving you money."

Shazza grinned at him, "I never turn it down. But you don't owe me wages."

The captain smiled back at her. River liked that Shazza relaxed the captain, made him feel more comfortable and less at the same time. Mal wouldn't ever have to wonder where he stood with Shazza, wouldn't have to worry about being offensive unless that was his intention. River could read that he liked the Dyton woman, liked her smile and her strength, the bravery it took to deal with people like he and Riddick and River. But Shazza had sense too and Mal really liked that, sense being something he was short on at times. His tone was just at touch flirtatious as he replied, "Well, unless there'd be some kind of benefit for the exchange of said money..."

Her grin never faded, "Probably not, no."

The captain bowed slightly, "Then I suppose the least I can do is escort you to the fair."

River watched as her friend made a teasing little bow of her own, "Why Cap'n, how uncharacteristically chivalrous of you. "
Mal contrived to look hurt as they moved off towards the fair, "I can be chivalrous." Their banter continued as they walked away from the ship. River shook her head over their silliness and headed up to the bridge. Riddick would find this as amusing as she did.

Her mate looked up as she entered the bridge, extending an arm in invitation for her to sit in his lap. River sank gratefully into his embrace. "The day is done, and the darkness falls from the wings of Night, as a feather is wafted downward from an eagle in his flight," She murmured softly as the darkness outside deepened.

"Gotta say Qing Xiāng, don't feel like that," Riddick offered quietly. "Got a heaviness to the air, like a gatherin' storm."

River took a deep breath and nodded her agreement, "He is very right, against the stone breakwater, only an ominous lapping, while the wind whines overhead, coming down from the mountain." She shuddered slightly and let his hands soothe her, warm palms on her back and thigh.

"Well we'll deal with it when it comes," He could tell something was bothering her. Inhaling her scent told him that burnt cinnamon and citrus wound into her scent like little insults against the warmth of her base scent, steel magnified as she Searched for the crew and Read where they were and what they were doing. "Tell me 'bout our folks. What're they doin'?"

River smiled and nodded, accepting the distraction, "Book and Kaylee are playing games. Book chose discretion as the better part of valor and did not guess an obese woman's correct weight. He lost but she was not angry with him when he guessed wrong."

Riddick chuckled, "Yeah, sometimes that's a good idea." He agreed. "How about Jayne? He was thinking of winning toys for Ruby earlier."

"He finds darts irritating, took out his knife and killed the balloon, won a large stuffed turtle," River grinned. "Brother feels satisfied, a good toy for the little one. Thinks he might try to get a panda next."

"Yeah Shea was always competitive," Riddick nodded, half smiling.

River sighed happily, "Wash and Zoe, talking about the captain, eating fried curly carrots. Said he'd bring us funnel cake and teriyaki."

"Yeah?" Riddick was pleased with that, she heard it in his voice, underscoring what she felt from him.

"Hmm…Shazza too," River nodded. "She and Mal are flirting, talking about the fair."

"What're they sayin'?" Her mate asked with a smile.

River closed her eyes and began to listen more closely, to the actual words of their friend and the captain. Just as she had once listened to Fry and Johns plotting, she listened to Shazza and Mal, repeating their words and actions for Riddick to hear.

"Playing the ring toss game," She said softly. Mal had Shazza almost in his arms, her eyes closed with him guiding her hand as she held the ring.

Shazza was laughing, "Why do I have to close my eyes?"

The captain was smiling down at her, his expression open and good humored, "Makes it more challenging."
River watched as Shazza tossed the ring and nearly hit the vendor who had been helping someone else on the other side of the booth. "How'd I do," She asked, opening her eyes.

"Perhaps challenging was not the best place to start," Mal admitted with a half grin. He picked up a few rings and tossed one. His ring flew unerringly to one of the pointy sticks and landed, circling it. Shazza was laughing, "This is fun. It's been such a long time since I've had fun like this." She watched as Mal tossed another couple of rings and the barker pulled down a silly looking wobble headed geisha doll for her.

Mal looked at her in surprise, "Now you can't tell me that an attractive lady like yourself has never been escorted to a fair?"

River's friend was shaking her head as she made the wobbly headed doll jiggle, "We didn't have them on Dyton. Too much chance for disruption I guess."

Mal's face was a study in surprise and annoyance, "Seems like folks need to blow off steam sometimes."

Shazza nodded, "Exactly. I remember there was one when I was a girl but… Nothing after that. I wonder what happened?"

Mal took her hand and settled it in the crook of his arm, "Where I was raised, we'd celebrate the foundin' of Shadow with a fair, just like this one. That is until the Alliance outlawed our quaint celebration. It was a little against unification spirit."

Shazza was looking around the fair, a half smile on her face, memories of being a child amidst such wonder surfacing in her mind. "Maybe that's why I can't remember any others. If they weren't… approved…"

They'd wandered near a stage where an Alliance quán guì was speechifying. River tilted her head as she listened and repeated what she saw for Riddick. Neither of them was angry with the other, not upset, just remembering and feeling none too pleased with what they were seeing now. A huge banner that proclaimed, 'Alliance rewards those who reward themselves'.

The quán guì was proclaiming, "Thanks to the good Alliance people of Verbena, our gear shift factory is opening ten days ahead of schedule."

Everyone around the stage was cheering, Mal clapped and didn't quite holler but he wasn't quiet either, "Oh, yeah. Let's all hear it for the good Alliance."

Shazza looked at him, a little worried, "Mal."

The captain looked at her and smiled, "Don't worry, not gonna get us thrown in jail. I think."

The dark haired woman's smile tilted wryly, "And my adventures on Serenity continue."

Mal nodded agreeably, "Lifetime of excitement. All part of the service we offer our passengers."

Kaylee raced up to them, babbling excitedly, "You have to come see the tattoo guy. His tattoos keep changin' colors. There's this one it's a sunrise." She stopped and tilted her head, "Am I interruptin'?"

Shazza laughed, "Mal was telling me about how exciting life with all of you is."

Mal was chuckling along with her, "I got a tattoo… dunno if I can compete with ones that change
color though." He was looking around at the crowd, "And it might be best iffen you got some distance from the Browncoat."

Shazza rolled her eyes at him, "You really think I'd run away from a big wig making a speech?"

The man on the stage droned on, oblivious to the rebellious couple in the crowd, "Verbena was scarcely surviving, barely more than a piece of barren rock, but now with the Alliance factory opening you and your families will be able to lead full and satisfying lives."

The Dyton woman tilted her head thoughtfully, clearly reconsidering her inclination to stay, "On the other hand I am allergic to pomposity."

Mal chuckled, "Go on and see the amazing tattoos." He was still smiling as Shazza and Kaylee walked off and turned to move through the crowd in another direction, nearly walking right into an Alliance officer. She was slightly shorter than him, a sturdy, compact woman in her forties with blonde hair and dark brown eyes. Mal recovered quickly, nodding as politely as he could manage, "Go Alliance."

River rolled her eyes at Mal's obviously fake endorsement and stilled as something else trembled along her senses.

River had gone stiff in his arms, her body shuddering, almost convulsing as something sent citrus and burning steel through her scent. Whatever she was reading was massively bad and he doubted it had anything to do with Mal at the moment. "Hey," He rubbed his hand over her back and held her close to his body. That helped when she was having a nightmare, but she'd never had a nightmare while she was awake. "I've got you Qing Xiang."

"It's bad, its bad," She was muttering against his neck and she was right, it was.

The explosion that rocked the ground, and the ship along with it, left his ears ringing and Riddick winced. He looked out into the darkness past the bridge's windows and saw the heat signature of what had to have been a massive explosion. Dust was filling the air like fog and smoke and if it weren't for his eyes he wouldn't have been able to see at all. "River, can you see if Shazza and Kaylee and Jayne are all right? The rest of the crew?" He wouldn't ask but if they were hurt they'd need help. There were a lot of people out there that would need help. River's scent spiked with burnt cinnamon, silk and steel as she turned her abilities to finding the minds of the crew. Riddick looked up from his work, verifying that Serenity hadn't been damaged, as Simon came onto the bridge.

"What was that?" The doctor was gripping the bulkhead as if the ground was still rocking beneath them.

"Felt like a concussion bomb, tied to the local power grid, multiple explosions, remote detonation," Riddick replied shortly. Beside him River began to call out the names of those she'd found just as Inara joined them on the bridge.

"Jayne, fine. Kaylee, bruised. Wash, worried and bruised. Zoe, singed. Shazza, groggy, headache. Mal, blurry but well. Book, on his feet," River looked at her brother and Riddick. Somehow he knew he wouldn't care for what she'd have to say next, "We should not leave the ship. Sabotage of an Alliance factory is will draw the feds and purple bellies. Not safe."

Simon looked at his sister and drew a deep breath, nodded and then left the bridge without speaking. Riddick inhaled and knew just from Simon's scent that the doctor was going to help.
"You might be right," Riddick stood and began to follow Simon, River and Inara trailing him as he walked down to the infirmary. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't help." For once he could do something that wasn't killing, wasn't patching up men he'd led into a fight, men he should have kept from getting hurt. For once the injuries weren't his fault and he'd be able to do something about them.

"We can't," River argued. "In ten minutes this whole area will be overrun with Alliance. We can't stay, can't get caught, can't go back." Riddick looked at her as she stood in the doorway of the infirmary. She smelled very strongly of burnt cinnamon, was obviously worried, and he still couldn't agree with her.

"Then I guess we find out just how good yours and U's huskin' skills are," He replied keeping his voice calm. "Simon an' me are goin'," Riddick looked at River. "Whether you like it or not Qīng Xiāng."

"Richard, please," River was sincerely worried and getting a little angry that he was being stubborn and he was sorry about that, but not by much. "I understand that Simon wants to go, he has an oath, but we're wanted fugitives. You remember what Jayne said, all it takes is someone using their eyes. We'll be caught."

"River, I ain't takin' the time to debate this with you," He said flatly. "Now we can all go help an' do some good or you can try to stop me an' then you an' me'll really have a fight on our hands." Riddick looked at Inara, "We could use your help if you're up to it."

"I'll put on something less refined," Inara nodded and hurried off.

River was staring at him, Reading him and he stiffened his resolve as he threw supplies in his go bag, "River all my life, the only thing I was good for was killin'. I can finally help people live an' I ain't walkin' away from that. Wanna be somethin' more than the murderer."

"Tā mā de niǎo. Don't like it," She warned him and he knew she was really pissed at him. "But I'll help. I'll be right back."

Riddick watched her go and exchanged a look with Simon, who was half smiling in spite of his sister's anger. "We're gonna be payin' for this for a while maybe," He reminded the doctor.

"You don't usually argue with her unless it's for her safety," Simon observed as he rechecked his instruments and drugs. "For the first time she's on the other side of the equation and I don't think she likes it."

Riddick shrugged, "Dunno how this'll play out, but I do know that this time I'm right. I can't huddle in the dark Simon, hidin' from the risks. It's not the way I'm made."

"I know," The slender man nodded. "You're a warrior. And now you'll fight Death instead of bringing it."

"Got a poetic side to you," Riddick grinned as he finalized his own preparations.

River was running down the stairs and had a satchel slung crossways over her body, "Ident cards." She handed them to Simon and Riddick, "Silas Turner, we call you Doc or Si." She told her brother and nodded as Inara joined them, wearing clothing as simple as she had. "Richter Brennan, we call you Rick." She told Riddick quietly, "I'll be Rilla Brennan, your wife. All other histories are similar. Refer to time as a soldier, sergeant, or status at Medacad without worry."

"Then let's get goin'," Riddick pocketed the ID and kissed her forehead. "We've all got work to do." He was very aware that River was uneasy and angry but he knew this was right. For once he wanted
to help people live. He wanted to use what he'd learned to help folks that hadn't done anything to deserve the lot that had fallen on them. He felt more than heard River take a deep breath and sigh as they strode hurriedly off the boat.

"Just afraid of what could happen," She admitted. "Cowardly and unworthy of her mate to snivel so in the face of adversity."

"Be lyin' if I said I wasn't a touch concerned myself," Riddick admitted. "But we're warriors an' we don't let a little fear get in the way of doin' battle. Right?"

"He is correct," River nodded. "We must go this way," She pointed towards the thick of the crowd and the four of them moved. "Mal is sending the others back to the ship. But Book is already helping and won't go. We'll run into them soon."

Riddick kept a sharp eye out behind the specs Simon had lent him. They didn't obscure his night vision but they did help hide the silver gleam of his very active eyes. When they got closer to the center of the madness he saw Book with Mal, both of them carrying a man towards a large tent. From the smells and tables he could see its original purpose might have been a food tent, a shaded area for the fair goers to eat. Now it seemed to be a triage center.

As they got closer Riddick could hear Book and Mal speaking, "We need to be leavin'." Mal was pointing out quietly. Dust clung to the man's clothes and skin, he had a grim look to him, more so than usual.

Book was shaking his head, "There's work to be done here." The shepherd looked as if he'd aged two decades in five minutes, sorrow lined his face.

Riddick moved past the arguing duo as Mal brought up the same point River had, "In case you've forgotten, Shepherd, we've got three Alliance fugitives on our ship."

Book had seen what Mal hadn't, pointing towards Simon who was quietly taking charge of the wounded, "Afraid not anymore."

Riddick ignored the conversation going on behind him and looked at River and Inara, "Find Shazza, make sure she's all right. Find the rest of the crew, get 'em working."

Simon looked up from his patient and met Riddick's gaze, "We need to categorize the injuries, identify the most critical."

Riddick nodded, "Get goin' on him Doc. I'll get the rest of this organized." The quick check of his surroundings, to be sure of where his people were, was automatic. River clearing a table and laying out supplies with Inara, the companion taking over the task as the diminutive woman grabbed someone else and spoke to her quickly.

Moving towards the wounded that were coming in he heard Mal cursing behind him, "Gǒu niáng yǎng de."

Zoe had arrived, her voice questioning, "Sir?"

Mal must have indicated Simon or himself because Riddick heard him, "Looks like we're stayin' a bit."

Book's voice was moving closer to Riddick, "Good. We can use the help."

Riddick looked up from his examination of a man's skull, "Book." He greeted the shepherd as Mal
and Zoe came up behind the older man, "Silas, the doc." He clarified since the three of them weren't apprised of the aliases, "He's gonna handle the really tough cases. Soon as Jayne gets here," His old friend came into the tent, looking a little singed but none the worse for the wear. "Good, you three, triage, first aid, anybody don't need immediate help, sit 'em down an' get 'em calm."

"Doc an' your girl gonna handle the surgeries?" Jayne asked as he set down his belongings, a huge stuffed turtle among them.

"Rilla'll do the best she can. Need every hand we've got," Riddick nodded. "Inara, she's gonna keep the supplies organized, help keep us in water." He looked at Mal, "Where's Shazza?"

"She took a knock on the head," Mal's voice wasn't quite steady as he imparted that news. "I got her in a corner of the tent over here," He pointed in a direction slightly quieter than the rest of the tent. "Figured to let her settle a bit, then make sure nothin's real damaged."

"All right then," Riddick nodded, "I saw Wash an' Kaylee, they headed towards the boat?" He looked at Zoe who nodded, "Right, get 'em back here once they're certain the ship's secure." He looked at the four of them and took a deep breath, "All right, Book, you an' Zoe, you're on triage duty. Mal, you back 'em up, try to keep folks calm. Jayne, you an' me, we're medics, we patch folks up best we can, keep 'em from dyin' before the doc can get to 'em." Jayne nodded and grabbed a bandana out of his pocket tying it over his curly hair.

"Once we're done with the bulk of the folks need sortin' out, Zoe an' me'll give you a hand," Mal told Riddick. "Meantime, I'm guessin' you're Rick, Rilla's your wife an' Silas is her brother?"

Riddick nodded, a quick grin tugged at his lips, "Yeah, pass that on to Wash, Shaz an' my mèi mei when you see 'em." A sudden swell of people came into the tent and that was the last time he felt like smiling for a while. "Let's get to work. Jayne, with me." He could tell that Mal wasn't thrilled with his gun hand/co-pilot giving him orders but at least the man knew when to argue and when to just do what he was told. No doubt there'd be questions later as to why he and River had joined Simon in helping all these people. But for right now, there were wounded; bloodied and torn flesh and people in pain. Questions could wait until later.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: This episode was called 'Dead or Alive' and it was never filmed. The writers took aspects of it and used them in 'The Message' but if you read through the RPG books about Verbena it talks about a terrorist attack on an Alliance built factory. Since I'm going to end up using 'The Message' later on I didn't want to have the same story line twice. I can't tell you much more now without giving away what'll happen in later chapters but I do want to say that I've made this much more Riddick-centric than Mal or Zoe.

Chinese Translations:

lǎo píao - literally, old frequenter of prostitutes.

Dì yù - hell
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

Gē ge - big brother

quán guì - influential officials / bigwigs

tā mā de niǎo - goddamn it / literally 'His mother's dick'

Gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch

mèi mei - little sister

Quote Sources:

To sleep; no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause. – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

The day is done, and the darkness falls from the wings of Night, as a feather is wafted downward from an eagle in his flight – The Day Is Done – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Against the stone breakwater, only an ominous lapping, while the wind whines overhead, coming down from the mountain. - The Storm - Theodore Roethke
Riddick was very conscious of eyes upon them as he, Jayne, Mal and Zoe cleaned off their hands at the water pump. The crowd around them had the potential to turn ugly fast. Some were trying to clean up, moving the wreckage of the factory, clearing the small street but most of them were simply angry, frustrated over what had happened.

Mal had an eye on the crowd too, "Simon should be done in a couple of hours. As soon as he is we're outta here." He clearly had the same uncomfortable wariness Riddick did when it came to the potential mob around them.

Zoe nudged Mal, "Captain." Riddick glanced to where she was looking. A very officious looking officer in his twenties, of obvious Oriental descent was moving towards another officer, a woman, statuesque with very dark blond hair in a braided bun at the base of her neck. Her spit and polish demeanor had been smudged; clearly she'd been working hard since the explosion. It wasn't hard to hear the conversation, as it was taking place almost beside them.

"Corporal Grayson," The female officer nodded at the male. "What do you have for me?"

"Lt. Quillan," The corporal saluted and referred to a comlink he held, "We ran the manifest from the factory through the cortex and flagged one of the workers. Suspicious background."

Quillan took the comlink and regarded it with a frown. Riddick caught a whiff of saffron, spices and the scent of raisins and wondered what her mood was. Her expression was resolved but weary under it, "Independent in the war. Let's bring him in."

"We're searching for him now," Grayson told her.

The crowd had apparently heard the same thing Riddick had. A male voice shouted, "An Independent did this?"

The trickle of unease down the back of his neck increased to a stream and Riddick exchanged a worried glance with Mal. His eyesight made the ugly mood of the crowd very clear and the Alliance officer was very close to it. She'd spun around at the sound of the shout and it was clear from her expression that she hadn't realized the locals were so close. One of them, his face distorted with anger was trying to get right up in her space, the crowd right behind him, "Who is it?"

The officer, Quillan, shook her head, "Not your business."

That didn't set too well with the local, "Not our business? This is our town. These were our people."

Her voice was very quiet, discreet almost, but that didn't hide it from Riddick's ears as the woman told her corporal to get reinforcements. As the younger man moved off the Lieutenant turned back to the crowd, "Alliance justice will handle this man."

The same mouthy local had drawn his own conclusions, "It's one of those gorram Browncoats, right?"

Someone else in the crowd took that idea and ran with it and Riddick glanced with concern over at the tent with his family and Inara in it as the shouting began, "Had to be from the factory." Someone
else seconded that and added, "That guy, working electric, he never drank with us."

The Lieutenant snapped out an order, "Settle down!" But the crowd had its head and it was rapidly turning into a mob.

"Yeah, too good for us. Lyin' sack of—" Someone else was shouting and Riddick took a cautious step back. Mal, Zoe and Jayne with him as the crowd became unruly and another voice added, "Saw 'im at the saloon."

The crowd began to move, Lieutenant Quillan attempting to keep order but she was only one woman, "Stop it. Now. Stop!" Her shout did no good, the crowd wouldn't hear reason at this point and orders only enflamed their mood.

"Out of our way," The self-nominated spokesman sneered and pushed past her.

Mal had kept quiet, wisely deciding discretion was the better part of valor. Riddick kept an eye on the crowd as the captain commented to Zoe, "This is gettin' ugly."

The first mate nodded, "What do you want to do?"

Mal turned and looked at Riddick, "Get Simon and the others. It's time to go."

Riddick looked at Jayne and the younger man nodded slowly, "Maybe not move too quick like." Jayne suggested.

"Last thing we want is to look like we're runnin'," Riddick agreed. "Act fearful 'round a mob an' we're sure to get taken up by 'em."

Mal's grimace of agreement was pained but he and Zoe slowed their purposeful stride to a careful walk that avoided conflicts as they headed towards the tent where Simon and the others were still working.

Jayne's shoulder nudging him drew Riddick's attention to a group of bodies laid out on the ground. A huge man with a fuzzy beard was touching the face of a woman. As Riddick watched, the man kissed the dead woman's forehead, his face a study in grief visible even behind the beard. The man appeared oblivious to the madness around him until he heard a shout of triumph and looked up.

Riddick cursed under his breath as the mob came their way, one of the voices shouting and vindictive, "We've got 'em." The crowd was surging and pressing, darkness no friend to any of the locals and Riddick felt more than saw Mal and Zoe step back near the edge of the triage tent, out of the way as the mob dragged a man past them.

The victim of the mob's justice wasn't a large fellow, his only crime appeared to be wearing a brown coat similar to Mal's. Riddick felt more than heard Jayne's furious snarl at the man's treatment, the mob dropping the man to the ground and the same local who'd challenged the lieutenant kicked him. "Murderous independent," The kicker sneered angrily.

He knew the minute Jayne had enough and couldn't fault his old friend for it. Jayne pushed his way through the crowd, Riddick in his wake and grabbed the local kicking the mob's victim, heaving him away from the man. He stood hand on his gun and glared as Riddick moved past him and checked the victim's vitals. "How is he," Jayne's voice came from above him, hard with anger.

"He's a ā tā mā de bloody mess," Riddick reported. The man had at least two broken ribs and a concussion on top of all the superficial injuries. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the bearded man who'd been mourning the dead woman. He pushed through the crowd and made a beeline for the
unconscious independent.

Jayne snarled and blocked the man from getting any closer. "Get back in line or I'll shoot you."

"We're not letting you beat him to death," Riddick seconded as he stood to back Jayne up. Big as his old friend was, the grief stricken local was nearly as tall and half again as wide.

"He killed my wife! Get out of my way," The reply was half insane with rage and pain.

Riddick shook his head, "You don't even know if it was him yet."

Some bèn dàn in the crowd called out, "You got blood on your hands. Maybe it was you that done it."

Riddick growled at the accusation, "We got blood on us because we came off our safe ship to help your gorram wounded. Got family still helpin' 'em. So you wanna beat on someone you just try me. Because I will send you to hell right along with the rest of the dead."

There was an ugly murmur from the crowd and Jayne stiffened his hand on his gun while Riddick eased his own fingers towards the sidearm on his hip. Before the mob could turn on them there was the loud startling sound of a gunshot. Riddick saw Quillan step through the crowd with her corporal and a couple of Alliance purple bellies with her. The lieutenant had her gun drawn and had obviously fired the shot.

"The next person to touch that man is dead," Quillan informed them all coldly. The crowd and the bearded man reluctantly backed away from Riddick, Jayne and the barely breathing man. Quillan reholstered her gun and grabbed some papers from her corporal before she approached Riddick. She nodded at Riddick and Jayne, "You two, help me turn him over."

Riddick bent and nudged Jayne's leg. The taller man was still watching the crowd, "You got a gentler touch'n me Rick. I'll keep ya'll covered."

He nodded at Quillan, "Man's got a concussion judging from the goose egg on his skull and at least two broken ribs." Riddick explained as he gently turned the man over with Quillan's help. "Doc's in the triage tent, my wife should be able to wrap up the ribs, keep 'em from pokin' at his lungs."

Quillan nodded, "I'll see to it my men handle him carefully." She took a careful look at the unconscious man's face and compared it to her paperwork. Looking at the crowd in irritation she said in a loud voice, "It's not him. We know who the culprit is and he's no longer in town. He's taken a land shuttle."

The crowd was thinning out now, the mob drying back into normal upset people and Riddick could see Mal and Zoe on the edges of the crowd near the big tent. Mal made a derogatory noise at the end of Quillan's speech and the convict could see Zoe elbow him to shut her captain up. Jayne exchanged a glance with Riddick and the two of them made their way over to the captain, masking Mal's near involuntary eye roll.

Quillan, thankfully, was still talking and didn't notice Mal's blatant disrespect, "Every available ship in port is now under my control. Alliance personnel and volunteers will be assigned to each in order to go after and apprehend the target. Captains please report to Corporal Grayson."
A few men moved towards the corporal but before Mal could get the bright idea of sneaking off
Quillan headed straight for them, "Captain Reynolds."

Mal, caught and unable to deny is own identity nodded in resignation, "Yep."

"I'll be going with you," The Lieutenant informed him.

Mal blinked and seemed to consider for a moment what his response should be before he gave in
semi-gracefully, "Shiny."

Quillan looked at the four of them and nodded towards Riddick and Jayne, "These your men?"

"You might could say so," Mal nodded. "As much as they belong to anyone."

That gave Quillan pause for a moment but she set the odd phrasing aside and spoke directly to the
two gun hands. "It was well done of you to step in. The man was innocent, could have died at the
hands of the mob if you hadn't done something. Your names?"

Riddick wondered if God was laughing. An Alliance officer wanted an introduction and was
commending him and Jayne on something they'd done. Getting a hold of his sense of the ridiculous
he offered his hand, "Richter Brennan. This here's Jayne Cobb. My wife Rilla and her brother Silas
are still in the triage area."

Quillan took his hand and shook it, then did the same with Jayne, a pleasant firm grip without any
fuss about it. "We're all grateful for any help they're giving. I understand you were also helping with
the wounded. You have experience with this?"

Jayne shrugged, "We're fair medics." He had put on his dim rim boy persona, masking the
competence and intelligence he'd displayed when he was working on the wounded. "Life's messy
out on the rim."

That drew a half quirk upward of Quillan's lips before she turned back to Mal and handed him a
piece of paper, "Our target. Have your ship ready to go by oh-one-hundred." She turned on her heel
and walked back towards Grayson.

Mal looked down at the picture, Riddick and Jayne looking over his shoulder as Zoe spoke quietly,
formulating a plan, "We can tell them we're grounded. Kaylee can fake a problem with the engines.
Shouldn't be that hard."

Riddick swore, "Pissin' hell!"

Mal glanced back at him, "What now?"

Riddick nudged Jayne and pointed at the picture. Jayne's reaction was just as irked, "It's Private
Everton."

Mal looked at the two of them, "Explain."

Riddick sighed, "Before the Dà Chóngs, Everton was in our unit."

Jayne was shaking his head, "Don't see how he coulda done this. Hurt all these folks. Man wasn't
exactly…"

"He wasn't looked at for the Dà Chóngs," Riddick said flatly. "He was a soldier, a private. Never
advanced any farther'n that. Don't even know how he'd go about figurin' a way to pull off a piece of
work like this."

"You could though?" Zoe asked quietly.

Jayne snorted derisively, "Without hurtin' anybody."

Riddick nodded, "Yeah. Know how to take down a buildin', make it implode, nice contained fall. Done it before when our units were too close for a full on explosion. You don't want to take out your own unit when you're attackin' the enemy's stronghold."

"Generally not recommended," Jayne agreed in a dry voice.

"But this Everton, he couldn't?" Zoe pressed.

Riddick and Jayne exchanged a long look and Riddick finally shook his head. "I trained him, before I was recruited for Đa Chôngs, I was young but I was still his sergeant. I didn't see this in him. But I could be wrong."

Mal sighed, "Guess we're going a'posseing."

River hefted the bag over her shoulder and handed Mal her data pad. "I made it more in depth this time. Still Black Swan but it will hold up to a check by the purple bellies if they go snooping on the bridge," She explained to the captain. "I had a bad feeling when we landed." She looked out into the night, her eyes easily seeing into the shadows, "I still don't like this."

She could tell the captain was relieved, "Not much thrilled about it either little one." He agreed and looked at Inara who was also carrying a sack of medical supplies. "Just try to keep your heads down. Rick and Jayne have some history might be helpful here. Try not to talk to anyone if you can help it."

"Not my first rodeo captain," River rolled her eyes even as she felt her nerves shudder with prescience. It was an awful feeling, the knowing and being unable to even verbalize or mentally articulate what she knew.

Inara didn't seem to sense her mood, she was bristling at Mal's condescending attitude, "Thanks Mal, I think I've got that covered."

The captain seemed to notice that something wasn't quite right with her. River could feel his concern as he addressed Inara, "Okay, fine. But don't let moonpie talk to anyone, either. You think you can handle these guys but... just don't let your guard down."

River looked at Mal and she knew what she was about to say would make no sense to him but she was unable to stop herself from speaking, Mal tilted his head at her. "Yeah?"

She shook her head, "The cobwebs are growing sticky, they're turning blue with the sun and will catch us all in their tendrils. Have to step carefully."

The captain to his credit turned his head towards the boat and hollered for Riddick to come out, "Rick, need a word." Turning back to River he just sighed and shook his head, "Thanks for the update."

River growled in frustration sounding remarkably like Riddick, "Just because I don't always make
sense it doesn't mean I'm wrong. I'm not stupid." She shook her head at Mal, "And I will keep an eye on Shazza. She's better but head injuries…should be watched."

Inara took a closer look at Mal and River knew the moment she realized that most of Mal's fussing came from worry over the dark haired Dyton woman, "I will too." She smiled reassuringly and Mal couldn't help but respond to it.

The captain relaxed slightly, his relief obvious even through his attempt to conceal it. He nodded, "I know you will. This just…"

River shrugged, "Uneasy. An uncomfortableness as Jayne says."

"Yeah," Mal agreed with a frown addressing Inara as Lt. Quillan approached. "The Alliance has assured us the delay won't be too long, Miss."

River tilted her head as the Lieutenant paused near Inara and River, obviously able to tell they were both from the core in spite of their simple clothing. Quillan gave them a formal nod, "My apologies for the inconvenience."

Inara returned the nod with gracious courtesy and River smiled at how easily the Companion could remind others of her status without a word, "It's no problem. I hope you catch the monster responsible."

Quillan nodded again, "We will."

River felt every hair on her body rise and stand upright as Riddick arrived in the cargo bay. His footsteps barely caused a vibration on the deck plates as he stalked cat footed towards her. He was beside her before the captain even realized he'd arrived making Mal jump slightly when he spoke. "Nû ren, I know you're pissed, but are you really gonna go without kissin' me?"

She sighed and resolved to not worry him about the frisson of unease that wouldn't leave her bones, "No. Love you in spite of the stubborn streak. Or maybe because of it. Wouldn't have you if you didn't have it."

Riddick nodded his understanding and ignored everyone around them to fix his gaze on her, "We can fight later." River shuddered for an entirely different reason as his silver eyes lighted upon hers and devoured. He looked at her as if he never wanted to stop before bringing his mouth down hard and possessive over her lips. Hot, riotous need filled her, spilling from his lips into her mouth, a promise that no matter what they would always be together. His lips moved, taking, demanding and devouring her, tongue and teeth clashing as he easily lifted her into his arms and reminded her that no matter what, she belonged to him and he to her.

Riddick smirked his pleasure when he finally released River and set her on her feet again. He could tell she was dizzy with lust and weak kneed. Inara had to put a steadying hand under her elbow to help her walk down the ramp. Quillan was regarding him as if he'd lost his mind and Mal was sighing his annoyance.

"Lieutenant, if you'll stop bothering my paying customers, we can be off," He told the Alliance officer. Riddick could smell the man's aggravation at having his ship commandeered. Riddick leaned against the ship and kept his eyes on the Lieutenant.

She was checking something on a data pad and looked at he and Mal, "There'll be three others
joining us." As she spoke two men, one a skinny towheaded fellow with a big gun, the other short and not quite as skinny with a brown mustache that made up for his retreating hairline moved up to the ship.

"I'm Jonah, this here's Mather," The skinny one introduced the two of them as he looked Serenity over. "Well, shoot, doubt this piece of rustin' dust would be able to find a stick of dynamite up a donkey's ass."

Riddick wondered if he could get the man to repeat that in front of Kaylee. She'd wallop him with a wrench for insulting her girl. He was half smiling at the thought when Mal addressed the subject, "Well, lucky for us there's no donkeys on this planet." Captain wasn't pleased, his tone was quiet and pleasant but he had an undercurrent of pissed off that went with the green pepper scent Riddick was catching.

He was even less pleased and Riddick's mood fast joining the captain's when the huge fuzzy bearded man walked past them and into the cargo bay. It was the same man Riddick and Jayne had kept from beating the mob's victim. He had a huge gauge shotgun strapped to his back and hadn't spoken two words.

Quillan nodded in the bearded man's direction, "That's Azuria."

Riddick was watching the backs of the men as they stood at the top of the ramp just inside the cargo bay, "Don't need them. Really don't need the mouthy one. Me an' Jayne are the best tracker's you'll ever see."

The lieutenant seemed inclined to debate the point and her cool eyes regarded him thoughtfully, "I don't see how you can make that argument."

Before they could really get going on that particular debate Mal interrupted, "Fun group." He was looking at Quillan with a cold expression. "Better be able to control 'em. They disrupt my ship and I'm tossing 'em off."

Lt Quillan didn't fold her arms but her spine stiffened as if she wanted to, "I don't need to remind you, Captain, who's in charge here."

Riddick brought a hand up to rub his chin and hide his smirk. Mal was well and truly pissed at the woman now, and his tone showed it, "Never had no doubts about that."

For an Alliance officer Quillan wasn't unobservant or stupid. In fact, in another time and place, Riddick could have seen himself happily working with her. That cool regal beauty was something he would have liked to see warmed up and gasping in his bed if he wasn't wound around River's strong delicate little fingers. The blonde woman proved her intelligence by ignoring Mal's tone and less than deferential attitude, simply informing him, "We're checking the northern sector. I'll give your pilot the coordinates." She walked calmly up the ramp and into the cargo bay, her instincts for how to reach the bridge unerring.

Mal followed her up the ramp and looked at Riddick as he shut the airlock. Riddick looked at the would be bounty hunters and then up to where Quillan was disappearing into the middeck, "Mal…"

The captain shook his head with a sigh, "Let's worry on what we gotta when we have to." He frowned for a moment, "You little woman seems to be a mite twitchy though. Anything I should know?"

Riddick shook his head, "You ain't wrong about that but it's nothing she's mentioned to me."
Mal looked heavenward as if pleading for mercy from a God he didn't believe in anymore and took a deep breath. "Nothin' for it I guess. Let's get goin'. You make sure Wash is filled in."

"She left a data packet in his chair. Something she worked out with him a while back," Riddick said easily mounting the stairs. "He'll pass it on to Zoe. I'll see Kaylee in the engine room before I head up to the bridge."

Mal nodded and set the airlock doors to seal up for atmo behind them, "Well let's go follow orders."

Riddick gave a dark laugh, "Yeah, case you ain't figured that out Mal. I've never been good at blind obedience."

"Sergeants usually aren't," Mal agreed and began to follow him up the stairs.

River was conscious of Inara's surprise as they walked through the pitch black night to the tent full of wounded. She could see very well, knew that her eyes must be glowing and was grateful that Inara had the presence of mind to not comment on the phenomenon. The tent serving as an infirmary was well lit though and thankfully her eyes adjusted quickly.

In a corner she could see Book praying over an elderly male body. He paused with his head bowed for a moment and then pulled the sheet over the dead man's head. As she watched he moved onto the next body and began the process over again. From the amount of bodies she saw laid out in an orderly row Book would be busy for a good portion of the night.

The same people who had tried to help before were still there, mostly ignorant but willing to follow instructions and Simon was directing people and soldiers as best he could. At the moment he was inspecting the eyes of a man who was half unconscious. Shazza was in another corner nearby, obviously dizzy still but gamely helping another woman clean a man's leg of grit and wood splinters.

River took a deep breath and did her best to anchor herself in Riddick's mind. Distance wasn't too much of a factor so long as he was planetside or in the case of Serenity, in the same hemisphere as she was. She'd improved her mental shields against intrusion to the point where she wasn't screaming in agony around all these hurt people.

She and Inara hurried towards Simon and put the bags of medical supplies down, "Silas." She greeted her brother with a half-smile. "What can we do?"

Simon glanced at her and then Inara, "Keep an eye on Shazza until she gets her bearings. She's not doing badly but I don't want her overdoing it."

Inara nodded, "I'll do that. I imagine Rilla will be of more help to you surgically than I will."

River indicated the bags, "We brought more medicine. Use it sparingly."

Simon nodded, "Mèi mei if you'll get Inara and Shazza going with some of the injured. Shazza and one of the locals are trying to clean the wounds. Everything has to be cleaned before we can begin treatment."

"Triage is still in effect," River asked the question that would determine just how long the supplies lasted. "Or is the Alliance going to provide medical supplies?"

"They don't have much here," Simon replied. His tone was distracted as he began to stitch the
wound his patient had on his scalp. "So I'm afraid yes, triage is still in effect."

River nodded, "Can make sure those who cannot be helped do not suffer anymore." She raised an eyebrow and waited for Simon to acknowledge both her meaning and comprehend what she was offering.

"Nerve paralysis?" Simon was quick. It was nice to have a brother who was also a genius.

River nodded again, "If it must be done. Yes. For those who could not be helped otherwise."

Her brother thought for a moment and made a decision, "Yes. You're in charge of triage. Anyone requires the two of us at once will have to wait." River gave him a minute indication of her understanding, not wanting to draw attention to his decision. The locals wouldn't understand but if someone was so badly injured that they would require both she and Simon to deal with the wounds that person would probably die anyway and if they tried to save him or her, three others would die while they made the attempt. Triage was an awful necessity but it had to be done. Simon looked around, "We're getting the second wave of wounded now, when you're done with the evaluation let me know. I'll get you started on the patients."

River nodded and moved towards a soldier who was standing near the doorway with a shocked and helpless look on his face, "What's your name?"

"Uh, Blakely ma'am," The soldier, no more than twenty, saluted her as if she was an officer.

"Corporal Blakely, I need you to go to the general store, or wherever there are supplies and find us sewing thread, strong stuff, carpet thread, even fishing line will do." River told him firmly, "Also bring needles, scissors and any cloth you can find. And any type of alcohol for sterilization. We'll need anything you think is useful. And wash your hands at the pump before you go touching the supplies."

"I can go with him and help," One of the local women offered. "The saloon will have whiskey."

River gave her a sly half grin, "I'd rather you find moonshine if anyone makes it. The higher the proof the better. Alcohol will be our best bet for cleaning out the wounds."

"We can do that," The woman grabbed the soldier. "C'mon, there's a hand cart in the general store, we can load it up. And bring your gun."

"Yes ma'am," The soldier seemed grateful for the direction and River nodded as they moved off with purpose.

"You and you," She pointed at two others who didn't seem to have much to do but stand around. "You and these ladies," She indicated Shazza and Inara. "You're going to help them clean the wounded. Make do with water right now, get the wounds exposed but don't do anything that increases the bleeding." She looked at Inara, "They'll do the heavy lifting. If you come across anyone with broken bones, call me, I'll show you how to set them. I'm going to get started with triage like Silas told me."

"What about the kids ma'am," One of the purple bellies asked hesitantly. "There's about six or seven little ones just wanderin' around."

"Find someone from your unit who has sisters or brothers, someone who's good with little ones, get them in here to take care of the children," River ordered. "And get the names and families, we'll need to know if they have any kin to go to after this." She didn't wait to see if they would obey, moving to the most chaotic corner of the huge tent where wounded lay moaning or wailing with pain.
Steeling her mind she began to work her way through the wounded, joined by Inara and Shazza and the soldiers after a moment. They began separating those who could wait from those who couldn't and the ones who could not be helped from all the rest. It was a long, grueling and painful process and not for the first time River thanked Book's uncaring God for the anchor of Riddick's mind.

She was in the middle of stitching a wound in a woman's thigh, her husband holding her hand, the gash was dangerously close to the femoral artery. The artery hadn't been nicked but wooden shrapnel had penetrated deeply enough that River had to use the utmost care to clean the wound or she'd do more damage than the splinters, some of which were the size of her pinky finger. Simon had watched her carefully stitch up someone else before nodding and saying she'd do fine. For tricky things she'd had to call him, the best way to remove the splinters without touching the femoral, how to clean a wound without opening it further.

The two folk she'd sent for alcohol and supplies had returned with barrels of the stuff and two hand carts loaded with everything they could loot from the general store. River was handing over patients to be bandaged with colorful calicos and delicate india prints. The soldier and the girl who'd fetched the supplies were in charge of bandaging now, both of them sensible enough when given a straightforward task.

She'd just tied off her stitches and was stretching her back before she began the initial bandage when there was a commotion at the front of the tent. Two alliance soldiers, along with the corporal she'd seen in Riddick's mind, were bringing in a stretcher. The corporal, Grayson, she pulled the name out of his mind, shouted for a doctor.

Simon looked up from his work, "Over here." He pointed at an empty table next to River and looked at her, "You're nearly done?" When she nodded he gestured for the two soldiers to take the woman's stretcher over to the bandaging duo. "Put your wounded down, carry this woman, carefully," He emphasized. "Over there," He pointed. "Then you can go."

River regarded the man who'd just been set down, "It's the Commander." She whispered. "Tanaka."

Simon gave her a sharp look and nodded, "We don't care about rank, only the wounded. If that's your last patient with serious wounds give me a hand with getting him stabilized before you move on to the less seriously injured."

River nodded and looked for Inara, Shazza and the two soldiers. "One of you men, bring me a jug of that moonshine and some toweling. Then keep on doing what you're doing."

"I'll do that," Book called from his corner with the dead and began to fetch the supplies she'd requested.

River couldn't quite believe that the man was still issuing orders. She could hear him talking, but it was just so hard to take in. He was talking to the corporal, "Grayson, update."

Grayson, to his credit, was apprising Simon of the circumstances in which they'd found the commander. "They just got him free, the wreckage had him trapped."

Tanaka shouted, "Now!" With a worried look Grayson rushed off and Simon looked at River before he took a deep breath. The two of them were carefully lifting Tanaka's arms away from his belly where he was clutching it when they both heard the rumbling of ships.

River looked at the spaceport for a moment. A shiny Alliance shuttle rose from the landing pad followed by three spaceships of various shapes and sizes, none of them particularly elegant or new. The final lift off was Serenity. Each ship zipped off in a different direction and she felt Riddick's
mind moving away from hers but thankfully, the anchor held deep in her mind.

She breathed a sigh of relief and looked back down at Tanaka. "We've got to get him under." She echoed what Simon was thinking. "He's much too aware of his surroundings. He'll go into hypertensive shock."

"I know," Simon's voice was grim as he began to look through his bag.

Riddick watched as Wash flew Serenity, keeping an eye on the landscape below them. He'd taken the co-pilot's seat but Wash was doing the flying for this run. Jayne was leaning against the bulkhead, going through his memories of Everton.

Stroking his goatee Jayne looked at Riddick, "Everton... c'mon, he was so by the book he got upset if I pissed 'thout getting' your approval to leave."

Riddick nodded, half smiling, "Remember when he wanted to write up Winters because he wouldn't shave?"

Jayne gave a half laugh as he set the turtle he'd won on top of the cabinets, "Well, it was a pretty stupid lookin' mustache."

"Yeah, only time I ever agreed with him," He paused, thinking, wondering if someone could have changed so much, or if Everton was really innocent. "If he did this though…"

Jayne nodded his agreement, they'd seen too much ugliness from both sides of the war to have faith that just because a man wore a browncoat that he was a good person. "Gotta ask I guess. Don't remember him bein' chī xiàn." He thought for a moment and met Riddick's eyes as Zoe and Mal came onto the bridge, "Though I do recall he didn't much care for a pair of kids bein' corporal an' sergeant over him."

"Thought he could do my job better," Riddick nodded. "An' he knew he could do yours better."

"Still, bein' stupid don't make you a terrorist, lessen he's gotten smarter," Jayne sighed tiredly.

Riddick knew he'd been looking forward to some good food, winning toys for Ruby and coming back to sit with River and go through the cortex searches from Mr. Universe.

Zoe came up behind her husband and rested her hand on his shoulder, Riddick could smell Wash's mood brighten slightly with the presence of his wife. "We need to reach him first," The first mate reminded them all quietly.

Mal nodded, "If we don't, he's gonna be railroaded or worse, dead, if that lynch mob gets to him."

Lieutenant Quillan entered and Zoe left the bridge. Riddick guessed the first mate felt too many officers made the command deck a bit crowded, plus he could tell she just didn't like Quillan.

Mal looked at the blonde officer and as if he had never been contemplating letting Everton get away nodded at her, "Lieutenant. Anything yet from the other ships?"

She shook her head, looking out onto the dark landscape and Riddick took a moment to be grateful Wash kept the bridge at a decent light level. Quillan wouldn't get the shine of Furryan eyes, not on the bridge at least. "No," She said finally looking at Riddick and then Mal. Jayne seemed to feel it was best he wasn't around for this conversation and took himself out. Riddick could hear him go to his
bunk, probably for Vera and some other guns.

Mal was pretending to make conversation, he was not good at it, not when he didn't like a situation. "So, do you guys have anything on this guy other than he was an independent?"

Quillan was still studying the darkness of the horizon in front of them, "I have my men checking other leads, but to be honest Captain, this feels right."

Riddick sighed as Mal continued his stupidity, "Really? And you deduced that by some sort of intuition..."

"Don't knock intuition Mal," Riddick said mildly, drawing brief grin from Wash who was, very intelligently, remaining silent. "It's kept me alive more than once."

The lieutenant ignored the byplay, "I deduced that by the fact that he ran." Riddick found himself agreeing with her on that point. If you were guilty, running tended to prove it. If you weren't, it made you look guilty. Running was stupid either way. But Everton hadn't ever been too bright by his recollections.

Of course Mal didn't see it that way, "Sure. Gotcha. Good logic. Seems all matter of smart..." He paused for effect and Riddick rolled his eyes. "Course, guess I'd run too if I had a herd of yokels lookin' to beat the horses' snot out of me."

Jayne came back on the bridge with Vera and a couple six guns on his hips. He threw Riddick a roll of shivs and a pair of guns with a casual air that drew Quillan's gaze aware, momentarily at least, from Mal's long brown coat. He'd caught the tail end of the captain's comment and laughed a bit, "Yeah Mal. You would." The big merc rolled his eyes, "Runnin' just makes a predator chase you. Ask Rick."

Riddick shook his head, "Give the cap'n some credit Jayne. He's learned since he met me. Don't poke the wolf. Running? It's just stupidity all around."

The conversation had not, as he'd half hoped, distracted Quillan from Mal's coat. "You're independents." Riddick frowned, she was damn smart, figuring all three of them for Browncoats even though he and Jayne didn't wear the remainder of the uniform, and hadn't since they'd been Đàn Chóngs.

He and Jayne exchanged looks and nodded at the officer. She seemed gratified that they didn't deny it even as she was irked by Mal's continued posturing. "Was called that at one time," The captain said.

Before Wash could say something to break the tension, and the staring contest Quillan was having with Mal, there was a loud beep from Quillan's comlink. She lifted it off her belt and read it. "They've found a trail."

Jayne looked at Riddick. He could read the taller man's face in spite of the blank expression Jayne offered. Jayne couldn't figure how Everton had done this. Riddick wasn't of quite the same mind. In his experience even a very good person could commit a heinous act, if it was in the name of something they considered a greater good. Riddick hadn't ever liked that line of thought much.

He looked at Quillan and Jayne both, "There was a man once, name of Ghandi, man of peace, of non violence. He said, 'I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.' But he also said, 'It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of nonviolence to cover impotence.': "
Jayne looked at him and frowned, "What are you sayin' Rick? You know I ain't smart like you an' Mal."

"Ghandi knew that you had to follow your heart, you had to follow you conscience," Riddick explained to his old friend quietly. "Guess I just wonder what's in Declan Everton's heart. Dunno if he did it or not. Running's a bad sign, but it's not proof."

Quillan was regarding him with some shock, clearly not expecting Earth That Was philosophy quotes from a man who looked like he could tear someone apart with his bare hands. "Isn't he the one who said the highest court was conscience?"

"There is a higher court than courts of justice and that is the court of conscience. It supersedes all other courts," Riddick nodded. "He was a smart man." He leaned forward to Wash, "You want to get some coffee? Stretch your legs? I'll take the stick for a while."

"You're a gentleman," Wash sighed in relief. "I think Zoe made the coffee though. You want some or do you like your hair normal and not standing on end."

"What hair," Jayne laughed and straightened up from his lounge against the wall. "I'll come give you a hand Wash. Ma'am? You like some really strong coffee?"

"Can you stand a knife up in it?" Quillan asked with a half-smile. "If so, yes please."

"Zoe's coffee can make a spoon stand on end," Wash was chuckling as he left.

Quillan regarded Riddick as she took a position behind Wash's chair, politely not taking over the pilot's seat. "So you're a gun hand, a medic, a tracker and now a pilot?" She tilted her head, "Is there anything you can't do?"

"Not much talent for singing," He admitted and flashed her a grin. "And my wife'll tell you I'm a man of many character flaws."

"So long as you can dance with her, a wife will usually overlook a lack of singing voice," The lieutenant nodded thoughtfully. "You and your captain don't seem to agree on much."

"Well we were both sergeants, both had our own way of doing things," Riddick shrugged. "You wanna give me the trail signs? We'll input 'em get 'em ready for Wash." He listened as she read them off and carefully entered them to Serenity's finicky cortex giving it a smack when the screen tried to flicker at him. "No, Mal an' I don't always agree. 'Specially about what he will and won't allow my wife to do. But he's the captain."

"He tries to order your wife around," Quillan seemed a bit surprised.

"He considers her a passenger, she isn't officially crew. Just provides cortex service now and then, keeps this old girl running," Riddick shrugged. "But he still gets in his head he can tell her what to do." He couldn't help the laugh, "I'm her husband and she don't obey me. The man doesn't have a chance in hell of getting obedience from her. But he keeps trying. Like herding cats."

That startled a chuckle out of the lieutenant. Wash and Jayne came back in with the coffee and handed it around. Wash looked at the cortex, "You had to hit it again didn't you." He observed with a knowing air.

"It was flickering," Riddick growled his annoyance. "I miss my wife."

"And not just for her tech skills?" Wash was teasing him.
Riddick decided to confound Quillan a bit more, "Absence diminishes mediocre passions and increases great ones, as the wind extinguishes candles and fans fires."

Jayne chuckled, "That's sorta an understatement ain't it Rick?" He sipped his coffee and winked at Quillan. "Why don't you take the navigator's chair ma'am," He gestured at the station behind Riddick. "Rick, I'm gonna go clean Vera and my girls. Keep an eye on those two yahoos and make sure they don't bother our mèi mei."

Riddick nodded, "Good notion. Dunno if Mal thought of the fact that he's got three men he don't know on the boat and Kaylee ain't exactly versed in self-defense."

"Your little sister?" Quillan was confused again and Wash threw her a smile.

"Our mechanic Kaylee," He explained kindly. "Jayne and Rick think on her like a little sister. Rick takes that real serious. His nèi xiōng is still earning Kaylee's forgiveness for a gaff on Jiangyin and that was at least a month or two back. And Rick loves the man like a brother."

"I'd better," Rick was fighting the winds in the atmosphere, his arms tight with tension. Quillan was getting a little punch of lust at the sight behind him. She smelled like vanilla and tea, not unpleasant at least. And she was getting control of herself even as he identified her scent. "Silas has sewn me up quite a bit."

"He's the surgeon helping out back at the fairgrounds with your wife?" Quillan's voice was thoughtful.

"That's him, boy wonder," Riddick laughed and sighed in relief. "Blasted valley's and their winds," He grumbled as he was able to relax again. "Wash we should be coming up on that trail pretty quick here." He picked up his coffee as the pilot took over. "I'd better go check on Kaylee. Jayne's in the galley but I'll feel better if I take a look at our little sunshine myself."

"Sunshine?" He heard Quillan ask as he left the bridge.

"Kaylee's the most cheerfulest girl you'll ever meet," Wash assured her, a smile in his voice.

He was not expecting Mal to gesture to him from the stairwell for him to follow down the stairs to where Zoe and he were holding a conference on the mid deck. "What in the gorram hell are you doing?" The captain hissed out the question. Riddick waited, folding his arms after he strapped the guns around his waist, tucking his roll of shivs under his arm. When he didn't reply Mal elaborated, "Have a seat ma'am, like some coffee, let's talk some poetry at her. What's wrong with you? She's a fed."

"First of all Mal, stop hissing like a cat," Riddick spoke in his normal quiet tones. Gravely his voice might be but it still sounded menacing even at its blandest. "Second of all, courtesy don't cost me. And when Jayne understands why it's good to be polite to an officer and you don't? Makes me wonder which of you's smarter." That got a snort of amusement from Zoe and an irritated look from Mal.

"Have you forgotten she's commandeered the boat to go fetch someone might very well be innocent," Mal's tone was getting a little snippy. "But you're up there laughing and joking, talking to her like she's a normal person. Nǐ zài jiāng shén me pì huà?"

Riddick heard the telltale creak of the stairs and sighed. Quillan wasn't stupid. She'd seen him duck
into the stairwell. "Mal, I know she's a fed. And I know it rubs you wrong that she commandeered your boat. I'm not altogether thrilled with the Alliance myself if you'll recall." He looked at Zoe and flicked his gaze towards the stairs behind her so she'd understand, even if Mal didn't, that they had someone might be listening.

"Then why are you bein'…flirty with her," Mal almost exploded. "Gorramit, you're actin' in a manner very peculiar for you Rick an' it's making me gorram twitchy."

"You had better really think about what you wanna say next," Riddick growled the words out. "Because I'm going to ride on past the idea you think I might consider cheating on my wife. Unless you do something to provoke that memory to the forefront of my gorram mind."

"That's not what I'm saying," Mal qualified. "But you're still acting…odd. I'm used to you being a gunhand. And a little crazy. Verbena's having a strange effect on you Rick."

"No stranger than usual," He was really finding this conversation irritating. "Look, Quillan's all business. That's good. She's got a job to do and she's going to do it. I get the impression that until we show her we're more than thugs and thieves that we're vast and contain multitudes, she'll keep thinking of us that way. She's not a bad woman, not a bad officer. But we're not her men. She's got no obligation to us."

"You're playing her?" Mal came out with the worst possible interpretation and Riddick groaned in frustration at the man's obtuseness.

"No, for the love of—" Riddick felt like shouting. "All I want is for Quillan to see us as people. People with brains who might be more useful alive than dead. If it comes down to shooting, I'd rather she hesitate to shoot with any of us in the line of fire. Trust me Mal, unless you're me, it's a helluva lot harder to shoot at a target when there's someone you know in the way. Especially someone who's been nothing but polite, and in another life, you might actually like." He sighed, "I'm really pulling out the old quotes tonight, but there was this guy on Earth That Was. He was…kinda like a Browncoat. And he said 'They vote for us two to one if they know one of us.' That's all I want Mal. I want Quillan to know us. The people who live on this boat and have to live with blood on the decks long after she leaves."

He began to push past the captain and first mate, "Now if you don't mind, I'm going to make sure Kaylee's all right since I trust that mouthy idiot a lot less farther than I throw him." He nodded to Quillan who had made it all the way down the stairs. "Ma'am."

Riddick decided as he stalked cat-footed up the stairs that he'd sit in the galley with Jayne and keep an eye out for Kaylee. Better to demonstrate to the two idiots than just tell them. And Kaylee got nervous about impending violence. Actual violence too, when he thought about it. He really need to have Jayne teach her about guns. She'd feel better if she knew they were just little machines that would love her if she loved them.

Jayne was sitting at the table with Jonah and Mather, comparing weapons. His old friend was holding Vera proudly. Johna had a sleek, shiny piece of fèi tòng làn tiě that Riddick recognized as an amateurs weapon. It would break down if it wasn't babied every time it was reloaded. Mather had a decent weapon, an energy crossbow with a wicked look to it. Azuria was sitting in the corner by the game table, silent. Riddick saw Jayne shoot a look at the man now and then but the other two just ignored him.
Taking a seat at the table he unrolled his shivs and pulled out his whetstone. Jonah had taken Vera from Jayne's hands, "Nice heft." It sounded a bit derogatory and Riddick smiled to himself. Jonah's skinny arms couldn't handle Jayne's best gun. That's why he carried that shiny plastic garbage. It was lightweight.

Jayne sounded proud as Badger's waves about Ruby, "You should see the hole it can make in a man." He held his hands five inches apart. Riddick chuckled to himself as he began to sharpen his knives.

Jonah nodded, "Sweet. But for pure accuracy can't beat my compressed airgun. Cut clean through a roach's butt at hundred yards. Course, not as pretty as Mather's." He picked up the crossbow and tossed it to Jayne as Kaylee walked in the room. Riddick watched as she got herself some coffee and ignored the male posturing at the table. Jonah, running his mouth still, was describing the beauty of the crossbow, "Nuclear power pack, 200 psi, titanium arrows, go through ten inches steel."

Jayne nodded his expression critical, "Could work." He glanced at Riddick. "Rick? What'd you think?"

Riddick shrugged, "Don't play dumb Cobb. That could work, but you know the T4 model with 300 psi is better. That'll still get the job done. I just don't like havin' to buy titanium arrows. Expensive as hell."

"You'd rather kill up close," Jonah had a sneer in his voice if not on his face.

The escaped convict looked at him with a tilt of his head, Mather just grunted an acknowledgment of Riddick's opinion, unbothered by it. Nodding to Mather, Riddick picked up one of his knives and held it by the tip, "I'm good at killing." He flicked his wrist and the knife flew through the air to land quivering in the doorjamb across the room. "Don't need to be up close. Don't even need a weapon. He picked up the metal cup of coffee from in front of Jayne, sipped and returned it. "I can kill you with a teacup."

Kaylee made an exasperated sound and he saw she was trying to pull the knife out of Serenity's hull. "Rick, gorramit, you're putting holes in my girl."

Laughing under his breath Riddick stood to remove the knife from the door frame. "Sorry mèi mei, I'll try to do better."

"You had better," She scolded him and when he'd removed the knife turned to Azuria, "Did they offer you any coffee? It's a bit sludgy and gross-tasting, but the punch'll keep ya goin' till dawn."

Riddick kept an eye on the man but Azuria didn't even look up from the table as he spoke, "No, thank you."

Kaylee nodded, "Um, okay." She turned towards the engine room but then looked at Azuria again, "I saw you. At the fair, well, after the fair, after the... I'm so sorry. Was that your—"

Azuria interrupted, "No, thank you."

Riddick put himself between Kaylee and the big bearded man with the large gun, "Kaylee, go on back to the engine."

"Rick, it's just..." She was wearing her heart on her sleeve, felt so bad for that man and he understood.

"I know, but you can't do anything for him," He tried to explain. "He's worse than I was when we
left Jiangyin. He's got nothing left inside. You talking to him just reminds him she's gone. All he has left is the hope for blood. I don't want that splashing on you."

"But if—" She wasn't getting it.

"Kaylee," He put some steel into his voice. "No. Sometimes something is broke, can't be fixed. Remember?"

She looked at him, and then at the broken man and nodded sadly. "All right Rick." He watched as she drank her coffee and moved to put the cup in the cleaner while he took his seat again, knife in hand. Jonah was running his mouth again and he knew the minute Kaylee actually started to hear the conversation at the table.

"So, me and Mather, all into this factory gig, just came in on a ship yesterday," Jonah babbled. "Couldn't be as bad as some other we've done before. But now that job's all and done."

Jayne shook his head, "Can never depend on no job." Mather's grunt might have indicated agreement. Riddick concentrated on his knives, testing them one at a time before he slipped them into their sheaths around his body.

Jonah was still babbling, "But then this bounty thing came up and hey, I can shoot. This could be a deal, maybe be even better. Make more doing this then working at that ruttin' factory for a month."

Jayne had been examining Mather's crossbow, Riddick could see him mentally evaluating, thinking about what he would change if he could. Give Jayne a new weapon to fiddle with and even the man himself would admit he was happy as a pig in slop. But he did not like what he was hearing from Jonah, "Nothing personal with all that bad luck and your fancy weapons and such, but just so we're clear..." He gently set the crossbow down on the table. "The bounty's mine."

Riddick tilted his head, "Cobh, take a breath." He advised. He was rewarded with a ferocious frown and a surreptitious wink from his old friend.

The skinny mouth breather squared his shoulders, for all the good it did him, and stared back at Jayne, "Now, not that I don't appreciate a man who's all boasty about his weapons, but—"

He didn't have a chance to finish that sentence. Kaylee was well and truly pissed now. She stepped up to the table with her hands on her hips, her pretty face set and angry, "What are you saying?"

Jonah was more of an idiot than Riddick had first thought, "Huh?"

She was clearly disgusted with the lot of them, "You insensitive louts. Have you no shame. People lost their lives and all you can think about is money." She smacked Jayne on the head.

"Hey," Jayne objected tilting his head back to look at her. "Man's gotta be found. People who find him gotta get paid. That's just how it is Kaylee."

Riddick nodded slowly, his eyes on Jonah and kept his voice cold and quiet, "Lieutenant brought you along. Way I see it you're about as useful as tits on a bull." He jerked his head at Jayne, "Me an' him, ain't no one to beat us for tracking. We'll find the man who did this thing."

Jayne nodded and was rewarded with Kaylee's hand squeezing his shoulder in apology, "No hard feelin's or nothin'." He said flatly, "But he's right. No one hides from us for long. We want someone found, we find him."
Author's Note: This chapter was a weird one for me. River's not thrilled with her family at the moment but arguing in public is the sort of attention she doesn't want to draw. Riddick…he's a trickier one. He's not stupid, usually has multiple motives for the things he does, and we're getting a glimpse of them here, but at the same time…he's a bit worried himself. This situation is completely not good and he's not thrilled with having Feds on board but its not like he can object much. And Mal's doing a brilliant job of acting like an ass anyway.

So I hope you all like this. It's not easy for me to write because, as I've mentioned before, I don't have any visual references. I can picture a fairgrounds, and for some reason I have no trouble picturing the aftermath of a massive explosion but the individuals. Jonas, Quillan and Azuria…yeah they're not as easy. So bear with me folks.

Chinese Translations:
tā mā de - fucking
bèn dàn - fool / idiot
Nǚ ren - wife
Mèi mei - little sister
cí xiàn - crazy / insane
nèi xiōng - wife's older brother
Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pì huà - What shit/the fuck are you saying
fèi tóng làn tiě - scrap metal / a pile of junk

Quote Sources:
I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent. - Mahatma Gandhi

It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of nonviolence to cover impotence. - Mahatma Gandhi

There is a higher court than courts of justice and that is the court of conscience. It supersedes all other courts. - Mahatma Gandhi

Absence diminishes mediocre passions and increases great ones, as the wind extinguishes candles and fans fires. - Francois de La Rochefoucauld

Vast and contain multitudes – Walt Whitman

They vote for us two to one if they know one of us. – Harvey Milk
The bridge was quiet except for he and Wash muttering back and forth about crosswinds. They currents in question were stiff enough that they were both actively flying. Riddick heard Zoe come in and didn't look up from the console. He sensed more than saw her come up behind Wash and put a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Captain should be right behind me."

Wash nodded, "Thanks." He and Riddick had been keeping an eye on the trail and something wasn't right. But it was the sort of thing they both would have to run by the captain before acting on it. He checked something on his controls and his face angled slightly towards Riddick even as he kept one eye on his instruments. "Rick?"

Riddick growled, "Yeah?" He really was using a lot of his arms to keep the ship on course. "Chủn bèn wind."

"What if this guy, you know, did it?" Wash asked, still keeping half his attention on the instruments. It was clearly a question he'd wanted to ask for a while but circumstances hadn't allowed it. Circumstances weren't that much better now but Riddick guessed Wash didn't want to wait until they had the guy to ask.

The murderer smiled grimly, "Trust me, this guy couldn't even tie his shoelaces if it wasn't described to him using step-by-step graphics."

Wash nodded, "Sure." His arms strained along with Riddick's as they fought the air currents for a moment, "But, well... people change."

Zoe's voice was quiet, "All we want to do is hear his story. He was one of us. We owe him at least that."

Riddick nodded his agreement, "People do change. But I trained this guy."

Mal stepped onto the bridge, "Someone like you training him, one would hope he'd have a smarter escape plan that limping along in a land shuttle." His tone along with his words indicated he wasn't impressed. He stood behind Riddick, "What's up?"

Wash looked at Riddick who shrugged to indicate the pilot was the senior officer and could give Mal the good or bad news depending on perspective. "We've been tracking his flight plan. We'll be on him in another hour, easy."

Mal sounded irritated that they'd called him up to the bridge for this, "And?"

Riddick snorted, "For the last hour the pattern the shuttle is flying has continually repeated. Every zig, every zag. A little too precise with a human at the wheel." He could feel Zoe and Mal exchange a glance above he and Wash's heads.

"He bailed out. Knew we'd catch up to him," Mal muttered thoughtfully.

Zoe had an equally speculative tone in her voice, "Do you think the other ships'll pick up on it?"

Riddick shook his head before Mal could answer, "Can't could count on 'em being stupid. Our luck's
never been that good."

Mal seemed to agree, "Track it back, see where he dropped. I'll go explain it to our guests."

Riddick turned off his side of the console and indicated that Zoe should take his place if need be, "Lemme do it Mal. Everton's my problem."

Of course Mal couldn't leave it at that, "I'm the captain. My boat, I talk. You come along."

Riddick folded his arms and leaned against the wall of the galley. Quillan had taken the relatively empty space at the end of the table and was working on some sort of paperwork in her data pad. Jonas and Mather had, in a move smarter than either of them looked, moved themselves to the observation lounge out of her way. She looked tired, pushing a wayward strand of blonde hair back into her braided bun. Mal, of course, seemed oblivious to her fatigue or mood as he explained what Riddick and Wash had discovered and their conclusion.

"You're not trying to keep me away from the target, are you, Captain?" Quillan asked in a deceptively mild tone.

Sarcasm was Mal's order of the day it seemed, "Yes. Your instincts are incredible." Riddick sighed and barely kept from rolling his eyes in the dim ship light.

"Actually, my instincts are usually pretty dead on," Quillan told the captain in a cool tone. "And right now they're telling me you're not sharing everything you know."

Mal shrugged, "Fine. I'll turn the ship back around and we can follow all the other dupes, and when we take down an empty ship, then—"

"Okay. We'll play it your way," Quillan agreed abruptly. Mal nodded and turned to go back to the bridge but Riddick remained motionless, knowing that the lieutenant wasn't done. She had the air of a woman with suppressed knowledge. "Mr. Brennan."

Riddick didn't snap to attention but he did stand up a bit straighter, "Yeah." He nodded politely but making her see him didn't mean he jumped at every word.

"Pulled up your service record," Quillan said quietly.

Riddick sighed, River had dug deep for the alias, but she'd kept all his military history, everything he'd done in the army except for why he'd joined. "Yes ma'am." Now was the time for formality and he stood straight away from the wall, looking far more like a sergeant than he had in a long time.

The lieutenant regarded him thoughtfully, "You were very loyal to your troops, right up until you were transferred. An admirable quality, but I hope that you're not under any illusions that just because this man was an independent, that he's innocent and needs your protection."

Riddick shrugged and didn't look at his captain, "The war was awhiles back." He kept his eyes on Quillan wanting her to read and feel the truth in his face. "I could tell you I just want to make that bounty. For sure it wouldn't hurt us none. But now? Now I want to know if I helped train a man who could do this. Does it make me responsible for him? I want the truth. Did he change? Is he innocent? Or was he always twisted underneath and I didn't smell it on him. I catch him, I find out. Death closes all; but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that once strove with gods." He nodded to she and the captain equally and the ship shuddered
slightly under his feet, "Excuse me, I gotta help pilot the ship."

He left certain that Quillan was considering his words, even if she wasn't convinced, and aware that Mal was more confused than ever. But then, when wasn't the captain confused about Riddick, really.

River watched, handing Simon instruments and occasionally checking Tanaka's blood pressure as her brother operated on the commander. The officer was barely conscious, a good thing considering his agitation whenever he opened his eyes. Simon was holding the wound open with one of his tools, his bare hands buried in Tanaka's gut.

"Keep this steady," Simon told her and River reached out for the tool, kept it from moving as Simon had to use both hands inside the commander. Grayson appeared at the side of the table and Simon didn't look at him for more than an instant. His patient had earned his full attention, but he spared just enough to warn the corporal away, "Not now. Whatever fell on him caused internal bleeding and since we don't exactly have x-ray equipment here I've had to operate." He scowled into Tanaka's belly, "This isn't the optimal place for exploratory surgery."

But Tanaka stirred, his eyes opened and spotted Grayson. River cursed as the commander struggled to talk. In a strangled voice the officer demanded, "Report."

Grayson clearly agreed with Simon, shaking his head, "It can—"

Tanaka's voice grew stronger even as his heart rate elevated dangerously, "Grayson!"

Clearly believing that if he made his report quickly and plainly he could then let the commander rest, Grayson blurted it out, "They believe the target had dropped onto land, they're currently heading to the estimated drop zone."

River noticed Book coming up to bring them bandages, staying a moment to see if he could be of service to the two of them. Tanaka was still talking, "Who?"

Grayson was trying to back away, "He was a private in the war. Independent."

River cursed as Tanaka started to have difficulty breathing, still ranting even as he wheezed, "Damn browncoats. Should've wiped...out when had chance."

Book frowned slightly as River grabbed some of the bandages he'd just put down, anticipating Simon's need for them. The shepherd's voice was quiet, "Always thought you needed a bit more evidence to convict a man than the color of his coat."

River nodded her agreement, "Me too." She took one of the syringes out of the box on the table and showed Simon, arching an eyebrow questioningly. When her brother nodded in agreement she injected Tanaka and set the needle into the empty box. Looking at Grayson who was lingering worriedly she spoke, her words sharper than she'd intended, "You need to stay out of here unless you're bringing in more wounded. If you're just here to see him you have to stop. When he sees you he gets worked up. You just saw how badly. He'll die if we can't keep him stable. So don't come near him again. Go and keep searching for survivors. Defenseless under the night our world in stupor lies."

"You're not the doctor, you can't tell me—" Grayson was interrupted by Simon.

The core trauma surgeon spared the corporal a glance, "I'm the doctor. I'm the only doctor. And I'm
telling you that she's right. I almost lost him a few minutes ago. So keep out unless you're bringing wounded in. Don't let him see you. It's not good for us to keep him under and its even more dangerous for him to try and talk while I'm looking for bleeds in his belly." He looked up for a half a moment, his eyebrow arched sardonically, "Of course if you don't like him and wouldn't mind him dying…"

Grayson nodded hurriedly, "I'll stay as far away as I can manage, we're mostly searching for survivors anyway. I'll send others with them and coordinate the search efforts."

River nodded, "Good. Inara, Shazza and some of your men are still doing basic first aid. Book, will you help them determine who really needs our attention and who can handle Inara or Shazza looking at them?"

Book nodded, "Absolutely." He offered the corporal a smile, "The commander can't do anything from a surgeons table anyway, his orders are superseded by his medical condition if I understand correctly. So let's let Silas get on with it and keep doing the good works."

"Yes sir," Grayson nearly saluted the old shepherd and hurried out.

Riddick automatically looked around the area where Wash and he had set Serenity down, it wasn't bad, the trees and brush were thicker on one side of the ship, more so than the other. At least the damn winds had died down, otherwise they'd have demolished half the area getting the ship on the ground.

Everyone was holding glowsticks, bright things that sloshed with luminescent liquid. They'd last longer than hand lights, were more stable than a lantern and had a cold light so they wouldn't start a fire from resting on the ground or burn off your hand holding them. He'd never cared for them, but that was his little peculiarity. Jayne and the others in his crew, Mal and Zoe were holding them down, away from his eyes. The other four…well they didn't know him.

Riddick slid his fingers beneath the spectacles and rubbed his eyes, "I appreciate that ya'll are blind as geese out here but could you stop holding the damn sticks at eye level?" He addressed Quillan with more irritation than she'd heard in his voice yet and it seemed to reach her.

"Something wrong Mr. Brennan?" She was regarding him curiously.

"Yeah, the damn sticks are burnin' my eyes with your lot holdin' them up by their heads," Riddick said flatly. "They don't do you any good there anyway. Hold 'em at your sides, away from your eyes, you'll adjust to the dark better." He watched as the four of them did as he'd asked and nearly sighed in relief. "Better, thanks."

"You ain't using a glowstick?" Jonah had finally noticed the obvious and commented on it.

Riddick rolled his eyes, "Nope. Why would I want to screw with my night vision?"

"Can't see without 'em," Jonah argued.

"You can't," Riddick ignored the mouthy idiot and shrugged looking at Quillan.

She took that as her cue, "Keep in constant contact. We don't know how dangerous this man is. Assume that he's armed."
Jonah, of course, hefted his gun, "Not a problem."

Riddick rolled his eyes and watched as Mal tugged Jayne aside and had a quiet word. "That direction. Like we talked," The captain murmured.

Jayne nodded, "Give 'em the show."

Mal was looking at Jayne worriedly, "Yeah. But—"

Riddick smothered a smile as his old friend began ignoring Mal, looking at the ground closely, stopping near some bushes and shining his light on the ground there. "This way I'm betting," He spoke without a trace of hesitation and began to move into the bushes. "Bounty's as good as mine."

Even as Mal tried to continue his sentence, "Don't—" Jayne led the Quillan and the other three bounty hunters into the brush. The captain gave up and looked at Zoe and Riddick.

Zoe shrugged, "Well he's not hootin' and hollerin'.

Mal nodded, "At least he's effective."

Riddick smiled as he listened to Jayne walking somewhat quietly through the bushes, followed by four much clumsier bodies. 'He's good at night. I'm better." He took off the spectacles and slid them in his shirt pocket wincing at the crunching noise of breaking bushes in the distance, "Course he's leadin'a trio of bèn dàn's."

He sighed and turned towards the bushes he'd noted when they came off the ship, "Denser brush this way." He moved into it, pleased to hear that Zoe and Mal moved much more quietly than the trio of idiots.

He could hear Jayne in the distance, shushing Jonas as the man called out a taunt to Everton, like a child playing hide and seek. Riddick shook his head and knelt to check a bush, showing Mal and Zoe the broken branch. "Over here," He murmured.

Mal and Zoe followed him and nodded at the trail sign. Riddick frowned and looked behind them. "I think we'll have company soon," He remarked keeping his voice down. "She moves better than the others, almost as good as Jayne or you two."

He took a deep breath and moved quietly, deeper into the forest, very aware of Zoe and Mal following him, and Quillan doing the same from some distance back. A small clearing gave him the first clear footprint he'd seen and he smiled.

Mal and Zoe went to wait by the footprint as he walked carefully around the clearing and stopped by a very thorny looking bush. Zoe looked at him and whispered, "Think he's holing up?"

Riddick nodded, "It's what I taught him to do."

Mal was oddly silent, studying the bush but Zoe raised an eyebrow, "So, your superior tracking skills are gonna find him..."

He gave her a half grin, "Not will. Have. My superior tracking skills have found him."

Mal joined them and reached into the bush, sticking himself on a couple of thorns. He quickly pulled his hand out. "Ouch! Gorramn it!"

Riddick rolled his eyes, "Tā mà de niǎo Declan. Come out. Or I'll drag you out an' I'll guarantee you
won't care for that one little bit."

Declan Everton emerged from the thorny bush by crawling and looked up at him in shock, "Sgt. Rick?"

"Yeah," Riddick regarded his soldier with a frown. By all appearances Declan hadn't changed much. He still had straw colored hair, a thin face and glasses that gave him a studious appearance. He was thin, probably hadn't been eating well for some time, and seemed smaller than the last time Riddick had seen him. Of course he'd been about twenty then, while Riddick had been only eighteen, at least to Everton's mind. Declan reached to shake his hand and Riddick shook his head, "What're you doin' here Everton."

Everton still had that nervous air about him too, "I ran as soon as I heard where that crowd was headed. Was sure they were gonna get me... God, it's good to see you."

Riddick nodded, "Yeah." He didn't like this. Something didn't smell right. Mal and Zoe were picking up on his reserve and took a half a pace back.

Declan was still trying to convince him, "I didn't do it, Sarge. I swear."

Riddick tilted his head and gave him another nod, "I understand." Before Declan could say anything he pulled his gun. Mal and Zoe looked at him in surprise just as Quillan stepped into the clearing.

Mal seemed to figure out that this was the company to which Riddick had referred earlier, "We've apprehended your bounty." He remarked in a calm voice.

Riddick could see that she wasn't entirely convinced but she nodded, keeping her eyes on him, "Good."

He looked over at the edge of the clearing where she'd emerged, "You were followed. Big fella with the shot gun." He glanced at Mal, "Azuria. He'll kill him. Man's wife died."

Quillan stepped forward as Mal and Zoe grabbed Everton's arms while Riddick kept his gun on him. Quillan holstered her weapon and stepped forward to cuff Everton's hands. As she did the very ominous sound of a big gauge shotgun ratcheting sounded through the clearing.

Riddick sighed as he looked at Azuria aiming the shotgun right at Declan Everton. "Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pīgu yǎn. It's always something isn't it."

Quillan stepped in front of her prisoner. Riddick looked at Mal, "You don't tell my wife about this." He warned his captain as he moved to stand beside Quillan.

The lieutenant didn't acknowledge his presence other than to give him a minute nod as she kept her eyes and attention on Azuria. "You don't want to do this," She said in a surprisingly soothing voice.

Azuria wasn't shaking, wasn't manic, he was disturbingly calm and determined. Riddick really didn't like what he said next, "If you don't move than I'll just shoot right through you."

Quillan could be just as stubborn though. She shook her head at the man she'd brought along to retrieve the bounty, "This man is going back to stand trial. Step back."

Riddick watched as Mal began to move closer to Azuria. Captain had some sort of play in mind. Unless it looked like Mal needed backup best to just remain where he was, let Mal run his play. Azurai didn't waver but he did address Mal, "Stop movin'!"
Mal stopped short, held his hands at his sides, well away from his guns. Quillan chose that moment to speak again, distracting Azuria from the captain, "If you don't set down your gun, I'll be forced to kill you."

The big fuzzy bearded man shook his head fiercely, "I'm already dead. Nothing else matters except I take this with me. Now move!"

Riddick had to give it to her, Quillan held firm, Declan was entrenched behind the two of them, safe from Azuria's gun. Before Azuria could get too settled into that idea Mal started talking, "This really isn't the way to do this." The captain's voice was casual, not bored but polite.

"Shut up!" Azuria snarled at him. There weren't any tears in his voice but the anguish Riddick could hear went far deeper than any tears could. The man truly did believe he'd lost everything.

Mal was moving carelessly forward as he spoke, "No, I mean you need to angle higher if you're hoping to shoot both of 'em." Zoe was fading further to the side, her eyes on Mal, and Riddick heard her unsnap the button holding her gun in its holster. The captain continued talking, keeping Azuria's attention, "Though I'd step back a pace if I were you, it'll be a might bit messy with all that blood and gore and everything."

Azuria seemed to actually see that Quillan was a person, looking at her, "Move. Please."

Quillan was content to let Mal talk it seemed. She stayed motionless beside Riddick who had his ears pricked for anymore sounds from Zoe. Mal shrugged, "Not that I don't get your reasons and everythin', but come on you're not a murderer. And that's what you'd be, if you pulled that trigger."

Azuria's voice was pained, "Thirty years we been married, last week. Not always best of times being out here, but we were there for each other, always there. Couldn't think of my life without her, can't think..."

Mal knew just what to say, "Then you need to ask yourself... would your wife really want you to throw away your life like this."

Azuria hesitated for a second but Riddick saw the moment he made his decision and steadied his shotgun. His finger began to press the trigger. Mal realized it at the same time, moving towards the bigger man. Before Azuria could fire, bright light from the other ships in the sky shone down on all of them. Azuria looked up, startled and Mal wrestled the shotgun out of his hand.

"It's over," Mal told him, not unkindly.

Azuria, obviously a man of few words and disgusting action, spat at Mal's feet. "It'll never be over."

Riddick could hear Mal's resignation even over the ships above them, "Anger. Good emotion. Let's get that all out." Riddick turned to look at Declan who was more than a little pasty. Quillan's hand was clamped on his arm as she talked into her comlink. Mal continued speaking, turning to Zoe and gesturing at Azuria. The first mate already had the big vigilante in her gun sights. "Take him back to the ship."

"Movin' speech, sir." Zoe nodded and pushed Azuria in front of her before she turned to Mal, "Take him back to the ship."

Mal didn't quite smirk but he did shrug, "Really? I was afraid it might've come off a little insincere." The dark woman shook her head at him and moved Azuria away. Mal walked over towards Quillan and Riddick and pointed at the ships above them, "Gonna let them set down? Not that I don't think you can keep 'em all from lynching our target, you know you being so successful with just that one guy..."
Quillan shook her head, "They're not landing."

Mal nodded, "Good."

The lieutenant wasn't done yet, "But they will be escorting us back to town."

Riddick watched as Quillan pushed Everton in front of her and began walking. He fell into pace alongside of her, studying the man he'd known back in the war. Mal was following them, stewing about something. But when wasn't the captain stewing when Alliance was about.

He frowned and looked up when Quillan addressed him, "You stood there. You didn't move. You could have."

Riddick tilted his head, "Cap'n's good at his job."

"You let him do it because Everton's yours?" Quillan pressed, "Or because you agreed?"

He took a deep breath and decided to give her the truth, ugly bits and all, "If Everton had killed my wife... No one, not you, not Mal could stop me. Nothing in the 'verse would be left standin'. I'd burn it all to the ground." Riddick gave an easy shrug aware of her shocked gaze, "Don't make it right. That's just how it is."

Quillan blinked finally, "You're that in love with her? Or just that crazy?"

Riddick grinned, wicked and fierce, everything River loved on his face, "I can't be both?" He jerked his head towards Zoe at the front of their little parade. "I'm gonna head up, let Wash know we got him. We'll have to get a passenger dorm ready. Might could use a crew bunk but I ain't puttin' him in Kaylee's room and she's the only one who wouldn't have weapons in the bunk."

She nodded, still obviously shocked and he strode forward easily moving through the darkness.

River took a quick look around the tent, it was quieter now, the moans and cries of pain dulled by time and treatment. She'd left Simon's side several times to remove shrapnel and stitch up patients but thankfully she was able to leave Inara and Shazza to bandage the wounded.

Grabbing a bucket of water she moved towards Simon again. Grayson had just arrived and was headed towards Simon and Tanaka. River frowned as she beat him to the operating table and began to clean the blood off of Simon's instruments. Her brother nodded absently, "Thank you. I've cauterized one laceration and if I can just reroute this crushed artery—"

His patient groaned, he was barely conscious, but it was obvious he was in a great deal of pain. Grayson reached them just in time to hear Tanaka's groaning. The corporal reacted as most people would, demanding the doctor do something, "Help him!"

River scowled at Grayson, "Get out. Won't tell you again."

Simon shook his head, working as fast as he safely could, "Local's wearing off. He's lost too much blood to be put completely under."

Tanaka groaned again and Simon's frown deepened, "Hold this, right here." He handed River one of his instruments. "Don't move it." When she had a good hold of the instrument, the metal vibrating with the movement inside Tanaka's body, Simon loaded some liquid into his hypogun and pressed it
to the commander's neck. The officer sighed and visibly relaxed, his eyes opened and met Grayson's.

"Sir?" Grayson ignored River's fuming and Simon's frown at him.

Tanaka issued his orders, "Go. Get estimated time."

The corporal nodded, "Yes, sir." He hurried off.

River watched as Tanaka looked at Simon. The man was gathering strength but only because he didn't have any feeling below the neck. He was still pretty breathless and she frowned. He was just stubborn enough to want to talk. And Simon was more concerned with the surgery than with how alert his patient was. "Pain gone," Tanaka observed.

Simon nodded curtly, "You may feel good but it's just an illusion. You need to relax. I should be done soon." He handed River one instrument and took the other she gave him without missing a beat.

"What give me?" The commander asked weakly.

River glanced up as Inara moved closer to them, bringing more strips of cloth for sponging and bandages. Simon was immersed in the surgery and answered Tanaka absently, not really thinking about what he might be giving away. "Moxoceline B."

River swayed slightly and felt Inara's arm come up around her shoulders as the world around her began to turn sticky with blue cobwebs. Tanaka's next words seemed to simply confirm her trepidation, "Fancy stuff for border doctor."

Inara looked at Simon and put her hand on Tanaka's shoulder, "Please don't exert yourself."

River took a deep breath and tightened her hold on Riddick's mind, far away as it was, it was still a good anchor to reality and not what she say layered over it. She ignored Tanaka's muttering about the surgical tools and pressed her fingers to his neck, taking his pulse, "Silas, I'm going to put him out. He can't be awake like this, not if we want him to survive."

Simon's eyes jerked up from Tanaka's wound to meet hers and understanding dawned beneath the surgeon's distant expression. He nodded once, "Do it."

River took another deep breath and tightened her hold on Riddick's mind, feeling for the carotid arteries and the spinal cord. As quickly as she could she pressed inward. The moxeceline B kept the man from clawing at her hands as she ruthlessly cut off blood and oxygen to the brain while her other hand compressed the spinal cord. A combat technique Riddick had taught her, to immobilize and render an enemy unconscious, the spinal compression lasted for thirty minutes, the blood would begin to flow to the brain the moment she released the arteries.

As Tanaka went limp under her hands River nodded to Simon as she checked his eyes, "No movement, unconscious state should last at least ten minutes. Nerve paralysis, for thirty minutes, no permanent damage."

Simon breathed a sigh of relief, "Good." He looked at Inara, "If Grayson comes back in, have the soldiers keep him out. Tanaka can't do any good right now anyway."

Inara nodded and moved off to check on the patients Book was helping. River excused herself after a moment and went to a corner of the tent to take several deep cleansing breaths. She could feel Riddick was on his way back, coming closer all the time, but bringing trouble with him. That at least
was normal. She looked around the tent, slightly relieved to see that nothing was colored with those sticky blue cobwebs now. A few tendrils were sneaking in, a product of the increased Alliance paranoia but nothing like when Tanaka's gaze and sharp mind had fixed on her brother and his core medicine.

Riddick let Wash take full control of the ship as Jayne came onto the bridge, "I want you to have your gun ready. Be prepared."

Jayne nodded, "For what? To run or fight?"

Riddick shook his head, "Either. Both. Don't know what will be needful. Don't even know if Mal will agree with me."

Jayne was frowning now, "You think he did it? Or he didn't and we're gonna hafta run."

Wash was not pleased to be hearing any of this. The pilot spun his chair around and stood to face the two of them. "Gun handy? You're not thinking about shooting a fed. Tell me you're not gonna freakin' shoot an Alliance officer."

Riddick shook his head, "Not thinkin' anything Wash. I gotta know if he's guilty before I figure it out. But something doesn't feel right."

Wash was still shaking his head, "What? He'll get a fair trial."

Jayne wasn't so sure about that, "Yeah, right. From the Alliance."

The pilot deflated a bit, "Well, unless he's guilty."

Jayne was looking at Wash like he'd lost his mind, "We don't abandon one of our own."

The Furyan looked at the two of them, both his friends but on opposing sides at the moment, "No we don't Cobh." He told Jayne. "But we don't know. I need to know Shea. We transferred out. But I was...You know what I was. You coulda died. You an' everyone a you who was there. I gotta know. So just stay ready."

"Rick," Wash's voice was hesitant, "What if he's innocent? Or worse, if he's not?"

Riddick headed for the door, "Still figuring that out." Behind him he heard Jayne drop into a chair and Wash kicked the wall in frustration. It was time for him to talk to Quillan. He forced himself to calm down. He'd been away from River now for most of the night…it wasn't the first time he'd had to work and not see her but it was the first time she hadn't been on the boat since Jiangyin. The animal was getting twitchy.

He found her down in the cargo bay on her comlink. They'd closed off the passenger lounge from the rest of the ship, not that unlocked doors would stop anyone determined enough. But they'd make a racket opening and that was all they needed as a warning. "Mr. Brennan," The lieutenant greeted him calmly. She seemed slightly more relaxed now that Everton was in custody but she was still carrying a lot of tension in her spine. "What can I do for you."

"I want to talk to Declan Everton," Riddick told her flatly. "You can listen, you can even give me a list of questions you want asked. I don't care. But I need to get in a room with him so I can suss out if he did this or not."
"You need to know..." She was regarding him thoughtfully, her voice a murmur. "How long have you and your wife been married Mr. Brennan?"

"It hasn't even been a year," He shrugged. "Met her when she was fifteen, just...looked out for her and her brother, its not an easy life if you're not used to the Rim, you know?"

"I was thinking on what you said earlier, that you'd burn the world if something had happened to your wife," Quillan was frowning. "It had a terrible ring of truth to it. But everything you've said to me has sounded true."

"There isn't a lot I bother lyin' about," Riddick shrugged. "Someone asks me somethin' I don't wanna answer, I just...don't speak. I'm not obligated to give out pieces a myself to anyone has the brains or balls to ask me questions."

That got a half smile from her and she nodded her understanding, "I'm curious as to how you'll be able to tell if he's lying to you. How can you know that you won't fall for a story?"

"There aren't many folks like me," He had to answer this carefully. "My wife, she calls me Lù duān because I know when someone is lying and when they're telling the truth. I've always known. Dunno how. Rilla, my wife, she thinks its 'cause a my brain workin' fast and takin' in all sorts a little details about a person, body language, temperature fluctuation, adrenaline levels. Me? Well maybe I'll never figure it out but its served me well my whole life. Never been wrong about it. And in the war it kept me and my unit alive more than once. I mete and dole unequal laws unto a savage race, that hoard and sleep, and feed, and know not me."

Quillan was thinking this over, ignoring the quote for a moment, she obviously wasn't sure if this was a good idea or not. "You can talk to him, but I want to be in the hall where I can hear what he says. I'll make a noise, move towards the door if I think he needs a break."

Riddick nodded, "Soft interrogation...always better to let 'em ramble for a bit, then leave 'em alone, let 'em get nervous, stewin' in their own juices for a while. Then go back with fresh ears and eyes, see if anymore more shakes out."

"You have done this before," Quillan blinked.

"Told ya, hearing what's true or not, kept me and my unit alive during the war," Riddick gave her a half grin. "I'm thinkin' I just start out askin' what happened after he gets done babbling. He'll do that for a while, he never knew when to shut his mouth."

"You don't even like him," The lieutenant realized in shock.

"Nope," The convict shook his head. "Never did. But that doesn't make a difference right now. Now its just a matter of if he's guilty or innocent or a mix of the two and finding out which." He ran a hand over his scalp and mentally noted he needed to shave soon.

She nodded slowly and began to move towards the lounge. Riddick moved ahead of her to get the doors and felt her heart rate accelerate for a moment as his muscles bulged pulling the heavy doors open. Just went to show that even the most sensible woman felt her hormones at times. He kept the smirk off his face and hoped he could similarly impress River when they got back. He did not want to have a continuation of their fight, especially as desperate as he was feeling to just breathe in her scent and hold her. As Quillan watched he checked his goggles against the light of the passenger dorms. They'd been keeping the ship a little brighter in deference to the passengers who were unused to the passages and odd angles of Serenity. The lieutenant nodded and he ducked into Everton's room as quietly and sneakily as he could, and braced himself for the man's chatter.
Riddick watched as Everton paced while he leaned against the door. The man never could shut his mouth. He'd rattle away on a stealth mission for the comfort of his own voice if he wasn't muzzled. He never could do calm and patient, not like Riddick and Jayne. That was part of the reason he'd never been recruited for the Dà Chóngs. That and his inability to lace his boots without step by step instructions.

"A shuttle. That's all I'd need." Everton paused, "Okay, maybe a little money, but I promise I'll pay you back."

Riddick judged now was a good time to start with the questions, now that Declan had asked for something. "Hold off for a minute. Firstly, I need the story of what happened back there."

He listened closely and took deep breaths of the man's scent when Everton answered, "I swear I was just helping 'em build the factory." The browncoat shook his head, "It wasn't the best job, but it's gāi sǐ hard to get any work after the war. No one wants to hire an independent. I'm untrustworthy just cause we lost."

He really didn't like how Declan smelled these days, leather, gunpowder, blood, dust and smoke along with baby powder and rye. Riddick nodded slowly as he considered his ex-compatriot, "Yeah. Been there."

Everton continued to run his mouth, "You know the Alliance'll just pin this on me so it looks like they're actually doing something out here. I don't want to cause trouble for you or your crew, Sarge, but... we were on the same side, you've got to get me outta here."

Riddick heard a noise in the passage outside the room and put a finger to his lips, just as Quillan slid the door open behind him. The polite nod he gave the officer in no way belied his thoughts to either Declan Everton or Quillan. "Lieutenant."

"You," She stared at Riddick, "Come with me please."

"Ma'am," Riddick gave Declan a nod and followed her out to the lounge.

Once there Quillan turned and faced him, "I agreed to let you talk to him and so far he's talking but not about what we want. Is there anything?"

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his head, "He's lying about something, but I can't tell what it is yet. I don't know him well enough anymore. I transferred out to..."

"To the Dà Chóngs. And you didn't mention that," Quillan seemed a touch annoyed about that.

"Didn't seem relevant," Riddick shrugged. "It was me an' Cobb both."

She nodded as if accepting, "Sure." But she was pissed, "Gorramn it, how do you think this makes you look?"

Now he was the one getting pissed, "Why don't you tell me." He folded his arms waiting. Objectively, Riddick realized that he should have known this was coming. But in keeping the leash tight on the animal, in controlling his irritation with Everton and the entire situation, things were starting to slip past him.

"Like you helped him. Like I'm a sucker for trusting you." She made a slashing motion with her
hand, "God, did you not see all those people dead. All those lives destroyed."

Riddick forced himself to control his rage; regarded her coldly, "I was there. My family was there." He gestured to the ship around them, "He, if he did this, whoever did this, if he'd screwed up the charges a little more, coulda blown up the ship too. If it was me? Wouldn't have taken the fairgrounds. Would have imploded the factory. Contained bursts. A series of charges and no gorram need to knock out the power." He was scowling furiously at her, "Because me an' Jayne know how to blow a building without killing civilians."

Quillan was shocked and taken aback, "You're that certain?"

Riddick took a breath and forced his voice even, forced his rage away, out of his voice, "I know this; I am the best at what I do. Me an' Cobh, we're half the reason your side had such a hard time winning the war. Scouts and thieves with a talent for killing quiet and destruction on a massive scale once we got half trained. Half the time if we were taking down a building our unit was pretty damn close so we didn't want a massive explosion like the one at the factory. But Declan Everton wasn't trained for this. So he's either innocent, incompetent or he just didn't care who he hurt."

Quillan seemed to agree with that assessment at least, "Which are you leaning towards?"

"Like I said, he's lying about something," Riddick rubbed a hand over his head again and tried to muster his patience. "I just need to figure out what."

"Your captain doesn't seem the type to stay out of these things," The lieutenant commented.

He couldn't help laughing quietly at that, "He ain't. But he's learned I got my ways. I trusted him to distract or talk Azuria down. Mal's learned when to trust me."

Quillan looked towards the passenger dorm, two men imprisoned there, one for possibly killing one's wife, the other for trying to kill the first. "Leave Everton for a while like we discussed earlier. Talk to him again later. Let him stew for a bit, think I pulled you out and you'll have to sneak back in to talk again. Gives you more sympathy."

Riddick nodded with a half grin, "Good idea. Sneaky." He sobered, "I just want the truth lieutenant."

The fleeting thought that he also wanted to get back to River as quickly as possible rose to his tongue and he stifled it. Best to not confuse the issue.

"Yeah," She nodded back. "We're on the same side in that thing."

An hour later, he was considering going back in to talk to Declan when Kaylee walked through the passenger lounge to Azuria's bunk/cell. She had a tray of very mushy food and no utensils. Riddick guessed Quillan had inspected the tray before it had been brought down.

"Thought you might be a bit hungry," He could hear her speak to Azuria and wondered if she'd get more of a response this time. Nothing. Kaylee continued, her voice kind, cheerful, "It's not that good, but supposedly nutritious. Isn't it amazin' that the things that are so good for ya, always taste the worst."

She was in the doorway when Azuria finally spoke, Riddick could see Kaylee turn to look at him, "You ever love anyone so much that you couldn't imagine taking a breath without 'em being there to hear it? To share it." The man's voice was quiet and pained.
Kaylee shook her head, "No. But I've seen my brother and his wife. And they're like that." She took a breath, "But if I did, maybe I'd want to make sure the person responsible for 'em dying would also end up just as dead."

Riddick frowned and looked at Kaylee when she came back out, "Sweetheart, you all right?"

"Just a lotta darkness Rick," She sighed and leaned against him for a minute. "Didn't even get to win no toys for Ruby."

"Jayne got that goofy turtle, it came through the explosion better than he did," Riddick reminded her. "We'll stop somewhere, pick up a few things for her. Presents from all of us."

"Something to smile over, once all this...is done?" Kaylee asked hopefully.

"Maybe even get my mèi mei a dress too," Riddick suggested with a smile. Talking to Kaylee relaxed him a bit, nothing like River, but she let the animal be soft, be gentle. It eased his mood somewhat, took some of the rage away.

"We'll see how it goes, whether or not the Cap'n ever wants to set dirtside again after this," The cheerful mechanic offered that possibility with a roll of her eyes. "I'd better see to my girl, don't want her frettin' for attention what with all these people around."

"Get Jayne to help you with anything heavy," He kissed her temple affectionately before she left.

River sighed, after ten minutes Tanaka had woken up again, a bit blurry around the edges. Thirty minutes later the paralysis was wearing off and Tanaka was trying to question Simon again. The man was more obsessed with getting answers than with his mortal wound. To make matters worse Grayson had come back again and was standing out of Tanaka's sight behind his head. "Doctor, his blood pressure is very high," She rattled off the numbers and Simon frowned.

Her brother looked right at Tanaka, "If you continue to talk and keep your adrenaline levels high, then it won't matter what you find out because you're going to bleed out and be dead." He continued with the surgery and glanced at River, "I want you to induce full immobility and give him a shot of something to relax him again. Not enough to interfere with the surgery; just enough that he can't talk."

Grayson looked horrified, "What are you doing?"

River put her hands back to Tanaka's neck finding the pressure points she'd been taught such lethal use of, "You heard what the doctor said." She pinched the spinal cord again and began to compress the carotids firmly. "I'm rendering him unconscious."

Grayson looked in horror at where her hands were and reached for her, "You can't do that."

Without moving her hands River kicked him sharply in the stomach and then in the head. "Yes, I can," When he dropped to the ground she sighed and looked at the soldiers by Inara and Shazza. "Pick him up and get him out of the way."

Book came over to help as she finished with Tanaka and removed her hands from his neck, "That may come back to haunt you."

River shook her head, "He'll come to in a bit. Just need to remind him that he wouldn't even be
allowed in an operating room. Can't let him endanger the patient." She frowned down at Tanaka and looked at Simon before she put her fingers back on his carotids. The blue cobwebs thickened every time he woke up, every time he saw their faces. She'd have to keep the blood flow from the brain until they diminished back to normal. The way they'd been before the bombing.

By the time she was done Tanaka's face was red but she was certain he wouldn't remember them. "Short term memory loss, no other ill effects," She murmured for Simon's benefit.

"Good," Simon muttered. "The last thing I need is to deliberately botch a surgery to keep him from chasing us. Stubborn goat."

River nodded, "Could give lessons to you and Rick."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So here we are... I have to admit that none of the new characters you see are mine. Quillan, Tanaka, Grayson, Azuria, Mather, Jonah and Declan Everton are all part of the unfilmed script written by Cheryl Cain. I have used Quillan a bit more than the original script called for but I also changed the script so it would be more Riddick and Jayne centric and not revolving around Mal so much. After all we meet one of Mal's men in The Message. Since Dead or Alive wasn't filmed they used some of the idea in The Message. I thought the script would work if I revamped it to make Riddick the sergeant who trained Everton.

That being said I hope you all are liking it. Its giving Riddick a chance to show he's more than just the murderer. He knows how to think and manipulate people and he'll do it if he thinks it'll benefit his friends and family. Mal isn't particularly thrilled but when is he ever when it comes to Riddick?

River and Simon are trickier...she's very insane in the original script. But I figure she'd be able to help Simon out, Reading what he needed. And if she's inducing unconsciousness or nerve paralysis he's not betraying his oath as a doctor to keep Tanaka from recognizing them.

Chinese Translations:

Chūn bèn - stupid
bèn dàn s - fools / idiots
Tā mā de niǎo - goddamn it /lit. 'His mother's dick'
Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pìgu yǎn - May your child be born with an imperforate anus
Lù duān - Luduan, mythical Chinese beast able to detect the truth
gāi sǐ - damned
mèi mei - little sister
Quote Sources:

Death closes all; but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that once strove with gods. - Ulysses - Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Defenseless under the night our world in stupor lies. - September 1, 1939 - W.H. Auden

I mete and dole unequal laws unto a savage race, that hoard and sleep, and feed, and know not me. - Ulysses - Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Riddick watched, his back against a crate as Mal and Zoe finished checking a stash of weapons hidden in one of the cargo bay's secret compartments. It had been a couple of hours since he'd talked to Everton, in another few minutes he'd let Quillan know he was headed back to continue the 'interrogation'.

Mal wasn't taking the Alliance being on his boat well at all. This was worse than the time they'd found that derelict. Apparently being taken into Alliance custody wasn't so bad but having a fed on the ship and ordering him around was more than Mal could take. So the captain was feeling blustery.

"No one's gonna tell me what to do on my ship before I figure out what I'm gonna do," Mal grumbled to Zoe

The first mate was as stoic as ever, "Then you know what you're gonna do?"

"No," Mal shook his head. "But if we run we'll be flagged in the cortex and become sittin' ducks for any Alliance cruiser sailin' by. Even that mask the little genius worked up won't hold forever."

Zoe could have been suggesting tea and dumplings as the evening meal for the lack of expression on her face, "Okay, then we don't run, which means we don't fight."

Mal nodded, "Yep."

Now her frustration showed, just a bit. "Then we sit on our butts and do what? He'll get railroaded if he's innocent."

"Thank you, Queen of the not helpful, I know that," Mal retorted.

Every now and then it was blatantly obvious that these two had been through hell together. Zoe's tone wasn't quite disrespectful but it would have had Wash cheering with its over familiarity and sarcasm. "Well, time's short and not that I don't enjoy watching you mull over a brilliant plan, sir, but-"

Riddick rolled his eyes, "And I would that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me. The plan is for him to stew some and then I talk with him some more. Quillan's on board with it. He could have let them spit at each other a bit more but if Mal started shouting Everton might hear even through the closed doors. They were thick enough that even he had trouble hearing through them but Mal's voice could carry when he was trying. He was aware his own voice was just short of biting but he was feeling edgier the longer he was away from River.

Pushing the bay doors open Riddick listened idly to Mal start to bluster again, "Hey, if you-"

Riddick stopped, he'd seen the same thing Mal had. The door where they'd been keeping Azuria was wide open. Riddick scowled, "Well shit." He ran down to Everton's room and shook his head, "Azuria's in here. His neck's broke. Gǒu niáng yǎng de."

Cursing to himself over his own carelessness he headed for the stairs at a run, on Mal and Zoe's heels until they got to the galley. Only the animal's grace kept him from tripping over Zoe as they stopped. Jonah was on the ground, unconscious. "Alive. But his gun's missing," Zoe said after a moment's
Mal began to move towards the bridge, his instincts to check his ship; Riddick turned towards the spare shuttle "Find Quillan. I'm going after Everton." He started towards the door and down the stairs that led to the catwalk and the shuttles.

He could smell Everton before he saw him, the man's sweat was so strong it permeated the passage. He caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye, the goggles partially blocking his peripheral sight, and ducked in an automatic reflex.

The fist that would have hit his jaw rammed against his goggles. Riddick cursed as they got knocked loose, the light was brighter in this area of the ship and after the shade of the goggle the sudden brightness was a shock to his eyes. He moved forward slowly, adjusting them and heard Declan close and lock the door behind him. Declan turned back to him and began to come down the stairs, holding Jonah's fancy high powered gun.

"Sorry about that, Rick. Thought it was the fed," Everton was watching him closely, clearly not trusting him.

Riddick straightened and made a show of adjusting his goggles. Better for him if Declan thought he had trouble in this light. It wasn't fun, in fact it was irritating as hell, but it wasn't painful like the sun could be. When he'd straightened them properly he stared at Everton, "What the hell is going on?"

Everton shook his head, "That yokel tried to kill me."

Riddick rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, "That I can believe." He shrugged, "Your hand to hand's improved some."

Declan ignored the conversational tone, his straw stack hair standing wildly on end from his agitated hands tugging on it. "I've got to get out of here."

"You didn't have to break his neck," Riddick said slowly. If he played this right he could still get the truth out of Everton. Declan never could keep from tooting his own horn.

"It was instinct, I swear," Declan shook his head and Riddick could smell the lie, pungent and bitter rising from his skin.

"Sure it was," He nodded not quite agreeably and moved toward Declan. That got the man raising his gun somewhat and moving back on the catwalk towards the shuttle.

"You do believe me, don't you, Sarge," Everton wasn't quite asking, more demanding the reassurance and Riddick stopped moving. Declan was still aiming his gun straight at Riddick's belly and the convict had no interest in bleeding out with a doctor back at the fairgrounds. Declan began to move again, backing down the catwalk towards the shuttle.

His body language casual, Riddick followed him, "Sure, I believe you." And he absolutely did not. Azuria moved like a bull, a quick step like Everton could have gotten out of the bigger man's way and run for it. It took force and intent to break a man's neck on equal ground.

"Just let me take the shuttle. You can tell the Alliance that I held a gun on you," Declan was half looking over his shoulder and half looking at Riddick, ready to run or shoot. It was hard to tell which with the man's pulse spiking with adrenaline.

Riddick smirked, the temper he'd been holding all night put a little growl in his voice, "And that'd be the truth wouldn't it. Since you are."
"Not by choice," His voice rose a bit desperately.

And that was what rang the alarm bells in his brain. Because Declan Everton did have a choice. He'd chosen to take up the Browncoat cause. He'd chosen to kill Azuria. And now he was choosing to hold a gun on his former sergeant. Riddick stopped moving and leaned back against the railing, throttling back the animal in the hope of getting answers, pretending a relaxation he didn't feel. He folded his arms and regarded the former soldier, "So, you did do it."

Declan stopped short, looking at his sergeant and straightened up. Riddick watched as the nervous angular man with spectacles seemed to calm, to strengthen and toughen before his eyes, the caricature of a nervous innocent man dropped like a spent bullet casing. "And if I did?"

Riddick gave a shrug of disinterest, "It was an Alliance factory. Why would I give a shit about that?" He could see on Everton's face that he wasn't completely sold on that particular line. Muscles flexed as he tapped his hands on his biceps in irritation. His voice still held that rough growl that always unnerved Declan, "'Course, I am a bit pissed that your explosion almost took out my people. Hell, almost took out me. You were never any good at sabotage."

Everton shook his head, "Would've warned you if I'd known."

The ex-sergeant shook his head in imitation of the terrorist he was staring down, "No you wouldn't have. Taught you better than that. Never take your eyes off the target."

He judged that his eyes had adjusted to the light enough and pushed his goggles back, blinked slightly and regarded Declan with his naked gaze. River had told him he could convey more in a look than most men could in a thousand words. She had the same trick, and in the Academy she'd learned from him how to lie with a look. Deceit in gestures and expressions and in the calm of their eyes, words were superfluous against the weight of his expression. Even as Riddick thought of River, Declan relaxed.

"God, Sarge. You had me a bit worried there," The once Browncoat shook his head.

Riddick forced himself to chuckle in spite of his need to snarl and moved a bit closer, "Should kick you on your ass for leaving me with an Alliance Fed on my ship, though."

Declan shrugged, "I knocked her out good, came up behind her in one of the stairwells." He laughed a bit, a slightly manic sound that scraped Riddick's nerves. "We could solve both our problems, drop her out an airlock, make a run for it."

"Yeah we could," He reached up casually, grasping one of the chains hanging from the inside of the hull, "Or we could not." Everton looked at him sharply and Riddick slammed the chain into his face. One well aimed kick and the gun Declan held was over the side of the catwalk and possibly busted on the deck below.

Riddick stood in front of the man he'd trained, taught how to survive the war and wondered what had gone so terribly wrong in this man's head that he'd kill hundreds, injured thousands, all to fight a war long since lost.

Everton wasn't quite nervous but he wasn't exactly calm either, "Guess this changes things."

Riddick nodded, his hands flexing at his sides, "You might say." Every inch of him was itching to thrash this man, the reason River wasn't on the boat, the cause of Feds being on Serenity.

"You turnin' me in?" The man had the nerve to ask the question in an accusing tone.
Riddick didn't even bother to nod this time, "I damn well am." Everton began to inch toward the shuttle while Riddick kept pace. He was beginning to see that the kid he'd trained when he was only a kid himself had long since been lost. All that was left was a terrorist who wore a Browncoat and killed for a lost cause.

"It was an Alliance factory. Those gears are an essential part of a new line of military skiffs," Everton tried to justify his actions. "You do remember what those skiffs did to our men on the field?"

The man was insane, or worse, he wasn't and he thought he was right, "But they're not using those skiffs on us anymore." Why he was bothering to reason with the man Riddick really wasn't sure. But sooner or later Everton would run out of catwalk and then Riddick would be on him.

"For now," Declan spat the words, hate in every syllable. "But the next time a planet decides that maybe it would like to celebrate one of their own holidays, what do you think is going to happen? That the Alliance is going to say go ahead? Hey, we'll all bring cake."

"But it wasn't just the tā mā de factory you blew up," Riddick snarled the words out and had the pleasure of seeing Everton flinch just a bit at the reminder of the animal he could become.

"Commander Tanaka is the top-ranking official in this sector," Declan had more reasons, more justification, more nonsense to Riddick's mind.

"And all those people, children, my family?" He'd rarely been this furious when someone wasn't directly threatening his life. He could feel the animal just spreading out, cold fire filling his veins in preparation for the hunt.

"This is war. Acceptable casualties," Everton reasoned. "You remember that, don't you, Sarge?"

"Isn't war when they're not shootin' at you," Riddick retorted. "Then it's just plain murder. It's tiān shā de terrorism. It's not what we were fighting for." And then Declan ran out of catwalk and launched himself at Riddick. He could feel a feral grin pulling at his lips, ducking a punch and throwing one of his own that sent Everton reeling back. Trouble was, hit him too hard and he might break Declan's neck. Had to put just the right amount of strength into his arm.

Declan grabbed hold of him and did his best to push Riddick off the catwalk while Riddick let him make the attempt. Everton was no match for him and the longer he tried to fight the more worn out he'd get. So he let Everton try to hit him, blocking every punch, occasionally kicking out in a way that would leave painful and purple bruises on the man. Below him, he heard Quillan and Mal race through the lounge doors to the cargo bay.

Quillan's gun clicked and Riddick cursed to himself, he didn't want the Fed to take Everton down. He wanted to beat the crap out of the man. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mal push Quillan's gun down, heard his captain speak, "He needs to do this."

Riddick couldn't be sure if Quillan replied because at that moment Everton attempted to head butt him. Riddick grabbed him by the shirt and held him off before Declan could connect, concuss his captain speak, "He needs to do this."

He was seriously considering throttling the wiry man when Everton started talking. The man never knew when to shut up, "You were always so damned good. Uppity boy did everything better. Killin' quiet, stealing from the enemy. Then getting recruited to the Dà Chóng, like you were special, more than a street rat. Thought you were better than all of us grunts. What are you now? Huh? Hired gun on some piece of fēi tóng làn tiệt. And givin' me over."
Riddick shoved him back, and snarled, "The war ended. We lost. And if you weren't guilty I would have fought for you. But I never taught you this."

Everton launched himself at Riddick again and managed to land a pretty vicious right hook. Riddick ducked the left that came at him next and grabbed the hanging chains again. Pushing off the railing he swung around and kicked Declan straight in the chest. Everton sailed over the side of the railing and landed on a pile of boxes. He didn't do the boxes any good but they did break his fall.

Riddick took a deep breath and looked over the railing down at Declan. He was stirring slightly, so he was alive, if beat up. Riddick wiped a bit of blood off his face and watched as Quillan and Mal took Everton into custody. It wouldn't be long until they were on the ground again. He took another breath and hated that River's scent was fading from the air, ships air cycling clean, taking his mate's scent away from him with scrubbers.

He saw Quillan hand Everton over to Mal and take a step towards the stairs as if she was going to come talk to him. Mal shook his head at her, "Don't." When Quillan just regarded him quizzically the captain shrugged, "Man was toyin' with Everton. Could have killed him anytime. Probably wanted to once he knew the man was guilty. Kept him alive because you been insistin' on that."

Jayne came down the stairs and took Everton's other arm, "Step into the infirmary Lieutenant, we'll take a look at that bump. Best to leave Rick alone for a bit. He don't like bein' away from his wife an' it's been more than twelve hours since he's seen her. 'Tween that an' leavin' Declan alive… best to let him find some calm 'fore you talk to him."

Riddick looked around and took a breath to be grateful that Mal was beginning to understand what Jayne knew very well. They'd keep Quillan away from him until he'd gotten the animal under control. That was for the best. "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: look on my words, ye Mighty and despair," He muttered the phrase before he headed towards his bunk and the scent of River's hair on the pillows. That would calm him like nothing else.

River looked at Simon, he was exhausted but Tanaka would live. He would live with some memory loss and slight brain damage but that was better than dead. The blue was beginning to creep down over the world again, the Alliance was turning its attention to Verbena, word getting out regarding the madness that had occured here.

Grayson had come up to them as they were bandaging Tanaka and River looked at him, "He'll recover, but he needs to take it easy."

Simon nodded as he sealed the bandage and checked Tanaka's vitals one last time, "We found another blocked artery. If you had kept..."

River interrupted her brother before he could get himself arrested for sassing a fed, "Your men can take him home, get him more medicine. The paralysis will be wearing off soon, so its important to keep him calm and immobile for the next day or so."

Book came up to them and regarded the sleeping Tanaka, "I take it he'll live? In spite of his best efforts?" They watched as Grayson began to hustle some of the waiting soldiers into the tent to take the commander away.

Simon nodded, "He will. We'd better get ready, I'm sure the ship will be back soon. I'll do one more round of the wounded and-"
Book shook his head, "Inara, Shazza and I have checked everyone, no new bleeding, no more dead. They haven't brought in any more wounded in over an hour."

River could see Shazza and Inara talking quietly with the soldiers and girls who'd been helping with the wounded. "Inara, Shazza," She called quietly. When they looked up from the conversation she nodded towards the entrance. "Time to go."

There was a loud rumble and she nearly smiled as she heard the ships returning, Serenity settling into her place at port.

"Someone will have to let me know, is this normal for a fair," Simon remarked as they began packing up the instruments.

"I'm told not," Book smiled as he helped them gather up the medicine and supplies not used. They'd gone through a prodigious amount of Serenity's supplies.

"More games and food, less blood and screaming, is what I understand," Shazza remarked.

Simon looked at her worriedly, "How's your head?"

"I'll live. Wouldn't mind you checking it out a little more back on the boat, but I think I'll do for now," Shazza smiled. She and Inara were leaning against each other in their weariness.

River pulled one of the bags over her shoulder and watched as Book took the other. "Time to go," She said firmly. The world was turning more blue by the minute and she didn't like the color. Sticky cobwebs and fat spiders in the middle.

Riddick watched, his hand on his gun as Quillan and Mal walked a handcuffed Declan Everton down the ramp and onto Verbena again. Part of him wondered if the man was satisfied with all the carnage he'd caused or did he see it as just the first step, not nearly enough. All these people dead, maimed, lives destroyed and for what? Jayne nudged him and Riddick nodded. He'd barely noticed Jayne coming up to him, now he was glad his old friend would walk with him behind the prisoner. He wasn't taking a chance on Everton getting away.

The tent they entered was clearly a make shift command center. Riddick saw Grayson talking with a couple of soldiers to one side of it, clearly giving them orders before he hurried off. Quillan handed Everton over to two more soldiers without ceremony and moved to a table. Yet another soldier stepped up and handed her an envelope.

He and Jayne stood and watched as she counted out the cash and looked straight at him, "I believe this is yours."

Riddick looked at Mal and didn't say anything. Thankfully he didn't have to, Mal came over, scooped up the money and put it into his little leather wallet. When he turned to go, Riddick and Jayne behind him, Declan stepped into Riddick's path.

"We're fighting the just cause. Independent thought, independent dreams, independent lives. It's a thing worth dying for," Everton declared staring up into Riddick's eyes.

Quillan moved towards them and took Everton's arm, pulling him back towards the feds, "Thanks. Don't think we need your mission statement."
Declan ignored her sarcasm, "Just repeating the words taught to me by the man who trained me."

Riddick growled softly. Quillan had noticed though, noticed that Declan had thrown a barb that for whatever reason, had hit, "Yeah we were. But the fight is over. And I never taught you to kill children. I don't hold with that. Never have. We ain't at war anymore. My cap'n's right. We're all just folks now."

Jayne finally spoke up, disgust in his tone, "Even when we was. Never killed kids."

Riddick shook his head, "I never taught you this."

Everton sneered, "Like the Dà Chóngs were any better."

"You weren't good enough for 'em or you'd know," Riddick growled at him. "This wasn't what we did." He shook his head and moved to stand at the entrance of the tent towards Mal. Jayne stalked ahead of him, clearly ready to beat the hell out of someone, intent upon reaching Serenity.

Quillan jerked her head at the soldiers, "Get him out of here."

Declan finally stopped staring at Riddick when the soldiers dragged him out. Riddick listened idly as Mal poked at Quillan, his eyes on the broken fairgrounds and the ruins of the factory. "No words about you being right?"

The lieutenant shrugged, "Would it help if I did? Give you a reason to hit me, to hit something. Your man is handling this better than you are." She waited a moment, "I was right."

Riddick gave her a nod before he followed Mal out. "Ma'am."

Of course, Mal couldn't just leave it at that. He had to poke some, maybe not realizing that for all that he was unsettled Riddick wasn't exactly feeling chipper. "How do you..." The captain paused as some soldiers passed them, "How can you act like you respect that woman, a Fed?" He asked finally.

Riddick barely restrained a sigh, "Her bein' Alliance has nothin' to do with whether I respect her or not Mal." He moved out of the way as a group of folk trotted past. "Dunno if you respected every Independent officer you met but I sure as hell didn't. Alliance don't have the monopoly on stupidity."

"But you worked with her, you two actually had a plan and, and—" Mal seemed astounded. "How could you...and you're wanted." To his credit he lowered his voice on the last phrase, not wanting any more trouble.

Riddick shrugged, "What would have made her more suspicious of me Mal? Skulkin' around and avoidin' her? Or doin' my job and goin' 'bout business as usual? She had a few moments of concern...whenever she got a glimpse of my eyes, but the fact that I wasn't worried tended to allay her fears some." He nearly sighed in relief when he saw Serenity, Jayne standing on the ramp waiting for them. "I had a job to do and I made sure I could do it. That meant working with a Fed."

"How?" Mal stopped at the bottom of Serenity's ramp. "How were you able to? You're always talkin' about the Animal, how twitchy it is...how could you stand to work so close to the enemy?"

"She wasn't my enemy Mal," Riddick shook his head. He wasn't sure how to make the captain understand. "She didn't choose to be your enemy either. Quillan was just doing her job. I made sure
that I could do mine by working with her. If I hadn't, if I'd gone behind her back, wouldn't have gone so smooth."

"And you weren't worried she'd make you?" Mal asked skeptically, "She wasn't stupid I'll give you that."

"I trusted River's work," He was keeping an eye out for his mate since he could tell she wasn't on the boat just yet. "She and U have been setting up fake idents since we visited. 'Tween the two of 'em there's nothing they can't husk. So the only thing that woulda given me away was me. Knew nobody else was gonna slip up an' call me the wrong name."

"I don't understand you," Mal said finally. "I coulda sworn you despised Alliance as much as I do."

"You ain't wrong there," Riddick shrugged easily. "But its one thing to hate a huge faceless government Mal. For me, its harder to hate somebody like Quillan, sees all them hurt folk and wants justice for 'em, an' she don't care what uniform or lack a that they're wearin'. I could tell from lookin' at her, if it had been a purplebelly or anybody else, she woulda gone after 'em just as hard."


"Didn't care for it much myself," He leaned against the side of the boat. "Bright side is, next time someone's sayin' Browncoats are scum, Quillan's the type who'll speak up, say who helped catch the terrorist, say how we kept her alive, didn't let him throw her out the airlock. Even though we was Browncoats ourselves. She knows us now. An' maybe Verbena won't hate us all on sight with a Fed like her around."

Mal made an unintelligible noise to indicate he was thinking that notion over. Riddick pushed himself away from the boat, "I'll be in my bunk."

"Rick, you all right? Seein' as it was one of yours that did this?" Mal asked him as he mounted the ramp.

"Everton wasn't ever mine. I just trained him some," Riddick frowned. "Just gotta figure out what went wrong."

He stopped in to check on Wash, make sure that he wouldn't be needed on the bridge and the pilot gave him a sympathetic gaze, "Everything okay?"

Riddick nodded, not really meaning it, "Sure."

Wash's eyes saw a little too much sometimes, he waited a moment and when Riddick didn't say anything more, offered a shrug of his own, "You know how I said people change?"

"Yeah?" He wasn't really sure what the pilot was getting at.

The shorter man's handsome face was somber, a rarity as he turned to look at Riddick fully, "You didn't, haven't. You're still about your people, still about the truth. Only this time your people didn't deserve you."

Riddick nodded slowly, "It's a thought that has occurred to me, believe it or not." He sighed, "Guess
I'm just a little fixed on how someone I taught to survive, lived with and fought with, could do something like this. Most of 'em joined the Browncoats because we all believed in the same thing. It's hard to see that belief get so twisted."

"How's Jayne takin' it?" Wash looked back at the galley where the gun hand was sitting with his stuffed turtle.

"About as well as I am, just different. He wasn't the one trained half those men. Got there after I did," Riddick said quietly. "I'd known Everton almost a year before I met Jayne. But Jayne's...like...nature's first green." Wash looked a little confused and Riddick almost smiled, "The saying goes, Nature's first green is gold, her hardest hue to hold. Her earliest leaf's a flower, but only so an hour. So leaf subsides to leaf, so Eden sank to grief, so dawn goes down to day. Nothing gold can stay."

Wash was blinking at him, "Sounds simple at first but..."

Riddick nodded, "Yeah, simplicity is deceptive. Because it's human nature to get bored with things, to get petty and forget the good around us. Jayne don't. He's gold. Sure he gets a little tetchy, but the things that matter to him? My first night on the boat, when Mal sent Jayne off from the table? He'd said somethin' nasty on purpose, brought me the plate of food he'd taken when he left. He didn't hafta do that. But he did."

Wash nodded slowly, "Any luck with his girl?" He changed the subject and Riddick was grateful. He didn't think he could talk about his old unit or Everton anymore.

"River and Universe are wavin' back and forth on that, hopin' to have the searches narrowed down," He answered absently. "Soon we hope." He looked around the bridge as he heard Simon and the others boarding. "I'll be in my bunk if you need me."

"Get some rest," Wash advised though from his expression he knew Riddick wouldn't get much. Not for a while.

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Her mate was discontent, alone in their bunk, replaying all the times he'd spoken to Declan Everton in his mind and breathing in her scent again. He'd wonder for a while, think things over and eventually come to his own conclusions. But she knew there was nothing he could have done or not done. He'd been sergeant to soldiers before his transfer. He'd taught them as much as they could learn. But he couldn't teach them his heart, not if the seed fell on stony ground.

She watched, sitting on the stairs just outside the galley. Simon was talking with Kaylee, describing how brilliant everyone had been with the wounded. Book was in agreement, saying his favorite part of the night was River ordering the soldiers around and how they'd just obeyed. "Any authority figure in a storm," Was how Inara described it with a throaty laugh.

Jayne was sitting at the table, carefully mending his stuffed turtle's neck being so it would be whole for Ruby. His entire mind was wrapped up in the task, refusing to consider Everton or how a man could turn so evil. Part of his thoughts occasionally darted to Riddick, worrying about the man he called friend and brother and sergeant. The thought resolved in his mind that if Rick wasn't up to his normal self in the next day or so Jayne would talk to him. A little smile curved her lips as she Read that thought. Jayne was a good friend.

Shazza was feeling better, her headache gone with a smoother. Simon had looked at her skull with his instruments and called it, "Thick but undamaged." Shazza had smacked him with one of the
stuffed pillows in the lounge. But Simon's relief that their older sister was unharmed was like waves of warmth through the ship.

Zoe was putting two plates together, loading them with flatware and food. She walked right past River and didn't even see her in the stairwell so intent was the first mate on the bridge and her husband. As she left Mal walked in and tossed a money pouch to Jayne.

"Divide it up," He commanded absently.

Jayne nodded, "Yeah." He set his turtle aside to begin counting out the money, for once reluctant to handle cash.

Mal sat down next to Shazza his hand worriedly checking the bump on her head, "Someone find Rick and River, make sure they know food's ready." His voice was absent, his thoughts and eyes on the Dyton woman, how easily she could have been hurt, lost to all of them. Her warmth and humor and dignity gone. The surge of rage over Everton was like quicksilver, flashing hot and then stifled.

River moved quietly from her spot in the stairwell and down the hall to their bunk. She dropped down into it silently and moved towards the bed. Riddick was lying there in the darkness, his eyes glowing as he stared at his memories. She moved closer and sat to pull off her boots, "Don't want to fight right now zhàng fū."

She loved that he was willing to set aside all the things not right at the moment and just hold her. "Yeah," He kissed her neck and pulled her close, cradled her in his arms. "Me neither."

She shivered slightly and pushed the worries, the blue cobwebs, to the back of her mind. Time enough to talk to him later, to continue or not continue the fight. Wash was flying them away from Verbena, away from the blue.

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A day and a half out of Verbena he couldn't stand it anymore. "What's the problem River?" Riddick snapped as his mate huffed and scowled at her cortex again. "We all got out okay. You've been sniping and snapping at everything since we left atmo. I don't see where we have an issue. I made a decision and it worked out." She'd been edgy and smelling faintly of sage since Verbena and he didn't like it. Pushing her into a fight would work as well as coaxing her into confessing what was wrong. A fight would be better since she'd been smelling of cinnamon for nearly a day now. A day of her temper stinging his nose was a day that put him in a pisser of a mood. He knew there was something wrong but she wasn't talking and damned if he'd let her shut him out. He'd had a bad feeling since before Verbena. It had been why he'd been running diagnostics when everyone had gone to the fair. He'd learned to pay attention to those feelings but River hadn't said a damn thing and that itched at him something fierce.

Riddick snarled as River glared at him. She'd set her cortex aside and nearly stomped down the stairs to where he sat on the weight bench. "He is being deliberately obstinate," She snapped the words out, biting down on each syllable, cinnamon coloring her scent with fury. "He had his way on Verbena and look what happened."

"Oh you mean the part where I was under a Fed's nose and she didn't have a gorram clue?" Riddick left off the weights and ignored Jayne's trepidation behind him as he sat up and glared at his woman. "Or the part where we got a reward for doing something right?"

"No," River shook her head. "The part where he was nearly jailed by the feds for interfering with
their prisoner. Or perhaps the part where a high ranking Alliance Officer began to question what
Simon was doing out on the Rim. Began to look too hard until we were forced to knock him out."

"One man without proof, injured and not in his right mind does not a posse of Feds make," Riddick
snorted in contempt for that line of reasoning. "You're just pissed I didn't bow to your will."

"I am not 'pissed' about anything," River nearly snarled the words back at him. "I am angry because
you disregarded my concerns and decided to put us all at risk."

"I had a chance to do somethin' righteous for a change," Riddick nearly lost control. As it was his
voice was slightly louder than his normal growl of displeasure, "Simon was gonna go anyway. If I
hadn't a gone with him who knows what woulda happened. So no, I didn't listen to you. You were
afraid we'd get pinched and you let that rule you."

"And I was right," River folded her arms and cinnamon was so strong in her scent it nearly drowned
out the plums. "We should have left. We could have taken a shuttle and met Mal and the others in
orbit. Staying was stupid and dangerous."

"But it was my decision," He'd had just about enough of this. She was coming unraveled about
something and he couldn't tell what it was. The sneaky smell of burning cinnamon was streaking into
her scent, citrus and blood eroding the steel and silk of her mind. "I chose River. I chose to take the
risk."

"Refused to listen," She shook her head. " Didn't even ask the girl. Just decided."

"You remember on planet when you decided I wasn't really interested in you?" Riddick hadn't
intended to remind her of that but she seemed to need the facts shoved in her face. "You remember
how you decided you weren't gonna have anythin' to do with me until I'd had a chance to be around
other women? How you were so sure you were right because it made sense? It took me bein' tied up
an' beaten before you talked to me about it. You had to get jealous of gorram Fry before you came
near me. Were you fuckin' right then River?" His words were a furious growl nearing a roar as he
reminded her of that little fiasco.

"He throws her past mistakes in her face as if they negate her current argument," Her tone was stiff
but her hands were shaking. Riddick nodded angrily. Whatever was eating at her, he had to get it
out, making her mad, getting her to lose control would lance the wound. He was beyond pissed;
she'd been hiding this for gorram days and all it did was build up in her mind and get in the way of
them being themselves.

"Yeah, because you're wrong now and you were wrong then," He growled at her. "You're my
woman. That means I listen to you and I trust you but I do what I think's right. And that's what I did.
Don't think you've tamed me River. Don't you ever fuckin' think I'm a tame lap dog you can put on a
leash. I'm a wolf. I'm your wolf and I'm not fuckin' tame. I follow my own code, my own "tưần shā de
rules and you know it. Don't you ever expect different."

"He is a tā mā de bèn dàn!" River nearly spat the words at him. "As if she would want him tamed.
As if she ever expected he could be. "Chăn bèn man who talks out of his pì gu and postures like an
ape over what he will and will not do. Doesn't think. Doesn't know what's coming. Doesn't see
everything and how it could all go so wrong. One erroneous step on Verbena and we'd all be in jail.
One wrong word to that Fed and she'd have shot you in the back. So certain he knows what is right,
didn't listen to what the girl said could go wrong."

"You're jumping at shadows and chasing nothing," Riddick roared back at her. "No; I don't see. I
don't know what's coming. Because tā mā de niǎo River, you're not telling me. You think I don't
know when you're hiding something? Think I haven't known for days now that something ain't right? You're tā mā de hiding things from me just like you did on planet. You don't get to make decisions for the both of us River. You don't get to sit back and play God. Not with us. Not with your life and mine."

"Not playing God," River shook her head, his words had struck hard. "Not playing. Deadly deeply earnest. Yī běn zhèng jīng." She was shuddering with the force of whatever it was she'd been hiding, buried in her mind, whatever it was she'd Seen. Her scent was redolent with cinnamon, burnt and unburnt, citrus, pecans and burnt sugar nearly overwhelmed her base scent of blood, steel, silk and plums. He hated it, hated how anger and fear, pain and doubt and shame boiled through her scent and took away the scent of her love for him, the strength and discipline of her mind. "They will come and we will bleed from our eyes and ears and nail beds. Nothing will stop the sounds. The first step is taken and we will pay and pay and pay."

Riddick took a step towards her and ducked as she screamed and blindly attacked, her feet and fists deadly weapons even before she drew her knives. He was vaguely aware of Jayne hurrying out of the bay, of Inara up on the catwalk, Shazza and Mal on the opposite side and Simon in the doorway. Kaylee was coming down the stairs and Jayne hastily blocked her from moving any closer to River. She was utterly mindless, nothing but steel in her scent. Steel and a strange chemical smell he'd always associated with the Academy, with the triggers they'd embedded in her mind. They'd tried to do the same to him, tried to turn him into the mindless weapon, but it hadn't ever worked.

The old saying was, you couldn't hypnotize someone who didn't want to be put under. He guessed his brain couldn't be embedded with behavioral triggers because it went too far against the animal's nature. They'd only managed one or two with River, triggers that tripped her right into combat mode. The good thing was that she couldn't sustain this type of fight for long against him. He was too tough, too good at fighting, and he'd wear her down until physical exhaustion caused her brain to reset the trigger. The trick was to live through the fight. That became a little trickier when she brought out her knives.

Oh fucking perfect, he could hear Wash and Zoe on the catwalk next to Inara. As if it wasn't bad enough Mal was witnessing River break down. Setting aside the issue of the captain's head being constantly up his pì gu, Riddick concentrated on his mate. They didn't have anything in the way of cargo she could throw at him, even River couldn't lift steel crates weighing two hundred pounds. And there wasn't anything she could damage. In an effort to wear her out he fought her all over the bay, keeping her from moving towards the stairs and the crew, keeping her attention on him.

If he hadn't been busy not getting stabbed, he would have taken the time to admire the beauty of River when she fought like this. She was a creature of elegance and grace, the blades extensions of her arms. He took a slashing wound across the ribs and a dagger's tip sank into his upper thigh but it was worth it to wrap her up in his arms and hold her motionless against him. He forced her head back by wrapping his hand around her chignon and set his teeth over her jugular, growled furiously against her skin, to let her feel his teeth. To know his dominance over her at this instant; he could bite her, tear out her throat if she didn't submit.

It was the one failsafe he'd been able to give her, along with the words Simon knew that put her into sleep. He'd managed to subdue her at the Academy after she'd been programmed and set against him. It was a flaw in the scientist's technique. Whatever stimuli she encountered after she'd been embedded had the potential to be recalled along with the programming. So when they'd first used the verbal trigger and set her in combat against him, he'd fought her to a near standstill and flattened her against his body, put his teeth to her throat, and snarled the challenge of his animal to hers. And she'd subsided, recognized him as her mate, and the trigger was reset.
They hadn't known for certain it had worked until they'd begun breaking down the verbal trigger, sessions of work accomplished only when the crew slept safely in their beds. They wouldn't have risked it if Simon hadn't been standing by, ready to use the phrase that put River to sleep should she get away from Riddick. He wasn't sure if they'd ever be able to remove the behavior she'd been programmed with, but for him it would be enough that no one else could activate her. They were her skills to use, so instilling an ability to trigger herself was their ultimate goal. But he would not have his woman, his mate, treated like a weapon, aimed and triggered to destroy something or someone against her will.

"Riddick?" Her whisper was choked, terrified and she was trembling in his arms.

"'S'all right, I got you baby," He whispered back and felt her relax. Those words were another release, a tradition since she'd first been implanted and his teeth on her throat had brought her out of that trigger induced frenzy. He was aware of Mal murmuring worriedly to Shazza, Inara soothing Zoe while Wash was boiling with anger. Simon had gone to Kaylee and Jayne, was reassuring Kaylee that River was all right, that this was something of which he was aware and that River would be fine. It wasn't a lie as such, but it was a truth that was far from being complete.

Whatever it was that River Saw or Read had been enough to trigger that behavior mechanism the Academy had implanted. She'd been pushing it back, trying to bury it, the scent of sage clinging to her since Verbena. He hadn't realized until he'd begun nearly shouting at her how much he despised the smell of deceit on her skin. That she felt the need to lie infuriated him.

"Not a lie," She whispered and shuddered in his arms as if she felt his fury like a weight. "Couldn't speak of it, couldn't think it, not until we were away from Verbena. Hurt to not...to not tell you. To hide it from you. Twisted in my mind, pain and rage," River was shaking now, trembling against him and Riddick took a deep breath and scooped her up to sit on the stairs near the airlock. Her hair had tumbled out of its knot due to his rough handling and they'd have to pick up her hair pins later. It fell over her back and his arm as he cradled her in his lap, nuzzling her temple and neck and hair with his lips, trying to soothe her.

"Don't know what the problem is. Don't know what it was on Verbena that hit you like this," He rumbled quietly into her ear. "You gotta tell me River. I can't help if you don't talk to me. I know something ain't right. Knew it when we landed that something was wrong, you were twitchy and feeling off, but you didn't say anything."

She nodded jerkily in his arms and he felt her turn to press her face to his neck. She inhaled deeply, breathing in his scent, calming herself, "Verbena...the officer there, the one who prodded and poked at Simon. He was very close to figuring out who Simon was, who I was. I induced unconsciousness and made certain to press too long on his carotid artery, prevent oxygen flowing to the brain, caused brain damage. He will live but he won't remember us. Might not even remember the explosion. We were so close to him calling the Blue, the world suffused in Indigo as he looked at me and Simon."

"All right," Riddick had known there was a small risk of them being recognized. He hadn't realized it was that close. But he and Simon still wouldn't have listened to River's warnings. The need to take action, to do something, had been too strong for them. It had been the perfect chance to remind Mal that he was more than a killer. What he'd told Mal about Quillan was something he'd been trying to do to the captain. He had to make Mal see them, River and Riddick, as people who were needed, rather than liabilities to be dumped off when they became too inconvenient. He'd wanted just once to help people, to be something more than the monster everyone saw. The phrase he'd thrown at Mal stuck in his mind again, 'they vote for us two to one if they know one of us'.

"He is not a monster, no more than she is," River whispered. "Not that it is an effective argument at
the moment, when she has made him bleed."

"Scratches," Riddick shrugged them off. "What else did you See on Verbena?"

She took another deep breath of his scent and he could feel that she was readying herself to answer the question, "Mr. Universe has sent me another search result. I have verified it." She looked up at him and he wondered if there was really silver in her eyes or if it was just his need to see her as a kindred spirit. Sometimes it seemed to him her eyes glowed like the stars themselves. "We will find Ciara on Ariel," She mumbled. "We must prevent a procedure from occurring. The final step before she is sold. But Ariel is in the Core, in the heart of the Blue Hands territory."

"You See them?" Riddick asked quietly. He was aware of the crew around the bay, the people on the catwalks, Jayne and Kaylee with Simon by the lounge. All of them were curious, worried or interested in what was going on with the two killers who had been fighting and now were sitting so quietly.

"Saw the pattern, the potential. Don't know what triggers their involvement. Can't See that far," River whispered. "They were pulling Verbena into their web, turning everything around us blue until we left the planet. Until I made the Commander forget. The tendrils still pull at us. I need to clean Serenity. The mask only hides us for so long while Inara takes appointments over the Cortex."

Riddick nodded his understanding, "She didn't make any while we were there though." He reminded her, "Too busy helping you and Simon with the wounded."

River nodded, "But she received waves as we were leaving."

"All right," Riddick nodded. "Let's go up to the bridge and run a scrubber."

River was acutely aware of the crew staring at them, Wash in particular was angry, staring at the bloody knives she'd sheathed and the still bleeding wounds Riddick bore from them. "River what is going on," The pilot kept his voice even and low as he met them at the end of the catwalk.

"Need to wash Serenity, make sure Inara's waves don't let the Feds track us," River told him from within Riddick's arms.

"But what was that?" Wash gestured at the cargo bay deck where she and Riddick had fought, "Since when do you draw knives to win an argument?"

"Ain't somethin' she'd do to anyone else," Riddick's voice was a reassuring rumble beneath her ear. "She only does it with me so I listen. Get's the animal's attention when my blood is up." He uttered the lie without hesitation or remorse.

"Get its attention some other way," Mal commanded from behind Wash. "We don't need anymore blood on the floors of the boat."

"Mal, now is not the time to push me," Riddick's growl of a voice had lost its Rim accent and he sounded almost as cold and core as Simon could. "She'll get my attention however she needs to. Just be grateful she doesn't look at you or trust you the same way. Because you couldn't ever keep up with her."

River shuddered and felt Wash's anger soften as he looked at her, "Mal, just a guess here, but I don't think River likes that method of getting Rick's attention anymore than we do."
"No, she don't," Riddick nodded at Wash. "Now we're headed to the bridge. Ya'll steer clear for a while, let us work." He didn't bother to wait for the captain's nod, Wash's acknowledgement was enough for him.

"Upset to see you wounded," River murmured. "Doesn't care much for blood or violence. Finds your solidity reassuring, like Zoe's calm, dislikes having it damaged. More angry that you were hurt than at me for causing it."

"Yeah, I know pilot man likes you just fine," Riddick's lips brushed over the top of her head as he sat in his chair on the bridge. "Now let's get to scrubbing Serenity."

River leaned forward and began to key in the commands for the program she had installed under Wash's eye. A ghost in the cortex it would encrypt and mask the source of any wave sent. Inara's waves couldn't be encrypted but their origin could be concealed. Serenity's cortex would be scrubbed of any information pertaining to their location.

She felt part of her mind calming with the familiar work, she'd written this program, had run it many times, it was almost like meditation to key it active. Riddick's hands rubbed over her back and legs, his lips brushing over her temple and hair. One big hand slipped under her skirt, sliding up her legs while the other unbuttoned the front of her dress. Powerful fingers slid gently over her skin, found the border of her panties and traced the fabric down to her mound. He stroked her teasingly through the cloth making her gasp and nearly miss a keystroke. It was hard to think, but amazing that his big hands could be so nimble, sliding around to her back and unhooking her bra. Fingertips plucked at her nipples gently, tugging at them before covering one breast with his palm. She felt more than heard his groan at the feel of her and sighed in reaction. "Hmmm...my mate," She whispered longingly.

"Finish your work woman," His low coffee and chocolate voice growled in her ear. "Hide us from alla them would hunt us down."

River moaned as his fingers stroked and pressed her clit through her panties and tried to concentrate on her job. Riddick's patience ran out when her panties didn't allow him to play with her bare flesh and she heard and felt fabric rip and his hand cupped her mound. His finger tips found her yīn dì and she nearly cried out at the sensation. "Finish the huskin' River," He commanded. "I'm gonna tease you until you do."

"Hmmm..." It was a struggle to keep her hands steady, to find and counter all the little traps Alliance liked the put in the path of the com buoys. But finally she hit the command for complete. "Done," She gasped the word out, thighs trembling with the need for his body. It felt as if every muscle was wound tight with desire.

Riddick just snarled and lifted her up against him, standing and pressing her flat to the storage lockers behind Wash's chair. River's breath caught as she realized that for once they weren't going to make it to their bunk. Her mate had already opened his pants and had hitched her legs around his waist even as he pressed her back to the lockers. His body was solid and rock hard, pressing between her legs, seeking her and sliding home, thick and hard, stretching her until she nearly screamed before Riddick's mouth came down on hers.

What followed was frantic and rough, her boots digging into his backside, his hips slamming hard into hers. His hands never left her pì gu and hips, holding her body to his. River moaned into his mouth as one fall swept over her and still her mate pounded into her ruthlessly. She was full of him, hot and deep inside her, and he was growling into her mouth, his kiss passionate and possessive, telling her, as decidedly as his teeth on her neck earlier, to whom she belonged.
She nearly screamed as the trembling began again, deep inside, and felt his body twist and press even deeper somehow, locking inside her until Riddick was frantic with need. His groan was a near shout as his fall overtook him, filling her body hotly, until it felt as if her belly was filled with fire. She was panting, gasping for breath in his arms when she felt someone staring at them and stiffened slightly. Riddick could see though, whoever it was, she was still so hazy from his possession of her, and her mate growled a warning.

Keeping her close to his body, still joined, he stalked off the bridge and she wound her legs and arms around him when he opened the hatch to their bunk. When he'd climbed down the ladder and locked the hatch behind him, Riddick's hands were on her again, pulling her dress over her head and making short work of the hanging bra and torn panties. Only when she was naked except for her boots did he set her on the bed. And even then, it was his hands that pulled off her boots.

"My Riddick," She whispered as he stripped off his clothes and pressed her back to the bed. "Mate, lover, husband, friend, mine." His body spread her thighs and pushed inside her again, his eyes not quite burning with the animal's silver but close to it. "Please. Yes," She moaned the last word as his body began to move over hers again. "Please, Riddick."

His mouth, hands and body pushed them both to pleasure after pleasure, until they were panting and exhausted and were she not dosed with a contraceptive she'd surely be pregnant. Finally when even his superior recovery and appetite was spent, they lay panting and entwined together. "She is sorry," River whispered, touching the stab wound on his thigh. "So sorry it came to that."

"Di yù River, can't think I'm worried about that," Riddick kissed her again. "We'll wait until everybody's had a chance to calm down and go play medic."

"Who was it," She changed the subject. "Someone saw us, on the bridge, saw you, taking me, reminding me that I'm yours and you're mine."

"Oh, that was Mal, Wash right behind him, trying to talk him out of whatever it was he thought to do," Riddick sounded amused. "Don't think he ever expected to catch us sexing."

"They have always been careful to be in their bunk when such urges arose," River remarked sleepily. "Trying to be civilized."

"Well considerin' every time you've been triggered and I've had to set my teeth on your neck, I've wanted to do what I finally did today, I'd say we're lucky this is the only time we've ever been caught," His tone was definitely amused. "Wanted to do that in the Academy when they triggered you. But that would have been..."

"Frowned upon," River murmured and kissed him. "Riddick likes his woman with knives in her hands, only thing better would be shivs he made for her."

"Yeah, gotta make you a couple," He agreed. "Let's get some sleep Qīng Xiāng."

"Yes," River agreed tiredly. "Bandages after some rest."

"Maybe," He shrugged and dragged a quilt over the two of them.

"But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, all losses are restored and sorrows end," River murmured the ancient line and pressed her lips to his skin again. His embrace tightened slightly and she felt the surge of affection welling up in him as they both succumbed to sleep.
Author's Note: So first of all, a huge thank you to RCoots for helping with the fight scene. I really wanted a continuation of the fight at the beginning of Dead or Alive because it didn't feel finished. Riddick decided to do something and did it regardless of whether or not River agreed. There wasn't any time to argue about it. I don't know that his course of action was the wisest but he's explained (to an extent) why he did it. And it was a good chance to remind Mal that he's more than a killer.

I don't know how well Mal really took the object lesson, but at least Riddick tried right? But then there was River to deal with and she's not exactly stable is she? Not right then anyway. But that scene was hard for me to write and have it feel well paced and coherent, so RCoots was a huge help, looking it over for me a couple of times after it was edited.

How did we like this chapter? Canon holds that a Browncoat terrorist blew up the factory on Verbena and the planet is in an economic depression because it hasn't been rebuilt. Verbena also isn't the best place to be if you were an Independent. I wanted something to counter that slightly. I also wanted the crew to see a bit of Riddick and Jayne when they were soldiers.

Oh, hints for the future... We're going to finally meet someone in Ariel. And in War Stories we'll find out how Jayne saved Riddick's life in the war. I'd love to hear your guesses and how you think all of this is going. Yes this is a shameless attempt at getting reviews and feedback. Its addictive.

Chinese Translations:

Gōu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch

tā mā de - fucking

tiān shā de - goddamn

fèi tóng làn tiě - scrap metal / a pile of junk

zhàng fu - husband

tā mā de bèn dàn - fucking fool / idiot

Chǔn bèn - stupid

pi gu - butt

tā mā de niǎo - goddamn it /lit. 'His mother's dick'

Yī bèn zhèng jīng - in deadly earnest

yīn dì - clitoris

Dì yù - hell

Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent

Quote Sources:
And I would that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me. - Break, Break, Break - Alfred, Lord Tennyson

My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: look on my words, ye Mighty and despair - Ozymandias - Percy Bysshe Shelley

Nature’s first green is gold, her hardest hue to hold. Her earliest leaf’s a flower, but only so an hour. So leaf subsides to leaf, so Eden sank to grief, so dawn goes down to day. Nothing gold can stay. - Nothing Gold Can Stay - Robert Frost

They vote for us two to one if they know one of us - Milk - Harvey Milk

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, all losses are restored and sorrows end. - Sonnet #30 When To the Sessions - William Shakespeare
Riddick frowned to himself as River carefully cleaned out the knife wounds she'd given him. In the middle of the night cycle they'd woken up starving. Now that they'd eaten something and cleaned up after themselves River had insisted on cleaning the cuts. They weren't anything that bothered him but it pleased her to do it. She'd been getting the threads of jasmine through her scent, usually that mean she was really determined about something, and it was easier to just give in. He found himself thinking again about how he'd broken through the conditioning. He could remember the first time he'd done it, when they'd set River against him, the verbal trigger still ringing in his ears. It had been the worst experience of his life to date, a girl barely sixteen, already half brainwashed before they'd even met, throwing herself into battle with him. There'd been nothing of her personality in her eyes. And her scent had been rife with chemicals overpowering the blood and steel.

He'd fought her, mechanically at first, and then more desperately, wondering the whole time if he'd ever get his little partner back. Did the triggers take her brain away completely, drive her to the edge of reason so the only sanity she could find was in the behavioral conditioning? She'd put up a helluva fight while he'd been figuring out what they'd done to her. He'd finally figured it out by comparing her behavior with what the scientists had attempted with him. What he called the animal was too strong in him, instinct, emotion, they didn't allow hypnosis let alone mental triggers or behavioral conditioning.

But River...she'd told him not long after they'd partnered up, how odd she felt, how she'd always relied on intellect. And with whatever they'd done, her thinking side was failing her. He'd begun to teach her, his way of doing things, relying on the animal. She'd been closer than she thought to really understanding it. Half of her reactions were animal based because she could Read emotions so well. It was only later that she'd begun to hear thoughts clearly. River'd had to learn to not fight that part of her, to accept it and let it become active, merging the two sides of herself.

But she'd been far from stable when they'd made her fight him. And he'd been desperate, ready to try anything to get his girl back. He hadn't even been sure it would work, if his animal could reach hers through the conditioning. But he'd had to try.

Her foot had nearly ruptured his spleen with the kick she'd given him but he'd caught her ankle and jerked her forward, grabbing her and flattening her body against his, tackling her to the ground. She'd screeched like a scalded cat and that had been his first hint that his hastily formed hypothesis might work. But he'd pushed her head back and closed his jaws over her jugular and carotid, growling as loudly and fiercely as he could, his animal very close to taking over. It had demanded its mate respond, acknowledge that he was dominant at the moment.

It had worked. Her animal recognized his, recognized him as her mate. Once River had been asleep that night Riddick had let himself think over the implications. Time got away from them, there weren't any clocks or even a way to tell the seasons in the white rooms. But he knew they hadn't known each other long, chronologically anyway. He'd still had to leash the animal down tightly, keep that part of himself from getting too aggressive with River and yet, he'd learned hope.

Her animal acceding dominance to her mate...that had given him hope that she might just want him someday. She might agree to be his with the thinking half of her brain. They already trusted each other. He could only hope that if they ever got out of this place, if they were ever free, he'd have a chance to be something more than her partner. The words he spoke weren't his but they did express...
something close to what he felt for her, "Thou art the blood of my heart o' hearts, thou art my soul's repose."

"Richard is thinking on when he first understood the girl saw him as he saw her," River's soft voice jerked him back to the present. She'd stitched up the stab wound on his thigh while he'd been remembering. "Is he happy with her? He is still pleased to have her?"

"Qīng Xiāng, do I look stupid?" He slid off the table and carried her into the lounge away from the cold infirmary. Neither of them were bothering with the lights, their eyes were enough in the darkness. "Never regret bein' with you. And don't get to thinkin' that those triggers bother me. More upset about what they do to you than anything you could do to me while you're under the conditioning."

Her response was to push him onto the couch and reach for his pants, her deft fingers rousing his diǎodō easily. Honey and plums and caramel were taking over her scent, like her body was made to please all his senses. She hadn't bothered with undergarments, throwing her dress on over her skin and now she just pulled her skirt up and slowly sank onto his jība. He groaned deep in his throat and dragged her mouth down to his before pulling her bodice open and finding her breasts with his hands. Sweet and soft and so gorram good and tight around him.

He didn't like that they'd argued earlier, fought really, or the cause of it but he did like that neither he or River seemed to care much about where they were. At least right now when no one else was around. The animal had nearly taken over on the bridge. He'd had to have her, had to remind her that she was his, that he was hers. That no matter if they fought, they were always on the same side, their side. He groaned as her body twitched and shuddered around him and looked up at her, alabaster and ebony in the darkness, she was perfection.

Riddick tore his mouth from hers and bent his head to her breasts, he'd never get tired of how her skin felt under his mouth. The tiny cries from her lips as he sucked her stiff little nipples between his lips or the shivers that rolled over her body as he used his tongue to tease and play her flesh. She shuddered and buried her mouth in his neck as her fall crashed through her body. He cursed in a low hard growl and jerked her hips down groaning as her body seemed to jerk his seed out of him, his fall coming without warning.

Her lips moved on his neck, pressing so sweetly to his pulse and he felt her sigh in contentment, "She is lost without him. Hate the arguments, hate being at odds, out of sync and feeling wrong even if she thinks she is right." Allspice and pecans teased his nose, trust and uncertainty mixing with the scents of love and joy and desire from moments ago. She pulled back to lookin his eyes, her own dark orbs glowing silver back at him, "Promise her, he will never let her go? Not while she breathes."

"That's somethin' I don't even need to say," Riddick growled at her possessively, he hated that she could ever doubt that, hated the smell of pecans. "Told you, told you on planet, told you in cryo, you're mine River. I'm yours an' you're mine and you always will be. You'll have to kill me to get away from me bàng jiār."

He wasn't the Reader but he could feel her relief, sugared violets, and for some reason that infuriated him, "Tā mā de niǎo River," He snarled. "After all this time, you got doubts about us? About me?"

She shook her head frantically, her scent spiking with plums and blood, "No, bàng jiār, no. Never doubted." Her mouth came down on his, hot and sweet, words between kisses, "Wanted to hear him say it. After she made him bleed. That she is still his. Would always be his. Love feeling the words when he says them."
Riddick lurched upwards and turned so she was beneath him on the couch, "I don't care if you slice me up until I look like a jigsaw puzzle." He growled down at her, his body pressing down on hers. "I don't care if you try to kill me. You give it your best tiān shā de shot zhī yǐn. But I'm still yours. You are mine. No matter what." He groaned as the animal quickened his body again and pushed her thighs apart, sliding so easily inside her. "I don't care," Riddick pressed deeply inside her and loved how her back arched helplessly, sensation taking over, her animal rising to meet his. "I don't care if we're both bleeding from a dozen wounds."

He felt her fall break over her and bit down on her shoulder, her body so sweet under his, "My Richard, my Riddick, please...mine..." She was moaning the words, her hands clutching at him, trying to get closer. He slid his arms beneath her body, holding her tightly to his body. Scents, sensations, tastes and sounds, everything about this woman sank hooks into him, called to everything in him. Animal or man didn't matter, he belonged to her. Her moans filled his ears, he could feel his control slipping, all he could think was to get deeper inside her, make her his.

"Wǒ cáo," He groaned as she ground herself against him and felt her body give inside, taking him even further, her scream muffled against his chest. He could feel her teeth sink into his skin and shuddered at the smell of blood. Riddick felt her fall again, seemingly endless trembling around his diǎo. "Tā mā de dì yù," He felt his own fall ready to burst through him. "Once more River, c'mon baby," He couldn't help the moan in his throat as she obeyed, her body mindless under his. "Cào dàn, River," The orgasm hit him like a fist, his balls unloading into her as she jerked helplessly under him, her own fall still shaking her body.

"My woman, my mate," He growled into her hair. "Bonded by body and blood and seed, forever River," Riddick really hoped she understood that he was never going to let her go. He couldn't. She was inside him, had been since he'd met her.

"Yes," She sighed beneath him. "She needs to hear his words now and then. Still amazed he wants, loves, all of her, even the crazy parts. Then happy I, that love and am beloved where I may not remove nor be removed." Her body was settling now that her emotions were calming and notes of blood, steel and silk wove through the plums, caramel and honey. He was still amazed sometimes at how good she smelt to him. Even the notes for the things he hated, her pain, her shame and worry...the scents themselves weren't displeasing. Only what they meant to him.

"Same goes Qīng Xiāng," He kissed her hair and lifted himself off her body. "C'mon," Riddick pulled her up and into his arms, carrying her back up the stairs. "Let's go back to bed. See if I can't wear you out 'til you can't think much."

"He will impregnate her despite the contraceptive," River giggled into his ear and the flood of lust that hit him was like a wave of heat at the thought. She moaned and he quickened his pace until he was kicking open their bunk and dropping down into it.

"Why don't we see how I do with that," He smiled at her wickedly and pulled off her dress before locking the hatch behind him.

Jayne was thinking hard about something and he didn't like the feeling. River looked up curiously as the big man came into the lounge outside the infirmary. Simon was relaxing with a book, Riddick doing the same thing on the couch with her feet in his lap while she was doodling the faces of her men in her sketchbook. "Jayne," She smiled as reassuringly as she could. "He will join us?"

"Yeah," The big merc sounded hesitant but he pulled up an ottoman and sat down on it so he could
"Mal thinking of putting us off the boat again," Riddick tilted his head and set the book down as he asked the question. Simon did the same thing; River could almost feel her brother's spine tighten with foreboding.

"Not that I could tell," Jayne shook his head. "No, he an' Zoe were talkin'. Guess he were some worried 'bout that fight you two had in the cargo bay." He told River and Riddick, "He's used ta talkin' stuff out with Zoe."

"Wise of him," River nodded. "Zoe is more level headed, more objective, unless it concerns Wash or Mal." She sighed, "Tired with all these, from these I would be gone, save that, to die, I leave my love alone." Riddick tilted his head, when she Read him, he was smelling threads of pineapple in her scent, hiding how not normal she was tired her out, and the thought that it wasn't doing any good was exhausting.

"Yeah," Jayne took a deep breath. "I'd been back helpin' Kaylee with some weldin' in the engine room, an' they didn't hear or see me in the hall. But I could hear 'em plain as day from the stairs back there." Sorta come into the middle of the conversation but Zoe was askin' if he was so worried why he'd offered ya'll a place on the boat to begin with."

River nodded her understanding and Jayne continued, "An' Mal, he says that anybody could see, River weren't right when she come outa that box. Maybe that were his fault, bustin' it open, but after ya'll told him 'bout the Academy he'd got the idea ya could use the help. An' when ya'll told him what happened to River... well he did his best for ya'll an' that weren't Zoe's business. It were private 'tween you two an' Inara."

Jayne looked at Simon, "I'm guessin' whatever happened that they see Inara 'bout you already know, 'cause you ain't actin' shocked. That's good. Wouldn't wanna cause no trouble."

"I do," Simon nodded and offered a worry stiff smile for the big man. "How did Zoe react to that?"

"She guessed it were something to do with why Wash says River's got PTSD," Jayne replied. "But she didn't understand why Mal would take ya'll in and then start with the questions. Trusted ya'll enough to have you on the boat but ever since he's been pressin' and questionin', waitin' for somethin' to happen."

"Second guessing himself," Riddick said slowly. He'd been quiet, simply listening, and River could feel that he was waiting for the entire tale before he decided one way or another what he wanted to do.

"Sorta," Jayne nodded. "See, Mal told her, he thought he was helpin' some fugitives, could sorta handle themselves, and a little crazy girl. But the girl, she ain't so crazy, and even the core doc, looks so soft at first, ain't as green as he seems. And when he pushes he gets a little more of the story every time. But not the whole thing. Knows you're hidin' things."

"And Zoe probably pointed out that he'd known that from the first, why was it a problem after he'd offered us a place on the boat," Simon guessed.

"Somethin' like that yeah," Jayne's lips were pressed in a thin line. "So Mal, he tells her, what if he was wrong? What if he put all of his crew in danger takin' ya'll on? He spouted some line of garbage 'bout what if River was too young to really know what she wants and she's with Riddick 'cause she don't know any better? He's lettin' a girl ain't even eighteen shack up with a man gotta be a decade her senior and for all he knows, it isn't somethin' should be happenin'." That got a growl of fury out
of Riddick and River reached over to pat his knee soothingly. Jayne nodded his acknowledgement of his friend's anger and continued. "He starts sayin' how you two are more dangerous than ya'll looked at first, and he's not sure if it's worse or better 'cause River has those fits now and then."

"Why doesn't he just throw us off then?" River wondered thoughtfully, "Had the perfect opportunity with the Walden. Could have wished us fare thee well."

"That's part a his problem," Jayne grimaced. "He's real pissed at himself 'cause he's in a corner an' he don't know the whole story. Ya'll are fugitives, Cain't be denied, and danger from the Alliance, 's somethin' we're all used to. He's worried 'cause you three are tricky and dangerous just by yourselves and he's got you on the boat with Kaylee and Wash, an' they ain't combat tested. So he'd like to throw you off. But he's worryin' 'cause what if he was right to offer ya the place? To take ya in 'cause ya need the help even if ya are creepifyin' and volatile-like."

Riddick frowned and looked at his old friend, "He decide anything?"

"Mostly to just wait an' see a bit longer," Jayne sighed. "He said he's tryin' not to poke 'cause ya'll seem to get worse when he does. He don't like makin' ya bleed he said, but he's responsible for everythin' happens on the boat. Ya'll run amuck...he's holdin' the bag."

Simon rubbed his forehead, "Well that's quite the conundrum he's got." The doctor looked at the other two, "I think our biggest concern is how much to tell him and how much danger he'll be in for knowing it. Not to mention there are things we still don't know ourselves."

River looked at Riddick, "Can ask Inara to speak with him. Vouch for what she has seen in us, the veracity of his initial assessment."

"That's a start," Simon nodded. "She won't give details but she can provide him some reassurances as to the validity of your relationship and that he was right to let the two of you 'shack up'."

Riddick was not pleased by the thought but he nodded his agreement with a grumble, "If it ain't enough for him then he can screw himself. Least about that."

"The fighting... well, I can tell him River had argued with you before we went out on Verbena and you overruled her. What he saw in the bay was merely the continuation of the fight," Simon offered quietly. "If his concern is that River might grow violent with anyone else I can reassure him about that. She and I have argued often and she's yet to strike me."

"Might could point out she trains with Book in the bay even an' she don't much like him alla the time but she ain't never raised a hand to him," Jayne suggested after a moment's thought.

River nodded, "It does not answer his concerns about Riddick."

"Seemed more worried 'bout what ya'll do together," Jayne offered. "But he don't like how Rick was dealin' so polite with the fed neither."

"Mal doesn't think politically," Simon snorted. "Rick was openly admitting to an attempt to sway her thinking. Mal's probably pissed he didn't think of it himself."

Riddick sighed, "We could stop hiding so much of what we can do." He suggested to River, "Chafes the animals anyway, not runnin' free. If we're gonna get thrown off the boat...may as well be for what we are, not what he thinks we are."

"Will always be hiding something from him though," River sighed. "But a gradual emergence from the shadows might be politic. They are unholy who are born to love wild plum at night." Riddick
knew what she meant, that Mal might never understand them, or accept them but at least they’d have tried.

"So we have a plan," Simon nodded. "Let's see how it goes. We don't even know what planet we're headed for next and if its too close to the core we might have to adjust a few things."


"Almost..." Jayne tensed and his eyes burned with hope. "Really? You think?"

"Last search from Mr. Universe, leads me to believe so," River nodded. "Must run stealth searches while we are there, a great deal of work to be done. But...yes. Soon."

"Don't know whether to worry more or be relieved," The gun hand sighed. "And this gradual emergence thing? How're ya'll plannin' to do that?"

"I figure to not hide quite so much of the animal," Riddick shrugged. "Ciara is first priority, but if River's right, and she rarely isn't, we'll be finding her soon. When we hit Ariel. After that... well we'll get her on the boat. Explain exactly what she's letting herself in for traveling with us."

"She has been endeavoring to not...scare the captain so much. No dancing out of the blue, not following her natural inclinations with her partner," River murmured. "Intimacy confined to the bunk, rarely even kiss outside of it. Wishes the same freedom of spirit Wash and Zoe enjoy."

"That's the thing," Riddick sighed. "Mal don't trust us, so we try to behave civilized and it fits about as well as a coat on a cat. Or a collar on a wolf."

"Stifling, leads to tempers fraying, the animals wish to snap the leash, run rampant," River agreed. "As bad as the Academy in its way. Constantly hiding who we are."

"That ends," Simon's voice was firm. "You have been doing very well, done your best to ease our minds, even mine." He gave them a sardonic grin, "No, I'm not oblivious to everything. Shazza asked me, if you two were...all right. She was used to seeing you on the skiff and on the Rascal Puff. River always in Riddick's lap, the two of you kissing, sparring, she was worried something was wrong."

"What'd you say," Jayne asked curiously.

"That Mal had an aversion to public displays of affection and still thought River was too young for sex period given what she's been through," Simon shrugged. "Shazza isn't stupid. She knows that Mal doesn't quite trust the two of you. That you had to knock him out to get him off the boat was a huge hint in that direction."

"Will begin to spar more violently tomorrow," River suggested. "Will help improve our skills anyway. Cannot continue to hold back. Control is needed, but must go no holds barred sometimes."

"Yeah, or Mal's gonna start gettin' pissed about all the brawls we get into dirtside trying to work out the aggression," Riddick chuckled.

"We're headed into White Sun now anyway," Jayne said quietly. "Guess Inara had a word with Mal about her yearly screenin'."

"Watched Wash set the course myself," Riddick agreed.

Simon frowned, "Mal won't want anyone drawing attention to Serenity." He reminded them, "He'll
be in a bad mood because Ariel is about as Core as you can get."

"We'll figure somethin' out," Riddick met her eyes and River nodded her agreement with his intent.

"We must. Cannot let Ciara slip away again," She told Simon adamantly. "Won't let it happen."

"First we need to know where she is," Simon began ticking off the list on his fingers. "We need to know if she's guarded, and by whom. If she's tagged, and if she'll come willingly. So no matter what we'll need Jayne or something she'll trust that comes from Jayne."

"I can help you with that," Jayne nodded. "I'll go with you, or I can give you somethin' let her know you're comin' from me."

"Then it's only the first three we need to worry about," Simon looked at his sister and Riddick before he looked at Jayne again. "How old is she anyway?"

"She's...born six months after me. So she's twenty five or thereabouts," Jayne shook his head. "I don' even wanna think 'bout what she's been through since she was took."

"I'm still having a hard time believing her parents just...sold her," Simon frowned. "How...how could they?"

"Wasn't legal, strictly speaking," River murmured. "Indentures aren't considered...couth by most polite folk," She shrugged. "Thriving business in training the young for professions. Especially if they are gifted in any way."

"Yeah, her parents had enough money after they sold her to take care of the rest a the kids," Jayne said bitterly. "They up and moved to a better part of town, bought themselves better lives on Ciara's body and freedom. Part a why I left...joined up...I'd a killed 'em if I'd stayed."

River sighed, "Won't let her be kept any longer." She told Jayne firmly. "Just need to keep alert. Ready for our opportunity."

The big gun hand stood and nodded, "You let me know what you need. Anything at all. You got it."

Riddick looked at him, "Cobh, if you hadn't kept me alive durin' the war, I wouldn't a been at the Academy. Wouldn't have River. Might not even be here, Simon might not have gotten her out. Way I figure it...this's 'bout the only way we got of thankin' you for the lives we got."

"You're my friend Rick, didn't want ya to die," Jayne shrugged uncomfortably and walked out of the lounge, headed for the stairs to the catwalks.

River looked after him, "Afraid to hope too much. Afraid it will be a dream again, that we'll fail, or worse...that Ciara won't wish to come with us."

Riddick shook his head, "One thing I know about folks from Kerry, they're as stubborn as Browncoats for wantin' their freedom. From the way he talked about her all them years ago, Ciara's been waiting for a chance to get out goin' on... twelve years now. No matter what they've done to her outsides, or taught her, I'm bettin' she's still the same girl from Kerry screamed and fought and had to be doped to be taken away."

River smiled, "We'll find her on Ariel."
They hadn't really intended to do anything to upset Mal, more just...let him see that River and Riddick weren't really any different from Wash and Zoe. It hadn't even been deliberate, more of a decision that they could kiss one another if and where they wanted. Zoe and Wash necked on the bridge all the time; besides Mal was supposed to be asleep. Unfortunately controlling River's wicked side was not an easy thing.

It had started out innocently enough, well, as innocent as they ever were; with Riddick taking his shift on the bridge as they neared Persephone. River had come and seated herself in his lap, drawing a smile from Wash as he left and a grin from Riddick.

He'd figured they'd talk some and they had, plotting and planning ways to find Ciara on Ariel. After they'd talked and worked for near two hours River had deliberately switched off her cortex and draped her arms around his neck. "No more talking my Riddick," She'd uttered the words with all the finality of a command, honey suffusing her scent.

"No?" He'd had to tease her. The lights were dim enough that he hadn't even lowered his goggles to see the console and he could see her hungry expression as she stared at his mouth.

"No," River shook her head and pulled herself closer, slender body pressed against his, to kiss him. Hot, sweet luscious mouth, sipping from his, nibbling and teasing until he'd wrapped his arms around her and hauled her even closer.

He'd completely lost track of time, her mouth and scent was intoxicating, plums and honey filling his nose. Riddick had let his hands wander and found the hem of the skirt she was wearing as well as the ties to the little wrap around sweater. His groan was one of heartfelt frustration as he realized she'd taken off her underpinnings before she joined him on the bridge. "Such a little tease," He told her as his hand slid up her thigh.

"She is no more a tease than he is," River gasped as his mouth sucked down her neck, tasting her skin. "He wears such clothing that tempts her to remove it and then she is never given the opportunity." She'd pulled the hem of his teeshirt out of his pants and was busily stroking and caressing his chest and shoulders under it. Such gentle little hands, they could hold a knife or a gun and be absolutely lethal but they felt so gorram good on him.

"My woman takes what she wants," Riddick pushed her sweater open to see her gorgeous shuāng rǔ and nearly groaned again. She'd turned in the chair so she was straddling him, her pelvis pressed to his, and if he angled his face right he'd be able to simply lift her and one of her nipples would be right against his lips. She moaned as if she'd Read the thought and lifted herself up slightly. He couldn't resist, sweet soft flesh budded tight before his lips, he opened his mouth and leant forward just enough. Her gasp was loud in the quiet of the bridge, and he groaned as her hips rotated against his, the friction just enough to tantalize but not enough to satisfy either of them.

She'd tried to push his shirt up more but he'd refused to let go of her body, so her hands were stroking and squeezing his scalp and neck, holding his mouth to her breasts. He barely heard Mal in time to get River's sweater jerked hastily over her breasts. River was blinking as if dazed, holding the sweater shut, looking as if she were about to get thoroughly tumbled. Riddick grinned up at her and leant up to press his lips to hers, "So sweet," He muttered and was rewarded with a dreamy smile and more plums and honey.

Mal's expression as he strode into the bridge was not one of pleased surprise. River had refused to stop kissing Riddick so Mal had interrupted an embrace, perhaps not quite as heated as earlier but still, obviously they'd been necking. "What in the name of the Buddha is going on here," The Captain burst out.
River blinked up at him and then down at Riddick, "Kissing?" She announced as if uncertain that was really the answer to the question. She looked at Riddick again as if to make sure that really was what Mal was asking, roses threading into her scent. He loved that kissing him discombobulated her so much that she got confused by simple questions.

"You're not to be doin' that on the bridge," Mal scolded.

"Why?" River blinked up at him with an almost innocent blink belied by her swollen lips and disheveled clothing. "Wash and Zoe kiss on the bridge. Do more than kiss."

"You're not Zoe. You ain't even eighteen years old," The captain looked like an irate parent who'd caught his daughter sneaking a boy through her window.

Riddick wondered if he ought to speak up, but River gave him a warning squeeze of her thighs and he decided silence was the better part of valor. If he talked it'd just look like the lecherous hump didn't want his little bed warmer to go away. River talking looked like a woman defending her right to kiss her husband.

"Of legal age on the majority of planets in the system," River shook her head and settled herself more comfortably on Riddick's lap, her body melting effortlessly against his. "My zhàng fu. I wish to enjoy the same rights Zoe has with her husband."

"Zoe don't hump her husband on the bridge whilst he's on duty," Mal blustered.

River gave him a look that suggested Mal was both stupid and naive, "Captain is less than observant. First mate and pilot have had sex on the bridge. As well as other places." Riddick took a deep breath, River was getting more than a little annoyed, cinnamon mixing in with the remainders of honey in her scent.

"You ain't Zoe," Mal snapped back not seeming to care that he was repeating himself.

"Won't stop. Love my Riddick. Mine. Kiss him and touch if I want," River glared at the captain darkly. "Have sex with him if I want. Can't stop me."

"Oh yes I can," The captain really wasn't pleased if the shade of red he was turning was any indication. He reached for her arm and had just grasped it to pull her off Riddick's lap when Riddick growled. River hissed and her knife was suddenly resting against his femoral artery, while Riddick's was at his carotid, Riddick's reach being longer than River's. "What in the gorram hell are you doing!" The captain's yelp was not at all manly or dignified.

"Not allowed to touch the girl," River's animal had just come out with a vengeance. Apparently whatever she'd been reading from Mal she hadn't liked it. Cinnamon, burnt and unburnt, filled the air, fear and anger and citrus, pain, old and dark in his nose. Whatever he'd meant to do, Mal had managed to scare River half to death, throw her into the animal enough that she drew her blade in self defense, her eyes burning silver as she stared at the captain through the shadows.

Riddick looked at his woman and slid his other hand out from under her skirt to flip the shipwide com open. He could talk her down but with the captain there he'd need some backup to deal with him. "Wash, Zoe, would you get to the bridge now please, your Captain's about to get himself sliced," He drawled into the com.

He gave them a certain amount of credit, it took less than a minute and that was with them managing to get mostly dressed. Wash's boots were unlaced and his shirt was open, exposing a manly chest while Zoe's hair was disheveled and she wasn't wearing her body armor, though she had grabbed her
mare's leg. "What in the name of all that's holy is going on," The first mate's crisp voice demanded as she strode onto the bridge in her bare feet.

"River," Wash was looking at the trembling girl whose sweater was hanging open, exposing an awful lot of skin but thankfully still covering her breasts. Miraculously, her hand on the knife was steady as a rock. "River, are you all right?"

"Touched her," River's voice was trembling. "Tried to take her away from Riddick. Will pull her away. Can't do that. Can't take her away. Not his to take or give. Belong to my láng, my zhàng fu," She looked at Wash and then at Zoe. "Tried to pull her away. Not her father, no wish to be. Only the authority figure. Still not right..." He hated how her scent had twisted with citrus and burnt cinnamon, the anger faded slightly and now she was left with pain and fear while all the honey was gone.

"Oh tiān shā de," Wash breathed the curse in shock. "Rick, I guess you're backing River up?"

"Yeah," Riddick nodded, "My woman doesn't want to be touched, I'm the first one to make sure no one touches, not even me if she don't want. It's her body. Less she's doin' something to threaten the well bein' of folks on the boat or Serenity herself, don't see how anyone's gotta right to touch her."

Zoe's expression was coldly furious, "Would someone explain to me exactly what happened here?"

"I come in and they're... intimate," Mal sputtered the words out. "Told 'em they weren't to be engagin' in such acts on the bridge." Riddick managed to keep his face straight when Zoe gave her captain a look very similar to the one River had given Mal just a moment or so ago.

"And?" Zoe prompted, "I'm guessin' there's more to it than that sir, because blade happy as River might get with her man she doesn't just draw her knives on everyone else around her. Think we'd all be a lot more nervous if she did."

"She started givin' me an argument," The captain was working up a good head of steam. "I'm the captain and what I say goes and if I say she can't be kissing him and doin'...other things such as they obviously were then that's an end to it."

Riddick snorted and removed his shiv from Mal's throat, "Yeah, 'cause that works so well on women." He tucked the shiv back into its sheath and pressed a gentle kiss to the base of River's throat. "Xiǎo láng, you can put the shiv away. River, Wash an' Zoe won't let him grab at you. You know they won't."

River took her eyes off Mal for an instant to meet Zoe's gaze, "She won't let Riddick tie your sweater back up? That can't be very warm."

Riddick carefully found the ties he'd so nimbly tugged open and pulled the sweater back around her body, tying them in a lopsided bow at her waist before he pressed another kiss to her collarbone, "Forgot about the part where River was saying that you an' Zoe neck up here all the time and why was she different than Zoe? Cap'n never managed to give her a straight answer."

Zoe was regarding her captain as if she'd never seen him before, "Sir? Do you have an explanation
for why you would manhandle a traumatized teenager?"

River slowly withdrew her knife and tucked it back into the sheath on her calf before she shuddered. Riddick gathered her closer, tugging her down to his chest, a little ball of frightened girl now. Only minutes before she'd been confident in her sexuality, ready to take what she wanted from him, knowing it was her right as his woman to be with him. He didn't know what memory Mal had thrown her into when the captain had grabbed her but it hadn't been anything good. "I got you River, I got you," He held her ear to his chest so she could hear his heart and stared at Mal coldly. "I'm waitin' for you to answer the first mate cap'n," He said flatly, the growl in his voice an obvious threat.

"If she's my crew she obeys the captain," Mal ground the words out. "An' plain facts are that she was given an order and wouldn't obey it."

"And that gives you the right to lay hands on her," Wash apparently couldn't contain his irritation giving Riddick little chance to voice his own beyond a growl. "Mal, the girl was raped and tortured. You trying to drag her off Rick's lap when she's half dressed wasn't-"

"Wasn't what," Mal looked at his pilot and then at the trembling girl in the co-pilot's arms. "Wasn't going to remind her that orders get obeyed? Wasn't tryin' to hurt her. Weren't even going to drag her anywhere. Put a hand on her arm and got no further than that when I got knives pulled on me." He looked at his first mate, "There's gonna be times I put hands on someone. Maybe it'd have to be her. Orders are orders."

Riddick stiffened as River's voice began to murmur against his skin, "Anger. Eyes filled with it, hands hard with Right. Knows what to do. Make her compliant again. Remove her from the male subject, observe his reactions... possible emotional attachment, hypothesis must be tested." He felt her shuddering and mentally reminded her he was right there, she could hear his heart with her ears. Her scent was filled with citrus, cinnamon and sugar both burned black, terror, pain and shame driving the animal nearly mad.

Zoe and Wash were worried while Mal was staring at River in shock as she continued to speak, "Female subject Tam must be reminded of the consequences of noncompliance. Be certain she is awake, responsive, no head injuries before beginning the procedure." Riddick felt her shudder and buried his face in her hair as she continued to speak. "Hold her down, clamp her back onto the table and make sure she can't move her head. Fix her eyes open this time."

Riddick felt like he was strangling, he couldn't breathe listening to her recite the memory, "Don't allow her to lose consciousness, subject Tam must be taught to obey or pay the price," Her head moved on his chest, her lips pressing to his heart, like fire through his shirt and she continued, "Implacable, insistent, knife tips on her skin, cutting into her parts, helpless to stop it. Steel, holding her down, raping her, reminding her that this is what happens when she does not obey, when she does not learn, when she does not improve. Eyes always watching, smiles, pleasures taken as she screamed."

Riddick couldn't stop the growl from rising in his chest, "The three days they took you." He remembered, "When all I could do was wait. Started to go crazy after sixty eight hours. They had to tranq me." He lifted her face to meet his eyes, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It would have killed you," River shook her head. "Nothing I hadn't endured before. Healed her up fully before they gave her back. No scars from that torture." Her hand cupped his cheek, "Meant to tell you before, thought it was done when we talked with Inara, both memories overlaid." She pressed a gentle kiss to his lips, doing more to reassure the animal than any amount of words. "Captain grabbing me...felt the same as when they took me away from you. Sleeping, warm and felt
safe, your arms around me, grabbed her, pulled her up and away, reminded her of what happens when she fails. When she doesn't obey."

Riddick looked at the captain, "Pū jiē then." He stroked a hand down River's back, "If she's not your crew you can't make her obey you. She's a private citizen, and you can contract with her for work." River kissed his lips and his cheek again and rested her cheek against his neck. He knew his pulse was loud in her ears, "But until you can manage to give orders without putting hands on her..." Riddick had never wanted to kill the captain so much as right now.

Zoe looked at Mal, whose expression was not pleased and then back at River and Riddick, "You two been pressing for River to be crew. She's a good hand." The first mate's voice was carefully neutral.

"That was before Cap'n put hands on her," Riddick growled. "She likes bein' useful. Likes helping. But now Mal can pay her a share as a private contractor. Means she can pick and choose her jobs and she don't gotta obey him. Not like crew does. Only for the safety of the ship." He looked at River in his arms, trusting and soft, "It's my idea though. She's gotta agree to it."

River looked up at him, "Want the right to kiss my Riddick when I like, not just in our bunk. Tired of hiding who I am, who we are." Her head turned deliberately and she stared at Mal, "She is an adult."

"No you ain't," Mal told her flatly. "Not even eighteen doesn't make you an adult. You're a crazy little girl involved with a convicted murderer, both of you prone to violence and I should never have let you live with him."

Riddick nearly stood and throttled Mal but he was preoccupied with keeping River in his lap so she couldn't kill the captain or knock him unconscious, "Qīng Xiāng, you can't kill him. He doesn't know what he's talking about." He banded his arms around his angrily growling woman and whispered into her hair, "You're mine and I'm yours." He soothed as well as he could. "No one is going to take me away again."

"Sir, telling her she can't do what she's already done for a while now...not exactly reasonable," Zoe pointed out. "Telling her you don't want her bunking with him? Not going to help."

"Wants to take my Riddick from me," River spat the words glaring hatefully at Mal. Riddick was very careful of where he was keeping his hands, mindful of the cinnamon redolent in the air and how quick his woman could be. "Says she is not an adult, should never let me live with my mate." She stared at the captain, "Was fine with it as long as he didn't have to see. Could act like she was a child."

Wash sighed and shook his head, "Mal, you're acting as if River is a normal seventeen year old. But how old were you when you joined the Independents?"

"I was around twenty five, twenty six," The captain looked at his pilot. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Because until then...I'm guessing you had a fairly regular life," Wash told him. "River...well from what she's said, it was normal until she was fourteen, considering she's a genius and they're never completely the same as the rest of us. And Rick, grew up on the streets, joined the Independents when he was fourteen, and was a sergeant within two years."

"Sir what my Mister is trying to say is that you seem to expect that they know what...ordinary looks like," Zoe pointed out. "My guess is they don't. River was too young to be romanced and I'm guessin' the penal system don't exactly educate its guests on manners and etiquette."
Riddick was watching River and saw her smile slightly before she regarded Wash and Zoe. She shook her head, "No words. Nothing in the Academy. Strephon kissed me in the spring, Robin in the fall, but Colin only looked at me and never kissed at all. Strephon's kiss was lost in jest, Robin's lost in play, but the kiss in Colin's eyes haunts me night and day."

Zoe regarded her thoughtfully, "So Riddick's your Colin." She summarized. And River nodded.

Riddick did his best to soothe his woman again. She still smelled strongly of citrus and cinnamon with undercurrents of burnt sugar and he felt the anger boiling up inside him again that she felt shamed by what had happened. Now that he wasn't going to have. Not at all.

"None of it was your fault," Riddick took her hair in his fist and forced River to look in his eyes. "Don't you dare be ashamed. Don't you fucking dare River." He stared at her until he knew she was reading him, until she heard in his mind how proud he was of her. How strong he thought she was and how brave. And how grateful he felt that she was his. "Whatever happens, what's important is we survive. We fix ourselves. We ain't broken Qīng Xiāng. You're tiān shā de tā mā de perfect."

"Shì," River nodded. "He belongs to her hǎi kū shí làn. And she to him." She turned her head and kissed the inside of his forearm, the scars that circled his wrist, almost unnoticeable, and Riddick nodded and let go of her hair.

"Lǐ suǒ dāng rán," He told her, settling her against his body, letting River move his hands to where she wanted them. One ended up on her back and the other on her pì gu. If Mal didn't care for that but too damn bad.

Zoe had watched them closely and from her scent she'd seemed fairly pleased with what she saw, "That Cap'n, is why trying to keep River away from Riddick is pointless."

"Because he's a possessive hún dàn and she's brainwashed into agreeing with him?" Mal's voice was more like a yelp. Zoe was leaning against the bulkhead with Wash beside her, her expression neutral. Wash looked more alarmed by Mal's lack of composure than anything River or Riddick had done.

"No Mal," Wash was clearly trying to calm the captain down. "They're not brainwashed, either of them." He rolled his eyes. "I doubt they even seriously tried with Riddick. River maybe but we saw that Rick has way's of keeping her on an even keel. She might draw on him but she's never managed to put him down."

"It ain't natural for a girl her age to be-"

Zoe interrupted her captain calmly, "Thinkin' you're forgettin' sir, these two aren't... well." She shrugged, "I dunno what's been done to 'em. I'm guessin' it was as bad as anything we saw in the war." Riddick nodded at her and she looked at him for a moment before she turned her attention back to Mal. "You wouldn't grab me and try to pull me off of Wash, not even before we were married would you do that."

"River ain't you," Mal argued. "She's just a kid. And he's almost ten years older than she is."

"Eight," Riddick told him flatly. "And she's not a kid. She hasn't been since they 'elevated' her to be experimented on." He couldn't seem to make himself let go of River. She was calmer in his arms now but she was still upset. "She's a woman. Has been for goin' on three years now."

"Because you say so," The captain spat back at him. "You don't have rights to her."

"Mal, she's not a child," Wash cut in. "She makes her own choices, and from what Simon tells us she
always has."

"She ain't even eighteen yet," Mal seemed stuck on that argument.

"Sir, all due respect but you're missin' the point," Zoe folded her arms and regarded the captain with her dark gaze.

"Killed a man in the Academy before I was sixteen," River whispered. "Was told he was telling secrets. Talking where he shouldn't. Given a choice. Could kill the man or she could be taken away from her partner. Sent to kill Richard. Sent to kill her brother."

Riddick looked at Mal, "I killed my first man at fourteen, a rapist hủn dàn. Told you about that." He smoothed a hand down River's hair. "Read somewhere, childhood ends when we start to worry. By that token, River an' me, we ain't ever been children."

Mal was staring at them, his face shocked at what River had said, at what Riddick had concluded, "You think that makes it right?"

Zoe looked at her captain sternly, "No, Sir, what makes it right? These two? They're two of a kind. If River ever wasn't a match for Riddick she is now. It's not like changin' from script to plat sir, you don't go from being innocent to not and then go back. Her age doesn't make a difference."

"It makes a difference to me," Mal scowled furiously. "I let them bunk together, let him do lord knows what to that girl and the result is-"

"Is what?" Riddick asked his tone dangerously low. "Say it. River is my woman. Just what sort of monster do you think my touch makes her? What sort of thing has she become that she welcomes the touch of a murderer?"

"She's an unbalanced, dangerous, child," The captain persisted in his insistence that River wasn't an adult.

"Been saying it since her first day on the boat," River's voice was hot with her anger, cinnamon was burning his nose, he could feel her animal rising. "She is not a child. A woman. Adult woman who knows what she wants."

"How can you know what you want when you can't even talk straight," Mal dismissed her and looked at Riddick. "And you-"

"That's enough sir," Zoe cut him off before River's animal could rise completely and take care of Mal's idiocy in a way that would be more permanent than River's fist in his eye. "Once again, you are completely missing the point."

"What is the point Zoe," Mal demanded impatiently.

"That you don't have any more right to tell River who she can and cannot sleep with than you did me when Wash and I were starting out," Zoe told him flatly. "You might not think so but River is a grown woman. Riddick is the man she's chosen. And wonder of wonders he's chosen her back. It's between the two of them and that's all that matters."

Wash had been watching the two of them, meeting Riddick's gaze and now and then looking at River to be sure she was still feeling all right. "I'm just curious about something Mal," He tilted his head.

"And what might that be Wash? 'Cause now's the time to indulge your curiosity," The captain
snarked at him.

"You've never grabbed Zoe and you've caught us having sex," Wash pointed out. "What brought this on?" He seemed to realize something; Riddick could see it on his face. "Has this has been building ever since you saw them on the bridge after they'd been fighting? I told you not to bother them Mal."

"You were right behind me, you saw the same thing I did," The captain snapped. "Don't tell me that didn't bother you at all."

"All right, I won't tell you," The pilot shrugged at his captain. "I was impressed as hell from what little I saw," He winked at River and if she didn't giggle Riddick could feel and smell her amusement at the pilot, tequila threading into her cinnamon scent.

Zoe looked at her captain and shook her head at Wash, "Not really the time honey." Her gaze fell on the captain again, "Mal, I understand you have reservations about their relationship. But this back and forth crap is gonna end. You may have the right to order River about for the safety of the ship and crew, but you do not have any say over what she does with her body or with whom."

When Mal appeared ready to interrupt again Zoe frowned at him, "I'm not finished." Her voice was cold, "Now I'll be the first to admit that I don't understand everything about these two. Not by a long stretch could they be considered normal. But they do apparently consider themselves married. And you don't get to tell them where they can express their affection for each other."

She looked at Riddick and River sternly and River pulled her face away from Riddick's neck and regarded the first mate somberly, "That being said, if you're caught naked anywhere on the boat but your bunk, you'll be scrubbing the head with your toothbrush."

River shook her head, "Not naked. Skirt and sweater covered all important bits." She argued factually.

Wash began to chuckle and had to lean against his wife for balance. "Yeah, that's the only thing that's kept us from scrubbing the head with our toothbrushes," He admitted.

Riddick found himself relaxing slightly and looked at Mal, "Captain or not, you don't lay hands on my woman again. Not without her knowin' what you intend. Won't have you throwin' her back into that memory again."

"Now see here," Mal began to bluster.

"Less you wanna help us bring that memory up, over and over, so she can deal with it," Riddick continued implacably.

"River told us once that after what the Academy did, she reads intent in how people touch," Zoe explained quietly. "Called it a thousand different variables or somesuch, instincts and body language, so she'll know if you're just tryin' to help and when you're bein'...well. Like you were."

River nodded silently and rubbed her cheek against Riddick's neck. She smelt more of pineapple and blood, the steel and silk fading slightly. He took a deep breath, "Is there any end to this discussion in sight?" He met Zoe's gaze, "After alla this... gǒu pi River's tā mà de tired. She don't normally smell like pineapple. Gotta let her rest some."

"Think all that needs to be said has been," Zoe looked at her captain. "Sir? There anything you'd like to add that's worth sayin'?"
"You two see the doc, you get yourselves checked out," Mal looked at them sternly. His expression was hard for Riddick to read and his scent was muddled. "You make sure there ain't anything physical wrong. Alla that from the Academy."

"Simon already did exams on us both," Riddick told him heavily. He was finally able to decipher Mal's scent as worry. Fear, anger, worry, more than a little desperation and protectiveness aimed towards River. "It was one of the first things he did when we told him what had happened to River."

"I'll take the rest of your shift. Be better to get all of you away from me some so's I can actually think on things," Mal shooed them all off the bridge. "Go on, get," He made flapping motions with his hands, shoulders set. Riddick stood and River simply wrapped her legs around his waist so he could carry her, rather than leave his embrace to walk.

River murmured tiredly, "Cap'n doesn't like when he and Zoe don't agree. Doesn't like feeling wrong when he was sure of Right. Unsettled and upset. Still wants to protect the child. Sees a little girl. Disturbed to see a woman in her place," Riddick growled his understanding. Just because he got it though, didn't mean he had to like it or agree. He'd gone through his own issues with River's age. She'd proved to him she knew what she wanted. Mal didn't have any say.

Wash and Zoe followed them off the bridge and Riddick looked at them, "Me an' River, appreciate that ya'll were willin' to speak for us. Knew he wasn't happy but we'd figured on havin' Inara talk to him 'bout me an' River."

"Cap'n takes time to understand things," Zoe told them quietly. "He don't like to be wrong. Worries that he was about you. Worries that he should be protecting the girl from the man he feels like he gave her to. He just takes time. But the not hiding? That'll help."

Wash nodded, "I'm not always thrilled with Mal's attitude myself. Its no secret we don't always agree. But give him some time. It hasn't been that long since you two got yourselves married. I'm not sure he even believes that part of it. Stranger than he can imagine."

Riddick nodded his understanding, "Still, thanks. You want Wash, I can take your shift on the bridge tomorrow. Don't need a lotta sleep. Give you two some time together."

That got him an appreciative grin from Wash and a nod of gratitude from Zoe. River lifted her head from his chest and released her legs from around his waist, sliding down his body to the deck plates. "She also gives her thanks. Apologies for the chaos and memories."

Wash's jovial face twisted darkly, "You don't ever apologize for what those hún dàn did to you River. You don't need to apologize for what wasn't your fault."

Zoe nodded, "Glad you're doin' better. But it takes time. It's been years since the war, still wake up with nightmares."

Riddick looked at River; they were both cognizant of how much trust it took for Zoe to admit something like that. It took trust or a true understanding of River's need, either was to be respected. "Someday the nightmares will fade?" River asked hopefully.

"Someday," Wash nodded with a sad smile. "Go get some rest. Sounds like you two could use it if we're all talking about nightmares and we're awake."

The joke wasn't a great one but Riddick gave the pilot a smile anyway and River's lips curved up even as she coded in the key to their bunk. "Pilot is a good man. Has a good partner of his own."

"Yeah he does," Riddick agreed. Wash and Zoe nodded their good nights and headed down to their
bunk. Riddick watched as River climbed down the ladder and followed her. "C'mon baby," He began to undress her for the second time that night. "Wanna hold you, feel you skin to skin. Wake you up like I wanted to when we were in that hell."

River's smile was exhausted but welcoming as she pulled off her boots and unlaced her skirt waist. "He has a very good plan," She agreed and stood to pull the bedding down. "Loves to feel his body against hers."

Riddick crawled into bed after stripping off his clothes and pulled her in after him, "I don't know what I'd do without you River." He admitted quietly as her hand stroked down his arm. "You're the best part of me."

"She feels the same about him," Her voice was tired, on the edge of sleep. "Loves him."

"Love you too," Riddick closed his eyes and let himself just enjoy holding her as she slid into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: RCoots gave me a hand with what I called 'In Which Mal Is An Idiot' when I sent it to her. Our last scene there wasn't easy and I wrote it when I was tired so I was a little repetitive. Her help was invaluable and I really appreciate her taking the time from her own awesome story to help with mine. If you haven't checked her story out its called Hide Hide Yourself For Now and it's truly awesome. Great visuals, amazing to read, everything is so easy to picture.

I'm guessing the not hiding thing is going to be a little problematic for our couple here. We see how well it worked out when they just tried relaxing a bit. And it wasn't even deliberate. LOL I don't know that sparring a bit more aggressively will please Mal any better either. He needs time to get used to things and I think maybe River fighting so violently with Riddick worried him a bit more than he let on at the time. Guess we'll have to see how it goes.

So? Any more guesses? I've sort of put in a spoiler for Ariel if you were reading closely but I'd love to hear how you folks think Jayne saved Riddick's life. Yes, I'm shameless. Please read and review. I love to hear what you folks think. Even if it's just something you don't understand. I'm happy to answer questions. And God knows I tend to write very... oddly so things aren't always immediately understood.

Chinese Translations:
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
diǎo - cock
jī ba - dick / penis
bàng jiār - lover / partner
Tā mā de niǎo - goddamn it /lit. 'His mother's dick'
tiān shā de - goddamn
zhī yīn - soul mate / intimate friend

Wǒ cào - holy fuck

Tā mā de dì yù - fucking hell

Cào dàn - fuck!

shuāng rǔ - breasts

zhàng fu - husband

láng - wolf

tiān shā de - Goddam!

Xiǎo láng - little wolf

Pū jiē - fuck you

tiān shā de tā mā de - goddamn fucking

Dǒng ma? - Understand? Got it?

Shì - yes

hǎi kū shí làn - lit. when the seas run dry and the stones go soft / forever / 'till the end of time

Lǐ suǒ dāng rán - as it should be by rights - idiom; proper and to be expected as a matter of course / inevitable and right

pì gu - butt

hún dàn - bastard

gǒu pì - bullshit

Quote Sources:

Thou art the blood of my heart o' hearts, thou art my soul's repose. - A Song - Paul Laurence Dunbar

Then happy I, that love and am beloved where I may not remove nor be removed. - Sonnet #25 Let Those Who Are In Favor - William Shakespeare

Tired with all these, from these I would be gone, save that, to die, I leave my love alone. - Sonnet #66 Tired With All These - William Shakespeare

They are unholy who are born to love wild plum at night - Wild Plum - Orrick Jones

Strephon kissed me in the spring, Robin in the fall, but Colin only looked at me and never kissed at all. Strephon's kiss was lost in jest, Robin's lost in play, but the kiss in Colin's eyes haunts me night and day. - The Look - Sara Teasdale
River looked up as Riddick entered the passenger lounge. Shazza was painting her toes, and she was returning the favor, the two of them with bottles of acrylic polish that made her mate's nose wrinkle in distaste. Persephone's orbit put her in place for Serenity to drop Shazza off on their way to Ariel rather than on their way out of the system. She was trying to not pout but she'd miss Shazza. And they weren't staying on Persephone for more than a day. Time enough to get fuel, water and other supplies but not enough to do more than say hello to Badger and Ruby, give Ruby the toys they'd all gotten and take off again.

Mal was feeling wanderlust again, he'd been around people too much and they'd all rubbed him the wrong way. She and Riddick especially. Mal was still trying to resolve his quandary regarding her status as Riddick's woman when the captain still saw her as a child. Maybe it was because she was so small? Or because he'd rarely seen her fight in truth. Either way when his mind was restless Mal needed to keep moving. Thus their stop on Persephone would be of necessity, very brief.

There would be very little time for shopping or anything else interesting. Luckily Badger had agreed to lay in supplies for River, Riddick and Simon. Jayne was planning on getting more ammo and anything else they put on the list in case it was needed for Ariel.

"What's wrong little sister," Shazza tugged on her foot with a smile. "I'm still here and you're missin' me."

"Music when soft voices die, vibrates in the memory. She does not wish to say good bye," River admitted. "Captain doesn't like the core, won't be returning for some time. Wish to keep my jiě jie with us. My friend, no pretenses before her. Only truth."

"You're still chafin' at the Captain's rules some," The curly haired woman nodded her understanding. "He was powerful worried when you went after Rick with those blades of yours."

"Triggered by the implications Read on Verbena," River admitted softly. "Not enough to discuss them, need a solid fight. Captain doesn't like Richard and I to fight without caution. Finds the animals unsettling still."

"He only ever meets them when he's upsetting the two of you," Shazza reminded her. "Maybe perhaps ya'll think about ways to show him that aren't so upsetting?"

River frowned, "She does not wish to be a sideshow freak." The implication of showing off for Mal was an unsettling thought. It sparked something ugly feeling inside and she shook her head. "Not to be dressed up and poked and asked what I see." Riddick's solid presence was a comfort against that thought, his mind blazing with certainty that no one would ever ask that of her. Not while he was around to prevent it. He was content to sit and watch the two of them though, his silence a comfort rather than oppressive. He, like her, was soaking in Shazza's presence, storing memories against the absence to come.

To her credit Shazza nodded her understanding, "Don't think I'd care for that myself. Though you did look fine when you and Rick taught us all to dance." She turned the subject, "Badger'll be pleased to see you folks, even if its just a short visit." She looked up as Simon came out of the passenger dorms and smiled at them.
"Are we plotting to spend more time on Persephone?" He asked hopefully.

Riddick grinned up at him, "The ladies have some ideas."

"Wishing, no plotting as yet," River shook her head. "Simon would like to exam Ruby? Immunizations?"

"She's due for the second round of shots," Simon nodded. "I'd like to look over Badger's entire crew to tell you the truth." He looked at Shazza. "If I can spend some time with all of you, we might be able to get everyone's health checked before Serenity is due to leave."

"Possible," Shazza nodded slowly. "If Badger can get the medical supplies would you wave part of your fee?"

Simon grinned at her, "I'm happy to give he and his crew the family discount." Dark eyes were twinkling wickedly, "If I get one on the drugs I need for the crew. Each time we hit a new planet I need to immunize everyone. It doesn't run cheap."

"Well let's wave old Badger and find out what he thinks," Shazza suggested and River grinned.

"She will help," She offered. "Bring Richard, act as nurses for Simon." River was gratified to see Riddick nod his agreement.

"Might could even handle some of the shots," He offered quietly.

"Make some money doing your huskin' work, false papers," Shazza surmised. "To go along with the genuine medicine?"

"Important that all citizens be up to date on their vaccines," River agreed. "False idents must show such."

"Sounds like a plan," Simon rubbed his hands together. "This could be fun. Let's go wave Badger if your toes are dry." The girls had laughed but helped each other up and put the polish away while Riddick pushed himself up from his chair. River giggled at his sigh of relief when the acrylic fumes began to fade out of the air.

Riddick looked over at River again, stealing his eyes away from Simon as he attempted to make some of the protein taste better than he usually did. The cooking lessons kept him occupied, kept him from worrying on River these days. The day of hanging around Badger and his crew on Persephone had been their last really good day. He and River had tried for a good sweaty workout yesterday, fighting no holds barred in the cargo hold but Mal had interrupted with so much yelling that his mate had covered her ears with her hands. Now she was fiddling with her cortex at the counter, standing beside him and still jittery as a convict in a law station.

It might have something to do with being so close to Ariel, Riddick speculated as he gave Simon another instruction. The Core wasn't exactly filled with good feelings on convicts and murderers and he was both. Though when they'd checked with Universe he'd assured them the idents River had build and U had confirmed would hold up to any security cams there were.

He took another look around the galley, Jayne was cleaning a gun at the table. His old friend tended to work on his equipment before a mission, cleaning and double checking it. It didn't matter that he couldn't openly carry a gun on Ariel, every weapon he owned would be in tip top shape.
Kaylee and Inara were playing a game in the little observation lounge off the galley and talking quietly. Neither of them seemed to notice the tension of the other four but they’d have no reason to think this was anything other than a normal trip. Neither of them knew about Ciara. Even Wash, who was aware of the existence of Jayne's sweetheart, had no idea that they were contemplating a rescue.

Simon looked at him questioningly and Riddick nodded, the meal was about done. Simon dished up a bowl for Riddick, River and himself and Riddick herded River towards the table with the chopsticks. River shook her head as Simon put the bowl in front of her, "I don't want any."

Simon regarded her patiently, "River, you have to eat."

Jayne chuckled from where he sat, "Don't smell too awful Doc. Guess you're gettin' better. When you're, ya know, watched."

Simon laughed ruefully, "Damned with faint praise." He gestured towards the pot. "There's more if you think you can stand it."

Jayne shrugged, "Better than last time." He wrinkled his nose, "Thought it'd take weeks to get the smell out of the walls." He exchanged a half smile with the doctor who wrinkled his own nose in agreement, the memory was not a pleasant one.

Riddick took his seat next to River and looked at the cortex in front of her. She and Universe were narrowing down Ciara's location. Apparently there were a lot of hospitals on Ariel and whoever held her contract wanted her in one for some reason, some procedure, River had Seen that much.

He looked up as Zoe and Wash entered the galley, in the middle of a conversation apparently. Riddick ignored the couple completely though he couldn't help listening with half of his brain just in case it was information he needed later.

"We don't even have to go someplace fancy. We can just go to the park or something," Wash was attempting to persuade Zoe, "Feed the pigeons."

Zoe nodded sympathetically, "Sure." She put her arms around Wash, "Feed the pigeons. Probably get the firing squad for littering." The first mate shook her head and leaned against the counter.

Wash sighed, "Come on, it's not that bad."

Zoe's jaw set stubbornly, "It is. It's a Core planet, it's spotless. It's got sensors, and where there ain't sensors, there's feds. All Central planets are the same."

Riddick tilted his head thoughtfully and considered, Zoe wasn't wrong. Which was why River was so damn uneasy. Give his mate a rim moon with horses and cows and she was thrilled to death. Even Persephone was preferable to the Core. Beside him River made a small sound to indicate she concurred with his thoughts. She was far too tense though. If he put his hands on her shoulders or neck the convict knew he'd feel a hundred knotted muscles. She'd looked up and was staring at Cobh now, her mood winding tighter.

Wash put his case to the rest of them, oblivious to Riddick, River and Jayne's dislike of the Core, "Could you please tell my wife the fun she's missing out on?"

Inara looked up from the game with a smile, "Ariel's quite a nice place, actually." She laughed lightly, "There are some beautiful museums, not to mention some of the finest restaurants in the Core."

Wash nodded enthusiastically, "But ... not boring, like she made it sound. There's a...Um, ah, um."
He looked at Simon for help.

The doctor, nice guy that he was, swallowed his food and replied hastily, "There's hiking."

Wash looked at Zoe, "Yeah!"

Simon grinned and continued, "And you can go swimming in a bioluminescent lake."

Wash gave him an encouraging nod and Simon would have gone on but Zoe shook her head with finality. "I don't care if it's got sunsets twenty-four hours a day. I ain't setting foot on that planet."

The captain stalked into the room and caught the tail end of Zoe's little speech, "No one is setting foot on that fancy rock. I don't want anyone leaving the ship." He paused, "Come to think of it, I don't want anyone looking out the windows or talking loud. We're here to drop off Inara, that's it."

He dished up some of the mush Simon had made, tasted it cautiously and nodded before taking a little more.

Jayne put his gun together and groused, more for something to say than an actual desire to leave, "What's the point of coming to the Core if I can't even step off the boat?"

Riddick winked at Jayne who sent him a quick grin before Mal started to lecture, "You could have got off with Shepherd Book at the Bathgate Abbey. Could have been meditating on the wonders of your rock garden by now." Riddick slid his eyes over at River whose gaze was practically boring into Jayne, her scent was strange, not as if she was being triggered, but he was starting to get some burnt cinnamon in her scent and citrus. Looking around he couldn't see anything that would cause worry or pain, but there was no denying his nose.

Jayne was still feeling twitchy, ready to do something. Waiting had always gotten to him if it went on too long, "Well it beats just sitting."

Wash chuckled a bit, "It is just sitting." Jayne made a face at him and moodily studied his knife. He seemed conscious of River's stare but from his expression and puzzled scent Riddick knew the big man didn't understand why she was staring. Normally the byplay between the senior gun hand and pilot would have made River laugh but she didn't even seem to hear them.

The game had ended, and while they set up the next one, Kaylee asked Inara, "So, how long you gonna be planetside?"

Inara still had a smile in her voice, "Shouldn't be more than a day or two."

River was still glowering at Jayne, Riddick looked at his friend, there was nothing the big man was doing that would cause toasted cinnamon to thread into River's scent. He was quietly sharpening his knife. Wash had turned to look at Inara, "Big stop just to renew your license to companion. Can I use companion as a verb?"

Inara's laugh was gentle, the conversation a little game to her, "It's Guild law. All Companions are required to undergo a physical examination once a year."

Wash shook his head, "So, two days in a hospital? That's awful. Don't you just hate doctors?"

Simon looked up, "Hey." His dark eyes were twinkling as he looked at the pilot.

Wash hastily added, "I mean, present company excluded."

River's scent was filled with the scent of fear and worry now, he could hear a little keening sound
deep in her throat, something only he would hear. Citrus added to the fear, the steel of her mind being overwhelmed with pain and burnt cinnamon even as Jayne smirked teasingly at Simon, "Let's not be excluding people. That'd be rude."

Riddick's nose was filled with the scent of burnt cinnamon and citrus, he couldn't smell anything else but his mate. He slid his arm around River in the hope of calming whatever storm was raging through her mind but not in time to prevent her from what she did next. Her bowl went sliding off the table, her cortex shoved towards Wash. She was clawing her way towards Jayne, her hands reaching for him, the keen rising to a whimper and increasing to a scream, "Get it off him. Get it off!" Riddick barely wrapped an arm around her waist in time and held her in his lap as she shrieked, "It'll sink its fangs in and the eyes and take out his heart!" She was crying and screaming, still trying to get to Jayne, "They'll put the pieces in that don't belong!" She lunged, slippery as a cat and her fingers curved into claws and ripped at Jayne's teeshirt.

"Yeah," He was stunned but he obeyed, stripping down to his bare chest. River immediately began to calm down.

Simon had rounded the table and was kneeling beside the chair, "River?"

"It will hurt him," River whispered. "Take out his heart, put the bad pieces in. Sink in their claws and fangs and see inside him."

Mal was not pleased, he was looking at Simon, "When I took you and your sister in, the deal was you keep her in check. You can't hold up your end, we're going to have to revisit the deal."

Riddick growled, "No she ain't you tài mả de pǐ yǎnr. It was the gorram shirt." He managed to get the cloth out of River's hands and threw it at Mal, glowering at the captain. "It's the tài mả de Blue Sun logo that got her going."

"What's Blue Sun have to do with it," Mal asked. Riddick looked at Zoe who was regarding River thoughtfully but without the suspicion Mal had.

"Who do you think ran the Academy? Sponsored it? Government?" Riddick shook his head, "Might have had the government's name on it, but Blue Sun ran the thing. Funded it. They got weapons contracts with the Alliance. All sortsa contracts."

River was still shivering, "Blue everywhere, seeing into everything." She turned her head to look at Jayne, "It will hurt him, remake him, take our friend away. Promise to provide a replacement. Fù jīng qǐng zuì. Forgiveness? This above all, to thine own self be true and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

Riddick felt a wave of relief wash through him as Jayne's confused face cleared and he took a deep breath, "Next time you want me to strip River, you could just say so." He offered her a teasing smile
and River's scent quickened with sugared violets and tequila as relief and amusement filled her. She was still trembling, adrenaline had flooded her body but emotionally she was feeling calmer, the burnt cinnamon and citrus fading.

"Cannot ask such things while her mate is present, the Riddick might take such a request wrongly," She rubbed her cheek against Riddick's chest, her shivers fading slightly, and he chuckled still staring hard at Mal

"Damn right I would," He rubbed a hand up and down her back. "She ain't gettin' worse Mal. We're just all a little...tetchy. Core ain't friendly to us, no more'n it is to you."

Mal wasn't pleased but everyone else seemed more relaxed and the captain let the tense moment of Riddick's challenging gaze ease away. "Just clean up the mess would ya?" He said finally, "That shirt's nothin' but rags, may as well use it. And Jayne you go put on another one."

"River could lend me hers, it'd be a fair trade," Jayne suggested with a laugh as Riddick growled and River giggled.

"Wouldn't fit," She shook her head and patted Riddick's cheek. "She will be well." Her soft voice reassured him. "Sparring will help please." She was still vibrating with repressed adrenaline and the need for movement was gripping her. He felt the same way, needing a fight, a good sweaty bout to burn out the rage that had gripped him at Mal's words.

"Yeah, lets go do that for a bit," Riddick agreed and stood with her in his arms, easily taking her weight.

River, turned in her chair and reached out with her foot to poke her mate with her toes, "Get Jayne." She commanded mildly. Riddick groaned from where he lay prone on the bed and opened his eyes. She smiled sympathetically, as her mate pushed himself up and out of the bed. "She will give him a backrub later." With Mal in the galley they'd been able to have a short sweaty bout of hard fighting after her episode of killing Jayne's shirt. It had left them both sore in places but the animals were satisfied and languid with exercise.

"Why fore am I gettin' Jayne?" Riddick yawned as he pulled a shirt on over his bare chest.

"Found Ciara," River murmured. "And get Simon too. We'll need his expertise to get her out."

"Better take this down to the infirmary then," Riddick suggested as he pushed on his boots. "Grab some salve for our cuts too."

"She will dress," River rolled her eyes and left her portable cortex running while she pulled on a pair of cargos and a shirt over her undergarments.

In short order Jayne and Simon were rubbing the sleep out of their eyes while Riddick rumbled through the cabinet for salve. River looked at her brothers, one by blood and the other by choice, similar in their disgruntled 'I was sleeping' expressions and grinned. "Would not have interrupted dreams without good reason. Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove. Found Ciara, need a plan to get her out."

Jayne's joy was so profound it lit his entire face, making him look years younger than he was, like the boy Riddick must have met years ago. Simon smiled, glad for Jayne but with a little confusion,
"If you've found her...what sort of a plan do you need? You broke into a bank River, what's so hard about wherever she's being held?"

"Because we won't be able to move freely enough to get her anywhere but the hospital," River turned the cortex screen to show the men. "She's to undergo a couple of procedures before her contract is finalized and she's sold to the person who owns her permanently. After that we'll never be able to get at her. This is our only chance."

"St. Lucy's," Simon nodded slowly. "So we need a plan to get in, and get her out, without any trouble..."

"And a way to get the Captain and the others on board," Riddick added. "We're not going to be able to pull this one off by ourselves, good as we are."

"We have two and a half days," River told them. "She's scheduled for the procedures in the evening."

"All right," Simon was thinking and grinned. "It's a good thing that you tried to kill Jayne's shirt earlier River."

"How's that?" Jayne was still a bit dazed thinking he might see Ciara again. "The girl was freaked out and if she'd had a knife I'd a been dead. How's that a good thing?"

Simon grinned, "Because it gives me the perfect opening to go to Mal and get him on board with my plan."

River blinked at her brother and then grinned at Riddick, "Rob the hospital to pay for the job, make the girl the sleeping princess, tell Mal it's to scan her brain..."

"And Mal's already told Simon he's gotta get you under control," Riddick's grin was a thing of beauty. "So it plays into what Simon can say. If Mal thinks you're getting worse."

"Which he does regardless of what you've said," River interjected.

"-Then he'll go along with it because otherwise he's not doing anything to help when he could," Riddick finished with a grin.

Jayne frowned, "Why cain't we just tell Mal we wanna get my girl? Half the problems he's got with you three is how you're always hidin' stuff from him." He looked at the three of them and River knew he truly didn't understand. If they thought this was the best chance to get Ciara he'd go along with it but he'd feel better if they weren't going behind Mal's back.

"Captain does not like...change. Doesn't like things he can't understand or is not prepared for," River said slowly looking at Riddick for help in explaining the problem.

"Mal's twitchy enough because of us bein' in the core," Riddick took over and River nodded her agreement. "He's in a bad mood because me and River had been less...discreet about the animals, about everything really, because we're trying to hide ourselves less."

"Worried that this will be one straw too many, one problem, one more secret," River spread her hands. "Cannot allow him to say no. Cannot take the chance. In the end, it is easier to obtain forgiveness than permission."

Jayne nodded slowly, "So Mal's back is up an' he's been...less accommodatin' lately. An' ya'll are worried that'll spill over onto any plan he knows of to get Ciara back." River and Riddick nodded in
unison and Jayne sighed, "Well then, what do we gotta do?"

"So here's my plan," Simon began to explain what they'd have to do. He looked at them when he'd finished. "I think we should actually get the scan of River though, after we get Ciara. I'd like to see what they've done to you mèi mei. It's better for me to be prepared in case there's any injury later."

"So smuggle the three of us in," Riddick gestured to the fugitives. "You and Jayne go with River, get Ciara, get River scanned. "I'll stick with Mal and Zoe, get the goods, get us out."

River nodded slowly, "It's a good plan." She looked at Jayne, "Much will depend upon you grousing about lack of pay before and after Inara leaves for her appointment. Must emphasize to Mal that you are bored."

Jayne grinned at her, "To get Ciara free, I'd sing one a them operas you were showin' me the other day. I'd sound like a cat takin' a bath but I'd do it."

River grinned at him happily, "No arias required Jayne. Only much complaining." She leaned into Riddick and looked at Simon. "Let's make the list of what we'll need."

Simon grinned, "And we'll be able to get plenty of things from the source I have in mind that Kaylee will be able to use for things beside this job."

Riddick chuckled, "Always with an eye to his courtship." He teased gently.

Simon's nod was enthusiastic, "With the work Universe and River have done husking, if I'm needed, I'll be able to help as well."

"Let's get to plottin' then," Jayne grinned. "Sounds like it'll be kinda fun."

She couldn't help giggling, his enthusiasm was contagious, as they all bent to the cortex and began to make a list of what they'd need.

River sat on the catwalk with her legs dangling, and waited for Inara and Kaylee to come down from the galley to Inara's shuttle. Riddick was lifting weights below her, she could hear his thoughts, mentally going over the plan they'd all developed. Jayne had the hardest part, a fine line to walk, between friendship with Simon, Riddick and River and acting the bored gun hand who was a little bit stupid. Simon had grinned and told him to just pretend that River had really drawn blood when she'd attacked his shirt, and that Riddick wasn't around.

Jayne had chuckled and told Simon that he really wasn't sure he could be that mean these days. But he'd give it a shot. And then he'd acted so dumb Simon had looked at him incredulously and wondered aloud how Mal had kept from shooting him.

Jayne's laugh had echoed through the infirmary, "Smart mercs don't usually last long Doc. Nobody wants to hire a hand might second guess the grand plan."

Simon had simply blinked, "If I hadn't taught you, hadn't seen how quickly your mind works, and how easily you learn anything to do with numbers...I might have been fooled."

Inara and Kaylee appeared on the catwalk and River pulled herself up by the handrail to smile at them. Inara was walking arm in arm with Kaylee and River wandered in front of them. Mal and Jayne were in the cargo hold, setting up for a horseshoes game. Kaylee was trying to cheer Inara up,
"Just look at the bright side. Maybe you'll meet a young, handsome doctor and he'll ask you out and..." She paused thoughtfully, "What's the Companion policy on dating?"

Inara laughed, "It's ...complicated."

River could almost hear Kaylee roll her eyes, "Mmmm. Well, that figures."

Inara stopped at her shuttle and looked at the two girls, "Stay out of trouble." She hugged River and then Kaylee, a kiss on the cheek for each of them an additional affectionate gift against River's skin. Inara, whatever else she maybe have been, truly did care for them.

"Can make no promises," River grinned cheekily as Inara gave her an exasperated look.

Kaylee just grinned, "You, too. Bye." They both watched Inara walk into the passage to her shuttle before turning towards the stairs. "You wanna play a game of jacks River?"

River grinned, "Yes, sit and play, keep within Richard's sight. After Jacks, will teach you more hand to hand."

Kaylee groaned resignedly but nodded in agreement.

Kaylee had talked her out of hand to hand combat lessons when Mal had come down to the bay with Jayne the horseshoes in hand, the posts having been set up earlier. River had looked over at Riddick and he'd just grinned at her when the Captain challenged them to a game. "You don't wanna play us Mal," Riddick had chuckled.

"We don't lose," River finished with a grin.

Kaylee had laughed a bit and nudged River, "I beat ya at Jacks pretty easy."

"First time," River shrugged at her friend.

"So you've played horseshoes before," Jayne asked curiously.

River exchanged a glance with her mate and shrugged, "Calculation of trajectory based upon weight of object and strength of throw, use of advanced mathematics allows for optimal placement of the object." When both Mal and Jayne looked confused Riddick chuckled.

"She just means we've had a lot of practice figuring out how hard we gotta throw somethin' in order to make our target," The murderer explained. "Give her a horseshoe," His eyes gleamed with humor, "Show 'em xiǎo láng."

River smiled and took one of the horseshoes from Jayne, weighing it in her hand and narrowing her eyes at the post. With a few swings of her hand she got a very good idea how hard she'd have to throw the show to make a ringer. She was aware of Riddick's pride and amusement at how shocked Mal would be as she drew her arm back to throw and gave her mate a grin. One toss later and Mal was gaping at her while Riddick was chuckling, "Like I said, you don' wanna play with us." He grabbed River up into his arms and kissed her soundly before setting her back on her feet.

River leaned against Kaylee as the mechanic giggled at her, "Make ya dizzy River?" Kaylee teased and guided her over to the weight bench to sit.

"Hmm..." River grinned. "Too much pleasure, her system overheats." Kaylee giggled again and
River handed her a weight, "Should work with small weights, gain muscle with much repetition. Engine work will be easier."

Riddick took a seat on a crate nearby and began to work some of the larger free weights while River coaxed Kaylee into doing curls with the smaller ones. It wasn't long before Jayne and Mal began their horseshoe game.

River grinned at Kaylee as the mechanic returned to the cargo bay. She'd decided that as long as Serenity was dirtside she'd get the vents and water pipes flushed out. All the systems that Serenity ran on while she was in the Black could use what Kaylee called a good 'spring cleaning'. They were all things that were automated but required at least thirty six hours dirtside in order to accomplish them. Since Kaylee knew they were on Ariel for at least two days it was the perfect time to get all of that done.

Kaylee was feeling very pleased. A cautious surface Reading of her thoughts told River exactly why. They were hooked into the docks water and air filtration systems as part of the docking fee and the water was perfectly pure and good for cooking and washing. They'd be able to do laundry and have long showers as well as store some of the water for when they returned to the Black. She took a seat next to River on the crate and watched the game while Riddick sat on the weight bench fashioning a shiv out of scrap metal and wood. River flipped open her sketchbook and began to draw Kaylee. She flicked her eyes over at Jayne for a moment and nodded in satisfaction. Jayne had been complaining intermittently throughout the ongoing game about no work and no pay.

The tall merc nodded in satisfaction as he threw a ringer, "Ah!" He glanced at Mal, "How're we going to find a job if we don't leave the ship?"

Mal was lining up his throw, "It's Alliance territory. Ain't any jobs worth having."

River glanced over at Wash, the pilot was sitting on a pile of barrels with Zoe standing beside him, "Nor the last three places we've been." The normally humorous man observed.

Jayne made another throw and missed, "My pop always said, 'anyone who can't find work ain't looking hard enough'." He walked over to gather up the horseshoes, "We ain't even looking at all." He looked up as Simon entered the cargo bay.

Kaylee looked at the doctor curiously and River concealed her grin by concentrating on her drawing as Simon walked up to Mal and the others, "You can stop looking. There is a client." He looked at Mal, "Me." River could feel Riddick's amusement as Jayne and the other three looked at the doctor curiously. "I have a job for you."

Mal was curious, River could feel it and Kaylee walked over to the rest of the group while Riddick simply looked up, giving Simon is attention if not his looming presence. The captain was wondering how in the 'verse Simon could pay them for a job when he didn't get paid anymore than the rest of them, "You've got a job for us?"

Simon nodded, "One that will pay for itself ten times over." His appearance was calm, as if he was completely unworried. River tilted her head and concealed a smirk, Simon was at his best when he was actually doing something. He accomplished all his worrying beforehand and now he simply concentrated on the plan, the words, what needed to be said and done in order to bait Mal into taking the job he proposed.
Jayne played his part perfectly as everyone but Riddick and River circled close to Simon, "Aw, forget it. We ain't that desperate."

Simon held out a vial, "You know what this is? It's a common immune booster called isoprovaline. Street value for a dosage this size, fifty platinum." River watched as Jayne contrived to look intrigued, Kaylee and Mal exchanged interested looks as Simon continued, "Maybe twenty credits." He handed Zoe the first vial and held up another, "Propoxine, maybe eighty." Jayne took that vial while Simon gave another to Wash, "Hydrozepam, two hundred. And all of these are just from the medkit I had with me when I came on board. At a hospital like the one in Ariel City, they'll have shelves of that stuff. Whatever the take, it's more than enough payment for what I have in mind."

Wash was clarifying, "So, the medvault isn't the job?"

Simon shook his head, "That's the payment. I tell you how to get in, get out, and what's worth taking; if you help me get River into the hospital's diagnostic ward." He slanted a glance at River, echoed by the captain and River made a face at them both, supremely unconcerned.

Mal asked what everyone but Jayne and Simon were thinking, "What's in the diagnostic ward?"

Simon was still looking at River but turned back to address Mal, "A 3-D neuroimager. If I can get River in there, I might be able to figure out what they did to her at the Academy."

Mal summarized the plan, "So we get you and your sister into the whatchathing and you tell us how to clean out the hospital."

Simon nodded, "Yes."

Kaylee was hesitant to say it but she finally asked the question that worried her the most, "Not to be negative, but, don't the hospital need that medicine?"

Zoe shook her head, "Government run facility. They'd be restocked in a matter of hours."

Simon nodded again, his agreement plain, "She's right. They'll never miss it. Plus they have lockers for each wing on every floor. No one goes to the medvault except to restock those."

Mal was looking almost enthused, "Plus, folks on the rim sure could use it."

Wash's expression was thoughtfully concerned though, "You know, it's all very sweet; stealing from the rich, selling to the poor, but you're talking about breaking into a highly secure Alliance facility. How do you on plan getting around security?"

Simon shrugged, "It's not easy; but it can be done." He began to take the vials back, tucking them away in his hands. "Come up to the galley and have a seat. I've borrowed a cortex from River and I'll lay it out for you." He began to explain a bit as he walked and everyone began to follow him, "You see, like all Core hospitals, St. Lucy's has its own dedicated security force."

River giggled silently as Riddick scooped her up into his arms and held her for a moment before walking after the others. "You all right with all of this plan?" He asked her quietly, his lips against her ear.

She sighed, "Have to remind him that the dose will have to be last minute or it will wear off before we are inside."

"Yeah," Riddick's mouth was warm and delicious against her ear and she shivered. She could feel his amusement and the echo of her own lust rising in him.
"He will find this annoying when my mate realizes we will have no time for sexing until after the job is done," River sighed and turned her head to brush her lips over his cheek. His growl of displeasure was confirmation that no, desire at the touch of skin wasn't so funny when their time wasn't their own. River sighed, "Afterwards." She promised.

Riddick took a seat at the end of the table in the galley so he could keep an eye on Mal and smiled as River settled herself in his lap. Everyone was studying the schematics of the hospital while Simon continued his little speech, "The Security force is a small battery of local Alliance Federals sub-stationed here." He pointed at the cortex screen and everyone obediently put their eyes where he pointed. "Now, every floor, every doorway is equipped with sensors, and at all points of entry - patient ident scans. However, once clear of those checkpoints, movement within the facility itself should be relatively unhindered."

Riddick nearly chuckled at the look on everyone's face, including Jayne's. His oldest friend was proving to be quite the actor, he seemed as confused as everyone else by Simon the planner of profitable jobs. Simon didn't seem to notice, or perhaps he'd expected everyone to be a little confused at how organized and methodical he was, "Now, the standard layout should put the medvault somewhere..."

Of course Mal had to interrupt, "Now, let's go back to the ident scans. You and your sister, not to mention Rick, are tagged fugitives. How do you figure we're going to get you in the building? Because I don't figure he'll let ya'll just wander 'round an Alliance facility."

Simon looked at him as if the answer were obvious, "Through the front door." Mal's scoff was almost verbal it was so eloquent an expression. Simon smiled, "Believe me, Captain, getting the three of us in is going to be easy. The rest of you, that is going to be the real trick. We'll need to procure a few items off ship. I've made a list. Now, given my status as a fugitive, someone else will have to-

Riddick watched in amusement as Kaylee, Wash and Jayne all raised their hands before he'd even finished the sentence, "We have some volunteers. Good. Now, before we ever make it to the front door we're going to have to breach the perimeter. Only official vehicles are allowed in, so, we'll need one."

Mal's eyebrows went up and Simon shrugged, "Now, obviously we can't steal what we need. Any illegal activity in the planning stages could end this thing before it starts. St. Lucy's Hospital contracts with the local municipal dumpyard for all its large disposals." He smiled slightly, "Big hospitals mean big waste, so we shouldn't have any trouble finding what we're looking for."

Simon was pacing around the table, Riddick wondered if it was because the man was a surgeon, if he was used to moving when he thought. Everyone was staring at the cortex screen as he spoke memorizing the layout. "We'll have to look like we belong," He smiled. "All we have to do is slip a couple of bills into the right hands. That gets us uniforms, ID badges and keycards." River clapped her hands happily and Riddick grinned as Simon gave her a bow of respect, "A little creative forgery and we've got ourselves a working alias."

Simon shrugged, "Now, all of these items are easy to obtain. They'll get us up to the door. Now, in order to get us in..." He eyed Zoe, Mal and Jayne, "This might be a bit more difficult."

Wash and Kaylee stood, "We'll get goin' with River an' Rick, find us a medical shuttle."

Simon grinned, "Actually I'd planned to go with you. If you'll give me a moment to give these to Zoe
and Mal." He looked at Jayne, "Since you and I have found you better with spoken communication I'll be quizzing you as we go through the junkyard."

Jayne nodded as Simon handed Zoe and Mal a little script he'd written. He'd filled in Jayne's lines so the other two would know what was going on. "I can get the uniforms and such too. Pick 'em up an' met ya'll back at the ship."

"Good idea," Simon nodded. "We'll make arrangements and drop you off with the cash on the way back with our goods."

Mal and Zoe were staring at the script and River giggled at them, "Dialogue is problematic?"

Riddick pressed a kiss to her neck, loving the scent of tequila on her skin. She found the Browncoat's dismay hilarious and was looking forward to Simon drilling them on their lines. Jayne was hiding a smile. He and Simon communicated rather well these days. His reading skills were improving but he still found the spoken word easier to understand. He was actually looking forward to learning his lines and goofing them up to mess with Mal and Zoe.

"I can't pronounce half the words," Mal protested.

"Sound them out," Riddick suggested picking up his girl. "Everybody put on grubby clothes. Junkyard's no place for silks di di."

Simon laughed ruefully and nodded before heading down to the passenger quarters to change.

Riddick couldn't stop chuckling at Simon's expression. He was watching Kaylee like she was the most amazing woman in the 'Verse. They'd brought a shuttle and were rapidly filling it up with things they could use aboard the ship and not just for the heist. They'd already found reusable filters, pipes, a couple of catalyzers and so many coils and gears that he'd gotten dizzy trying to figure out what was for which part of the ship.

River was having a great time, climbing over things and finding what she called buried treasure. Things to make crybabies and a few things she said would be good for surprise packages. "Be nice to have something that explodes if a Reaver tries to catch us again," Was all she'd said.

Jayne had chuckled and nudged Simon, "She's soundin' more like me an' Rick all the time. Explosives, ordnance, guns and knives."

"I'm sounding more like you and Rick," Simon added dryly. "I never thought I'd need to touch a gun much less be able to use one semi-proficiently."

"No knowledge is ever wasted doc," Riddick told him as he hauled another large piece of equipment into the shuttle.

Wash was looking around with a shake of his head, amazed at the waste. "I want to come back for another shuttle load. Do you know how much of this stuff we could use? I mean with all of us working on it? Half of this equipment could be repaired. I saw two different x-ray machines and the parts can't be that dissimilar."

"Where?" Simon asked eagerly and Riddick watched the two of them hurry off.

"Even the doc loves the junkyard," Jayne laughed as he found a good length of steel and more
piping.

Kaylee was looking around with a shake of her head, "Figures. First time on a Core and what do I get to do? Look through trash." She wandered towards them with her basket, "Couldn't he send me shopping at the Triplex, or... Oooh!" She lost the train of her complaint as she picked up a piece of equipment from a bin, "Synchronizers!"

Wash and Simon came jogging back around the corner, "We found one." Wash grinned. "And we definitely need to come back. Four pieces of equipment that we can consolidate into two and sell at the skyplex."

River giggled as she came running up to Riddick, "She has found something for her mate too." She handed him a piece of metal, good quality and just the right length to fashion a shiv. "He will teach her to make them?"

"Damn right," Riddick grinned. "All right folks, let's see if the ambulance works. Wash, you wanna flip for who flies it back if it does?"

"Oh it'll work," Wash was shaking his head. "I had a look at the engine. All it needs is a couple of new rotor pins and a tune up. We can get everything we need for it and pile it in the back. It's still got power in the cells and they'll get us back to the boat."

"Well let's see what we can find," Riddick grinned and stuck the metal River had given him in his pocket. Jayne was looking at the sun, "We got another two hours 'fore I gotta meet the fella 'bout uniforms. We gonna make it?"

"We should be fine," Simon assured him. "From what Wash says the ambulance was just thrown away because the engine needed more work than they wanted to pay for. Wasteful."

"Idiot core folk," Jayne rolled his eyes. "We might could sell the ambulance later on too, right?"

"Out on the rim yeah," Riddick shrugged. "One thing at a time though."

"Yeah," Jayne agreed and jogged up to Simon. Riddick could hear the two of them practicing Jayne's lines as they all headed towards the ambulance.

River was working on the forged Ident cards in the passenger lounge while Riddick, Kaylee and Wash repaired the ambulance in the cargo bay. Simon was in the infirmary with Jayne, Zoe and Mal, making them rehearse. It was hilarious to hear, mostly because the crew continued to mispronounce their lines or substitute incorrect words. Jayne was giving a disturbingly good impression of ignorance.

She kept an eye on Simon's body language but so far he was fairly relaxed listening to Mal run his lines, "The patients were cynical and not responding and we couldn't bring them back."

Simon corrected him gently, "They were cyanotic."

Mal nodded repeating the words, "They were cyanotic and not responding-"

Simon joined in Mal's sentence offering the right word, "Not responsive."

The captain jumped on the word, "Responsive."
River concealed a smile as Simon prompted, "And we were unable to..."

Mal was trying to remember the next word of his line, speaking with the doctor, "Res.. Res..."

Zoe jumped in with an air of excitement to rescue her captain, "Resuscitate them." She spoke the words with Simon. "Yes!" Zoe grinned triumphantly. River looked up with a grin and had to look down again as Jayne's confused look nearly had her giggling in amusement.

"Resuscitate them," Simon coached them into saying the words properly.

Mal and Zoe repeated the words, without the happy expressions this time, soberly, "Resuscitate them."

Simon nodded, "Good." He gestured for them to go again. A gleam in his eye warned River that this time wouldn't be as easy.

Mal began firmly, "They were cyanotic."

Only to be interrupted by Simon asking Zoe, "What methods did you use?"

Zoe frowned, "We tried pulmonary stimulators and-and cardiac... We ..."

"Infusers," Simon prompted her.

Zoe's fist clenched in frustration as she repeated the words, "Infusers... Infusers. Pulmonary stimulators and..."

All of them repeated the troublesome words and River nearly giggled again, "...and cardiac infusers."

Simon turned to Jayne and River had to look down again at the empty expression on the gun hand's face, "What about cortical electrodes?"

Jayne frowned, "Oh! Uh, we forgot 'em."

Simon shook his head, concealing his smile, "Let's try that again."

Mal nodded, tired already, "Yeah."

River stood and stretched for a moment, wandering to the doors of the lounge to look out into the bay, Wash was working on circuit boards for the ambulance. Kaylee and Riddick were welding, sparks flying and for once Riddick's goggles were for more than just light. She could hear his thoughts, the absolute determination in his mind that they would make this work. They were going to get Jayne's sweetheart back for him no matter what.

Behind her the practicing had started up again, Mal was trying to rattle off his phase, not quite getting it. "Pupils were fixed and dilapidated-"

Simon shook his head, "Dilated."

Mal pounded the table, "Dilated! Dilated!" He muttered to himself in Chinese, "Ching-wah tsao duh liou mahng!"

River shook her head and continued to work. As they were the badges would get pass muster but if she wasn't careful the magnetic strips would deactivate and they'd have to steal another badge to get into the medvault. Several hours later she looked at her brother and the crew and picked up her capture. "Picture time," She told them from the doorway of the infirmary. Simon obligingly got out
of the way and let her snap captures of each crew member.

"Don't forget Riddick too," He reminded her.

"My mate is unforgettable," River grinned and picked up the hat and spectacles Riddick would need to wear. He was still in the cargo bay with Kaylee and Wash, both men having stripped down to tanks as the crawled around and over the slowly improving ambulance.

"Must take captures of the ambulance pilot and the second orderly," River told the men.

"You're really goin' Rick?" Kaylee blinked in surprise and Riddick wiped his face of sweat and put on the specs and hat for his picture. Wash did the same, giving the camera a wide eyed stare.

"Kaylee there's no way I'd let River and Simon do this alone," Riddick shook his head. "Jayne's gonna be with 'em while they get the scan. And three bodies means three coffins, better take for all of us."

"Seems a little risky," Wash agreed with Kaylee. "I understand the whys of it, just was kinda surprised you agreed to the plan to begin with."

"It's a good plan," Riddick shrugged as River looked at the captures and nodded her satisfaction. "No denyin' they did something to River's brain. She ever gets hit in the head it'd be good that Simon ain't surprised by what he finds in there."

River grinned at the pilot, "More than he already would be." She laughed and kissed Riddick lingeringly before she hurried back up the steps to her equipment. She was vividly conscious of the feel of his hands on her waist, the repressed need they were both feeling as they went about their work. Burying herself in the cortex and manufacturing the paperwork they'd need distracted her for a while longer, until she heard Simon drilling the crew on their lines.

She wandered over to the doorway and watched with a tilt of her head as Simon pointed at Mal expectantly. The captain took a deep breath and began to recite, "We got there and the patients were cyanotic... Not responding.. Non responsive... And we tried to reviv...Resuscitate them.. And, despite our best efforts.. Ah, they kicked... Despite our best efforts. Ah, they..." His words stumbled.

Simon pointed at Zoe, "Which methods did you use?"

The first mate nodded, "We tried pulmonary stimulators and cardiac infusers."

As she watched Simon looked at Jayne who was writing something on a small piece of paper, "What about cortical electrodes?" The doctor tilted his head, "What is that?" He sighed, took the paper and balled it up. It was a cheat sheet, River Read from his mind, with silly notes. Jayne's attempt to make Simon lose his composure and laugh in the middle of the rehearsal.

Jayne looked up, his disturbingly stupid expression on his face like a mask, "We applied, we applied the cortical electrodes. We used them electromagnetic... Reacted from... We were unable to a ...We applied the cortical electrodes but were unable to get a neural reaction from either... Unable to get a neural..." His expression twisted in frustration and he pounded the table swearing in Chinese. "Gāi sī lǜ chún mǎ zī."

"Response," Mal offered helpfully.

"Response," Jayne repeated. His tone was annoyed, belied by the amusement in his mind as he played the part he and Simon had so carefully rehearsed at the junkyard and the nights since the doctor had come up with the plan. "Hell, I don't know. If I had wanted schooling, I'da gone to
school. I'll get it." Zoe was standing with her hands steepled together, fingertips pressed to her lips as she concentrated, while Mal paced and muttered, swinging his arms and getting into rhythm.

River grinned as Zoe caught her eye, "She has every confidence." She bowed to them slightly, "Jayne will do wonderfully, as will you all."

"Kind a you to say," Mal nodded. The captain still wasn't thrilled with her but he unbent enough smile at her slightly. "Gotta say if this depends on our playactin' I ain't too sure we'll even get in the door."

River shook her head, "Preparing for all eventualities. Odds are no one will even question you. But Simon is right. Must have the answers prepared. All the worlds a stage and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and entrances and one man in his time plays many parts."

Zoe tilted her head and zeroed in on what she considered the pertinent portion of River's words. "So they might not even ask about the pulmonary infusers?"

"Pulmonary stimulators," Jayne corrected her and brightened comically. "An' cardiac infusers...an' we applied them cortical electrodes but were unable to get a neutral, neural response from any of 'em."

River giggled, "Polish required but well done." She laughed when Jayne bowed at her from the waist where he sat.

"Go on, let us practice some more," Zoe shooed her off and River couldn't help her grin. In spite of what was to come, in spite of the blue cobwebs that seemed to festoon everything to do with the St. Lucy's job she was still amused. Something would go wrong, the hands of Blue would come. She felt the smile fade at the thought. She went to look at the Ambulance. The white paint was drying now and she was careful not to touch it. Kaylee hadn't gone completely regulation inside. The seats included storage underneath.

"Whatcha doin' River?" Wash asked as she slid down from the shuttle.

"Need to load some equipment into the storage under the seats," River told him somberly. Riddick caught her eye and she looked at him, "Hands of Blue."

"Here?" Riddick scowled fiercely and she shook her head.

"Saint Lucy's," She shrugged. "Nothing is certain...but I would feel more... content, if the storage space under the seats contained rifles."

"Well let's get a couple," Riddick suggested and Wash smiled slightly.

"Kaylee, let's take a look at the storage under the back seats. Make sure they'll hold up to a scan," The pilot suggested. "It's against the law to bear arms on a core planet."

River nodded, "Can make duplicitous transmitters." She said quietly. "To hide the rifles from scans. Like static. Won't show up inside the vehicle. Like the engine's running a touch unsmooth."

"Do that," Riddick agreed. "I'll get the rifles from the armory."

"Kaylee and I'll work on the storage areas, thicken up the walls some," Wash suggested and Kaylee smiled her agreement.

"Can't say I like guns none, but if it'll make you feel better to have 'em, cain't hurt," The mechanic
nodded.

River smiled and picked up the parts she'd need from the pile of junkyard scavenged goods, "She will commence manufacture of the transmitters."

It took another hour but the four of them had two rifles hidden in the storage compartment behind the pilot's chair. Riddick was looking inside the ambulance and nodded, "Stack us up an' we'll fit just fine. A little tight on the way back but it shouldn't be too bad."

River leaned against her man's side and shivered as his arm came around her, his hand on her waist, slipping beneath her shirt and fingering the skin over her hip. "Worth the trouble though," She smiled up at him.

"Yeah, I think so too," He nodded. "Guess the others are nearly done with their rehearsing," He looked towards the lounge. "Almost time to get this show on the road."

"Yes," River nodded. "I know that I shall meet my fate somewhere among the clouds above." Riddick looked at her sharply and she shook her head, "Not death...change. We will change things."

Riddick frowned thoughtfully, his dark voice murmuring, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour."

River nodded again, "Yes. One grain of sand, one moment, one flower petal drifting down and we are all changed. Cannot be helped." She reached up and traced his lips with her finger, "You will go with Mal, Jayne will stay with Simon and I, we will find Ciara."

"Three coffins worth of drugs and supplies," Riddick understood what she was saying. "And someone you know won't leave you behind if things get rough."

"Yes," River nodded. "Normally trust Mal but... lately we are a great deal of trouble. Don't think he'd leave us, but best to not tempt it."

"Yeah..." Riddick was frowning a bit. "Mal's too loyal to actually dump us there. He feels responsible for you. He ain't gonna leave you to get stuck back in a lab. Thinks I'm corrupting you."

"Aren't you?" River giggled at him and he grinned down at her, a dark wicked look that heated her blood. "I like it."

"Yeah me too," He chuckled. "Best go get changed into the stuff Simon bought us."

"Yes," River nodded soberly. "Do not look forward to this. We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Here we have...yeah we've got our folks conspiring to rescue Ciara and I don't know how thrilled Mal will be about that when he finds out. Mal is a bit confused lately and he's going to have a mini epiphany sooner or later but it'll take some time. He's just stubborn really and has to figure things out on his own and pushing him won't help. Unfortunately River and Riddick are getting a little tired of hiding who and what they are and there's going to be less and less of that. So Mal will have to figure out where he stands sooner or later.
He's really the ultimate Taurus isn't he? Doesn't like change. Poor dear. I know how he feels.

Any more ideas as to how Jayne saves Riddick's life? Hint: you'll find out how in War Stories so feel free to post your theories until then. I'm always interested in what you guys think.

Anyway, thanks for reading and faving, following and reviewing, especially reviewing. You're all very awesome.

Chinese Translations:
jiē jie - older sister
Wǒ cáo - holy fuck
Gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch
tā mā de pì yǎnr - fucking asshole
tā mā de - fucking
Fù jīng qǐng zuì - lit. to bring a bramble and ask for punishment - idiom / to offer somebody a humble apology
mèi mei - little sister
xiǎo láng - little wolf
dì di - younger brother
Gǎi sǐ lǜ chūn mǎ zī - damned lit. camel's lip, horse's mouth - idiom / fig. to chatter / nonsense / blather

Script Chinese:
Ching-wah tsao duh liou mahng! - Script Chinese - Frog-riding bastard!

Quote Sources:

Music when soft voices die, vibrates in the memory. - Percy Bysshe Shelley

This above all, to thine own self be true and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man. - Hamlet - William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove. - Sonnet 116 - William Shakespeare

All the worlds a stage and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and entrances and one man in his time plays many parts. - As You Like It - William Shakespeare

I know that I shall meet my fate somewhere among the clouds above. - An Irish Airman Foresees His Death - William Butler Yeats
To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour. - Augeries of Innocence - William Blake

We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep. - The Tempest - William Shakespeare
Riddick looked over as Simon walked into the cargo bay, his expression was pleased and surprised, "That's amazing! You four did an incredible job." Riddick exchanged a grin with Wash and Kaylee. The ambulance was perfect looking, fully restored, in working order and with a few extras to confound any scans.

"And now, for the finishing touch," Kaylee pressed a button to open the shuttle door. Mal, Zoe and Jayne stepped out of the shuttle, all of them in paramedic uniforms and looking very professional. Riddick grinned as River's hand slid over his duplicate uniform, caressing his arm under the pretense of smoothing out a wrinkle.

Simon smiled, "If I didn't know better I'd say you were ready to save some lives."

Mal rubbed his hands together, "Now all we need is a couple of patients."

The doctor's smile faded as he looked over at Riddick and River, "Corpses actually." He corrected the captain. "For this to work River, Riddick and I will have to be dead."

Mal grinned, "Huh. I'm starting to like this plan."

Riddick couldn't help the growl that resounded through his chest and River's small hand patting him didn't soothe him like it normally did. "Qù nǐde," He snarled at the captain.

Simon nodded to Jayne and the big merc brought out the body crates from the back of the ambulance. "Once I put River and Rick under, we'll have to leave very quickly afterwards," He explained to the captain. "They'll burn through the drugs too fast if we don't get this going. So I'm going to dose River first, then Rick, and then myself. You'll have to leave right away."

"Lemme get changed before you dose 'em then," Wash darted away. Since he'd be flying the ambulance he also had to be in uniform. Riddick suspected it was the first time the man had worn something somber since he'd gotten out of the POW camp.

Riddick moved towards Jayne and looked at River as she climbed into the box and sat cross-legged. She was already in her hospital clothes. Simon had taken a moment to pull his scrubs on when Kaylee had let him know the ambulance was ready.

He looked at her from behind the specs Simon had given him and cupped her face in his hands, "Nothin' we can't handle Qīng Xiāng." He reminded her before he pressed his lips onto hers, warm breath, sweet mouth, everything he needed in life under his hands. It took several deep breaths before he could force himself away and River still clutched at his hand, her fingers cold with nerves.

River's whisper wasn't entirely reassuring, "With meditating that she must die once, I have the patience to endure it now."

Simon was explaining what he was going to do, "I'm going to suspend cerebral, cardiac, and pulmonary activity-."

"In order to induce a proto-comatose state." Riddick and River finished the sentence in unison making Mal blink in surprise and Jayne grin.
Simon shook his head ruefully, "Sorry. I forget I don't have to explain everything to the two of you."

Riddick shrugged, "Spent most of my life with folks thinkin' big equals dumb. Little surprised you were explaining to River though."

The doctor shrugged, "I wasn't really. It was mostly for Mal." He handed Jayne a pressure syringe, "River and Riddick should be coming out of it by the time we arrive in the morgue. If you pop the boxes and they aren't give them a shot of this. You'll have to do the same for me since I know I won't come out of the coma without it."

Riddick watched as Jayne nodded and Simon began to administer the drugs to River. He was vividly conscious of Mal watching with interest, Wash and Kaylee with some trepidation and Zoe with an intense frown of concentration. Riddick kept River's fingers in his hand. When he felt her pulse stuttering he eased her down into the box and kept his face within her sight until her eyes closed. She smelt of drugs and burnt cinnamon and he hated it.

Simon nodded for him to climb into his own box and he growled under his breath. This didn't set right with the animal and the fact that his mate was being sealed into what amounted to a coffin wasn't helping. "Rick, I promise, we'll be there when you wake up. But if you wake up before the lid opens you've got to stay quiet. Or else we're all caught." Simon was staring him in the eye, making sure Riddick was hearing him.

Riddick forced himself to nod, "I gotcha Simon. Just... gotta do this quick all right? Quick as we can. 'Cause I can't stand too much of this."

Simon nodded began to move like lightening, injecting his reluctant patient as quickly as he safely could. Riddick felt the drugs steal over him, felt his heartbeat stutter and forced his body to relax into the drugs. They had to do this. It was the only way. Simon and Jayne were the last faces he saw before he closed his eyes.

It was dark. But his eyes didn't help penetrate the black. He could hear voices, wheels, a low murmur in a familiar tone. Three people, Shea, Zoe and Mal. Their voices were hushed but they echoed slightly and he could feel movement. The animal wanted to scramble for the lock, wanted to push the lid open, leap out of coffin. But the man could remember the words of his. He had to stay quiet or he and River would end up back in that hell. Simon would go to jail. Who knows what would happen to the others. He shut his eyes. It was easier to deal with the impenetrable darkness if his eyes were closed.

The sound of wheels and movement stopped and he tensed. Then Mal was talking, "Guess we'd better open Rick's first. Then Rivers."

"Get it open fast Mal," Jayne said seriously. "There's no way he's not awake, long as it took to get here."

"Who knew it could take so long to get to the morgue," Zoe's voice was closer and Riddick tightened his grip on the shiv he held. If there was anyone there besides crew they were dead. When the lid cracked open with a hiss he growled low in his throat before he opened his eyes.

Zoe's expression wasn't wide-eyed, but she managed to convey surprise with an arch of her eyebrows and a half quirk of her mouth, "Rick, you plannin' on usin' that knife?"

"Only if you weren't alone," Riddick forced himself to relax and looked over at River. Jayne was
opening her box and he could hear her heart, speeding up with fear. "Cobh, better get out of the way."

Jayne backed up as the lid opened and River sprang out of the box like an outraged cat, crouching on the floor and glaring around her. Even in hospital clothes she looked dangerous. As he had the thought her head spun around to find him with her gaze and River took a deep breath and relaxed slightly. "Should let Simon out of his box and his sleep," She reminded Jayne. "He will be sick from the drugs."

Riddick pushed himself out of the casket and stuck his shiv back under his belt. Mal was looking at him strangely, "How'n the hell'd you even get that thing in here? Everything's scanned."

Riddick smirked at him, "Its made outa bone." He looked at River, "Still got yours?"

His mate nodded solemnly and produced the small shiv he'd carved for her. He'd never had the chance to pass it to her on planet but when he'd given it to her on the Rascal Puff she'd been thrilled. It had stayed in a place of honor on the bureau until now. A small curved blade, painstakingly carved from the ancient bones of the dead giants, just like his but fitted to her smaller hands. "She is grateful for his skill."

Riddick smirked at the shocked look on Mal's face, "I don't go anywhere 'thout a weapon Mal. No where."

"An' cause it were bone it don't show up on scans," Jayne was nodding his comprehension as he popped Simon's box and injected the doctor with the wake up drugs.

It took a moment but Simon woke up, retching and Jayne shoved a pan in front of Simon's face. Zoe was looking at her watch and then at the rest of them, "If he's all right we'd best get goin'." She commented quietly.

"Yeah," Riddick nodded and made sure the specs were straight on his face. "You be careful. All of you."

River tilted her head up at him and pressed a kiss to his cheek as she rose on her tiptoes in the paper shoes, "Copper for a kiss." She teased gently.

"I'll owe you," Riddick kissed her fiercely. "You get what you need to done and you get out of this damn place." He growled the words into her ear, "Got plans for you after this."

"As she does for him," River nodded solemnly. "Go, steal lots of drugs."

"And on that happy note," Mal opened the door and Riddick nodded before following he and Zoe out, the three of them each wheeling a casket.

Riddick followed Zoe and Mal off the elevator and down the hall, Mal was looking at his hospital map, stuck inside his sleeve. "Two lefts, two rights, and we're there. You see anyone, smile," He told them both quietly.

Zoe shook her head, "I don't think anyone smiles in hospitals."

Mal contradicted her as they rounded a corner, "Of course they do, it's the Core. Everyone's rich and happy here, why wouldn't they smile?"
Riddick frowned as a doctor came up from the hallway behind them. "Excuse me," Riddick had never heard a more supercilious voice, not even Simon's when he was being snippy. As they were three paramedics going about their business Mal and Zoe ignored the man and continued on. Riddick sighed as the man repeated his demand for their attention, "Excuse me." Riddick stopped and let the man pass him.

Mal turned and smiled pleasantly if with an abundance of insincerity, "Hi."

"Where're you taking those bodies?" The doctor demanded pompously.

Mal pointed towards the direction they were going, "Just downstairs to the morgue."

"Downstairs is that way," The man pointed in the opposite direction, irritation in every line of his body. He was ostentatiously ignoring Riddick.

Mal frowned and looked at where the doctor was pointing, "Right. Must've gotten turned around."

Riddick watched as the doctor snorted derisively, "Let me see your badge." He looked at Mal's badge and then Zoe's, taking Riddick's when it was handed to him. "Nothing to say for yourself?" He demanded of Riddick.

The convict offered him a bland smile and pulled out the core voice River had taught him, "Is there something I could say that would be helpful? Sir?"

"I doubt it," The doctor scowled. He gestured to Mal, "Walk with me a minute."

Mal nodded amiably, "Where're we going?"

Riddick exchanged a glance with Zoe as Mal took up the doctor's attention. At the moment he was still in the pompous man's sight so he couldn't do much. Zoe, however, was being ignored and would use the opportunity. At least that's what Riddick hoped. He couldn't exactly tell what was on her mind.

The annoying doctor turned and looked at Mal with a sneer. He pointed at the badge he wore, "You see this badge? It says 'doctor'. I say walk, you walk."

The captain nodded again, projecting innocent agreement, "Yeah, but, where're we going?"

Riddick watched as the doctor began to read Mal the riot act. Even though Riddick was taller and obviously more muscular than the doctor the core man was directing all of his attention to Mal, whom he considered to be the idiot paramedic. Riddick almost shook his head in amazement at how much people stifled their instincts. Everything in the man should be screaming he was next to a predator but he was oblivious.

"You must be new," The fussy core doctor told Mal as Zoe walked up behind him with something in her hands. "Don't get comfortable, your type never lasts long around here. When your supervisor hears about the rude and disrespect-ARGH!"

Riddick nearly chuckled at the sound of the doctor being electrocuted and losing consciousness. He caught the idiot man before he could concuss himself on the floor, holding him easily. Mal looked from the doctor to Zoe.

The first mate shrugged and put away the defibrillator she'd stolen, "Clear."
"Great but what do we do with him?" Mal asked with a frown.

Riddick smirked at the captain, "We transport him." He nodded to Zoe, "Pop that casket open would ya?" When she'd opened the lid Riddick dumped the doctor inside and put his hand around the man's throat.

"Don't kill him," Mal hissed in alarm. "We can't go leaving dead bodies lyin' around."

"Not planning to," Riddick pushed hard on the carotids. "I'm slowin' blood flow to the brain. Can't have him comin' to with a bump on the head, that fair shouts 'nefarious deeds done here'. But since Zoe electrocuted him, I'm messin' with his brain. They find him it'll look like he had a stroke and collapsed."

"You're giving him a stroke?" Zoe had a horrified fascination in her normally stoic voice.

"Nah," Riddick grinned at her as he watched the doctor's face carefully. "Even I can't do that. But if I withhold oxygen long enough, there'll be some minor brain damage, the same as a stroke would do. Between the electricity and what I'm doin'? Well you can check with Simon but the symptoms'll fit a stroke."

He kept the pressure up until the man had turned an unattractive shade of puce before he released his hold on the doctor's throat. "A stroke's really just an electrical storm in the brain after all," He explained quietly. "Plus it'll keep him quite while we get to the medvault. He don't seem like the robust type but it don't pay to take chances."

"I don't get it," Mal was staring at him. "One minute you're explaining about strokes and brain damage, and soundin' almost like Simon. An' the next you're talkin' like Jayne."

Riddick chuckled and shut the lid over the doctor, "I contain multitudes Mal." He told the captain. "C'mon, let's hit the medvault. Seems like we've gotten a little behind."

The captain was still shaking his head and Zoe was looking at him strangely but the two of them nodded and began to push their caskets in the direction of the medvault again.

River looked at Simon who was taking his stethoscope and other doctor type instruments from Jayne's pockets. "We'll have to hurry if we want to make the deadline," She reminded him quietly.

Jayne nodded as he handed Simon the badge labeling him as a doctor. River would play patient in a wheelchair until they got to Ciara, then they'd see what was needed. It wasn't perfect but they couldn't know just how many folks were outside Ciara's room or how suspicious they'd be. "Got my fingers crossed," He muttered.

Simon gave the huge man a half smile meant to be reassuring, "It'll be fine." He clipped the badge to his lab coat pocket and gave himself a quick once over before he strode towards the door. "We have the layout memorized. She's only two floors up, and in the same wing as we are. The neural imager is one floor up and in the east wing. Then we all simply walk out the front door to the waiting ambulance."

River nodded, "We must screw our courage to the sticking place." She took a deep breath and tried to shove away her trepidation. She had the most disturbing feeling that this would go so badly wrong they'd be lucky to get out alive.
Jayne wasn't oblivious to her tension, and neither was Simon, though her brother was concentrating more on sinking himself into his role of 'Core Doctor' again. The relaxed manners and posture he'd adopted on Serenity would not do for Saint Lucy's. Even as she watched, her sweet big brother adopted a supercilious expression and a stiff unyielding spine.

"Let's go," Simon's tone was clipped and cool. Jayne responded to it without even thinking, pushing a chair forward for River. She took her place in it and did her best to project a weary if wealthy and noble patient. She let her eyelids droop languidly even with her spine ramrod straight.

Simon walked ahead of them and to the right while Jayne pushed her alongside Simon. Unless the patient was very important doctors didn't speak to them in the halls. So haughty was her gē ge's expression that no one even questioned them until they reached Ciara's room. Simon had grabbed another wheelchair when he saw the nurse's station and was pushing the empty one.

As they neared the nurse at the desk, River watched her brother's expression change from serene arrogance to arrogant impatience. He began to speak irately to Jayne as they neared the nurse, "This is completely the opposite of my explicit instructions. What reason did the imaging suite staff give for this stupidity?"

Jayne blinked in surprise and opened his mouth, closed it and looked uncertain, "Not really sure Doc." He offered finally, "Just said how we was to bring both ladies down now." His gruff voice was diffident, respectful of Simon but clearly unsure if he was answering the question correctly.

Simon huffed in exasperation, "When I speak to their supervisor they will be severely reprimanded." He almost snarled the words though his pronunciation never slipped from proper tones. "Double booking the suite. Of all the incompetence." He shook his head and addressed the nurse, "Miss Ciara Riordan is booked for an appointment with the imaging suite. Please fetch her and make certain she's dressed comfortably."

The nurse shook her head, "I'm sorry doctor but there's nothing on her schedule until her surgery this evening." She was consulting her datapad as she spoke.

"Well as I have her booked to the suite for a complete scan before her procedures you have clearly made some error," Simon's dismissed her concerns. "You can go over your book again later. At the moment I require Miss Riordan. Now are you going to fetch her or will I have to speak with your supervisor?"

The nurse didn't quite sigh in irritation but it was a near thing. She stood up from her desk stiffly, her expression cold and rounded the station to enter Ciara's room. River could hear her voice speaking to someone else, another woman replying and felt a surge of hope from the second woman. The Reader narrowed her focus on the second woman and nearly smiled. Ciara was hoping that she'd find some way to escape en route to the imaging room.

The nurse came out, took the wheelchair from beside Simon without a word to him and pushed it into the room. Five minutes later she wheeled it back out with a slender woman in it. She was taller than River even sitting, with long luxurious dark auburn hair and deep brown eyes. She was clutching at the arms of the wheelchair as if it was taking all her concentration to keep from jumping out of it and bolting.

River tilted her head as the other girl met her gaze and gave her smile halfway between reassuring and bored, unable to break character. "Really, this is tedious, more so than usual," She objected in the ennui laden tones her mother would use at a party. "Can we not get on with this silliness?"

"At once Miss," Jayne said from behind her. His voice was still respectful and quiet, but Ciara's gaze
darted to his face. Her eyes widened slightly, and River could feel her incredulity as she forced her eyes back to her lap.

"Yes, of course," Simon nodded. "Let's not subject either of these ladies to much more of this fiasco," He nodded grandly at the nurse. "This once I'll forgive the absence of an orderly as you clearly are woefully unprepared for today's schedule." He looked around the hall, "Where is your staff? Leaving one nurse alone on the floor. Foolish and worrisome."

"One of the patients coded unexpectedly and they—" The nurse began and Simon cut her off.

"Patients always code unexpectedly," He sneered. "But I take your point. I will take charge of your patient. Once we have returned Miss Singh to her room Miss Riordan will be returned here."

River bit her lip as Simon took Ciara's wheelchair from the nurse and began to push it forward himself, "Come along." He snapped back at Jayne when he was two paces ahead, "Let's not be all day about it."

Jayne bobbed his head at the nurse respectfully and hurried forward, "Yes sir." He muttered as he walked quickly enough to catch he and River up with Simon and Ciara. The elevator doors had barely closed when Ciara was trying to get out of her chair.

River grabbed her wrist, "Stay in the chair." She told the other girl, her grip forcing Ciara to obey. "This masquerade only works if we follow the plan. The imaging suite is next."

"What plan? Who are you?" Ciara was clearly not entirely trusting of the two strangers in the elevator with her and she wasn't entirely sure that Jayne was her childhood sweetheart either.

"Jayne, what's that song you were humming the other day?" Simon asked, apropos of nothing, "We were working out in the bay and you started singing out of the blue."

"Huh," Jayne grinned, his hospital persona fading for a moment, "Oh, you're thinkin' a 'Raglan Road'."

"That's the one," River nodded. "You told us it always reminded you of her." She kept her gaze on Ciara. "She isn't sure that it's really you Jayne. And she doesn't trust us. Doesn't know us. You'll have to reassure her or we'll never get out."

"Our odds that bad?" Jayne was frowning and patted his pocket to verify an object was still there. "Can't do it here, gotta wait 'til the suite. Doors are gonna open soon."

"Can you trust us until we get to the imaging suite?" River looked at Ciara. "Just until then. Please?" Ciara gave her one shaky nod and River grinned at her. "Good. Won't be long. Promise."

The doors of the elevator began to slide open then and she let go of Ciara's wrist to adopt her bored rich patient expression again. Simon's spine stiffened and Jayne wiped the smile off his face. They continued like that down the hall to the suite and there was a simultaneous sigh of relief from the three conspirators as the doors closed behind them.

River shook her head, "All right. Jayne must convince Ciara that he is Shea."

Ciara hadn't waited for the doors to close entirely before she leapt out of her wheelchair, "What is going on?" She was trembling with hope and fear at the same time, worry and anticipation warring inside her as she stared from Jayne to Simon and River and then back to Jayne again.

"I been lookin' for ya since ya was taken off Kerry," Jayne said quietly. "Got somethin'll prove it."
He reached into his pocket and took out a small silver circle. "Saved up every coin I had since I was eleven to get this," He told her. "Was scared someone'd buy it out from under me. Walked you home every day from school, watched you look in that shop window, an' stare at this ring."

Light as a cat the big man moved towards the woman he'd searched for far and wide. "Joined the Browncoats, got off planet an' been lookin' ever since they took ya from me." He reached for her hand and gently uncurled her fisted fingers to lay the ring in her palm. "Never stopped lookin'. I done plenty I ain't proud of durin' my life but you been the sole reason I ain't ever given up, ain't ever stopped. Had to find you Ciara."

"Shea?" She was staring from the ring in her hand up to his face, the curly hair and blue eyes the only recognizable similarities between the hulking man before her and the boy she'd known.

"Yeah, it's me," Jayne nodded. "And we're gonna get you outta here. Get you free."

"Which leads us to the next part of the plan," Simon interjected. "I've got to get the neural imager going and get River onto it."

River looked at the machine and frowned, "Don't think this is a good idea." She shook her head.

"We're here, and you agreed I needed to see what they did," Simon reminded her. River took a deep breath and looked over her shoulder to Jayne as Simon led her towards the machine.

"Jayne," She caught his attention. "Stand at the ready please. Bad feeling."

"Shuí huō wú qíng," Jayne muttered but nodded, drawing Ciara along with him to come and stand by the imager.

Riddick stopped as Mal and Zoe paused before a door. He was really disliking the hospital, everything was the same, all the walls and floors, even the people seemed disturbingly similar. "Twelve-oh-five. Here it is," Mal noted as he swiped his keycard. He frowned as it didn't work. Zoe took his place and swiped hers. It didn't work either.

"Must have been demagged," Zoe frowned. She looked at Riddick, "Wanna try yours?"

Riddick nodded, "Since I wasn't holding the defibrillator and wasn't anywhere near it going off." He swiped his card through and frowned as it turned green and then red again. "Cào dàn," He cursed. "She told me the magnetic strip was touchy."

"Well that's our luck," Mal shook his head and popped open Riddick's casket. "Lucky we ran into a doctor ain't it."

Riddick nearly chuckled as Mal pulled the doctors card off the unconscious man's pocket and used it to get through the doors. "Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud turn forth her silver lining on the night?"

The captain rolled his eyes, "None of your poetry now Rick. Let's get the goods and get gone."

Riddick dumped the doctor out of his casket and positioned him so it looked as if the doctor had come into the medvault and collapsed. Then he began to empty the shelves nearest to him into the casket. Mal frowned at him and Riddick shrugged, "You two got the list of what's most valuable. I figure we get all that, and everything else is extra. We've got the three boxes. May as well use 'em."
Zoe shrugged and looked at Mal, "So long as we get everything on the list does it matter if we come back with extra?"

Mal was still filling his casket, "Grab bandages too then if they've got 'em in here. We're always short a them."

The convict couldn't help but grin as he continued to empty the shelf, "Think Simon'll be mad?"

"Doc's always after me for more supplies," Mal retorted. "Don't see how he could be. We're showin' initiative. An' gettin' supplies."

"Doc seemed right set on that plan though," Zoe reminded them. "Maybe we just not mention the extra. He can find it in the cabinets. By then we'll have made a few stops. Could easily have picked it up elsewheres."

Riddick let the chuckle he'd been holding back loose and shook his head, "I ain't gonna lie to Simon." He told them as he continued to work. "He's a brother to me. I can take the heat. Specially if it's Simon heat. Man's got nothin' on his sister's temper."

Zoe grabbed the last few cases from her shelf and looked at Mal who was nodding his confirmation of the list he'd written on his forearm. "All right, that's it. Whatever you're holding, put it in the case and let's go," The First Mate called time on the job.

Mal and Riddick nodded, grabbed the last of their boxes and shut the lids on the caskets. "And back to the ambulance we go," Mal grinned. "I like this job. Easy peasy so far."

"I hate it when you say that Mal," Riddick grumbled at him as he followed the other two out of the room. "Something always goes wrong when you start sayin' shit like that."

From ahead of him Zoe made a sound of agreement while Mal just shook his head at their superstition. Then they were all as grimly silent as paramedics should be when transporting bodies down hospital halls. Riddick took a deep breath and wished again that he knew how River was doing. He wouldn't be easy in his mind until she and the others were back with them.

River did her best to not panic as she positioned herself on the imaging chair. "Jayne, must be ready," She told him turning her head. "Please."

"Ready for what?" Jayne tore his gaze from Ciara's face and looked over at she and Simon.

River shook her head, "Just ready." She looked at Simon and shivered, "Hurry please."

Simon nodded typing instructions into the cortex of the imager. As she watched a series of holographic images appeared over her body. Skeleton, circulatory system, muscles, nerves, all of it was pared away until only her brain remained, hovering over her head. "The data is downloading," Simon murmured.

As River watched Simon put his hands around the holographic image and tilted them to rotate the scan of her brain. His frown was fierce and she could hear his brain working as he took in exactly what had happened to her. "They opened up her skull," Simon murmured in horror. Jayne walked over to look, gently bringing Ciara with him and the two of them looked at River inquiringly. She smiled weakly as Simon continued to look at the scan, "That's a scalpel scar. They..." Simon shook his head and looked at Jayne, "They opened up her skull and they cut into her brain. She said they
had but...I couldn't understand why."

Jayne was frowning, "Why then?"

River sighed and Simon shook his head, "The only reason to make an incision in someone's brain is to... lobotomize them. Or to go in and remove damaged tissue. Why..." He took a deep breath, horror nearly overwhelming him, "...anyone would cut into a healthy brain is... They did it over and over..."

River spoke finally, her eyes on the scan, seeing the same thing Simon did, "They stripped my amygdala."

"The what?" Jayne was confused. Ciara wasn't much better though she had a general idea of what the amygdala was.

Simon began to explain as he continued the scan, "You know, ah, you know how you get scared or worried or nervous, but you don't want to be scared or worried or nervous, so you push it to the back of your mind? You try not to think about it." He glanced at Jayne and Ciara who were both still looking mystified. "Your amygdala is what lets you do that. It's like a filter in your brain that keeps your feelings in check."

River shrugged uncomfortably, "Feel everything, all the time. It's why Richard had to teach me, animals...animals know how to feel everything without going mad." She shook her head, "Something is wrong. The world is going blue." She looked at Simon, "Have to get out. Now."

"Chòu mǎniào," Jayne cursed.

Ciara blinked in confusion, "But there's nothing happening."

Simon was shutting down the scan, killing the cortex and stuffing the data crystal in his pocket, "River doesn't like Blue." He said succinctly. "It's not a good color."

River sat up and pulled out the bone shiv Riddick had carved for her and slammed it into the cortex screen shorting it out. "Buys us some time," She explained and hopped off the chair. "Can't go out the front way. Go out the back. Contact the others, circle around."

Jayne nodded, "Ciara, stick close because we're gonna be movin' fast." He looked at River, "Can ya tell what was it set this off?"

River shook her head and frowned, "Must be genetically tagged." She looked over at Simon, "Being dead got me past the scans. Genetic tags are the only thing that explains why the Blue cobwebs come back when I got on the imager."

"Unless they have filters set up in case anyone scans a stripped amygdala," Simon agreed grimly. "Let's move. I know the hospital best so I'll lead."

"I've got the rear," River nodded, "Jayne, keep Ciara safe between us. We're not going to lose her. Even if you have to leave Simon and I."

Jayne's jaw set stubbornly and River could hear his thought that there was no way he was going back to tell Riddick he'd gotten his own girl out and left Rick's woman behind. "We'll see," Was all he'd say. "Ain't caught yet."

Their swift walk through the hospital was tense. Simon was giving the impression of a doctor in a hurry and his entire body radiated impatience. No nurse or orderly in their right mind would want to get in the way of a doctor on the warpath so they weren't waylaid by any of the staff. River could
feel the apprehension of the men and women who saw her brother's face and how they quickly moved to avoid his path.

It was when they reached the back wall of the hospital that they ran into trouble. River looked at Jayne, "Go. Run back the way we came. Tell Riddick where we are." She instructed calmly and moved up to stand beside Simon. She was conscious of Jayne's mental refusal and felt Ciara's confusion but stoic resolve to stay at Jayne's side and sighed. It would make things more complicated but she couldn't physically force her big friend leave them. She pulled her hair out of its braided chignon, tucked the pins in her pocket and deliberately mussed it. She knew that with her hair down and half covering her face she looked like a child. It was part of the reason she kept it back from her face around the captain and crew, so they would think of her as an adult. But now it was to her advantage to look weak and childlike.

"Simon," River whispered and her brother turned with his hand on the door. "Be ready for her madness." It was all the warning she could give him. He was halfway through the door as she spoke and there was a glaring light.

"Federal Marshals! Don't move!" The voice was loud and implacable, as was the sound of a shotgun ratcheting into readiness. "River and Simon Tam, by the authority of the Union of Allied Planets, you are hereby bound by law."

Simon looked at River and she nodded slowly. It would be too difficult to make an escape from where they were. It would have to be later on, from a different point of egress. "We'll come quietly,” Simon said in his polite voice. "The orderly was simply obeying a doctor, he shouldn't be——"

"Take them to Processing," The agent in charge interrupted him. The Feds began to cuff she and Simon and she saw others doing the same to Jayne and Ciara. Ciara's face was a stoic mask over gibbering fear as her hands were pulled behind her back.

"You're under arrest for aiding and abetting Federal fugitives. Better get a lawyer," The Agent sneered at Jayne and Ciara. Jayne's hard shoulder hit the man's chest and his steel toed boot caught the man in the shin. Before anyone could take advantage of the opportunity created one of the Feds shot Jayne in the chest with a sonic wave gun. Jayne fell to the ground with a groan and River sighed.

Riddick could smell how bored Wash was as they approached the ambulance. The pilot had been forced to sit and wait for them which was hardly exciting stuff. He also had the tendency to worry so he was extremely relieved when he caught sight of the three of them pushing their loaded caskets towards the ambulance.

Riddick helped Mal with one of the caskets while Wash helped Zoe with another. "How much did we get?" The pilot asked as Riddick and he moved to load the last crate, stacking the three of them in the back of the ambulance.

Mal jumped into the vehicle, "Enough to keep us flying."

Zoe actually sounded hopeful as she and Wash climbed in, Riddick bringing up the rear, "Can we fly somewhere with a beach?"

Wash brightened visibly, "Maybe a naked beach?"

Riddick chuckled slightly even as he kept his eyes on the entrance of the hospital. Wash and Zoe
were kissing, and he checked to be sure they were out of any hospital staff's line of sight. The captain
didn't quite snap at them but he did roll his eyes, "Cut it out. Job's not done until we're back on
Serenity."

Zoe smirked at her husband, "Sorry, sir. Didn't mean to enjoy the moment."

Mal was wondering the same thing Riddick was and voiced the convicts worry, "Where are the
others?"

Zoe looked worried though Wash was still smiling. Riddick didn't blame the pilot, when Wash
started to worry he was very focused about it. But he didn't believe in worrying until he was given
cause.

Riddick shook his head, "I'm goin' back in." He began to stand up from his set and found Mal's hand
on his arm.

"No you're not," The captain shook his head. "We wait. Give 'em a little more time. Then we do this
smart."

Riddick growled angrily, "It's my family you're talkin' about Mal. Family you don't think much of."

"No matter how much I disagree with you an' River about damn near everything, Jayne an' Simon
are crew an' I ain't leavin' 'em." Mal got right in his face, "Now sit and wait a little more. I don't leave
my people. Not ever."

"Neither do I," Riddick didn't sit but he didn't leave the ambulance either.

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River watched as the Feds shoved Simon and Jayne onto a bench, Ciara sank down next to Jayne
and River took a place beside her. Simon whispered a compliment to Jayne on his assault, "If those
officers hadn't been armed, I think you'd have had a chance."

Jayne frowned, "For all the good it did." He muttered back.

"Well it was a start," Simon murmured back. "And River said something about acting crazy so she
might be providing a distraction."

"Well when it comes to diversions..." The gun hand stole a glance over at River and Ciara, 'Gotta
admit, River actin' crazy would drive anyone a little distracted.'"

River judged that was an appropriate cue for her to start her speech, "They took Christmas away."

Simon and Jayne looked at her and Jayne blinked, "What the hell now?" His voice was a throwback
to his old act of dislike and irritation of River in her first few weeks on Serenity.

River leaned towards them and used a confiding tone, "Came downstairs for the shiny presents.
They took the tree and the stockings. Nothing left but coal."

Jayne gave Ciara a wink and then glared at Simon, "Will you shut her up!"

Ciara was looking from Jayne to River in shock and tears started to leak down her face. River truly
felt bad for the girl, she was confused and afraid, but there was no way to reassure her without giving
away what she was up to. The Feds were looking at her like she'd lost her mind, and the Agent in
charge seemed extremely uncomfortable.
She stared at the Agent and widened her eyes before she spoke again with a smile she knew was creepy. "Don't look in the closet, either. It's greedy. It's not in the spirit of the holiday. I do not set my life at a pin's fee; and, for my soul, what can it do to that, being a thing immortal as itself?"

Jayne gave a credible snarl as he eyed where the guards were, "You shut the hell up, right now, or so help me, I will shut you up."

Riddick growled as Mal asked, "Time?"

Zoe shook her head, "Ten minutes past rendezvous."

Riddick forced himself to not go for his shiv, "Something's wrong." He shook his head.

Mal nodded, "Something's happened."

Riddick looked at Wash, "Wave Kaylee."

Wash picked up the comm and began to hit the buttons of the console, "Kaylee, are you linked?"

Riddick took a breath and forced the animal back as Kaylee's voice sounded over the comm, "Uh..." She paused a second and then continued, "I am now. What do you need?"

The convict leaned forward and spoke over Wash's shoulder, "Find out if there's any kind of security alert in the hospital."

"Hang on," Kaylee was typing as she spoke.

Zoe was attempting to be reassuring, "Could be they're just late."

Mal shook his head, "Not this late. Jayne would have sent up a flag."

Riddick looked at Zoe, "Precise as Simon is? An' with River an' Simon with Jayne? No, this got derailed it wasn't something delayed. Somethin' went wrong."

Kaylee's voice came over the comm again, "Nothing from hospital security, nothing on the local pipeline, either."

The frustrated growl reverberated through the ambulance and caused the other three crew members to look at Riddick in alarm. "Keep lookin' Kayee. Somethin' ain't right here."

He could hear Kaylee's frown of confusion, "Although I am getting some weird chatter from the official two-six-two. Sounds like..." She stopped for a moment as if to think, "...They're talking about ducks."

Zoe sounded grim, "Code."

Mal nodded, "Feds got 'em." He looked at Wash, "Have her bring up a hospital schematic on the Cortex. Find me a way into that security substation."

Riddick shook his head, "Don't need Kaylee to do that. Think I'd have even agreed to this plan if I didn't know every way in and out of that hospital?"

He took the communicator Zoe handed him and put in the earpiece and Mal did the same. Wash was
protesting, "Wait a minute, you don't even know for sure if they're in there."

Mal shrugged, "Gonna find out." He tested his comm, "Check."

Zoe nodded, "Coming in clear." She handed Mal a gun and looked at Riddick inquiringly.

Riddick chuckled and reached into the compartment the building crew had made in the seats. The two guns he pulled out along with a very impressive long knife got a whistle from Zoe.

"When'd you put all those in?" The first mate was blinking in surprise while Mal was shaking his head in resignation.

"River got a bad feelin'," Riddick said shortly. "Couldn't figure what. But she said she'd feel better with some rifles in the ambulance. I just added a few more for comfort."

"Wait," Wash was trying to inject reason into the endeavor. Riddick could have told him that was a lost cause but said nothing as the pilot continued, "So, you're just going to walk in through the front door?"

"No," Mal chuckled slightly, "Rick's gonna take us in there. You're gonna find a place to land in the back. Wait a few minutes after we leave and get there. You an' Kaylee work that out while we're en route."

Riddick used the cortex to pull up a rough map of the area, "Should be an employee lot in the back. This time a night, not a lot a doctors parked there. Try to land there."

Wash was looking at the cortex screen, "Oh yeah, this is gonna go real well."

Zoe's gaze was fixed on Mal, "We'll keep an ear out for more traffic."

The captain gave her a nod and looked at Riddick, "All right, let's go find our lost lambs."

River watched as the Agent in charge moved to stand in front of the bench where they were sitting, "Get up." He commanded. She, Ciara and Jayne stood while Simon remained sitting defiantly. Contradictorily, the Agent pushed Jayne back down and the gun hand scowled at him furiously.

Simon glared at the Agent, "What's going to happen to us?"

River shook her head as the man simply repeated himself. "I said, get up." He pulled at Simon's jacket and Simon shrugged his grip off and stood on his own. The Fed was equal to Simon in height but her brother had generations of breeding and righteous fury on his side.

She wasn't surprised when the Agent took a half step back as Simon began to speak in his deliberate elegant voice. Every inch of her brother spoke of his birth and breeding and even law officials couldn't help responding to Simon's unconscious authority, "Agent McGinnis, I'm certain you're working under a superior who is keeping close tabs on this case. I'm certain of that because important people don't do field work. I'm also quite certain your superior wants me and my sister alive. Now, I'm not going to move from this spot until one of two things happens." The trauma surgeon paused and regarded the Agent to be certain he was being understood completely, "You answer my very simple question; or you shoot me."

River smiled happily. She knew she was giving the impression of extreme insanity and it was having
the exact effect she wanted on the guards. They were radiating nerves. Jayne's intimidating bulk, Simon's icy calm, her craziness and Ciara's tears were creating a potent brew for disaster. The Agent responded to Simon in an overly precise manner, trying to conceal his anger and impatience, "We are transferring you into a holding area, until you can be retrieved."

"Retrieved? By whom?" Simon pressed while he had the advantage. River frowned and caught Jayne's eye. He gave her the barest nod and she knew the gun hand understood her concern. Whoever came to get them would not need Jayne or Ciara. They wouldn't even need Simon.

"People who want you alive. People not me." The agent answered Simon with cold pleasure and gestured to his minions. "Take them."

River kept a cautious if overly bright and happy eye on the guards. Her almost manic good cheer was really creeping them out. Two of them took Jayne and Simon first and another one began to herd she and Ciara after the men. The holding cell was a plain white box of a room and after the men entered it Jayne struck out with his elbow, hitting his guard in the face. He kicked the second guard in the stomach and pinned the first one to the wall with his shoulder.

Simon rammed the second guard while River whirled and kicked the guard behind her in the head. Her heel snapped hard against his temple and he dropped like a stone. Jayne knocked his guard to the ground and River heard the man's skull crack hard on the floor. Simon had managed to get his guard on the ground and was kneeling on his chest. Jayne's guard had managed to roll onto his back and the gun hand climbed on top of him and was trying to throttle the life from him.

River checked the guard she'd knocked out and smiled grimly. Ciara had the sense to stay out of the way, she'd taken a position near the door. River could feel her mind, anxious as she watched for more guards, and nodded at her as she walked past the woman towards the gun hand. "Jayne," She murmured his name quietly. "Stand away." The gun hand pulled back and River slammed her heel down onto the guard's forehead. His skull smacked back onto the floor and he slumped back onto the board. "Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity," She whispered as the light left the guard's eyes.

Riddick walked with Mal down the crowded hallway, nurses and orderlies, everyone was doing their evening rounds, getting patients settled in for the night. No one was paying any notice to them. Not for the first time he was grateful for the spectacles that masked his distinctive corneas and prevented anyone from noticing his most obvious difference from other men. He heard Mal ask Wash for directions even though Riddick was leading him.

Wash's voice was in his ear and Riddick nearly growled, as he took Mal down the same hallway, "Hang a left when you reach cryo, you'll see a door." They were already through it and heading down the stairs when Wash told them to go down to the green level.

"Gonna need you to say when we hit green," Riddick muttered to Mal. "It ain't far, coupla flights maybe. But I don't see colors like you do."

Mal nodded as they trotted downward, "This is exactly what I didn't want. I wanted simple. I wanted in-and-out. I wanted easy money."

Riddick shrugged, "Things always get a little more complicated, don't they?" He nearly grinned, "Especially when my woman is involved."
The captain was cursing under his breath, "Just once I'd like things to go according to the gorram plan."

Wash's voice sounded on the comms again, "Uh, guys, you might wanna hurry."

Riddick looked at Mal as the taller man asked carefully, "Oh? Is there a problem?"

Wash's voice was worried, "An Alliance ship just touched down on the landing pad. I think that the reinforcements just arrived."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So this is a little shorter than the last chapter but this was too good a stopping point to pass up.

I hope you all like Ciara's introduction to our story. She's going to be a lot of fun but right now she's confused, terrified and really not at her best. In spite of that she's bearing up pretty well huh? I'm proud of her.

I hope you guys like it. I'd love to hear what you all think.

Chinese Translations:

Qù nǐ de - Go to hell!
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
dì di - younger brother
gē ge's - big brother's

Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng - Fire and water have no mercy - idiom
Cào dàn - fuck!
Chòu mǎniào - Stinking horse piss

Quote Sources:

With meditating that she must die once, I have the patience to endure it now. - Julius Caesar - William Shakespeare

I contain multitudes - Walt Whitman

Screw our courage to the sticking place - MacBeth - William Shakespeare

Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud turn forth her silver lining on the night? - Comus: A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle - John Milton

I do not set my life at a pin's fee; and, for my soul, what can it do to that, being a thing immortal as itself? - Hamlet - William Shakespeare

Thou know' st 'tis common; all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity. -
River watched as Jayne staggered to the dead guard and took the handcuff keys. As quickly as he could he unlocked his cuffs and then Ciara's, Simon's and River's. As the gun hand unlocked River, Simon picked up the second guard's gun and handed it to Jayne. Simon was nervous, nearly edging over into terror but he was hiding it well.

River took the other guard's weapon and peeked out the door cautiously before moving to the left. Jayne pointed towards the right and murmured his question, "We don't wanna go out like we came in?" River shook her head; Jayne's thought was that at least they knew the way out in his direction.

Simon frowned, "There are at least four armed feds out there."

Jayne nodded, "Six. I know." River nearly smiled, in Jayne's mind six feds weren't much of an obstacle, not between him and River with Simon backing them up. It was nice to be trusted. Even if the idea was ultimately a bad one.

River shook her head at both of them, "We can't go that way." She stared in the direction of the Booking area. "They're here." She felt her hands begin to shake with the bone deep horror the Blue Hands always evoked.

"They who?" Jayne asked and then blinked, "Wait." He looked at her and then at Simon. "Does she mean…?"

Simon wasn't sure what River meant, she could Read as much. "I, uh," Her brother stumbled over his words.

"Can we just move please?" Ciara asked in a worried voice. "Just outside a holding cell doesn't seem the best place for a conversation."

River nodded and began to lead them left, "Very accurate summation." She started to run and spoke over her shoulder, "The Hands of Blue are here." She couldn't help the quick pace of her feet; everything in her was screaming that she needed to run. They all had to run. The Blue Hands were worse than Death, worse than Reavers. They were utterly unfeeling and implacable in their drive to complete their mission.

Jayne's scowl would have been indication enough of his worry even if River hadn't been able to Read his mind. His expression turned darker, and he automatically kept a hand on Ciara when the sound of screams began to echo in the corridor behind them. "What the hell is that?"

River shuddered and increased her pace, "Half a league, half a league, half a league onward…Must go faster." She muttered and led them down the stairs at a jog. "Two by two. Hands of blue. Two by two. Hands... blue... two." She knew she was gasping and she could feel the tears on her face. They were close enough that she could feel their minds. They felt nothing. Living, breathing human beings who felt absolutely nothing. It was worse than the constant pain and anger of the Reavers. Her mind automatically felt for their thoughts, emotions, for any indicator of their intentions. It was all a horrifying blank beyond their determination to recover her and kill whomever she'd spoken with.

She could feel Jayne and the others behind her, terrified. But their fears were a pale echo of her own as she pushed open a heavy metal door and hurried across an empty room. They didn't have any idea
what was coming whereas she had no choice but to know, absolutely, the horrors behind them. River shuddered as she increased her speed to a run. Everywhere the Blue Hands went, screaming followed. She'd felt the agony of the dying as they bled, their terror and bewilderment. She had to keep enough distance between the Blue Hands and her friends or Jayne and Ciara and Simon would start to bleed and scream. She couldn't let that happen.

"Where the hell is she going?" Jayne asked worriedly. He had Ciara's hand in his. His absolute resolve to keep her with him, to not lose Ciara again, was like a warm fire in his mind and heart. River took a deep breath as she basked in that warmth and love the big man had for his sweetheart. His mind was a buffer against the pain of the screaming men behind her and the emptiness of the Blue Handed pursuers.

Simon was sounding a little out of breath but not as much as he would have been before Serenity. He still managed to answer Jayne though. "There must be some sort of exit this way."

Jayne was worried but he didn't say anything else. Ciara was looking around, her nerves screaming in River's mind. "I don't see an exit," The Kerry woman remarked in concern. She was clinging to Jayne's hand so tightly that both she and the merc would have aching muscles if they lived to see tomorrow. Her mind was frantic with fear and confusion but for one clear note that simply sang Jayne's real name like a song. Shea Cobh. He was what mattered to Ciara. He'd never let her come to harm in his life if he could help it. He wouldn't let anything happen now.

River wanted to look back at Ciara to reassure her. She would have reassured all of them of her certainty in her direction. But before she could open her mouth there was more screaming from the direction they'd run from. "Forward the light brigade," The words tumbled from her lips. Another staircase, endless white stairs with a doorway at the bottom. She ran down them, "Almost there." One flight. She didn't slow her pace, conscious of the other three on her heels, "Almost there." A second flight. She reached the bottom and the landing with the blue door, "Almost there." She stopped in front of the door, "There. Need to get it open."

Jayne stepped forward and tried it. Of course it was locked. River, nodded as the big man tugged her away from the door to stand with Simon and Ciara, "Stand back." He shot the door with the gun and cursed as the sonic waves did nothing to break the lock. "Shǐniào, high-tech Alliance crap." He began to beat the lock with the butt of the gun.

River felt him then. Riddick's mind a bright and furious ruby red glowing beyond the door. "Jayne," She hurried forward and dragged her friend back. "Don't want you to get shot," She told him when he looked at her with a confused gaze.

"Shot?" He blinked in surprise. Surprise turned to pleasure when the sound of several bullets hitting the door and locking mechanism came from the other side of the wall.

Riddick kicked the door open, Mal standing behind him and River couldn't help herself. She might have teleported she crossed the space so quickly into his arms. Riddick grabbed her just as quickly, holding her against his body so her feet didn't even touch the floor. And then finally she could breathe. Riddick's arms squeezing her tight against his body should have had the opposite effect but from within them she felt safe. She was still shaking. She could feel the rage in him in reaction to her fear. The smell of burnt cinnamon drove him mad with fury. But if Riddick was with her she could breathe and think through the dread.

"Folks I think we've done all the damage we can do here," Mal pointed out. "Let's go."

River nodded from within Riddick's arms, "Blue Hands are here. We must leave now."
Jayne pushed Simon in front of him and scooped Ciara into his arms. River nodded to herself. Jayne wasn't taking any chances on Ciara getting shot in the run to the ambulance.

"Make for employee parking," Riddick told Simon. "Wash is parked there. We're right behind you."

River kissed his cheek and looked up at her mate as he pulled the door shut, "Just like old times." She remembered them running on planet.

"We gotta get some better old times," Riddick's voice held a hint of a chuckle as they began to run together, hands still linked, towards the ambulance. His relief to see her safe had brightened the grim resolve of his mind and her mate's sense of humor was showing again. Wash and Zoe greeted Simon with enthusiasm, Jayne and Ciara with confusion and River and Riddick with relief.

"We all aboard," Wash asked as everyone crammed into the available space.

"We're good to go," Mal told him and took a seat next to his pilot. Zoe stood behind her husband while River watched the door they'd escaped through. That terrifying blankness that signified the Blue Hands minds was getting closer. She shuddered in reaction. It was a dark day when she would rather deal with Reavers than these men.

"They come," She whispered to Riddick. "Get the rifles."

She loved that he didn't question her, didn't ask how she knew. Riddick just moved Simon off his seat and got Jayne to hold Ciara for a moment while he lifted the seat to reach the storage area under it. In the space of half a minute he'd retrieved the rifles and handed her one. River took the gun and studied her hands. They were trembling and try as she might she couldn't block out the Blue Hands long enough to get them steady.

Riddick saw her predicament and called for Jayne, "Cobh, c'mere an' take River's gun."

Jayne nodded and moved forward to crouch next to Riddick, "Okay Rick. What'm I shootin' at?"

"The source of the screaming," River answered from behind the men. She handed Jayne the gun and moved so she was behind the two men. "Blue Hands. No armor on the skull." She twisted her hands together in an attempt to control how they shook before she continued, "Shoot them in the head when they emerge. Must wait until both are clear of the door. Kill them both."

"Two by two Hands of Blue?" Riddick asked her as he sighted down the gun barrel. Wash was still above the parking lot. The ambulance was built for smooth landings and takeoffs and speed in the air. But smooth didn't always make for fast. Still, they didn't have long before they'd be at the right altitude for travel.

"Yep," Jayne answered as he checked the gun and began to line up his own shot. "When they got us in holding they musta made a call. Screamin' started soon after that. An' River started to go a little… wobbly."

"Didn't collapse though," River pointed out firmly. "Figured how we could get out. Forward the light brigade, charge for the guns." That she was trembling now was beside the point. She hadn't lost her mind when the men had come. Her eyes were on her mate, and even though he was looking down the scope she could feel his grim satisfaction. He was very pleased with her, grateful she'd been able to keep going in the face of her fears. And very determined that these particular men would not be hunting her again.

"Ain't sayin' you did bad," Jayne reminded her. "Just sayin' it was tough on you s'all."
"Not easy," She agreed and looked over her shoulder at Wash. "Mr. Pilot man, please do not take off for Serenity until after we have killed the evil men."

"We're killing people in a hospital zone?" Wash asked, "Isn't that against the rules? We had a plan for this right?" He sounded halfway between amused and worried as he kept the ambulance in a steady rise.

"Bad feeling," The Reader explained. "Hence the guns. Remember? Besides they started the killing. Killed every fed in the hospital to get to us. Made them bleed from their eyes and nose and teeth and fingernails. Screaming death and pain. Canon to the right of them, canon to the left of them, volleyed and thundered."

"Guess they did start it then," Wash nodded. "We've got another minute or so before we're at cruising altitude anyway." As always when Wash was flying his concentration was on his job. River took a deep breath and did her best to imitate his calm. Riddick was taking slow timed breaths, he and Jayne sinking easily into sniper mode. Even heart rates, deliberate breaths, and steady hands aimed as they awaited their targets with seemingly endless patience. Between Riddick, Jayne and Wash, she could feel her own nerves steadying.

"Don't need one," Riddick had a thread of deep satisfaction in his voice. "The hún dàn are pokin' their heads out the door now." He took a deep breath, "There's one." He told Jayne, "And there's the other."

"I got the right," Jayne confirmed his target and adjusted with silent ease.

"I got the left," Riddick agreed. "One, two…"

"Three," Jayne finished and the two of them fired simultaneously. Two bullets speeding on their way with the sound of one shot. River tilted her head as she looked between the two men and Read from her lover that they'd used an old trick from the army. Multiple snipers on coms, synchronizing their shots. It caused greater confusion to the enemy and obscured the sniper locations from anyone who might come looking.

"And they are down," The convict had a smirk of gratification in his voice and he turned to look over at Wash. "Two seconds to close it up and we're good."

Jayne was sliding the ambulance door closed as Riddick spoke. The big merc grabbed the rifles and stuck them back in the storage compartment before taking a seat next to Ciara again. "We're good to go," He called from his place.

River nodded her agreement, "Jayne is correct. No more pursuit. No one left to pursue us."

"Well let's go home then," Wash chuckled.

River took a seat on the floor next to Riddick and sighed as he pulled her into his lap. The captain was very irritated. He didn't like Wash not looking to him for permission before he agreed to hold the ambulance's altitude. He was angry that there was a person he didn't know with them, pretty as Ciara was. And he was really aggravated about the guns and the killing. He'd wanted a smooth easy job with no shooting and he hadn't gotten it.

Riddick's mouth on her neck, his thoughts silently praising her for a job well done as he held her tightly against his body, distracted her from the captain's anger. River wrapped her arms around her mate's neck and raised her face for his kiss. Hot, hard and demanding, his lips came down on hers. They promised her love and warmth and acceptance of everything she was. Her moan filled his
mouth as she responded by pulling his head closer to hers. He was everything. Her other half, her lover and partner, her dearest friend and her beloved. Her equal. Just as she was his.

No matter how angry Mal was, they'd done what they knew was right. Kept their promise to Jayne. Saved Ciara from a life of slavery. Riddick's hands were holding her tight to his body. She could feel Simon's relief, Jayne and Ciara's joy along with Ciara's lingering confusion. Zoe was irked but speculative about Ciara while Wash was sunk deep into pilot mode. River sighed against Riddick's lips and shut them all out in favor of concentrating on her love. Time enough to deal with the fallout from their little jaunt to the core.

Riddick had to admit he wasn't paying much attention to anything besides his woman when they landed in Serenity's bay. He noticed a bit absently that Inara was back and Kaylee was coming down the steps to greet them but River was in his arms again and he wanted to give that his full attention. Her head was tucked under his chin so he could feel and smell her hair while his hands rubbed over her back and neck. She was still tense and her scent notes were tangled with worry. The steel and silk of her scent had a frayed and worn smell to it and she needed rest. They'd both feel better once they were back in their bunk and skin to skin.

Riddick carried River out of the ambulance after Mal exited it. Serenity's unique collection of scents washed over them both and he took a deep breath. He and his mate both needed to sit and absorb that they were home again. The big convict sat on a nearby crate and concentrated on his woman's hair and face and her soft skin under his lips. The smell of burnt cinnamon was fading as her nerves steadied, replaced with the scents of love and desire. All he wanted was to concentrate on plums and honey but unfortunately there were other concerns to address. Mal's voice asking a very pertinent question of Wash caught his notice though and he reluctantly looked up to hear the answer.

"Tell me we weren't followed," He demanded of the pilot through the cockpit window. Riddick's spine straightened, his muscles tightening, in preparation for the answer.

But Wash shook his head, "Nothing in our rearview the whole way back."

Mal nodded in satisfaction but Riddick could still smell the temper on him. "All right. Take us out of the world, as quick as you can," He instructed his pilot. For once he did not order Riddick to accompany Wash.

The red haired man was climbing out of the ambulance quickly, "We'll be out of atmo in five minutes." Riddick could feel River's gaze following the pilot and looked down at her.

"When all noncombatants are out of range then the barrage will begin," River whispered and leaned back against his body with a sigh. "Fury and confusion, does not like surprises. Wants to know ahead of time if surprises are coming."

Riddick took a deep breath and nodded his understanding. He kept an eye on Mal as the taller man greeted Inara. The Captain was acting affable enough towards the Companion but that didn't mean the man's mood was improved. Mal was the sort that could smile at everyone else right up until he cut the object of his ire off at the knees. It was a quality the convict could respect but at the moment it was like watching a time bomb slowly tick down. Sure enough, the captain smiled easily at the elegant woman, "Hey. How was your thing?"

Inara smiled politely as Zoe emerged from the ambulance, gave Jayne a courteous nod and when the merc helped Ciara down from the vehicle didn't betray her surprise by so much as a blink. Mal's
question drew her attention though and she gave an elegant little shrug of one shoulder before she replied. "As advertised: lots of needles and cold exam tables." She tilted her head and regarded the ambulance taking up a great deal of space in the cargo bay, "I heard you had some excitement."

Mal's smile flickered into a grin as Kaylee came to greet them both, "Oh, nothing much. Lots of running around. A little gunplay." He looked at Jayne who was still holding Ciara's hand when Kaylee came up to them. "A couple of needles."

Simon exited the ambulance as Inara smiled and murmured something about a cup of tea. The tall Browncoat pulled his mechanic into a back to front hug and kissed the top of her head affectionately as Riddick watched. The man was still behaving as if there was nothing wrong. But Furyan could smell that the storm was about to break. Mal's gaze narrowed in on Simon as the doctor moved towards them both. "So... Did you get what you needed?"

The core doctor regarded Mal calmly and then looked at Jayne and Ciara before he glanced at River and Riddick, "We did. The scan seemed to set off the alarms though. I expect River will want to do some husking to find out why."

Kaylee was frowning as she got a good look at Jayne, "What happened to your face?"

Jayne's attention was forcibly pulled from his sweetheart and he blinked at Kaylee in confusion, "Huh?" In return Kaylee motioned to her own eyebrow, mouthing 'ow'. Jayne's hand reached up and came away with blood before he shrugged. "It's nothin'. If I didn't give Simon somethin' ta do he'd think I didn' like him no more."

Simon chuckled, "I assure you Jayne, you needn't injure yourself to make me feel needed. I've got plenty to keep me occupied between my sister and Rick. Not to mention the way Mal seems to get himself shot. Constantly." He added as an afterthought.

Kaylee laughed as she looked backwards up at Mal, "You do end up with bullets in ya 'n awful lot Cap'n."

Mal smiled, "Well that's cause I'm lucky that way. Got a magnetic personality."

His little mechanic groaned at the pun and shook her head. "Well I'd better get goin'. We're hittin' sky in a few and I wanna make sure my girl's all set."

Riddick watched as Kaylee left and turned his head to regard Mal expectantly. The blow up should come at any moment.

Mal waited. His lungs pumped like a steam train as he took deep breaths and exhaled, waiting for Kaylee to shut a door behind her. Finally the telltale thump of a door sliding shut floated down to them and Mal let loose. "What in the name of the wo de ma he ta de feng kuang de wai sheng dou are you four playin' at? You kidnapped someone? How'n the gorram hell did ya manage that?"

Before anyone, even Ciara, could interrupt and tell him that she was definitely not a kidnap victim, the Captain gathered more air and kept going. "I dunno what ya'll are playin' at but I've had enough a you treatin' this boat like it's your ruttin' toy store. This is my ship. I'm responsible for any law breakin' goes on an' that means if you're plannin' on somethin' I oughta know about it. An' iffen I don't? We're gonna revisit that talk we had 'bout the airlock an' how fast ya'll can breathe vacuum."

"Pū jiē!" Riddick couldn't restrain his roar for another minute. The fact that Mal had stared straight at the slender woman in the convict's arms as he threatened the airlock had roused the animal in a way that left the man straining for control. "Ever think that iffen you'd work with us for five minutes we
wouldn't have to hide?"

River patted Riddick's arm and slid off his lap so they could both stand. "We made a promise to Shea when we came aboard. Promised to help him find her. Promised to leave no stone in the 'Verse unturned." She told the Browncoat flatly, "We will not break our word because you were being tetchy. Displeased with me being a woman. Annoyed that we do not behave in the way you understand." Riddick growled deep in his throat to underscore her words. One way or the other Mal would understand that he and River were united in everything.

"Who in the name a all that's unholy is Shea," Mal wanted to know. He was looking very irritated and a little wild eyed at being thrown new names along with the new face in his cargo bay.

"That'd be me Mal," Jayne shrugged. "'S my real name. Shea Cobh." He still had Ciara's hand in his. Riddick would make book that the man wasn't letting go of the woman anytime soon. "An' she ain't been kidnapped," Jayne continued in an irritated tone. "She's been rescued."

"From what?" Mal shook his head, "A lifetime a breathin' rarified air? What's in the Core that you needed to rescue her from that you couldn't be bothered to tell me first? Because this weren't no spur a the moment thing I'm guessin'."

"Slavery," Simon interrupted the Captain before he could get going on another of his rants. The doctor's voice was ice cold and he was still with fury. "They took a free woman and they were going to sterilize her, tag her and sell her to the highest bidder." As Mal stared at him the Core refugee continued with a hint of a sneer, "And before you extol the delights of the Core worlds again, might I remind you that Core people took my sister and Rick and were torturing, experimenting and enslaveing them."

Riddick watched as Simon stalked off to the infirmary. He had to admire his little brother; Simon could really make an exit when he wanted to. He could feel the smirk pulling at his lips and smelt River's silent amusement at Mal's confounded expression staring after what he'd thought was a tame greenhorn doctor.

"The captain has slightly misjudged the situation," River said quietly. "Perhaps we should unload the cargo while Ciara and Jayne have Simon look them over. No surprises." She tilted her head at Jayne and it was Ciara who nodded.

"Come 'long now Shea," The slender newcomer tucked her hand in her beau's arm. "I'll feel better if you have that scratch looked at. An' we'll need to be certain sure that they've not stuck anythin' in me doesn't belong."

Riddick smiled as Ciara's language began to echo the lilt he'd first heard when he met Jayne. Mal scowled at he and River, "Fine, then Rick, you help me with the cargo. River, you go 'long with your brother an' do your huskin'. Like to know you're not gonna light up every sensor you come near in the future."

The Furyan watched as his little mate nodded and slipped off his lap before she kissed him gently on the cheek, "Hold your temper my láng." The Reader reminded him. "He knows very little of us in truth."

"No promises," Riddick growled but he grabbed her back for another kiss before he let her go up the steps to the lounge.

Unloading the ambulance wasn't exactly thought provoking work but Mal was frowning like he was using all his concentration on it. Finally the captain looked at Riddick and met his gaze, "I don't like
"Yeah, I've noticed," The convict grumbled as he set the last of the crates down. "If we'd thought that we could trust you it wouldn't have been a secret."

"Since when am I not trustworthy," Mal almost yelped and Riddick sighed.

"Lemme think," He rolled his eyes. Before he could continue Wash took Serenity off the docks and into the atmosphere. The captain hung onto the crates for balance while Riddick just leaned against the stairs. When they reached the Black the escaped murderer took the spectacles off and slipped them in his pocket. His goggles emerged from another pocket but he simply held them for a moment. The dim light was enough that his eyes were shining; he could smell that the sight unnerved Mal. "Right now you're a little freaked because a my eyes," He observed. "You've known about 'em for months but they still freak you out."

"And that means you cain't trust me?" The Browncoat clearly didn't like where this was going.

"Just an observation," Riddick kept leaning back against the stairs. He was relaxed even if the captain wasn't. "You decided I'm an evil lecherous hump somewhere along the way and that River needs protection from me. You've grabbed her and scared her to death, to the point where she pulled a knife on you. And you don't seem to get that if we don't tell you somethin' it's for your safety and ours."

"See! That there is just what I'm talkin' about. That's the sorta thing I need to know," Mal retorted. "You two adding things into a job because you feel like it ain't something that makes me feel easy about letting you have the run of the ship."

"If Ciara hadn't been in the hospital there wouldn't even been a job," Riddick snarled back at him. "That hasn't crossed your mind? Not once? None of us wanted to go to a Core hospital, risk our necks, for something as stupid as a scan. Yeah Simon wanted it but River's doin' well enough that he didn't need it."

"Then why-"

"Because a the way you treat us, the way you treat Jayne an' me an' River. Even the way you treat Simon," The Furyan interrupted him angrily. "You treat Jayne an' me like we're lower'n dirt. You act like Simon's an idiot about anything but doctorin' and Core life. And River...well half the time you act like she's a lunatic and the other half like she's a child. She's neither."

"So that means you gotta lie to me?" The Captain snapped back. "You four wanted to pull a job on your own ain't like I haven't let you before."

"That's the point Mal, ever since we broke down you act like you're waitin' for us to snap and kill you all in your beds." Riddick stood away from the wall and paced. He could feel his heart racing, like his blood could burst from his veins. "Dunno what we've gotta do to prove that we're not gonna turn on you but I'm gettin' tired of trying to figure it out." He looked towards the infirmary where Simon was doctoring Jayne, "That man...he's the most loyal, faithful person I've ever met besides River and Simon. When he gives his word there's nothin' that'll make him break it."

"You obviously ain't heard how he come to be on the boat," Mal nearly sneered.

The growl that burst from Riddick's throat was nearly a roar, "I know he took a better deal. Took a bunk on a boat where the women were treated decent. Where he had a better chance of finding his woman. He gave his word to Ciara before he ever met you. He hasn't turned on you ever. He hasn't
"Not two days after you came on the boat he was talkin' about there bein' an interesting day if he was offered enough money," The captain tried to remind him. "That sound like fidelity to you?"

"Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pìgu yǎn," Riddick cursed vilely. "All that proves is you ain't ever seen more'n Jayne. Shea Cobh is my brother. Jayne's just a mask to hide Shea. 'Cause Shea's been kicked around by the gorrar 'Verse enough. An' by you more'n most." He sneered at the captain. "He's been on your crew for more'n a year an' never turned on you. He's protected your women, been as polite as he could given his circumstances and he's gotten shot for you almost as much as when he was in the Browncoats. But that don't seem to matter to you none."

"It don't change the fact that you four went behind my back and-"

"Did what River an' me promised when we learned he still hadn't found her," His blood was hot and it showed in his snarl of a voice. The animal was rising, fury and the need to protect his family racing through his blood regardless of what might happen to the captain. "If we'd come to you an' told you Shea's girl was bein' held on Ariel you might not have even believed us." Riddick glared at the taller man and started to pace again trying to contain the Animal, "The way you've been acting lately we weren't sure if you'd just forbid us from settin' foot dirtside if you had the mind to. Then we woulda been disobeyin' orders. Didn't wanna do that. You're the captain an' all." His tone made it quite clear what he thought of Mal's leadership, "So we figured easier to get forgiveness than permission. We'd waited any longer an' Ciara would have been mutilated and sold, tagged like an animal and made a slave. We'd never have gotten her out afterwards. The hospital was our only window."

"I never woulda-" Mal tried to make a start on a defense and Riddick turned on him quickly.

"An' a month ago you would never have grabbed River an' tried to pull her off my lap," He snapped the words out. "We been tryin'," His hands clenched into fists. "Tā mā de niǎo we been tryin' so tā mā de hard to show you what we are. To not hide every ruttin' thing we need from you. So you'd see we ain't tryin' to...to deceive you."

"What are you talkin' about," The captain's smell reeked of confusion and irritation and Riddick snarled back at him.

Before he could speak though, River's soft voice was carrying through the air. Only Riddick noticed the undertcurrent of pain and fatigue in her voice and how it echoed in her scent. She strode quickly through the bay and took one of Riddick's fists in her hands, calming him further. "We have tried to show you. We have not hidden our needs. How much we must touch each other. How much we love."

"Makin' out on the bridge ain't-"

River's voice cut the Captain off more elegantly than Riddick's had, but no less curtly, "Is completely necessary to us, just as it is to Zoe and Wash." She shook her head at Mal and leaned against Riddick's side, calming him further. "We have sparred, worked hard on our fighting skills and stopped hiding from you when we did. Used our blades and had rousing bouts in our attempts to let you see the more of us."

"He looks like he's gonna kill you!" Mal objected, "I ain't lettin' a man that size fight a girl little as you with blades. You don't stand a chance against him."

"See that's where you're wrong Mal," Jayne and Ciara were walking down the steps Simon a bit behind them. "River could probably take Rick if she was tryin' to kill him. She's a bit faster, just ain't
as strong." The gun hand grinned at River. "An' there's the whole genius thing."

"Stamina is about the same," River nodded her agreement. "My mate is the only person on the boat who could stand against me truly." Riddick let his hand wrap around her waist and took a deep breath. The scent and feel of her calmed his rage better than anything else.

"We been tryin' to show you," Riddick remarked in a low voice. "Hidin' what we are, what we can do...feels like a cage. Like we ain't free any more than we were in the Academy. We kept tryin' to hide, to act civilized for you, an' it made it harder to keep control of the animals. Makes us tetchy."

"Feels like we could come apart at the seams," River nodded her agreement. "Couldn't keep doing it. Not when you knew we were hiding something. Concealing who we are made you more suspicious of us not less."

"Why didn't you just gorram say," The captain wanted to know. "You've been drivin' me crazy with alla these stunts you've been pullin'. And you wonder why I'm feeling tetchy myself?"

"Had no way to explain it," The convict shrugged. "Ain't anyone else in the 'verse like me an' River. Wasn't sure you'd believe us if we just said it. We got secrets still. Ain't ever gonna say we don't."

"But we were trying to share what we are with you," River told the captain softly. "Know that you feel protective of me." She took a deep breath, "It is appreciated but I cannot be protected by being put back in the music box. I must be myself. Richard must be himself. Or why bother to keep us aboard? If we must hide...can't do it. Can't hide anymore. Can't be kept in the cage again."

"See?" Riddick looked at Mal and saw a slightly dawning understanding on the tall man's face. "I'm Furyan. Got no words for what it does to me, to the animal, to be...restrained. You got a look after Jiangyin. I've been dealing with somethin' like that every day on this boat. And so has River. Alla the rules you got...we try an' abide by 'em. But you seem to make up rules just for us. Neither one of us can live in a collar Mal. We'll die first."

"So living under my rule, on my boat, ya'll can't do that anymore? Is that what you're sayin'," Mal was irritated and confused but at least he was trying to ask the right questions.

Riddick sighed and shook his head, "Dunno if you'll ever understand Mal." He confessed heavily. "An' maybe now ain't the time for talkin' about it. We're all tired."

"All right, let's skip past the rescues accomplished under my nose part an' go straight to the sniping folks out of the ambulance part," Mal changed the subject. "What in the hell was that?" Riddick almost winced. Mal's voice had gotten a little loud again and to someone with sensitive ears it was a bit uncomfortable. Thankfully Jayne was willing to answer the Captain.

"Remember how River was goin' on 'bout 'Hands a Blue'?" Jayne reminded the tall Browncoat, "That's what she were talkin' 'bout. Two fellas wear blue body armor up to their necks. They had this...thing..." He shuddered visibly and Riddick could smell his discomfort as the huge man recalled his experience in the hospital.

"From what I could gather it was some sort of sonic device," Simon explained in his cool measured tones. Doc was more unnerved than he looked but Mal wasn't working with Riddick's sense of smell or hearing. Mal wouldn't hear the barely noticeable tremble in Simon's voice as he explained. He couldn't smell Simon's outright terror at the idea of losing River to those men. "They were sent for when we were caught. I assume to take River back and to get rid of the rest of us. We don't know why they...killed all the Feds."
Mal shook his head and looked at River and Riddick, "Ya'll just attract trouble the way I do bullets doncha?" He sighed. "C'mon. We're in the Black. Rick, check with Wash 'bout the course we set. Jayne, you got dinner duty, 'spect you an' River can' handle that. I want everyone in the galley in an hour." He looked at Jayne and Ciara with a frown, "Guessin' you didn't exactly get a chance to pack. Simon, you go an' get Kaylee, see if she an' Nara can get Jayne's girl outfitted in somethin' sides scrubs."

River smiled, "My clothes should fit as well. I'll bring some to the galley and you can try them on."

Riddick watched as Ciara nodded with a grateful smile, "You're bein' far too kind. But I'm in no position to refuse your offer."

The convict pressed a kiss to his woman's temple, "I'll be on the bridge if you need me Qīng Xiāng."

Wash was absently turning his T-Rex dino in his fingers while staring out at the stars when he arrived at the bridge. "Rick," He greeted his co-pilot a bit absently.

"Wash," Riddick took his seat and checked the instruments before he turned slightly to look at the pilot. "Somethin' eatin' at you?" He knew his silvery eyes glowing through the dim light of the bridge was an unnerving sight but Wash looked up and back to his T-Rex without a flinch. There was a new note to the pilot's scent, like a smoky fire. An emotion he hadn't come across in the pilot yet, an oddity in itself since the two of them spent quite a bit of time together on the bridge.

"Just wonderin' how I should take it, that you didn't tell me about the rescue operation," Wash said finally. He looked up and met Riddick's gaze. "Did you think I wouldn't help?"

Hurt, Riddick realized with a slight frown. He'd hurt Wash's feelings, made the man think he and River didn't trust the pilot by keeping him out of the loop. "Shit," He muttered. "That wasn't it." He barely registered the sigh that escaped from his lips. "Didn't wanna put you in a bad spot."

"A bad spot," Wash repeated dully. "Because I've never been in one of those before," He muttered his sarcasm tinged with bitterness for the first time in Riddick's hearing.

"A bad spot with your wife," Riddick clarified. That got Wash's attention and the escaped murderer nodded emphatically. "Think I dunno how she feels about orders? 'Bout goin' off 'thout instructions? If we'd told you about Ciara, about our plan and Zoe found out you knew and didn't tell her? Shit. I can't think of a worse place to be than in bed with a pissed off wife. And I've spent years in Slams and on the run."

"I thought you didn't..." Wash shrugged uncomfortably. "I thought we were friends. I would have stood with you if Mal'd given you a hard time about it."

"We didn't tell Mal either," Riddick reminded him. "Nobody but me, River, Simon an' Jayne knew what we were doing. Worse came to worse ya'll would have been none the wiser. I'd a gone after my family an' the ship woulda left."

"Now that's about the sorriest thing I've ever heard," Kaylee's voice was a snarl that might have rivaled one of Riddick's in a temper if it hadn't been for her sweet voice. "Thinkin' we'd go off on our merry an' just leave ya'll. What kinda mèi mei d'ya think I am Rick?"
Riddick cursed as the bridge became crowded with Zoe and Mal entering the space behind Kaylee. "I thought we were gonna talk about this at dinner?" He glared at Mal. "Jiàn guǐ, why'm I botherin'? Crew like this I dunno how ya'll think you're in command. Run right over a man."

"Welcome to my little slice of life," Mal rolled his eyes. "Wash, came to let you know that preliminary course aside we're gonna hafta sit down and work out contacts an' all before we get set for fuel."

"Well right now we're headed for Persephone," The pilot explained cheerfully. "Thought Badger might help us unload the ambulance. And it has the benefit of being a regular stopover for us so it's not exactly suspicious if we've got anyone eyeing our trail." Wash leaned back with the peculiar half smile he got when he was clever with navigation and would like accolades for his particular genius.

"Good work," Mal nodded. "Now let's set the auto pilot an' get along to the galley. Seems I've got an extra passenger an' I'm not too sure I really understand how she came aboard." He shook his head in mock dismay.

"I'm a little shaky on that myself," Zoe commiserated with her Captain a sardonic smile playing around her lips.

"Tiào chū fǔ dǐ jìn huǒ kēng," Riddick muttered to himself and rose from his chair. "Really startin' to dislike the galley. Feels like I'm always tā mā de explainin' myself in there."

"You do tend to do stuff requires explainin'," Kaylee chirped her reminder at his back.

Riddick growled and shook his head but didn't reply stalking down the hallway in annoyance. River and Jayne looked up as he entered and Jayne gave him a commiserating look while River simply shrugged. Ciara and Simon were nowhere to be seen or heard.

River must have Read his curiosity because she smiled slightly, "Told Ciara to use our bunk to change into clothing. Simon is in the dorms setting up a room for her. Jayne was insistent."

"Gotta court her," Jayne nodded. "Won't be easy but I ain't treatin' Ciara like trash just 'cause her folks did."

That got Riddick smiling as he pictured his oldest friend with a nosegay in his hands for the slender woman they'd rescued. "Hope you're aimin' for patience," He teased the taller man. "I'm told courtin' a woman is hard work. Takes time."

"Yeah it does," Wash agreed having heard the tail end of the conversation. "Least yours likes you already Jayne. Zoe didn't like me at all when we first met."

"You were bothersome," River's voice was amused. "Didn't fit in any of the right boxes. Refused to be defined and quantified." Riddick could see her smiling next to Jayne as she chopped up vegetables and threw them in the wok. He narrowed his gaze on her and took a deep breath. Under the smells of the meal his woman was still tired and a little edgy. She was trying to behave normally, hiding her fatigue but after the meal he was taking her to their bunk. His initial reaction when they'd gotten out of the ambulance had been the right one, they needed quiet and time. Skin privileges to remind themselves they were both safe.

"Thought that was a good thing though," Jayne chuckled as he closed the steamer and set the timer for the rice. "Ain't that what that verse a yours said Rick?"

"Got a million in my head Cobh," Riddick chuckled in spite of the gathering crowd in the galley. Everyone was flocking to the table now. The convict nodded reassuringly at Simon as his brother
appeared in the doorway with a wary look. He didn't blame the doctor one bit for the caution, when Mal went on a rampage it was best to be out of the way. "You gotta gimme a little more'n that," He continued as Simon entered the room.

"The one you were sayin' 'fore the Siege," Jayne was stirring chicken flavored protein in with the vegetables while River grabbed plates, flatware and chopsticks. "It was s'all 'bout not knowin' why you love someone bein' better."

Riddick caught a glimpse of a slender face surrounded by waving hair that was a bit lighter than River's as Ciara came down the hallway and stood against the doorframe. She was wearing a pair of River's cargo pants and a tee-shirt. The pants were an inch too long and the shirt more than a hair too tight. She was a pretty woman, slender and elegant looking with curves that would look right snuggled up against Jayne. "Cobb why don't you turn 'round and pay attention to your woman 'stead a askin' me about poetry more'n four lifetimes old?"

That distracted his friend for a little bit as Jayne handed over command of the meal to River and leapt to get Ciara seated at the table. His solicitous manner got all sorts of goggle eyed looks from Zoe, Kaylee, Inara and the Captain though Wash simply smiled and took his usual seat.

River turned and slanted an admonishing look at Kaylee, "Knows that Jayne is not nearly as uncouth as he pretends." She reminded the mechanic. "Said as much months ago. No need to be afraid of Jayne."

"Aw, I know that," Kaylee shrugged as she took her seat. "But knowin' an' seein's two different things is all."

Riddick watched as the rest of the crew distributed themselves around the table while Jayne and River got the food laid out. Part of his brain was still working on the poetry Jayne had asked him about while the other was trying to figure exactly what to say about Ciara's rescue.

River slipped into her seat beside him, dropping a kiss on his cheek as she did and he couldn't help wrapping an arm around her waist. He'd come far too close to losing her today. Her slender body slid up against his, snug to his side and something he hadn't realized was wound tight inside him relaxed minutely. Her scent was warm with humor and the tequila smell of it tickled his nose. "Thought a somethin' Qīng Xiāng," Riddick murmured his question.

River nodded and smiled up at him before she turned to look at Jayne who was sitting as close to Ciara as the chairs would allow. In the quiet before the meal was served her voice caught everyone's attention, "Love not me for comely grace, for my pleasing eye or face, nor for any outward part, no, nor for my constant heart. For these may change or turn to ill so thou and I shall sever. Keep therefore a true lover's eye, and love me but know not why. So hast thou the same reason still to dote upon me ever."

Jayne grinned, "I shoulda known you'd think of it." He nodded his satisfaction and sent Riddick a grin, "I never can remember the words but it sure was funny to have you sayin' all sortsa inspirin' stuff 'fore we started fightin'."

Simon chuckled, "If my memories of what happened on planet are accurate he still hasn't broken the habit." The doctor shook his head as he passed the bowl of rice down the table, "I still didn't know him very well at the time. So it was a bit of a surprise when he and River began to trade Tennyson back and forth before we ran the gauntlet of our own little valley."

Riddick chuckled, "Probably didn't help that I'd been actin' like an ignorant fèi wù gǒu niang yǎng de the whole time we were there." Wash and Kaylee both had frowns on their faces, plainly trying to
remember if they'd been told this part of the story or not. The Furyan shrugged as he continued, "Had been keepin' up the charade 'cause a the merc that'd chained me up. After that it was more 'cause I didn't trust the pilot. But we were close enough then that I was lettin' the mask slip a bit. More worried about River an' givin' her a little comfort than intimidatin' a woman without a spine of her own."

"Speaking of spines," Mal spoke up and Riddick sighed. The Captain was going to start in on what they'd been doing and planning and the whole conversation was going to be worse than irritating. "Seems there's been more than a little bit of secret keepin' on my boat. River, Rick, you two got a little bit of talkin' to do."

Riddick growled his annoyance and forced himself to set the chopsticks down before he stabbed someone with them. Before he could speak Simon's voice cut through the tense silence, "Captain my sister and her husband need to eat more than two bites before you begin your interrogation." He told the tall man insistently. "Or do you think that being shut into a coffin, chased through a hospital and nearly recaptured by the Alliance is some sort of relaxation regimen for the two of them?"

"Well how's about you then Doc," Mal speared the slender core man with a glare. "Maybe you'd like to enlighten me as to why ya'll felt it necessary to hide what you were doin'?"

"I believe we explained that adequately in the cargo bay," Simon retorted coldly. "We didn't trust you to agree to a rescue. Your initial reaction to Ciara's presence proved, to me at least, that we were correct. We couldn't leave her there."

"Not that it ain't nice for Jayne to have his sweetheart back," Kaylee's voice was puzzled but reasonable. "But why were ya in the hospital?" The pretty mechanic looked at Ciara, "Don't look like you're sick."

"I was in the hospital so that once they sold me I wouldn't be able to get pregnant unless the man who bought me wanted me to conceive," Ciara's voice was as elegant as River's in its way but still held the musical lilt of Kerry in her speech. "After that they were planning to implement a tagging procedure so that if I ever ran he could find me."

"They intended to auction you off?" Inara's voice sounded as if she had trouble considering the implications.

"As far as I know," The escaped slave nodded, her bow shaped mouth set in a hard line at the thought. "I've been trained to be everything a man or woman could want. A bedwarmer, a caretaker, hostess, or secretary. A mistress, or even someone's nanny if that's what is needed."

"They gave you a Companion's training and then added to it," Inara realized in horror. "Without any of the spiritual guides or the respect implied along with a Companion. She looked at Mal and shook her head, "It's highly illegal."

"They didn't exactly advertise," The Kerry woman replied coolly. Riddick tilted his head at Jayne and the big gun hand gave him a half grin. Ciara had spine to spare and that was something he could respect. He could smell River's brain working as she listened to Ciara and thought over what the other girl was saying.

"So you started out a legal indenture?" Wash asked quietly, "Or was that just a line of zāo gāo they fed to your parents and Jayne?"

"I've no notion what my parents were told and I gave less than a damn about it after I was taken," Ciara shrugged off the question. "They sold me, took coin for me and never once looked me in the
eye whilst they did it. I held out hope that my Shea would come for me but I never believed that my family would make a try for me."

"From what I learned on the cortex it's quasi-legal at best," Simon explained quietly. "Indenturing children is only allowed under certain very narrow circumstances. But because no one knew the law Ciara's indenture wasn't examined very closely."

"Is that all they take girls for?" Kaylee looked worried, "I mean how many other kids have they done this to?"

"They don't always take children to be whores," Ciara shook her head. "It's my bad luck I grew up pretty enough to qualify." She shrugged, "It's like...an orphanage or a school. They want to know what skills we have, what we're good at, what we could be used for. One of the boys my age was taught to be a personal chef because he had a gift for it. Another girl was brilliant at math and she was trained to be an investment advisor."

"With whoring along with it," Riddick added grimly.

The Kerry woman shrugged, "I don't doubt it." She leaned against Jayne's arm and sighed, "They raise you to know that you belong to whoever holds your contract. Everyone got sex training. Even the ones who weren't...considered optimal for the trade."

"And how did you four find her," Mal aimed his question at the conspirators. "Couldn't have been easy."

"Wasn't," Riddick grunted in irritation. He took a swallow of water and sighed before he looked at River. "You wanna explain it?"

"Yes, my láng requires sustenance still," River nodded. "Began with a physical description. Tracked Ciara from Kerry, from the time of her indenture. Jayne knew to the day when she'd been taken." The Reader shrugged, "Found a broker on Persephone. Planned a job with Shazza and the Cap'n as distractions. Information theft along with a bank robbery. Narrowed down where Ciara was sent."

"That job we went on was so you could find her?" Mal blinked in shock. "You been plannin' this thing for that long an' you never told me?"

Riddick sighed, "I told Jayne the day we got on the boat that we'd help him find Ciara." He looked at Mal and knew his expression made plain that he didn't care what the Captain thought of his actions. "Ever since I've known the man he's been looking for his girl. Fought a war for her sake. Sure as hell wasn't gonna give up just because it was peacetime."

"Wasn't anything to tell until lately," River shrugged off Mal's irritation. "Mr. Universe allowed me to utilize his cortex and network to increase our search range. Fed me increasingly narrowed results until we found Ciara on Ariel. Determined that the day of her procedures was the only window of opportunity for rescue. Developed a plan to break into the hospital. Payday for the crew, a plausible reason for the job and voila, we were in."

"You mean you did all that and no one besides the four of you knew about it?" Ciara was staring from Jayne to Riddick and River to Simon and then back again. "How did you manage it?"

"The hard part was getting the crew in," Simon shrugged. "They're not Core and they're not used to pretending they are so we needed disguises. And of course the ambulance."

"Still don't see why you couldn't a told us," Mal argued. "Am I that unreasonable?"
The chorus of yeah's, yeses and in Jayne's case a 'hell yes' that came back from the four conspirators along with the addition of Wash's adamant question of 'when are you reasonable?' answered Mal's question pretty definitively. The captain scowled and Riddick shrugged at him.

"We told you that already. You've been in a bad mood because a River an' me. We weren't gonna take the chance of you not wanting to bother. Knew there could be trouble. Slidin' the three of us into a Core hospital was always risky with the price on River an' me. An' it ain't like they'd just let Simon waltz in an' out either." Riddick shook his head, "But we knew if we didn't get her today we'd lose our chance for good. Once she was tagged? Even if we got her we wouldn't have enough time for Simon to get rid of the tags before the feds caught up with us."

"How'd you get in an' out then since you three are tagged fugies anyway," Mal wanted to know.

River's laugh was like a breeze, "Genetically tagged." She reminded the Captain. "That doesn't mean a tag like Ciara would have gotten."

Simon nodded, "Think of the tag Ciara would have been given as something like…a bright red hat. Everywhere she went she would have sent off sensors as an indentured person. Like a leash leading back to the person holding her contract."

"And that's different from the tags you three got?" Zoe had been quiet up to that point but her question was like a knife cutting through the air. Riddick studied the first mate's expression. She wasn't pleased but she didn't seem as annoyed as Mal was.

"River, Rick and I are tagged but instead of a hat it's like a bracelet or a ring. We haven't been injected with anything that lights up sensors the way Ciara would have been," The doctor explained. "Our eyes, our faces and builds are in the Alliance database. But there are ways around that."

River nodded beside Riddick, "Ones and zeros, yes or no, the cortex sees all but can't see everything."

"Well that just makes all sortsa nonsense," Mal muttered.

Riddick watched his woman roll her eyes at the captain, "Mr. Universe and I husked the databases. Law enforcement has altered records. The cortex feeds cannot match our faces because the parameters have been changed so we do not match the records. We have not changed. But the records were."

"Cortex is a difference engine," Riddick slid his hand up and down River's spine as he took over the explanation. "It don't allow for maybe's and might coulds. It needs an exact match. Ain't like a human brain takes a look and says 'yeah that looks like our guy'. That's how we were able to walk outa the hospital. That's how we could go out on a Core world an' not get caught. Eyes are as distinctive as a fingerprint but River messed with those records too. Glasses to alter the corneas, change the camera's angle and they can't get a match on those either. River changed 'em but it's best to do somethin' to hide the eyes no matter what. Eyes are what people remember most a the time."

"Will do the same for Ciara as we have for the rest of the crew," River remarked absently as she traced her fingers over Riddick's knuckles. Her gentle hand was soft over his huge paw as it rested on the tabletop next to his glass and Riddick raised her knuckles to his lips for a thankful caress. "Must make introductions to Badger as well."

"Wanted to ask if ya'd get together some ident papers for Ciara," Jayne's eyes were on River. "Thanks to the hospital job got more'n enough cash to pay for 'em."
"Consider all paperwork a welcome home gift," River aimed a happy smile at the big gun hand. "She is pleased to help her gē ge reunite with his beloved."

Riddick chuckled in spite of his irritation at the surprised look on Cobh's face, "What'd ya expect Shea? My woman's got me beat to hell for loyalty."

"Might have something to do with how stubborn she is," Simon muttered in a pseudo discreet voice. Kaylee began to giggle and Wash started to laugh outright as River made a face at her brother.

Riddick pressed a kiss to his woman's hair and took a deep breath of her scent while he was so close. She still had those threads of fatigue in her scent. "You feelin' all right xiǎo láng," He murmured the question against her hair, hiding his voice beneath the chuckles and joking of the pilot and doctor.

"Everything feels heavy," River shuddered and flinched against him. Riddick looked up to see Mal's speculative gaze on River and growled low in his throat.

"Need to get you somewhere quiet," Riddick cursed himself for not taking her to their bunk right away. His arm around her waist was the only thing holding her slender body steady. She was trembling and her usual grace was nearly gone. A step back from the table and every eye fell upon them.

"Please, Richard," River moaned, her voice rising uncontrollably. "The staring...it's so loud! Make it stop, please make it stop." She was shuddering violently now, her legs folding under her until he had a choice, let her sink to the ground and kneel beside her or carry her bodily out of the galley.

He growled furiously as he sank to his knees, his arms banded around her protectively. The entire crew was staring at her and he could only imagine how loud their thoughts were in River's mind. "I gotcha Qīng Xiāng. Look at me, see me River," He slid his hand under her chin and tilted her face up so he could look into her eyes. "See? Right here. Breathe with me zhì 'ài. Breathe." When she took a deep breath along with him and he heard her heart slow minutely from its panicked racing Riddick nodded. "Good baby, that's real good. Now tell me what you need," He commanded gently. "Gotta get centered again. Right?"

"Need..." She took a huge gasping breath and Riddick felt more than heard her struggle for control over her words. "Need the blade and blood. It's... it's too loud. Heavy and hard, pushing at me. Please. My Riddick...please."

"S'all right," Riddick spared a moment to give Mal and Zoe a hard stare of warning that to speak in the next few minutes would mean a very violent and bloody death. "Got your shiv? Or you want mine?" He had to keep her talking, had to make it real for her. She could get stuck inside her mind for half a day if he didn't prompt her to speak when she got like this.

"Yours, please. Mine is...still on my thigh..." River's voice was faint but a bit steadier than a few minutes ago.

"All right," The convict kept his voice steady, as soothing as he could, and slipped the bone shiv out from his back. Closing her fingers around the handle he wrapped his hand around hers. "Feel me? I'm right here."

River nodded and took another deep breath. Riddick heard Kaylee whispering worriedly, "What's wrong? Why's she got a knife-"

Thankfully Simon interrupted her before the mechanic could get going. "I'll explain later Kaylee. Right now we all just need to keep calm and let River center herself. She's had to do this before."
"But I-" Kaylee subsided and Riddick dared a glance up to see Mal's hand on her arm. The captain hadn't taken his eyes off River and Riddick but he'd known unerringly how to silence Kaylee.

"'S'all right baby," Riddick crooned to his mate. "I'm right here. You just do what needs doin' now." He held his forearm out beside hers and released her hand. "You and me River."

"Blood to blood," River whispered drawing the tip down her forearm in a thin line. She handed him the shiv and Riddick did the same to his own arm.

"Blood to blood," He echoed her softly. He held his arm straight and nodded as River bent and slid her tongue along the bleeding slice on his skin. "My blood on your lips, my life within you," Riddick kept his voice low and gentle, his words only for River.

River nodded slowly and held her arm out for him. He bent and pressed his mouth to the cut on her arm, his tongue hot on her cool skin, tasting her blood on his lips. "My blood on your lips," His woman spoke deliberately, breathing in and out with exquisite care as she regained control. "My life within you."

"Blood binds us," Riddick looked into her eyes again. "Blood and life between us."

Her breathing slowed even further and her scent was clearing, the silk and steel of her mind stronger with every heartbeat, "Blood binds you to me and me to you." River exhaled the words carefully, "Blood and life between us."

Riddick looked at his woman and nodded his satisfaction. She was still wound tight, still needed time alone with him but she wasn't in danger of losing control anymore. Unfortunately that still left the two of them with an appalled audience of crewmates. "Well tā mā de dì yù," He muttered.

"Rick you'd better take River to your bunk," Simon said quietly. "I'll explain as best I can. You two can talk to us in the morning. But you need... well. I'm sure you know what you need."

Riddick tilted his head and saw that Simon was resolved, he had that ramrod straight spine that meant he was set and stubborn. Any argument would simply delay the inevitable. Riddick looked at River, still concentrating on her breathing and nodded his agreement. "C'mon baby, let's get you to bed." He stood and tucked the shiv back behind his belt again before he scooped River up into his arms. Without another word to the crew or Captain the escaped murderer cradled his woman in his arms and walked out of the galley.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Wow! Finally done with Ariel. I won't lie, this episode really suffered from an extreme case of 'I don't know what to do!-itis'. The way it was filmed didn't lend itself to writing very well and I got majorly distracted while I was writing it.

What do we think? Are we happy with Ciara's introduction? We'll get to know her a bit better in War Stories and then we'll be rearranging a couple of episodes because I think they fit better. Jayne is going to want to take Ciara home to Kerry for a visit so those two won't be around for a couple of episodes. Hence the rearranging. But did Ariel end the way you wanted? How did we like Simon's snobby doctor act? I figure he and Jayne will have a good laugh over that one later when they tell Riddick about it.
Chinese Translations:

Shǐ niào - Shit and piss
hún dàns - bastards
Pǔ jiē - fuck you
láng - wolf

Jiào nǐ shēng hái zì méi pígu yǎn - May your child be born with an imperforate anus
Tā mā de niǎo - goddamn it
tā mā de - fucking
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
mèi mei - little sister
Jiàn guǐ - to hell with it

Tiào chū fū dǐ jìn huǒ kēng - out of the frying pan into the fire
fèi wǔ gǒu niáng yǎng de - good for nothing son of a bitch
zāo gāo - Crap
gē ge - big brother
xiǎo láng - little wolf
zhì ’ài - most beloved
tā mā de dì yù - fucking hell

Script Chinese Translations:

wo de ma he ta de feng kuang de wai sheng dou! - script - holy mother of god and all her wacky nephews

Quote Sources:

Half a league, half a league, half a league onward – Charge Of the Light Brigade – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Forward the light brigade - Charge Of the Light Brigade – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Forward the light brigade, charge for the guns - Charge Of the Light Brigade – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Canon to the right of them, canon to the left of them, volleyed and thundered - Charge Of the Light Brigade – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Love not me for comely grace, for my pleasing eye or face, nor for any outward part, no, nor for my constant heart. For these may change or turn to ill so thou and I shall sever. Keep therefore a true lover's eye, and love me but know not why. So hast thou
the same reason still to dote upon me ever. – John Wilbye
Her mate's arms were warm and solid around her, his body heavy and protective as he cradled her against his chest. He held her even tighter as they descended the ladder to the bunk and River could feel the storm of his emotions like a whirlwind around her. Her Riddick was worried, for her, about the crews' reaction to their ritual bloodletting, about everything that had happened and what was to come. He wasn't built for worry. Her powerful husband was built for war, for battle, to face down anything that would strike at their heart. Worry eroded his control, made the animal come out snarling, as if the threads of tension were bars in a cage.

"She will be fine," River forced the words past her tired lips. "Too much all at once. It got tangled up in her head." She felt him sit down on the bed and his hands clutched even tighter at her body.

"I almost lost you," Riddick's voice sounded strangled with the effort of not shouting. "They were this close to taking you away from me." He wasn't shuddering, wasn't trembling but his entire body was coiled tight with the effort of not reacting to what might have happened. Richard B. Riddick did not break down. He did not shake with fear.

River slid her hands from his chest up to his neck and cupped his face in her hands, "Richard B. Riddick is the mightiest hero in the 'Verse. Would he marry so poor a creature as needed rescue from the likes of the Blue Hands?" It was her turn to be strong, her turn to remind him that they were both alive and still free. "Got ourselves caught and got ourselves away. And Richard shot the hunters down. Easy peasy; pudding and pie." She drew his face down to hers and pressed her mouth against his lips.

Heat flashed between them like a flame touched to paper, incendiary and immediate. In one fast turn of his body River found herself under him. His mouth was devouring her, tasting her skin, and his teeth on her throat insisted that she belonged to him. Moans and cries, growls and gasps filled the air around the two of them as they clutched at each other in near mindless desperation.

River felt the need rush over her skin in a hot shudder as Riddick's body pressed down between her thighs. He was hard and heavy over her, his hands fiery over the thin fabric of the hospital scrubs. His mouth was moving downward and the scrubs got in the way of his path. The sound of tearing fabric preceded the touch of cool air against her skin. She couldn't help her moan as her nipples tightened painfully, her breasts swollen with the need for his skin pressing down on her.

He was still wearing the uniform shirt and pants, it resisted all her efforts to touch his skin. "Off," River pulled at the shirt. "Off, off, off!" She tugged the shirt out of his trousers and found the hot flesh of his back with her palms. His groan against her skin was the most perfect sound. He was ignoring everything but his need to taste her, to feel her body under his.

His lips surrounded one nipple and sucked hard on the sensitive flesh while his hand palmed her other breast. She couldn't speak, the only sound that emerged from her lips was an animalistic moan of pleasure at the warm heavy feel of his calloused palm on her soft curves. Riddick was breathing deeply, inhaling her scent as he rubbed his body against hers. River moaned again as his diǎo stroked over her mound, wonderfully hard and hot through the thin scrubs.

She fumbled for his waistband, tried to worm her hand in between their bodies to unzip his trousers and couldn't. Riddick was too heavy, too determined to have his way, for her to release any part of
his body before he decided it was time. All she could do was arch her back, pushing her breasts up to his mouth and caress his skull and neck and back. How could his skin be so soft under her palms? How could the feel of him be so tender when he was such a strong, hard and oft times violent man?

His lips and mouth felt like the sweetest sting against her skin, the beginnings of his beard abrading her deliciously. River shivered as her body tightened, swelled, ready to burst out of her skin with need. His body was fierce with need as he held her down, grinding his hips to hers in wonderful but not quite enough pressure. She was wordless with need as his lips and tongue seemed to find every sensitized inch of skin to lave and suck and caress.

He teased and tormented her for what felt like hours before his free hand slid down to her hips and found the waist of her pants. One sharp movement later and they were ripped open down the front, her entire body exposed to his gaze and grasp. Riddick pulled back and finally met her gaze. River moaned and reached for the buttons of his shirt but his hands grasped hers tightly one huge hand holding both her wrists. "Mine," His deep voice rasped.

River nodded silently. Those heated glowing eyes held both man and animal. The animal was taking what it needed, reassuring both sides of Riddick that his mate was close and safe. For a moment that gleaming silver gaze faded slightly, the human side of her lover peering out at her, reining in his instincts to reassure himself that she was well. All she could do was smile. This was what he needed, what they both needed.

And then that quicksilver gaze was burning brightly through the twilight of their bunk again and his huge hands were pulling off his shirt, exposing his body to her hungry gaze. Those same hands pulled at the remains of her scrubs, touching her everywhere until she was flat on her back with his powerful body kneeling between her thighs. "Mine," He growled again. Whiskey and coffee and dark chocolate in her ears, Riddick's voice rolled over her skin like fur lined silk. Every part of her reacted to him, to that wonderful voice she'd fallen in love with in the darkness of the Academy. Like threads of silken need pulling through her muscles, winding tighter and tighter until she was helpless against it.

When he pulled off the trousers he still wouldn't let her touch him. His  jī ba was hot and hard against her thighs but he simply ignored his need and covered her body with his. His hands touched her everywhere, each scar, every bruise had to be touched and kissed and acknowledged in some way.

By the time Riddick put his mouth between her thighs she was wound so tight that she screamed as a blazingly abrupt fall rolled over her at the first stroke of his tongue and gentle suckle of his lips. And that was only the beginning.

It never failed to amaze her how thorough Riddick's animal could be. Whereas her animal was insistent about blood and sex, wanting to ride or be ridden and filled over and over with her mate's seed, Riddick's animal side seemed to take a strange possessive pleasure in bringing her fall again and again before their bodies were joined. She was weak and trembling with passion when her man finally slid his  diǎo inside her body. Inch by inch he filled her to the sound of her hot scream of need.

Stretched full of his cock and pressed down onto the mattress by his body all River could do was embrace the ecstasy of it. Her huge mate was desperate now, sawing back and forth inside her, and his breath hot on her skin. Every moan that fell from her lips was greeted with a kiss or a growl of possession, the man and animal merged completely with one goal. Her world narrowed to the sensations of his body and hers, hot, tight, wet and hard. Trembling skin, convulsing muscles and tender hands on her flesh.

He'd fallen in her, gasping and groaning, only a few minutes after he'd finally joined their bodies.
But he hadn't stopped moving or pressing her inexorably towards another fall of her own. She knew, objectively knew, that her lover's body was made for this activity. It was the primal purpose of the animal made flesh, to leave his mark on her, to procreate. If he wasn't so concerned with her pleasure, with proving that she belonged to him overwhelmingly, it might have grown uncomfortable. As it was it felt as if her body was overloading her brain with bliss. For every time he fell, Riddick pressed her to fall again and again, as if he couldn't be satisfied unless she was as mindless and desperate as he.

Up, down, north, south, direction had no meaning. Her world was his skin, hands, mouth and diǎo. The feel of his lips over hers, his fingers gripping her hips, jǐ ba hard and pounding inside her and his body covering her. His groans in her ears, his teeth on her neck or shoulder, hard palms holding her tightly were growing ever more desperate for release. River felt him shuddering hotly over her, a tormented roar of need on his lips as his final completion drew near. His palm slid down to her pì gu and urged her movements to quicken along with his.

She cried out in ecstasy as he slid impossibly deep inside her and bucked up against his body as every muscle seemed to contract and spasm around him. She heard herself wail his name, heard Riddick's voice shouting into her hair as he clutched her tighter and shuddered violently. His hips pounded against hers as he lost control. Hot, sweet, like lava burning inside her, River felt his seed pour into her womb as he shook and twisted himself hard and deep within her body.

"Mine," His voice was a rough demand in her ear. She shivered and murmured her agreement against his skin, her arms twined up between his shoulder blades as she kissed his salty neck. His voice echoed in her mind as he repeated the claim, "Mine."

River tried to pull him closer even as her eyes fluttered shut, "Mine." She agreed as exhaustion claimed her. "Mine."

The ship was quiet when she woke. Riddick's body was wrapped around her, half on top of her in an obvious effort to protect her even in his sleep. With a frown River listened for the rest of the crew and found them on the bridge and in the galley respectively. Kaylee was worried and so was Wash, though for different reasons. Kaylee feared that they'd done something to push River to such a desperate point. Wash was concerned that Mal would think his reasons for wanting the two of them off the boat even greater now. Zoe was trying to figure out what in the world they'd done. Inara was speculating on the ritualistic qualities of what she'd seen. And Mal…Mal was confused and didn't like the sensation. It happened too often around her for the Captain's taste and it made him irritable.

Jayne, Ciara and Simon weren't terribly concerned. Simon had seen this happen before. Jayne had been able to tell that River was better after the blood ritual and he'd explained Riddick to Ciara, at least in part. River smiled as she shifted and slipped out of Riddick's embrace. He grumbled in his sleep and his hand caught hers before she could entirely leave the bed, "Where're you goin' nǚ ren."

River kissed his neck before she answered, "Food and exercise. Need both. Also must explain the blood ritual last night. Mal does not like confusion."

"Understatement," Riddick muttered. "You want me there?" His silver eyes were staring at her through the darkness.

"Always want you," The Reader kissed him again. "But you should sleep some more. Four hours until your shift on the bridge. Can have at least another two hours sleep."
"I ain't up in another hour come'n get me," Riddick requested tiredly. River studied him for a moment before tugging her hand out of his grasp and covering him more thoroughly with the quilts. He was more exhausted mentally than he was physically. The events at the hospital had truly terrified him. She'd known before that he'd rather be taken back to the Academy himself than risk her recapture. The amount of pain he'd been holding back at the mere thought of losing her was astonishing. No one, save perhaps Jayne or Simon, would ever believe the sheer force of Richard B. Riddick's passions. No one but their family would understand just how integral she and her mate were to each other's peace of mind.

"If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it," River murmured as she pulled on her cargo pants and long sleeved tee shirt.

She climbed out of the bunk and walked down to the galley quietly. Most of the crew were sitting around the table or leaning against the cabinets. "Zǎo shang hǎo," She greeted them politely and took a mug down from the shelf. "Must apologize for such a display last night. Mental and physical balance was shaken by the events of the day."

Wash entered the galley and smiled when he saw her, "Hey little one. How're you feelin'?"

"Much better thank you," River grinned at him. "Was just apologizing for the disruption last evening."

The pilot made a 'phft' sound with his lips and shrugged, "Rick's said more'n once you an' him hear everything. Figured it was just all of us and our sounds along with the crazy day."

"Pilot is a very good man. Grateful for your understanding," The diminutive woman bowed her gratitude towards the cheerful man. "But perhaps there are questions?" She looked at the Captain and saw that he was surprised by the offer. "Easier to answer them now, the adrenaline rush has faded."

Mal nodded from where he was leaning against the counter, "Guess we were all just a little surprised by the blood s'all." He was watching her carefully as if concerned the weight of his gaze would drive her back into the chaos of the night before.

She tilted her head and poured herself a mug of tea, "Blood helps me to concentrate. The taste and texture of it, cannot be mistaken for anything else, binds me back to myself." She remembered the first time her husband had helped her through a blood ritual. It had saved her sanity more than once.

"But it was obviously a ritual," Inara observed. "Something Furyan?"

"Blood ritual," River nodded slowly. "Blood is very important to Furyans. It is life. The bonds it creates are powerful. Blood siblings, or spouses, this is not lightly done and can never be taken back. Richard discovered while we were at the Academy that when I became overwhelmed by my senses that he could draw me out of it with his blood."

"You couldn't have had a knife handy in there," Zoe commented curiously.

"That would have been too easy," River agreed with a dry smile. "No, he would harm himself, bite his lip, scratch his skin, draw blood and touch it too my lips. Whisper to me, words of the ritual. Taught me how to do it myself when I felt a spell coming on. With some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart."

"She had to do this on planet. The noise of the creatures, the panic of everyone around her, a man had just been killed," Simon recalled in a not completely steady voice. "She worried even through
the sensory overload that the blood would draw the creatures."

"They go off blood," His sister nodded. "Richard told me to do what I must. Solitary version of the ritual, got my breathing under control. Got on my feet." She took a deep breath, "Needs must when the devil drives."

"What was it that brought the spell on," Mal was concerned now. River looked at him and almost winced at how loud the Captain's thoughts were. He worried he'd done this to her. That they were all too loud, too demanding and they were contributing to her unrest. He was afraid that Riddick was more hindrance than help but that River would never see it.

"Too much fear, adrenaline, absence of a routine, and no quiet," River ticked off the reasons on her fingers. "Very little physical exertion but a great deal of emotional stress. Nothing to balance against. Worked too hard in St. Lucy's to control my senses, to not react to everything I heard and saw and smelt. Then came back to Serenity and everything seemed loud and heavy and pushed against my skin. Couldn't find my balance again."

"So this's kinda like on Jiangyin when you were goin' a little loopy 'cause a the cows takin' up space?" Jayne spoke up with his question before Mal could comment. His entire being was aglow with the pleasure of his woman's company and seeing that his friend's wife was well. She felt the last threads of guilt Jayne carried for her breakdown ease and fade as she smiled at him, so obviously feeling better.

"Very like. But worse because on Jiangyin there were no feds. No city full of people with all the noise and buzzing cameras and hissing cortex screens," The slender Core woman nodded. "Core worlds...they have so much to bombarding the senses... Persephone is irritating at times, Beaumonde is very annoying but Ariel was the worst. The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: little we see in Nature that is ours."

"But it ain't like after Verbena when you an' Riddick were goin' after each other all violent like," Mal wanted specificity and River couldn't really blame him. But at the same time she couldn't tell him about the triggers, not yet.

"No, that was me angry with Riddick. Had no quarrel with the rest of the crew. Hadn't felt quite right because he and I were not in agreement," River sighed. She sipped her coffee during the lull in questions and looked at Kaylee. The mechanic wasn't certain how to say it but she knew what her worry was. Finally the Rim girl just blurted it out, "Was it our fault? That ya got overwhelmed? I mean we were all chatterin' away and pokin' at you an' Rick. Should we a given you some space?"

River smiled at her friend, "Unlikely that the exact circumstances will repeat." She sipped her coffee, "But perhaps in the future, after a stressful day...a good rule of thumb would be to save interrogations for after I have meditated or exercised. Was very afraid yesterday. Richard was very worried. Too many emotions bubbling through us. Did not help my peace of mind."

"That's somethin' we'll have to keep in mind," Mal nodded his understanding. "'Less the boat's gonna fall outa the sky, we'll try to let you have a breather 'tween events and debriefs."

River nodded and finished her coffee, "Will go and meditate and exercise now." She explained as she set her mug in the cleaner. "Richard is still sleeping. Exhausted."

Jayne nodded, "Day he had, not surprised." The big merc set his mug down, "I'll come down, spot for ya if you like mèi mei."
The Reader gave him a pleased and grateful smile. "Kaylee and Ciara should also come. Simon as well. No reason to skip lessons today." She slanted a look at Jayne, "Must begin to teach Kaylee about guns. All of us work on hand to hand combat."

"Your doctor knows how to use a gun?" Ciara blinked as Simon rose from his seat without argument.

"Rick and Jayne taught me," Simon gave her an easy smile. "It didn't take me long to determine that we're all better off if I know enough to not shoot myself in the foot. And let's face it, in an emergency, every gun counts. Better my first time handling one is under controlled circumstances."

"Well I remember what Jayne and my Pa taught me," Ciara murmured. "But they don't exactly let us practice with guns. So I'm pretty rusty I'd guess."

River sent her a grin, "Must first learn to fall."

Ciara's groan was pained, "I don't like the sound of that." Her sweetheart chuckled wickedly while Simon and Kaylee winced in sympathy. River giggled and continued down the stairs. This would be fun.

River grinned at her brother as he pushed the barbell up again. Only Simon could have a conversation of this nature while he was exercising. He and Book were discussing the results of the scan. "I'd never seen that sort of...disregard for the good of a patient."

"Simon doesn't quite understand the nature of the 'scientist experimental vs. subject relationship,'" River teased as she watched Ciara and Kaylee spar. "Keeps thinking it should be like doctor patient."

"So shoot me, I don't understand sadism," Simon retorted as he pushed the barbell up again.

Book nodded his understanding, "Did you ever read the works of Shan Yu?"

"Shan Yu," Simon took another breath and lowered the barbell before he spoke again. "The psychotic dictator?"

"Yep," The Shepherd glanced at River. She nodded in answer and Book continued, "Fancied himself quite the warrior-poet. Wrote volumes on war, torture... the limits of human endurance."

She could almost hear Simon rolling his eyes. His voice was his mildest 'this conversation is ridiculous and I'm waiting for the point' tone that he possessed. "That's nice."

River shrugged, she knew what Book was getting at. The preacher continued, "He said... 'Live with a man forty years. Share his house, his meals, speak on every subject. Then tie him up and hold him over the volcano's edge, and on that day, you will finally meet the man'."

Simon was pushing the barbell up with a little more vigor now, he really didn't like Shan Yu. "What if you don't live near a volcano," He asked with a facetious smirk River didn't even need to see to know it was there. "I expect he was being poetical," Book shrugged. "Slow down a bit, you're going to lose momentum."

Simon took a deep breath, River felt him forcing himself calm, regulating his breathing. She studied
Kaylee and Ciara again for moment before she gave Simon her attention again. He was moving with purpose still but with more control. "Sadistic crap legitimized by florid prose," He said finally. "Tell me you're not a fan."

Book made a derogatory noise and shook his head, "I'm just wondering if they were. The people who did this to you River." He looked at her and she gave him a slight smile.

Simon struggled for a moment, she could feel the urge he had to shout, to throw the barbell, to rage at what had been done to her. River turned and looked at him calmly and her big brother took another deep breath, "The government did this to her."

The older man had a note of humor in his voice as he replied, "The government is a body of people, usually notably unguided."

Simon nearly chuckled, River could hear it in his voice, "Now you're quoting the Captain."

River shrugged, "Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one." Book and Simon glanced at her, neither one arguing the truth of her words.

Book was obviously still thinking, his voice was speculative, almost absent minded, "I'm just wondering if they put her through this just to see how much she could take. To truly 'meet her' as Shan Yu would have said."

River shook her head, "No." She answered the Shepherd. He was truly concerned, worried that she had been damaged beyond any help that could be given. "Torture was...a bi-product, not the intention. The means, but not the end."

Simon was rolling his eyes again, "Well nice to know that wasn't their primary aim." He snarked as steadily lifted the barbell. "Even without River's confirmation, logically speaking, if all they cared about was hurting River, they wouldn't still be after her."

"Is there anything that can be done?" Book was looking back and forth between the two of them.

River shrugged and concentrated more on the two girls practicing in front of her. Simon was answering Book, "River's already doing everything that can be done. Maintaining a solid routine seems to help the most. And we're researching. If we come across something we think will work without incapacitating her we might give it a try. Certainly we've got enough drugs on hand. Even with the way River and Rick can burn through them."

Book chuckled, "Yes, I'd forgotten you're moonlighting as a criminal mastermind now. Got your next heist planned?" His amusement was palpable at the idea of Simon becoming a crime boss and River giggled and exchanged a grin with the shepherd.

Simon had a sly grin in his voice, "No. But I'm thinking about growing a big black mustache." He waited a moment for Book to absorb that before he added, "I'm a traditionalist."

That got Book chuckling and gave Riddick and Jayne a good laugh as well. The two big men were doing their own workout with the older weight bench. One of the first things Riddick had done with his share of the hospital job was to buy a second bench and set of weights. He and Jayne had spent half a day arranging the area and organizing the equipment so anyone could come down and lift. River had contributed to the exercise with skipping ropes, ankle and wrist weights and smaller free weights that she and the other girls would have an easier time using.

That's what she was doing now, slowly lifting a five pound weight in either hand as she watched Ciara and Kaylee spar. Neither of them were very good yet, though at least Ciara was willing to
embrace the necessity of the lessons. Kaylee was still reluctant to raise a hand to anyone. Kaylee, a bit shorter but stronger than Ciara from all her work on the ship, needed to learn to use her assets in a fight. And Ciara, graceful and eager though she might be, still lacked to muscle to do much damage to an opponent.

River tilted her head thoughtfully as she replaced her weights on the wall rack and walked around the two women. Riddick's frown caught her eye and she heard his thoughts that both women needed to put more effort into their training. She didn't disagree. Kaylee was reluctant about anything that could possibly have to do with violence while Ciara didn't seem to understand that if she wanted to survive a fight she had to work on her strength as well as her fighting forms.

"Stop," She shook her head in exasperation. Both of them halted their movements, one with an air of relief and the other with a slightly anxious expression. "Kaylee, you are chà shēng. You have no interest in this and it shows."

"I don't wanna hurt anybody 's'all," The pretty mechanic protested.

"What if somebody wants to hurt you?" River nearly snapped back, "We are not doing this for fun. This is to keep you alive, safe and whole." She pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers and took a deep breath. More calmly she said, "Kaylee, if nothing else, you need to know how to get out of someone's hold. How to escape a captor. How to use a gun even if you can't aim it well yet."

"I ain't the gun totin' type," Kaylee argued. "When'll I ever need to use one?"

"How 'bout when Reavers come callin'," Riddick spoke slowly and quietly from his position of spotting Jayne. Book was still doing the same for Simon though her brother's turn was coming to an end. "I'd like to know I can trust you to hold a gun 'thout shootin' yourself or me."

"But that's what—"

"That's what the Captain an' Zoe an' alla us are for?" Riddick cut off her protest. "You ever seen Reavers up close mèi mei?" Kaylee shook her head slowly, her pretty eyes huge at the thought. "Me an' River have. We've fought 'em. An' trust me when I say that it's nothin' we ever wanna do again."

River shook her head in agreement, "Nothing is certain." She told the girls quietly. "We all have our strengths but we cannot afford to be deliberately weak. There are no children here. Kaylee, we will start again. Beginning with escapes and breaking holds. Riddick will teach you."

"I ain't ever gonna get away from him," Kaylee objected.

"Not if you begin with that attitude, no," River retorted. "Men are weaker than women in that they are very susceptible to pain." She looked at her husband and he winced but nodded his understanding. "Solar plexus, instep, nose, groin."

"Huh?" Kaylee wasn't getting the point and River shook her head.

Simon sat up from his spot on the newer weight bench and grinned, "It's an old self-defense anagram. SING." He and Book traded places with a slight argument about how much weight Book should be lifting.

"Uh huh," The pretty mechanic didn't sound convinced but she sighed and moved over towards Riddick.

"Ciara," River speared the newest crewmember with her gaze and nearly grinned as the elegant Kerry woman stood straighter when she was addressed. "Do you wish to be ruò bù jīn fēng?"
Confused, Ciara shook her head, her braid swinging. "Then you cannot neglect your weight training. You should be able to take Kaylee down but you don't have any strength to your hits. She can outlast you or, if she ever hits you, take you out with one punch."

"I've tried, but everything hurts after I do the weights, then I can't do anything else," Ciara wasn't arguing but she clearly was at a loss as to what she could do.

"New trainers," River decided. "Simon and Book will be your strength trainers. Medical advice and valuable experience. Also caution so you don't hurt so much that you stop."

Ciara nodded, "It's not that I don't want to." She spread her hands, "And Shea's been a fine help."

"Less kissing during weight training and more weights will go far," River caught the mental image Ciara had of kissing her suitor on the weight bench. The other girl blushed and muttered something about distractions and not being made of stone.

Jayne sat up from his bench and shrugged, "So it weren't my best idea." He agreed. "Got her back up to speed with pistols though." He was looking a bit sheepish but proud of his sweetheart.

"Next time we're on the ground, more target practice," River agreed. "Meantime, building stamina." She grinned at the two girls. "Time for a game."

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"I don't see why you're all fired up about everyone on this boat bein' as lethal as you are yourself," Mal had remarked after Kaylee had nearly run away from the lesson in firearms.

Riddick had frowned, River had just rolled her eyes and continued to help Ciara with her punches. Ciara was coming right along with pistols and she was a rare shot with a rifle. Kaylee however... no matter how many times River, or Jayne, Riddick or even Simon tried to explain that guns were just little machines, Kaylee had no interest in them and resisted having anything to do with them.

"Because it's dangerous for her to not even know how to hold a gun," Riddick had told the Captain finally. "I know violence isn't her way. I don't expect that to change."

"And how's forcin' her to learn about firearms not expecting that to change?" Mal either really didn't see the need or he was being obtuse out of sheer perversity. Riddick wasn't sure which at this point.

"Maybe a time comes when someone takes Kaylee, did you ever think a that," The Furyan asked calmly as he put his revolver back together. "They put a bullet in whoever's with her, snatch her up and she's long gone. Of course we'd go after her, but if something happened to her like on Jiangyin? Knowin' that if she got hold of a gun she could at least bluff her way out of a situation by holdin' it right would be damn reassuring."

"Kaylee don't hardly leave the boat unless she's in someone's company," The Browncoat was protective of his pretty little mechanic. "And I got no problem with the idea that she never takes up arms."

"You really think that's all there is to it?" Riddick didn't think this was on purpose. Mal really didn't see the need. "If nothing else it'd be nice if she could load a gun and hand it off to someone willing to shoot it. You can't tell me that knowing Kaylee could do that much would be helpful."

"We're not planning to lay siege anywhere that I know of," Mal argued. "Teachin' her how to defend herself, how to squirm out of ropes, I got no problem with. But if she don't want to deal with guns
then we can't make her."

"You could," Riddick pointed out. "But I'm getting the idea that you won't. Even if it would be helpful."

Mal had just shrugged at him and that had been the end of Kaylee learning about guns, at least for the time being.

Riddick, Jayne and River had doggedly continued to teach Kaylee how to defend herself at least, painful though that was. He was convinced that Kaylee was doing it on purpose. Every time they practiced she managed to hit him somewhere other than the area she was supposed to hit. He'd gotten a fist in the throat, an elbow to his balls and her foot on his knee more times than he could count. At least that's what he told himself. He was not actually counting. He wasn't.

Jayne was faring a little better with Ciara but not by much, mostly due to Ciara's lack of muscle. Finally Riddick had enough of getting hit in the throat and called a halt to the exercises. "Maybe let's try somethin' else," He suggested. "How are the two of you at getting out of a locked room, or wiggling out of ropes?"

Kaylee just blinked at him like she didn't know what she was talking about. Ciara shook her head, but hers was more a denial of skill rather than ignorance. "All right then," Riddick nodded. "Let's start with rope." He sighed to himself and thought that at least River was doing better with their students in respect to the katas. If nothing else they were building up muscle memory and that could only help.

It was at least a week later that Riddick was leaning against the catwalk railing with Wash, watching as Ciara and Kaylee struggled with a new set of rope bonds. Unlike the first couple days of work this time Riddick hadn't tied them together. So far they were both taking that as an indicator that they should do this alone. He'd blindfolded them too. If River could learn to do this so could they.

"Mind if I ask you a question," Wash kept his voice low so as not to distract the women below them.

"No more than I ever do," Riddick glanced at the pilot with a half smirk. "What's on your mind?"

"Last night…what were you and River doin'," The affable man lowered his voice even more after he'd looked around for anyone else who might hear. "The only time I've seen you two fight like that is…well after Verbena."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded. "We've been trying to keep it quiet. I mean Mal knows she can fight, he got a good look at how she can be after Verbena." He frowned trying to think of how he could phrase his answer without telling a bald faced lie. He could lie. He just didn't much care for it if it wasn't for River's safety. It felt like it had been a long time since he'd had to actually lie to any of the crew rather than simply phrasing something diplomatically or evasively. Finally he looked at Wash, "Know how you said River had PTSD?"

"Yeah," Wash nodded with a frown that sat wrong on his cheerful face.

"Her dreams are gettin' worse," Riddick told that truth without regret. "So I bring her down here, an' we fight. Try to get past the dreams. An' we're tryin' to get past the panic attacks she gets when somethin' reminds her of Blue Sun." He shrugged, "Guess you could say we're tryin' to deliberately trigger the problem and work her way past it."
"Makes sense," The pilot nodded his understanding. "Does it help?" He looked concerned and the convict nearly smiled at how good a man this was. How many people upon being told a young woman had PTSD and panic attacks that had to be dealt with by fighting with blades would instantly be concerned about her and not their own safety? Damn few from Riddick's experience.

"Sometimes," He answered quietly. "If fighting doesn't work...well, you saw how I ended it after Verbena. My teeth on her neck, that usually snaps her out of it. It's something that ain't...associated with what they did to her. Just don't wanna rely on it too much. She needs to come out of the spells on her own."

"I can see how fighting might help her though, let her feel like she's in control, can fight her own demons," Wash said thoughtfully. "Simon able to help at all?"

"Yeah," Riddick nodded. "He knows exactly how to trigger a spell. That way I'm able to be on the ground with River, fightin' with her and he's out of harms way. No distractions you know?"

Wash nodded, obviously thinking for a moment. "Good. You'd lemme know if I could help right?"

It was rare that he was surprised, the Furyan thought in astonishment. But Wash had managed to do it. He could feel the grin pulling at his lips, "Yeah. If there was somethin' you could do that wouldn't get you killed, absolutely we'd ask. Told Mal we'd be doin' this at night sometimes, in the spirit of full communication and disclosure." He added with a mocking twist of his lips. That was one of the phrases Simon had drug out when he'd been talking to the Captain about treatment for River and why she broke down sometimes after high pressure situations. They'd agreed that whatever they did to help River, Mal would know about it. No hiding for them and no surprises for Mal.

"I heard about that," Wash chuckled. "Simon explained it pretty well. I mean we all react to adrenaline differently. And with what the Academy did to River, well, it's not surprising she has a harder time processing everything."

"Yeah," Riddick growled at the thought of what they'd done to his gorgeous woman. "She still don't know what her brain's tryin' to hide either. She knows there's something there, something to do with Blue Sun. But she doesn't know what."

"Gotta admit it was kinda clever of Jayne to peel the labels off the cans and just label them with ink," Wash grinned. "No more mystery meals."

"Cobh isn't stupid," Riddick agreed. "Hasn't ever been. Stupid gets you dead real quick in a war." He slanted a glance at Wash thoughtfully before changing the subject. "So I hear you've got an idea to make more of a profit on the medicines?"

"Yeah I was runnin' it by Zoe the other night, figured you'd heard. With your ears I'm just glad the bunks are pretty sound proofed," The pilot nodded. "What do you think? Selling directly to doctors?"

The escaped murderer looked down at Ciara and Kaylee, the two women had been whispering, the sounds plain in his ears, but almost inaudible to anyone else and scooted closer together. He could see Ciara's hands tugging at Kaylee's bonds and nodded. They were tense, listening for sounds, but concentrating on escape rather than vision. They weren't doing badly but he'd hoped they'd be further along by this point.

Finally he looked at Wash, "Coupla problems I can see. One being that we don't have connections to any medical folk. And the more time we spend looking the more likely we'll end up on the bad end of someone's guns. Really don't like gettin' robbed much." He shrugged, "The other thing is that
everybody's gotta make a living. And we don't need to burn bridges bypassing Mal's normal contacts. Bringin' 'em a flush score like this? Says we're reliable, good business, and we're smart. People can make money doin' business with us."

"So it's a bad idea?" Wash was frowning thoughtfully.

"Not bad. Just risky," Riddick said with a shrug. "It would make more money. You're not wrong."

"Yeah," The pilot shrugged. "Zoe hasn't really told me what she thinks yet."

"That could be your answer right there," The Furyan told him dryly.

"Yeah," Shoulders nearly as broad as Riddick's shrugged. "I'm still kinda hoping she'll think its a good idea."

"Well the old saying is that hope springs eternal," Riddick looked back down at the girls. "You got any idea how to get through to Kaylee that learning this might just save her life?"

Wash sighed and accepted the change in subject. "Not sure. Kaylee hasn't had a lot of up close and personal experience with violence. She's seen it but the only time she's gotten hurt was when the Fed shot her." He shook his head, "Honestly I was surprised when River got her learning how to fight. But that started out with katas. Not kicks and punching."

"Yeah," Riddick nodded. "I just don't like the idea that she's helpless if trouble comes lookin'."

"Nobody does," The pilot reminded him. "But you can't force Kaylee to learn."

"You're tellin' me," The convict sighed. "Ciara's comin' along."

"River's game seems to be workin' some," Wash observed. "Even Kaylee chases her."

"That's 'cause she thinks its a game," He rubbed a hand over his jaw. "Maybe we ought let it be for now. She's gettin' better at gettin' out of ropes. And maybe if me an' River back off they can just do katas. The muscle memory will be good for something at least."

"Trick her into learning to fight you mean?" Serenity's pilot sounded truly amused by the idea. "It could work."

"It'd be better than nothin'," Riddick sighed and straightened up. "I'd better get down there, show 'em both a little more. See ya on the bridge in a bit."

"I'll bring the coffee," Wash agreed with a half smile. "You see River, tell her I'm looking forward to another game of digital chess. I'm hoping it takes more than fifteen minutes for her to kick my ass."

Riddick grinned as the pilot walked away and began to head down the stairs to the cargo bay. Time for a few more lessons on escape.

The bushel of apples was taking a place of pride on the galley table. Riddick selected one as he listened for River, Ciara and Kaylee. He could hear his woman leading the other girls on a merry chase, River's laughter followed by Kaylee's threats and Ciara's mutters of determination. Mal and Inara were discussing a client she'd be bringing on board. Apparently whoever it was didn't want to be gaped at.
Riddick chuckled and shook his head as he took a seat at the table and gave half his attention to what was going on below decks. He barely needed his superior hearing the girls were making so much noise. Apparently Mal agreed. His sardonic remark, "Ah, the pitter patter of tiny feet in huge combat boots." Directly preceded his loud command for them to shut up. As if he'd never raised his voice the Captain continued to speak at a normal volume with Inara, humorously promising her that he'd abstain from sword fighting.

The Furyan pulled out one of his many shivs and began to slice up his apple. Wash grinned at him as he munched on his own snack, taking happy bites out of the skin. "Somethin' funny Rick?"

"Listening to Mal and Inara talking," Riddick smiled slightly. "In the middle of the conversation he yells at the girls and then goes back to talking." He tilted his head, "They're runnin' up the stairs to the catwalks now. Listen, you can hear him yell."

Wash obligingly tilted his head towards the stairs where Mal's hollering could be heard, "One of you is gonna fall and die, and I'm not cleanin' it up!"

The female voices were getting closer now, "She took my apple!" Kaylee shouted her explanation for the race.

Inara's voice was a bit puzzled and quieter. Rick had to repeat it for Wash's benefit, "Jayne bought a whole crate of them."

Kaylee's answer was cheerful if a bit insane on the face of it, "And this one's mine."

River laughed, not even out of breath as she came through the corridor, Kaylee and Ciara hot on her heels, "Not anymore!"

Riddick watched as Kaylee finally caught up with River, tackling her onto a chair and wresting the apple away from her. Kaylee grinned, "Okay." She held her apple aloft like a trophy, "No power in the 'verse can stop me."

Ciara paused in the doorway a bit out of breath but grinning. Proudly she removed half of a tongue depressor from her mouth. "Breathed through my nose the whole time," She said proudly. "Didn't even clench my jaw."

River was laughing and hugging both of the other girls, "Doing very well. Stamina is increasing, speed is good."

"And running is always a useful skill," Riddick agreed. He picked up an apple and tossed it to Ciara who grinned and snatched it out of the air. River got a similar treatment as Zoe walked in the room and sat near her husband.

River was turning her apple in her hands, smelling it appreciatively as she moved towards Riddick. One hand rested on the back of the chair beside his as she held the apple to her nose. He grinned and pushed back from the table a bit, making room for her and to his pleasure his woman curled up into his lap, leaning against him. Her apple was set on the table as she took his shiv and half eaten apple.

Zoe's eyes were curious as she looked at them but she refrained from commenting as the two stranger inhabitants of Serenity began to share bites of carved up apple. She plucked one of her own out of the crate and took out a knife. "These really are the genuine article. I could get used to being rich."

Wash was grinning at Riddick and Ciara teasingly, "It's Jayne being so generous with his cut that confuses and frightens me."
Ciara giggled as she sliced her apple into sections and began to eat them one by one. "My man is very cautious with money. None of us had much growing up. But we have a weakness for fruit. Healthy sweets."

Zoe was shaking her head as she popped a piece of apple in her mouth, "It does kind of freeze the blood, at least until you see him smiling at everyone. That's disturbing on a whole different level."

The suit-ee to Jayne's suitor laughed again and shook her head, "I'm still getting used to the idea that Shea is someone to be worried on the matter of betrayal. It seems so funny that none of you know him but you've sailed together for more than two years." Before anyone could explain to her the circumstances in which Jayne had gotten onto the boat Kaylee's voice dropped into the conversation.

The cheerful mechanic was looking at Zoe curiously. Riddick got a flash of steel and silk from River and knew she'd gotten one of her flashes of insight. "Zoe, how come you always cut your apples?"

The Rim girl asked with a tilt of her head.

Riddick felt River stiffen slightly and then relax and knew that whatever memory that would be brought up wasn't a debilitating one. It would be a story, maybe not a nice one but given Zoe's experiences nice was pretty much out unless she was talking about her childhood or husband.

Wash blinked at his wife curiously, "You do?"

Kaylee nodded, "Her and the Captain both. Whenever we get fresh fruit, they never just munch on 'em." She nodded at Riddick with River in his lap, the way River was carefully cutting the apple as well. "Rick an' River do the same thing."

Zoe shrugged a bit, "Know what a Grizwald is?"

Jayne entered the galley and dropped a kiss on Ciara's head before he busied himself at the stove, "It's a grenade."

Zoe nodded her confirmation of the gunhand's words, "About the size of a battery. Responds to pressure." She carved off another piece as she continued, "Our platoon was stuck in a trench outside of New Kasmir during the winter campaign. More'n a week, completely cut off, and the Alliance entrenched not ten yards away. We even got to talkin' to 'em, yelling across insults and jokes and such, 'cause no ammo to speak of, no orders, so what are you gonna do?" Riddick watched as her eyes grew darker with the memory. "We mentioned that we were out of rations, and ten minutes later, a bunch of apples rained into the trench."

Wash clearly had an idea of where this story was going and interrupted with a bit of desperate cheer, "And they grew into a big tree, and they all climbed up the tree into a magical land with unicorns and a harp." He looked at the three girls with a hopeful nod.

Riddick almost chuckled, maybe Ciara or Kaylee needed that sort of happy ending, River not so much. Jayne finished making his tea and brought a mug over to the table. Flicking open a switchblade he stabbed at an apple and removed it from the bowl. When he took his seat it was next to Ciara and she grinned at him and fed him a slice of her apple from her fingers.

Kaylee wasn't paying attention or she might have grinned. Her mind was still on Zoe's story, "Blew off their heads, huh?"

The First Mate nodded. Her voice was matter of fact, "Cap said wait, but they were so hungry." She didn't quite sigh, she wasn't the type, but her tone was a bit more stoic than normal. "Don't make much noise. Just little pops and there's three guys that kind of just end at the ribcage."
Wash looked at River and then at Ciara and Kaylee, "But these apples are healthsome, good."

Jayne laughed, "Yeah, grenades cost extra."

Kaylee looked over at Ciara and Jayne, their seats next to River and Riddick, all of them carving on the fruit with their knives. "That happened to you too," She wondered.

"Nah," Jayne grinned at her and then nearly laughed through the apple that Ciara shoved playfully into his mouth.

"It was uncommon rare for us to get fresh fruit," Ciara explained as she took Jayne's apple and began to slice it up. "An orange at Christmas, or an apple for a birthday."

"It's too easy to gobble if you bite right in," Riddick offered. "Before you know it the apple's gone and you haven't even really tasted it. Gotta savor the juice, feel it in your hands, taste the difference b'tween the skin and the flesh." He took the knife and apple from River and began to cut a piece out for her. His mate took it and held it between her lips before she leant towards him. Biting off his share brought them together for a sweet apple tasting kiss.

"And one cannot share an apple thusly if it is simply bitten," River offered with a sweet smile. "To be offered an apple is to invite courtship, on certain planets. Enticing fruit. Original sin."

Jayne grinned at Ciara and was given a kiss along with a piece of apple, "So you thinkin' 'bout sinnin' some?" He teased his elegant looking woman.

She was prevented from answering as Mal entered the galley. Riddick paused in his carving of the second apple. He'd made it a practice since Ariel to keep an eye on Mal when he was in River's immediate vicinity. The Captain had gotten better about accepting the general oddness that was River and Riddick's relationship but he still had his moments of idiocy. And he really hated it when he saw River and Riddick sparring in their 'no holds barred looked like Riddick would murder River' way. Mal was getting more and more protective, behaving a great deal as if River was someone who should be sheltered.

"Wish is father to the thought, as the child is father of the man," River murmured in his ear. Riddick nodded and she continued, her soft voice making more sense than his musings could. "Hates what he has heard was done to me. Hates that I am younger than all of them and so capable of violent defense. Wishes he could have kept it from happening. Wishes I was innocent and untouched and he could threaten you with violence for courting me. Wishes to turn back the clock."

"He really does act like an outraged papa doesn't he," Riddick murmured and River giggled as Mal picked up an apple and began to cut it with a knife from the counter.

"Well," Mal was actually in a pretty good mood as he spoke to the crew. "We are about twenty thousand miles from our last drop, people, then we can take a break an' think about spendin' some of this money."

Riddick exchanged a cautiously happy look with River amidst everyone else's pleased exclamations. She wasn't exactly thrilled considering the area of space they were in. They were fast approaching Adlai Niska's territory and neither of them would feel at ease until they were out of it again.

Wash remarked to Zoe, sotto voce, "Could've made more."

Apparently he hadn't been quiet enough because not only did Riddick hear him easily but so did the Captain. Mal nodded an acknowledgment to his pilot, "That wasn't a bad idea, Wash, but eliminating the middle man is never simple as it sounds."
Riddick glanced at Zoe who was looking uncomfortable, to Wash who just seemed surprised. Sure enough the pilot was blinking at Mal, "You heard about..."

The Captain proved he wasn't a complete idiot by bringing up the same points that Riddick had. "About fifty percent of the human race is middle men an' they don't take kindly to bein' eliminated. This quadrant, we play nice. We got enemies enough as it is."

The murderer sighed as the pilot's scent blazed with anger. For a woman with as stoic a face as he'd ever seen Zoe looked very uncomfortable.

River sighed as she felt the ripples of anger and hurt, woven through with insecurity that emanated from the bridge. Her mate regarded her thoughtfully, "Somethin's wrong?"

"Wash and Zoe argued. Zoe is upset and uncertain as to what she could do differently. Wash believes he is second fiddle," River murmured and frowned. "He wishes to accompany the captain on the job. Has taken steps to ensure such a thing. Fifty fifty chance that it will be allowed."

"Uh huh," Riddick was not liking the sound of that. "Doesn't anyone think that we're under Niska's nose? And he's not the type to just forgive and forget?"

River shrugged unhappily, "Captain keeps it in the back of his mind. Doesn't think we'll be noticed." She let Riddick tug her into his lap and rested her cheek against his shoulder. "Put a mask on Serenity but a cortex mask won't help when all that is required is the ocular proof. Niska looks for a Firefly."

"Yeah, and with that skoplex he's got, bound to have sensors to go with it," Riddick frowned. "Think he'll try to take the ship?"

The Reader frowned, "Can't be certain. The villain isn't one for pitched battle. Likes torture, but doesn't want to risk his own skin." Her man wasn't feeling easy about being on this moon at all and she couldn't help but agree with him. Her skin was itchy, like something was tickling her mind and she looked over at the doorway.

Book was watching Jayne and Kaylee who were teasing each other with ever more outrageous bets regarding Inara's client. Ciara and Simon were chuckling over the original crew's jests and occasionally offering suggestions as to actual possibilities.

River shook her head and looked at her husband. He was still deep in thought, analyzing the likelihood of an attack. Where it would come was as important as when. She could hear Mal with Inara walking down the stairs to the airlock and the ramp of the ship. The Captain was quietly assuring the Companion that he would not be insulting and promising once again that he wouldn't start any swordfights.

Book gave the four younger people a reproving look. "Didn't Inara express a wish for privacy?"

Kaylee grinned at him, "We're not gonna spy on her Shepherd. But now we've gotta see who she's got. Bet he's handsome. Think he's gonna bring her flowers?" She looked at Simon curiously.

The doctor shrugged while Jayne took another slice of his apple and offered it to Ciara with a smile. "Sometimes a patron will bring a gift," Simon remarked quietly. "To show appreciation of the honor given him or her." Jayne and Kaylee blinked but Ciara nodded knowingly.
"Oh!" Kaylee's whisper got a little louder. "There he is." Even Book looked up at the entrance to Serenity at the sight of a large man in a suit.

River shook her head and Riddick grinned, "Nah." He nodded towards the fellow, "That's private security. We can hear the earwig he's got in."

Mal was offering his hand in a friendly manner, "Welcome aboard. I'm Captain Malcolm Rey..." Only to be completely ignored.

The security officer was looking around. River watched thoughtfully as his eyes took in the cargo bay, the captain and the lounge at the far end of the bay with people obviously in it. "We're all clear here, Councilor," He spoke into his comm.

Riddick chuckled in her ear, "Not very good if he didn't notice the very well armed crew over here."

"Or he can tell we're not a threat right now," River whispered back with a grin. She was treated to the sight of Mal blinking in shock as a very good looking blonde woman entered the cargo bay. She was very obviously wealthy but she greeted Inara with the respect the Companion was due if not flowers.

River grinned as Book blinked in surprise, "Oh my." The preacher seemed slightly discombobulated.

Kaylee was doing a little blinking of her own. The mechanic was staring after Inara and her patron as if stunned, "Oh, gosh, I... I-I knew she took females as clients... I just..." She paused as if to gather her thoughts, "They look so glamorous together."

Jayne nodded and shifted uncomfortably for a moment to Ciara's amusement, "Uh, bǎo bǎo."

His sweetheart giggled and rose from her chair to sit in his lap, "You always were wonderfully visual Shea." She bent and kissed him gently, startled when his arms banded around her and pulled her tight. River smiled as Ciara relaxed against her sweetheart and let herself be cuddled. The two of them were a romantic sight in her perspective. The big man holding the slender woman with no thought of anything more. They'd been apart so long neither took such embraces for granted.

River grinned and tilted her head upwards, "Time to work." She murmured. "Mal and Zoe are getting ready for the job."

Riddick looked at her, "I think the way Wash is bein'...Mal had a smart idea, me goin' along." The Reader frowned slightly and met his silver gaze to see his concern for the crew. "If any of Niska's people show up... We got a better chance of comin' back if I'm with the Captain."

His mate nodded, still troubled, "Something is not right... But I can't tell what it is. I don't know if it will be worse or better if you're with them." His hand slid up her back to cup her neck and squeeze gently, a possessive caress both dominant and loving.

"Somethin' goes wrong... well you know what to do," He pressed a hard kiss to her lips. "Come see me off?"

"Of course," River looked down at her comfortable slacks and sweater and then over at the rest of the crew. Book was shaking his head in amusement while Jayne kissed Ciara and Kaylee teased Simon about his knowledge of Companions. "Don't think I'll be missed," She added wryly.

Her beloved chuckled his agreement and pressed a kiss to her temple as they quietly ascended the stairs near the infirmary.
River followed her husband into the spare shuttle and leaned against the wall so she could look out at the dusty sunlight that streamed in from the cockpit windows. Zoe was preparing the shuttle for takeoff while Mal made sure the case of drugs wouldn't get knocked around. He gave Riddick a nod of greeting and offered River a half smile as he spoke, "Lucrative as this stuff is, I'll be glad to see the last of it. Kinda makes us a target for every-"

Zoe interrupted him, her voice both annoyed and puzzled, "River were you messing around with the cortex in here? The ignition sequence is all turned about. I can't even..."

River shook her head as Zoe turned to look at her. Before she could offer to make any corrections needed Wash stepped into the shuttle. "I can."

Mal nodded, "Well get it set, would you, Wash? We gotta get moving."

River nearly groaned, Wash was in a defiant mood. He was aggravated and upset with both his wife and the captain. "Here's a funny twist," The pilot suggested. "No."

"No what?" Mal blinked at him and River groaned.

"Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ."

River muttered the curse and hid her face in Riddick's chest. Her mate's arm slid around her shoulders as his mind flickered through possible outcomes and what adjustments might be required.

Wash stared at Mal, "No, sir."

Zoe looked at her husband, "Change the sequence?"

Wash nodded, "Didn't want you taking off without me. In fact, didn't want you taking off at all. Thought I might take this run instead. Me and the Captain." River sighed and leaned back against Riddick with a shake of her head. This was so not the time for this gǒu pī.

"The Captain who's standing right here telling you that's not gonna happen?" Mal wasn't quite glaring, but he wasn't pleased. "Not to mention Rick ain't exactly slight an' easy to push over."

Wash’s sardonic tones were doing nothing to improve Mal's mood and River could feel Riddick's sense of unease increase. "Well, it's a dangerous mission, sir. I can't stand the thought of something happening that might cause you two to come back with another thrilling tale of bonding and adventure," There was an element of painful truth to the pilot's words as he continued. "I just can't take that right now."

The Captain seemed to be similarly at the point of desperation as he looked back and forth between his first mate and pilot. "Okay, um, I'm lost. Uh, I'm angry, and I'm armed, so if you two have something that you need to work out-"

Zoe shook her head and River could tell simply from her carefully blank face that she was far more upset than she was letting on. "It's all right, sir. We've deal with Bolles before. Shouldn't be a problem." She slanted a glance at her husband after a half beat, "And I wouldn't mind sitting this one out."

Riddick stiffened slightly just as Mal scowled, "Oh, this is a fine fang-tzang fong-kwong duh zie but I don't have time to unwind it. Wash." He gave the pilot a hard look, "Get her started. Rick, say your goodbyes and take your place. Zoe, ship is yours."
River smiled as she was lifted up in Riddick's arms until their faces were level so her mate could give her a memorable kiss. "Don't worry my zhàng fu. Wife will be good while he is gone."

"Keep a sharp eye out," Riddick muttered. "I don't like doing business this close to that old jiān xié."

River nodded solemnly as he let her down. Zoe wrapped an arm around her shoulders and River offered her a smile, "Should we pretend to be Saffron and wash their feet when they return?"

Riddick's bark of laughter and Mal's yelp of dismay at the thought had Zoe's lips upturning. Wash's mockingly happy voice called after them as they left, "Bye, hon! We promise not to stop for beers with the fellas!" As the doors began to slide shut behind them River caught the pilot's last remark, "So, are we gonna sing army songs, or something?"

River shook her head as the engines started and she and Zoe emerged from the airlock, "Cap'n is very irritated. Husband is not thrilled either."

"Well I know why Mal's irked, what's Rick's issue," The stoic woman asked without a hint of curiosity.

"Doesn't like that there is no one to pilot the ship except his wife," The Reader told her solemnly. "Pilot and co-pilot both on the job? Not good tactics. And Niska is not far enough away."

Zoe nodded thoughtfully, "Job should only take coupla hours at most." She looked at River's less than business like clothing. "I'll man the cortex while you change into your workin' clothes."

River tilted her head, listening for Riddick's mind as she considered, "She will tell Jayne to make sure the weapons are all good to go. And Kaylee must check Serenity's heart."

The first mate was frowning a bit but she still nodded, "Don't wanna scare folks, but at the same time..."

The Reader offered a half smile of agreement as she pushed open the hatch to the bunk she and Riddick shared, "Better a little worry and preparation than ease and being caught off guard."

"When you put it that way," Zoe's frown deepened and she increased her pace. As River descended the ladder she heard the first mate's voice on the overhead, "All crew members will look to their areas of responsibility in preparation for boarding."

River gave a satisfied jerk of her head as she shut the hatch and pulled out her 'work' clothes.

Riddick cursed under his breath as the sun lit up the inside of the shuttle. The goggles he was never without came in handy as Mal and Wash were squinting against the harsh light.

Mal seemed to have some idea that now was the time to talk and Riddick kept his groan to himself and concentrated on the terrain and the area they were supposed to do the meet. "Look," Mal started with a glance at Wash. "This thing with you and Zoe..."

Not too surprisingly Wash wasn't terribly interested in a conversation, "Really not looking to talk on that topic."

Predictably enough that got Mal's back up, "Hey. I let that niou-se trick of yours slide because this is a milk run. But when I go on a mission, I'm taking Zoe and that's the drill. You know that. I mean,
what happens if we get into a situation here?"

"Thanks Mal, 'cause I love feelin' insignificant," Riddick muttered and got an annoyed look of his own from the Captain.

"Hey, I've been in a firefight before!" Wash subsided slightly as both former military men looked at him with varying expressions of disbelief. "Well, I was in a fire," He qualified. "Actually, I was fired from a fry-cook opportunity." Riddick rolled his eyes behind his goggles as Wash continued, "I can handle myself."

The Captain regarded his pilot with an expression that suggested he did not expect a positive answer to the question he was about to ask. "And you understand what Zoe's job entails?"

Wash, sadly, did not disappoint Mal, "I'll learn as I go."

Riddick cursed again, "Fuckin' wonderful! Huò bù dān xìng." He looked at the pilot, "Are you even carrying?"

"Carrying what?"

In a rare moment of unison Mal and Riddick both sighed, "Tā mà de niǎo."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I'm really excited about this episode because I've had an idea for this all along and that's what's kept me plugging away when I should be doing other things. Like exercising. I need a keyboard and screen attached to the exercise bike. I really do.

So I hope you all will bear with me and continue to hang in there. You know what they say, when you get to the end of you rope tie a knot and swing.

Chinese Translations:

diǎo - cock

jī ba - dick / penis

pì gu - butt

nǚ ren - wife

Zǎo shang hǎo - Good morning

mèi mei - little sister

chà shēng - weak student

ruò bù jǐn fēng - too weak to stand up to the wind - idiom; extremely delicate / fragile state of health

bǎo bǎo - darling / baby

Nǐ tā mà de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ. - Fuck everyone in the universe to death.
gǒu pì - bullshit, nonsense
zhàng fu - husband
jiān xié - crafty and evil / a treacherous villain
Huò bù dān xíng - misfortune does not come singly - idiom / it never rains but it pours
Tā mā de niǎo - goddamn it / lit. 'His mother's dick'

Chinese Script Translations:

fang-tzang fong-kwong duh zie - script - A knot of self indulgent lunacy
niou-se - script urine-shit

Quote Sources:

If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it, - Wuthering Heights - Emily Bronte

With some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart - Hamlet - William Shakespeare

Needs must when the devil drives - William Shakespeare

The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: little we see in Nature that is ours. - The World Is Too Much With Us - William Wordsworth

Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one. - Thomas Paine

The child is father of the man - My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold - William Wordsworth
Will You Stay Down On Your Knees

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Riddick smirked in amusement, despite his general feeling of unease, as Wash tried to carry the heavy plastic box of drugs. The pilot was breathing heavily, clearly exerting himself. Mal was leading them while Riddick kept an eye on their backtrail. Ahead of them he could see three guys approaching them from the opposite direction. The breeze blew towards him, giving fair warning that the men ahead were none too clean.

"So now I'm learning about carrying," Wash puffed as they drew a bit closer.

Riddick chuckled, "Not the kinda carryin' we meant." He teased the pilot as they reached the spot, the man he hoped was Bolles strolling forward to greet Mal. Wash set the box down with a sigh of relief and flipped back the lid. Riddick had to admit the pile of drugs was impressive.

"Nice to know you're still trustworthy," Bolles gave Mal a very grimy smile.

The Captain wasn't smiling just yet, "I'm not so trustworthy I don't want to see the money you promised me."

Riddick kept half an eye on the strangers as Bolles took a bag of coin from his guy and tossed it to Mal with a clink. He took a deep breath and searched the hills around them cursing the too bright light under his breath. He could barely see anything and the smell of the outlaws they were doing business with was strong enough that he couldn't be sure of any other scent. But there was something, an odor that reminding him of fueling stations. Nothing strong enough for certainty, just hints that made him feel far from easy about this meet.

Bolles must have been feeling chatty, he hooked his thumbs into his belt as he commented to Mal, "Man, can't believe you guys knocked over an Alliance hospital. The pair you have."

Riddick saw Wash grin and moved forward to put a hand on the pilot's shoulder to steady him. It wouldn't do to have Wash move any farther away from he and Mal. His skin felt almost constrictive, the animal on alert, something wasn't right. "Mal, we gotta get out. Now." He didn't know what it was but he trusted the feeling in his gut that said staying would be death. Since he and River had bonded that feeling had ridden him like a man on a horse whenever there was imminent violence of the mortal kind.

Mal was still all business, pretending amiability as he spoke with his client, "Yeah, the stuff legends are made of..." Thankfully he glanced at Riddick and gave him a nod before he looked back at Bolles and for once he and Riddick were in sync as they saw the same thing. A bright red dot appeared on Bolles' forehead, the painless mark of a laser sight. "Shǐniào!"

The shot that sounded hit Bolles square in the eyes while Riddick hauled Wash down to the dirt. Mal, not being stupid, did the same while Bolles' guys got taken out by sniper fire. Riddick snarled and fired in the direction of the shots and heard a muffled groan that let him know he'd hit at least one. "Ghosts in your face," He cursed as five more rose from the cover they'd taken and surrounded them.

"Too many," Mal muttered to him. "Less you can shoot 'em all now."

"Ghostin' 'em wouldn't be hard. Keepin' you an' Wash alive while I did it, that'd be the problem."
Riddick muttered back. "That ain't the optimal result."

"No," The Captain shook his head. "Much as it pains me to say it, let's lay down arms."

Riddick should have known that Wash would have a contribution. The pilot always had something to say, "Now I'm learning about scary."

River sat on the bay steps and methodically sharpened her knives. She'd occupied herself for an entire fifteen minutes with making tea and a pretty tray with an origami flower for Inara and her client and left it in the airlock after knocking on the door. She'd caught the client's exclamation of pleasure at the sight of the tray and Inara's affectionate laugh. It was easy to hear Inara's words, overlaid with thoughts of worry and pleasure, as the Companion explained to the councilor that a crewman's wife was from the Core and knew that Inara's particular clients appreciated well made tea.

Book had come out and was making use of the free weights since the barbell would be dangerous without anyone to spot him. Simon was in the infirmary, tallying supplies and verifying all his instruments were in working order. She'd put on her working clothes, the slender pants and teeshirt that weren't loose enough catch on anything and the light boots that made no sound when she walked. Her sword and guns were in their places about her body. But those was all the preparation she could make.

Now she was counting the minutes, listening for Riddick's warm bright mind and hearing nothing. The day was warm and the sun was very bright but she could only feel cold as she waited. Zoe came up beside the Reader, her mare's leg over her shoulder and River stood. Knives were replaced in their sheaths and the whetstone put in her pocket as Zoe spoke. "I reckon it's time we went and checked this out." The First Mate's voice was carefully stoic but beneath it her emotions were boiling with anxiety.

River nodded and looked up as Inara and her client emerged from the shuttle, Inara walking the blonde woman out down the catwalk stairs. Both women were all smiles, true pleasure taken in each other's company. Zoe looked at River and they both nodded, waiting until the client had been seen off and the cargo doors closed before speaking. "Inara," Zoe called as the Companion mounted the steps again. "Might wanna...stay in your shuttle for a spell. Mal and the others are overdue."

Ciara and Jayne came down from the armory as Inara reached the airlock. "Zoe, we're good for weapons and ammo. No problems I can see. We get that down time the Cap'n talked about, maybe go over everythin' real good an' test 'em all."

"Good," Zoe nodded. "Now go grab your weapon." Her voice and face were stoic as a stone's but Jayne had been around her for more than a year and knew when she was preparing for bad news.

"Why? What's goin' on?" Jayne looked from Zoe to River, "Bad feelin's?" His bright blue eyes darkened suddenly and River could feel his absolute determination that nothing should happen to Riddick.

Zoe nodded, "Maybe nothing. Maybe trouble."

"The drop?" Jayne shook his head as he said it. He knew as well as Zoe did that the contact wasn't the twitchy or treacherous sort. Well, mostly. He was mild compared to some. He looked at River who shook her head imperceptibly and his mouth twisted into a dark frown to match his eyes. "Bolles ever give you problems before?"
Zoe shook her head even as she lifted one shoulder, her unease palpable, "They're late. They should've been back more'n an hour ago."

River moved over to Ciara as Jayne headed back up the stairs to his bunk, "Need you to stay with Kaylee in the engine room." She told the taller girl solemnly. "If we're boarded she'll need someone who can use a gun. She knows how to lock you both in. Simon will stay in the infirmary."

Ciara took a deep breath and nodded, "I'll grab a rifle and a sidearm from the armory." She looked at Zoe, "Should we lock up the bridge?"

Zoe considered for a moment and then nodded, "River, go up and start the encryption locks on the controls. And make sure Inara's tucked in safe."

Simon came out of the infirmary with his guns strapped to his waist, "I take it we're going with worst case scenario here? Not that I blame anyone, with the luck we have." River gave him an appreciative look, her brother had learned his lessons well. He was thinking it was better that he wore the guns all the time. It was easier to remove them if they were not needed rather than need them and have them in his bunk where they could do no good.

Ciara and River both shrugged as they mounted the stairs. Zoe was checking her mare's leg as she answered Simon, "Maybe it'll all be for nothing and we'll find 'em all drunk in a bar. But I'd rather be prepared than caught off guard."

River left Ciara at the armory and quickly ran to the bridge. A few minutes work and the programing Mal had paid her for was put into action. She heard Ciara running up the armory stairs and down the hall towards the engine room as the Reader locked up the bridge.

"Jayne," She called over her shoulder as she heard him climb out of his bunk. "Need you to lock down the ship. Close everything off as you go down. I'll do the same thing for the front half of Serenity if you'll start on the stairs near the engine room."

"Meet you in the bay," Jayne called and she heard his heavy footfalls as he followed Ciara's path to the rear of the boat.

It took a few extra minutes but the entire ship was locked down. Simon was doing the same in the passenger dorms, climbing the ladders to the upper dorms and continuing on to the access hatches to secure them.

"Rear of the ship is secure," Jayne reported as he exited the lounge.

"All locked down on this side," River added as she hurried down the stairs. "Inara knows to stay in her shuttle."

Zoe nodded, "Well if we're boarded we've made it as hard as we can for them." She looked at River, "We go by ground. We'll take the mule."

Book stood from the weight bench, "I'll go with you."

Zoe shook her head, "No offense, Shepherd, but I sure as hell hope they don't need a preacher."

The older man didn't quite smile but he pressed his point. "Four sets of eyes are better than three. Might see something you don't."

The first mate's expression was thoughtful but finally she nodded. "Let's move."

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River knew before they reached the shuttle what had happened. The dead screamed up from the ground, shrieking at her and ranted about their murders. If Riddick were here she'd know, she'd know instantly. She walked next to Jayne and began to scavenge for weapons and money as if she was really as calm as she looked. Deep breaths, slow and careful, forced her heart rate to stay even. In this case, the body would rule the mind, her heart and breath helped maintain control of her thoughts. The animal inside wanted to howl and shriek defiance to the sky at the man who'd taken her mate. The woman knew hysterics and rage would serve no one even as her heart seemed to twist in her chest.

Impressions on the ground, Riddick's foot prints, blood and wrath rose from the ground, filling her mind with the events that had occurred. It only reinforced the ranting of the dead, this had been an ambush, set by a third party to catch everyone unawares.

"None of 'em's ours," Jayne called to Zoe. The first mate was scanning the horizon and her mind was filled with where the shots would have come from.

"This is precision work: sharpshooters." Book observed after he'd studied the wounds. "From the look of these wounds, I'd say a 54-R sniper rifle, laser sights."

River chuckled humorlessly as Jayne gave the Sheppard a verbal poke, "You do a lot of shooting at the abbey there, Shepherd?"

"Rabbits," The older man replied dryly.

"For stew, sure." Jayne nodded as he found another gun. His frown was thoughtful as he looked at the bodies, his mind only half on the conversation as he considered the situation. He was thinking over how it could have gone down, seeing the lack of knife-work or hand to hand combat Rick was known for. None of the dead had been killed by Serenity's crew and there were no other dead besides Bolles and his men.

River walked to where the bodies were and looked down, "Mal stood here, Wash and Riddick on either side and just behind." She indicated the positions. "Bolles and his men there," She pointed and then mentally calculated the trajectories. " Shots came from there and there, and there." She pointed at the little hills. "Three snipers, other men as well."

Zoe's face was harder than usual, "Whoever did this, they weren't after the goods." She had the container that the drugs had been packed in. It had been left carelessly on the ground.

River shook her head and Jayne frowned as he walked towards the hills, "We ain't gonna find 'em here. They're off planet already." He indicated a black streak in the sandy dirt. "Only one type of transport I know makes a mark like this."

"Fast burn—" River began.

"Rocket shuttle," Zoe finished grimly.

The Reader forced herself to take deep breaths and Jayne's hand on her shoulder was cold comfort, well intentioned though it was. Book looked at Zoe, "Craft like that not commonly part of a ship. More likely we're looking at—"

"Space station," The First Mate's expression was forbidding.

"Yes," Book nodded.
River turned and began to walk back to the mule as Zoe reached the inevitable conclusion and spoke it aloud, "I know who's got 'em."

Jayne kept Book from following the Reader, steered the man towards the shuttle with the guns and money and recovered drugs. "She'll take the mule back. Nothin' you can say would be a comfort to her now Shepherd."

It was, the Reader thought painfully, only the truth.

The place stunk of pain, blood, urine and death. It was all he could do to not sneeze at the stench of it. The blindfold was only partially effective. The room was rife with shadows friendlier to his eyes than light and he was able to make out things best not spoken of yet. He could smell the nerves of Mal and Wash, the pilot was near panicked while Mal was at least outwardly calmer.

Riddick stood quietly while Mal began to edge his way around the room. From the sound of it the Captain was using his feet to determine what was in the dank room with them. "You okay," Mal's voice was pretty calm considering.

Wash on the other hand was pretty panicky, "I think I've been kidnapped."
"Yeah," Mal's agreement was a bit absentminded. Riddick could hear him still moving around, his boot coming into contact with something metallic in the center of the room.

"You see where we are," the pilot wanted to know. The convict frowned. Wash would be the one had the most trouble with what was to come. He wasn't prepared at all for their situation.

"No," Reynolds replied tersely. He was still moving around while Wash could only stay where he was and ask questions. The pilot was unflappable under most circumstances. Reavers chases, bank robberies, asteroid fields and flying over trains didn't phase him one bit. But he wasn't in his chair on the bridge, he wasn't guiding a ship through hell. It was just him.

"Mal, what the hell is going on?" Wash demanded to know. His voice was growing mores strident the longer he talked.

"Ain't rightly sure," the Captain was lying. Riddick could smell it even over the scent of blood and piss and death that inevitably accompanied those two smells. Even Wash knew that wasn't strictly the truth.

"But you've got some theories," the shorter man accused.

"Still working it through," Mal replied evasively.

Riddick heard Wash's heart rate spike as panic struck him, "Rick, where's Rick? They didn't kill him did they Mal? I didn't see him get shot but he-"

Before Wash could work himself up too much Riddick decided to speak up, "'M fine Wash. Right here. Just listening, gettin' my bearings."

"Right," the pilot sounded as if he was nodding. "Good thought." He continued to speak and Riddick could hear his nerves ratcheting tighter with each word. "I don't want you to spare me, Mal. If you think you know what's happening, then you tell me. You wouldn't spare Zoe if she were in this situation with you, would you? You would be planning, and plotting and... possibly scheming."
He took a breath, not that it seemed to calm him any, and rattled on, "So whatever Zoe would do in this instance is what I wanna do. Do you know why? No matter how ugly it gets, you two always come back with the stories. So... I'm Zoe. Now, what do I do?"

Mal sounded a little irked but not so much as he could have been, "Probably not talk quite so much."

Wash seemed to take that in. "Right. Less talking." Riddick continued to look around the room as Wash continued to talk, panic overriding good sense for the moment. "She's terse. I can be terse." The convict would be willing to bet that his short friend had never been any such thing in his life. "Once in flight school, I was laconic."

Riddick wondered if it was Wash's singular gift that he could tickle Riddick's funny bone even as they were kidnapped and stuck in a room obviously designed for torture. He would bet platinum to donuts that the pilot couldn't keep silent for more than five seconds.

He won his bet with himself as Wash waited about three seconds before bursting out, "If I'm not gonna talk then you have to. What else?"

"Pay attention," Riddick offered quietly. There was no point in yelling or getting worked up. It would just waste energy. "Try to stay calm."

"We just gotta keep our heads," Mal added.

Wash, unfortunately, did not really understand the advice. "Right. 'Keep our heads.' That way we'll be able to... you know... keep our heads." He seemed to think of something, "You and Zoe have been in plenty of situations like this before, right?"

Mal was lying again, "Many a time." He answered the pilot.

"Many a time, you and Zoe..." Wash seemed to think about that for a moment.

Mal didn't quite realize that his pilot was now highly disturbed. "Once we know who it was took us-"

"Zoe and you together in a tricky..." Wash mused and then outrage hit him. "Mal, she's my wife!"

"Huh?" Mal seemed confused. More so than usual. Riddick felt that bubble of amusement in his chest again, laughter tickling his throat.

"What gives you the right to put her in a dangerous situation like this!" Wash demanded angrily.

"I didn't," the Captain argued.

"You did!" Wash snapped back.

"She ain't here, Wash." Mal was clearly attempting reason and logic. Since those weren't his strong points it was easy for Riddick to see how Wash could ignore Mal's attempts.

"No, but she would have been," the pilot argued.

Reynolds seemed to realize that reason would not help him at this point. Capitulation, however, just might. "Okay."

Wash was still rambling, "I mean, I'm the one she swore to love, honor and obey." The Furyan blinked behind his blindfold and considered the likelihood of that occurrence.
"Listen," Mal stopped mid thought. Clearly he had the same thought as Riddick, "She swore to obey?"

The convict nearly chuckled and it showed in his voice, "The hell she did. That woman?" He'd bet River's life and his on that. Zoe would never swear to obey her husband.

"Well, no, not..." Wash admitted and then snapped at the Captain, "But that's just my point! You she obeys! She obeys you! There's obeying going on right under my nose!"

Riddick groaned as Mal tried to excuse that. This conversation was going nowhere. "Look, Zoe and I have a history. She trusts me," the tall man tried to explain.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Wash was in no mood to be placated.

"Don't mean a thing, but you're making out like she blindly follows my every word. That ain't true!" Captain's voice was sliding towards irritated now.

"Sure it is!" The pilot snarled back.

"Not so. There's plenty orders of mine that she didn't obey." Riddick listened as Mal and Wash nearly forgot where they were as they argued. The only thing to beat these two for crazy was when he and Shea'd had a running argument during a mission that had lasted three days. He couldn't remember what it had been about and he doubted Cobh could either but it had been insane at the time. Something to do with grenades versus mines. It probably hadn't helped that they'd both been tired and hungry and stuck behind enemy lines waiting for the Independents to retake the territory.

"Name one!"

"She married you!" Mal shouted at his pilot.

Riddick winced as the door screeched open and made his sensitive ears ache. Three men entered the room, one of them smaller and lighter than the other two. The convict straightened from his relaxed posture against the wall and moved towards Mal, bracketing Wash between himself and the captain.

The three stopped before Mal and waited for something. The sound of sliding cloth whispered through the air and Riddick guessed Mal'd gotten a look at who had taken them. The captain's voice sounded surprised and not in a pleasant way. "Tā mā de hún dàn."

Riddick braced himself as the blindfold was yanked off his eyes and was pleased that apart from the glare of one bare bulb overhead the room wasn't too hard on his vision. Niska was looking up into his face and appeared displeased that Rick wasn't at all surprised to see him. "Figured as much," the convict shrugged. He wasn't going to act shocked as shit just to ingratiate himself to the old criminal overlord. He'd known this was coming since the first laser sight appeared on Bolles' head.

"What?" Wash was still in the dark. Literally. Without his blindfold removed he had no idea who Riddick and Mal were speaking with. His confusion and fear were evident to everyone in the room. Riddick glanced at Mal and saw the Captain had come to the same realization as him. They were going to have to keep Wash alive however they could.

It was a day of firsts, he and Mal were in agreement at least twice. Too bad the circumstances weren't better.
River used her code to get onto Serenity and drove the mule into its proper place. The others had arrived before her, which was all to the good. She'd needed the time to think, to plan and determine exactly how she was going to take back her man. Zoe would be thinking of the same thing. She knew that much without needing to Read the First Mate.

Zoe would want her husband and her Captain back. But she'd try to retrieve them the honest way. It might work. River considered Zoe's thoughts. The dark woman was stoic, still as stone and resolved in her mind. River sighed and followed the woman's thoughts up to the galley.

The crew was handing Zoe all the money they'd made off the hospital job. Everything they had on them. River watched as Kaylee gave Zoe a pouch, "Here's all I got left."

Zoe nodded, "Thanks." She put it in her bag. "Jayne!" She shouted down the hall.

The Shepherd was watching. He didn't seem to disapprove but he was cautious. "How do you know he won't just grab you as well?"

Zoe shook her head. "Don't think that's like to happen. I walk in there, unarmed, make the offer. This guy has his own code, twisted as it may be. Very excited about reputation. He'll see reason." She noticed River and nodded to her as Inara objected to Zoe's reasoning.

"Reason? He's a gangster. The money he paid you for that other job- it was already returned to him."

Jayne's gruff voice was flat, "Could be he's harboring some resentment at us for putting his man through our engine."

Zoe didn't seem to care about Niska's resentment, "Wait a reasonable amount of time, but if you don't hear back, I want you to take Serenity and get out of this quadrant. This don't play out right, there's no guarantee he won't come looking for the rest of you."

She was ready to walk out of the galley when River finally spoke, "It is a plan. But it is not a plan that will see all three of our men returned to us. Simon could get me plans of the station, with Kaylee's help. Need to find air ducts, passageways, too small for a man."
"I'm on it," Simon took off for the bridge, Kaylee hot on his heels.

"You're planning an assault?" Zoe asked incredulously. "That'll just get all of us killed."

"No," River shook her head. "Not an assault. Sneak attack." She indicated Zoe, "You take a shuttle, go and make the offer. I go with, slip onto the station. I bring my weapons, Riddick's knives, and I find the men. You get as many as Niska will let you take out. Get them medical attention and then bring Serenity back."

Jayne grinned wickedly, "Have fun stormin' the castle?" He asked with an appreciative gleam in his bright blue eyes. Ciara actually blinked and then giggled.

"A diversion?" She asked in her Kerry tinted core voice.

"Aye," River grinned back at her. "Serenity lays siege and draws attention. Lots of noise, confusion. I get in, to whoever's left, get them out, meet all of you halfway. Hopefully we'll kill Niska along the way."

"It's a decent plan," Jayne nodded and looked at Zoe. "Think of it as insurance. If River waits until she sees who you've got with her to get on the station..."

The First Mate nodded slowly, "If I get all three, no need for her to sneak on. If I come back with two or less we still need to retrieve the third. So she slips on and we go with her plan."

River looked at Ciara and Book, "We will need all hands. Everyone who can hold a gun."

Book nodded his understanding while Inara looked at River a bit helplessly, "What can I do?"

"Ask the counselor if we can have access to medical equipment," The Reader suggested. "Don't know how beat up they'll be but it won't be good. Simon might need things we don't have here."

Inara seemed relieved to have something she could occupy herself with. "I'll get started on that while you and Zoe are gone."

River looked at Zoe, "I'm not crew. You're in charge of the ship while Mal is gone. But Niska took my husband. I won't let chance rule whether or not I get him back."

Zoe nodded, "Can't say I expected you to." She looked River over thoughtfully, "Might want to dip into our stash of grenades. Jayne, get her set up while she's getting Rick's knives and guns."

Jayne nodded soberly and looked at Ciara, "The rest of us will get set up while you two are gone."

He looked a bit regretfully at the bag of cash to which he'd contributed quite a bit, "Well it was nice bein' rich while it lasted."

River patted his arm, "Don't worry. She has enough money to pay all of the crew back and then some. Most of it stolen from the very man we're going to pay." She murmured the last softly enough that Zoe couldn't hear her and was rewarded with an appreciative grin from Jayne.

"That has a nice ironical ring to it," He commented as he moved down to the armory. River shrugged as she dropped into her bunk and began to strap on a few extra guns and a set of knives for her husband. Riddick had better be unharmed or she'd make Niska wish he'd died at birth. She and Riddick hadn't survived the Academy torture chambers only to surrender to a crime lord with delusions of grandeur to rival the Marquis de Sade.
He'd known that this was not going to be a pleasant experience. And thus far he'd been correct. If Niska's scent got any more smug or delighted with the situation Riddick just might lose his temper and bust out of his chains. That wasn't to say he was having a grand old time. But as torture went it wasn't the worst he'd been through. It might have had something to do with the fact that it wasn't River in here with him being tortured. He'd always found it easier to deal with pain himself than see her in agony and be unable to do anything about it.

But his relief due to River's, relative, safety was fairly well mitigated by the fact that Wash was being tortured along with him and Mal. Mal wasn't doing bad but Wash wasn't built for this sort of crap. Still, Mal had done a pretty good job of distracting the pilot so far. Arguing seemed to keep Wash going well enough. So Riddick occupied his mind with tracking the conversation, such as it was, and figuring out what he could do to help Wash when the Captain's quarrel started to lose its efficacy.

Mal was catching his breath after a bout of truly uncomfortable electric shock. The voltage wasn't high enough to damage them permanently, not yet anyway. But it was painful, and not the sort of pain that the captain could shrug off. Riddick could hear Mal's lungs heaving to catch his breath as he continued to argue with his pilot. "I'm not... gonna say it... again. Shipboard romances complicate things."

Predictably Wash was answering back. Being tortured had done nothing to diminish the pilot's sarcastic nature though it had reduced his usual subtleties to nearly nothing. "For who? For you?"

"For everyone," Mal retorted.

"Well, what about lov——" Wash's question was cut off by another bone rattling surge of electricity. Riddick clenched his jaws together, conscious of Wash and Mal doing the same, in the hopes of having a full set of teeth if they survived this mess.

After the electricity ceased Mal barely paused for breath before he spoke. "I ain't against it as a rule... but in situations such as ours, it tends to cause problems. It splits loyalties."

"Know what I think?" Wash was slurring his words a bit, the bite of the electrical shocks removing the crisp edge of his words.

"What?" Mal was trying to look at him despite the fact that they were all bound onto the torture frame in the center of the room.

Riddick ground his teeth as the electrodes shot pain through them again with the sizzling sensation of every nerve jolting and quivering in agony. It was all he could do not to groan. The other two were weaker than he was and damned if he'd be the first to cave into torture. If Niska wanted him to shout in pain he'd have to do a lot more than shock him. But he could feel Wash sagging, his strength faltering as the electricity shut off.

Mal was prompting him, pushing for a response, trying to keep Wash conscious. "What, Wash? What do you think? Because I'm interested."

When it came, the pilot's voice was weak and Riddick knew it wouldn't be long before he slipped into unconsciousness. "This "policy" you got against shipboard relationships - that's just you projecting your own intimacy issues on everyone else."

Riddick decided this would be a good time to join the conversation, "Cap'n don't got intimacy issues. He's just a dumbass. Thinks he can tell people what to feel."
There was a whining buzz as he caught Niska signaling for the electrodes again and the Furyan bit off a curse as lightening pulsed sickly through him and fried his liver. It lasted longer, rattling his bones and plucking his nerves like Shea's guitar strings until all he could do was grind his teeth and endure.

It finally ceased and Mal jumped right back into the conversation, "'Course, could be a lot simpler than that. Could be I just don't think you're good enough for Zoe."

Somewhat blurrily Wash snarled, "And I don't give a good gorram what you think."

Mal was prodding Wash again as the pilot sagged back against the metal framework. "Oh, don't you? Zoe and I, we got a history, and I figure you gotta be asking yourself some fundamental questions as to the nature of that history."

"You never slept with my wife," Wash denied. He seemed pretty sure. Riddick would have grinned because the pilot was right. Even through all the effluvia of the torture chamber Furyan senses could tell Mal was bluffing.

The Captain jeered back at him, "Oh? That a fact? You know that for sure, do you? You ever ask her?"

Riddick actually growled a curse this time as the electrodes whined again. "Tā mā de dì yù," he nearly bit his tongue as the electricity jolted through him again. When they finally shut off he could see Wash slumping, his head hanging forward. With as much force as he could muster he kicked Wash in the foot. It got a mutter and a slight shake of Wash's head in reaction.

Mal renewed his efforts to keep the pilot's attention, "Hey. We been together for a long time before you came along, Wash. And she's a damn fine-looking woman." He nearly laughed and Riddick almost smirked in amusement. His captain was definitely crazy but it was the sort of nuts the convict could live with.

Riddick nodded, "He's right Wash. Iffen I wasn't taken I'd be givin' Zoe a second look or three."

Wash, his posture still nearly boneless, still had the presence of mind to argue. "Never happened. Know how I know?"


Despite being tortured, Wash was still able to sound as if he was stating the incredibly obvious. It was admirable really, not that Riddick was thrilled at the situation. "This whole Captain thing isn't Zoe's trouble. It's the-guy-she-never-slept-with thing. Hell, Mal, I wish you had slept with her. Then at least she'd be over it."

Mal was mocking Wash now, almost laughing. "Oh, you want me to sleep with her? Would that make you feel better?" It was a valiant attempt to keep Wash going and despite the tension between Riddick and the captain, the convict loved Mal for it. Wash was fading, and the argument was all that was keeping the pilot from lapsing into unconsciousness. From there it wasn't far until he was gone.

"It might!" Wash's reply was bleary but with a tenor of irritation that boded well for his continued existence.

Mal was scoffing now, "Oh, I'd imagine it would do wonders for her, too."

"Screw you!" It was unimaginative, unlike Wash's usual repertoire, but it was too the point and forceful. Another good sign.
"Get in line," Mal snarled.

Riddick was prevented from enjoying further byplay when Niska decided to interrupt with the electricity. " Gow niáng yǎng de," He cursed when the electrodes cut off again. Wash was slumping, nearly unconscious and Mal was trying desperately to get the pilot's attention again.

"Okay, Wash, I'm gonna do it." The Captain's voice grew more alarmed, "Wash!"

Riddick took a deep breath and turned his head, shouted the pilot's name as loud as he could directly towards the pilot's ear, "Hoban Washburne! 'Tenshun!" To his relief that got the man straightening up some, groaning but gamely trying to obey an order.

Mal started talking again, "Wash, listen. First thing we do when we get back..." His voice rose in panic as it seemed Wash was drifting again. "Listen to me!" He gulped in a breath, "First thing when we get back, I'm gonna... I'm gonna take your wife into my bed."

It didn't seem like Wash was really buying it but he actually answered albeit weakly, "Yeah?"

Mal was sounding relieved Wash was awake and desperate to keep him that way. "I'm gonna get me a piece of -"

This time after the electricity ceased running through them Riddick heard the bone chilling cessation of at least one heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Oh...about our little cliffhanger there... any bets as to who's flatlined? Sorry but I couldn't resist. And hopefully the mob with torches and pitchforks will spur me onto writing the next chapter.

Chinese Translations:

Shǐ niào - Shit and piss
Gǒu niáng yǎng de - son of a bitch
Tā mā de hún dàn - fucking bastard
Tā mā de dì yù - Fucking hell

Quote Sources:

Have fun storming the castle - The Princess Bride
Contrary to the expectations and beliefs of nearly every merc in the 'verse, Riddick was far too familiar with the concept of helplessness. He'd become well acquainted with it during his time in slams and the Academy had only sharpened his knowledge. But no longer hearing Wash's ragged breathing was possibly the worst he'd felt since he'd had to watch River be tortured if he didn't perform to expectations.

Niska was talking and the Furyan strained to hear the accented words through the roaring of blood in his ears. "Tsk, tsk, this will not do. Bring him back."

There was a low grade buzzing noise and a building whine of a defibrillator charging, then the scent of sizzling flesh and the sensation of electricity in the air as they shocked Wash's heart. Then the whole thing started again. Riddick was vividly conscious of Mal's labored breathing and fear as the torturers put their electricity to an entirely different use and failed. Niska was walking around the three men strapped to the torture frame and waved his hand almost indifferently. "What is the saying? Third time is the charm? Again."

The third time was the charm, thank all the gods and planets, and Wash's heart came stuttering back to life, his breath gasping back into his lungs.

Riddick took a breath and did his best to ignore the burning metal and plastic smell of Mal's fear and grief. The scents that filled the air in the room were of the worst kind and he'd tried his utmost to simply ignore his sense of smell. It was nearly impossible for a Furyan to ignore his senses but since Niska had started torturing them he'd had to make the attempt or go insane from the overload.

"I think we rest for a moment or two, then, yes, then we begin again." Niska nodded, "but something different for the smaller one I think. The thousand cuts... we do not wish the electricity to deprive us of our guest too soon."

Wash groaned faintly at the thought and managed to regain his sardonic wit. "You want a thousand cuts, you oughta watch me shave."

Riddick nearly chuckled and shook his head. "Need to use water as hot as you can stand and a damn sharp blade Wash. Dull blade pulls at your skin an' slices through it 'stead a your whiskers."

The buzz of electricity interrupted the conversation and Riddick cursed in annoyance.

It was hard to not catch Zoe's mood but thankfully Richard had taught her a great deal about breathing and control. It was something he excelled at, the idea of the mind controlling the body and not the reverse. She'd known some and had been working towards that end, crudely, on her own. But her mate was a master and thanks to his teachings about the animal, the balance she needed, she could maintain the control she so desperately needed to accomplish her plan.

She'd boarded the shuttle armed to the teeth, her sword and daggers distributed over her body, with the addition of her firearms and five compact grenades stuck in her belt. Jayne had wanted her to take more but she couldn't be so loaded down with explosives as to impede her movement. He had talked
her into a small pack of C4 and a couple of remote switches and she had no doubt there was some use she'd find for them. As diversions went, explosions made for fine ones.

Zoe was terrified that the two most important men in her world were dead and this was a fool's errand. That at least River could reassure her was not true. "They're alive," she said quietly. "They're all alive. The jiān xié will not kill them for at least a couple of days. Death would be too easy. He wants to meet them. Reads Shan Yu and believes in the sadistic crap legitimized by florid prose. He wants to punish them."

"Wish I could say that's comfortin'," Zoe was comforted though. And at the same time not, worrying that her man wouldn't be strong enough to withstand torture.

"Wash is stronger than she knows. Survived prison camp. Survives the worries of his warrior woman going out to play with guns and the captain." River offered the tall woman a smile. "Doesn't do well with torture but he will survive."

The First Mate shook her head and half grinned, "River you do have a way of making your point." She began to power up the shuttle. "Let's go get our men back."

River's smile tilted wickedly and she began to double check her weapons, sinking herself into the fighting woman her mate had helped her become. "The jiān xié will not know what has hit him." She predicted coldly.

Riddick was doing his best to sink himself into his own place of calm. The electric shocks were annoying, but not as much of a deterrent to meditation as his companions chattering. They'd found something new to argue about, this time it was whether or not kids were a good idea. To his surprise, Wash had taken the 'for' side of the debate, going against all his prior discussions on the subject, possibly due to the fact that Mal had taken the 'against' side.

Wash finally broke off his cursing as the razor left his flesh and gasped out a question. "Hey Rick, whadda ya think?"

Mal was slightly less profane in his speech but he chimed right in. "Yeah, c'mon Rick, waitin' on your opinion here."

The buzz of electricity jolted through their bones and he heard Wash curse with decent creativity, the ancestry of his torturer. "Yú chūn zǐ jiǎo de dà zǐ ròu!"

Riddick growled his irritation with the entire situation but managed a reply, "I'm thinkin' you two yap an awful gorram lot. I'm trying to catch a nap here."

Wash sounded slightly breathless, "With all this...noise?"

Mal, for whatever reason, found a new thing to argue about. Riddick was beginning to think his captain was contrary enough to argue the hind leg off a donkey. "Yeah but that was for a purpose. That was by them hún dâns as bought you."

The electricity slapped through them again, flickering on and off, leaving his jaw aching from
clenching it and Mal cursing the air bluer than it already was.

When he could unclench his teeth Riddick managed a reply. "Naw, meant in the war. Not with them other hún dàns." He growled as the shocks hit them again and smelt more of Wash's blood on the air. When they got out of this he really would have to commend the pilot on the extent and creativity of his insults.

Trying to distract himself obviously, Wash choked out, "When'd you get tortured in the war?"

"That woulda been when I was tryin' to retrieve a man." It was his turn to curse as he nearly bit the inside of his cheek when the electricity hit him. "Nǐ tā mǎ de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ. Man was dead. Got caught." He could hear Niska chuckling in the background and the electricity went off again.

Mal cursed this time, between the two of them and Wash they were working up quite a little rhythm, and managed to bite off a question. "Well how'd you get out of it?"

"Told ya Jayne saved my life." If he could have Riddick would have rolled his eyes at his captain. As it was he didn't dare open them or he'd be blinded by the bright bulbs spotlighting them on the torture rack. Good news was his goggles were just dangling around his neck; Niska hadn't taken them off him. Bad news was his chances of being able to put them on were very slim.

The buzz of electricity was longer this time; Niska was slowly turning up the voltage, trying to see how much they could take. It wasn't anything Riddick hadn't dealt with before, the Academy scientists could do entire university courses on torture and as long as River wasn't the one being hurt... Well, he'd dealt with worse. Irritating as the whole thing was, he just had to endure it until Jayne and River got going with whatever plan they'd cooked up with Simon. And since Wash and Mal's chattering were a disturbance to his attempts at meditation, he could be grateful that Wash a decent distraction from the torture.

"He got you out of a torture session?" Wash's normally light voice was strained and the Furyan could hear the drip of blood hitting the grated floor.

"Nah," Riddick paused as he heard the whine of the electricity build just before it hit his nerves again and ground his teeth together. If he broke a tooth because of Niska he would throttle the little rat personally. "He just killed every guard 'tween us and the camp line." There went the shocks again. "Got in, cut me down and helped me out." And again. Niska must really not like this story. Riddick took a breath before he continued talking. "'Course, Alliance used whips an' brands, and knives. Didn't wanna waste electricity in the field."

A whine and another long buzz of the shocks before Mal managed to wheeze out his words, "Yeah, this is high quality torture, this is."

Riddick actually found himself laughing at that, albeit tiredly. Cap'n could be damn funny sometimes. "Sure. High quality. Not terrible creative though. Worst thing about the war was how innovative they had to get. Wanted to know where my unit was, who was with me."

Wash was grinding his teeth against the pain of the knife, the Furyan could hear it in his voice, "So what'd you do?"

"Lied." Riddick told him flatly.

In return he got a very coherent, "Huh?" from the pilot.

"S'all you can do, you get caught." He told his friend, "'Cause everybody breaks eventually. Lie
from the start. Lie so often an' make up such crazy gu pì that when you break and they get the truth outta you, they won't know what to believe. Make it so if you can't live they can't profit from your capture. Confusion to the enemy after all."

The electrodes went again, on, off, on, off, until they finally went off and Riddick cursed Niska's ancestors and the frog humping son of a bitch's sanitary habits.

Wash almost, but not quite, whined as he was cut on again. "Well I guess we'll be adding to our collective memories for post traumatic stress disorder."

Mal seemed to feel compelled to comment on that. "Oh yeah, group therapy sessions for the whole damn crew after this bit."

"Cào nǐ zǔ zōng shí bā dài." Riddick growled his annoyance at the thought. "I gotta live through it, damned if I'll talk about it 'fore I'm ready."

And Wash, showing that he could keep his sense of humor through gorram near anything, quipped, "Aw... does that mean I won't get to swap manly stories?"

"Let's just get drunk all right?" His co-pilot suggested hopefully.

"I'll drink to that," Mal agreed.

And then Niska decided he wasn't being creative enough if they still had breath to speak.

River watched silently from the space beside the shuttle door as Zoe docked on the skyplex and powered the shuttle down. When the First Mate exited the shuttle, River closed her eyes and used every bit of her not inconsiderable skill to slip out in the shadow Zoe made and found a small space near the double doors to conceal herself.

It was difficult to watch Zoe go through those doors, unarmed, with only a bag of coin as a shield. But she managed it. It was her job to remain where she was, to be patient until they knew how reasonable Niska was inclined to be. She could hear Zoe's voice, the faint vibrations of it through the doors echoing what she heard with the mental grip she'd taken of Zoe's mind.

"I'm unarmed." Zoe was being plain and clear. "I wanna talk to Niska."

River could admit that Niska's staff was decently professional. They didn't abuse Zoe in anyway. She was patted down with the ruthless efficiency of men who knew their employer was subject to any amount of assassination attempts but there was no groping or pinching. She might have been a piece of equipment that could walk and talk for all the interest they took in her as they escorted her through the station and to the room that held the three missing men. Keycards, hallways and endless shadows but finally Zoe was in the same room as Niska and their men.

It wasn't easy to let go of the relative safety of Zoe's mind and latch onto Niska's foul, blood tinted brain, but it had to be done. Breathing in softly and quietly without gagging on the putrid tenor of his thoughts was even more difficult. Niska was delighted. Niska was ecstatic. Niska was like a xiǎo huáng dì pulling the whiskers off a cat before he tied a firecracker to its tail and put it in a steel box to die.

Niska was, in a word, disgusting. His brain had the same type of foul pattern to it that she'd found in the scientists at the Academy. And she knew from the tenor of his thoughts that his men were as
sadistic as he was but to do anything to someone without his permission would guarantee they spent time on the same torture rack the crew of the Serenity was currently 'enjoying'. Zoe wasn't abused simply because if it was going to be done, then he wanted to be the one to do it. It was simply another facet of his control and reputation. River shuddered mentally in revulsion and kept silent by stretching her control to the utmost.

It was certain that Niska intended to kill all of the men. Had already killed Wash once. He wanted to do it again and again. He would never give back all three of the men for payment. Even as he and Zoe spoke and Zoe interrupted him to choose her husband, River knew that Mal and Riddick would be required to stay. There would be no easy death for them. Niska planned to make sure their last days were filled with excruciating pain and humiliation. He wanted, more than anything, to hear the great and terrible Richard B. Riddick beg for mercy.

River nearly growled and forced herself to wait for Zoe to come back, for the doors to open from the inside so she could sneak in and begin her work. She might never have come to this place, might never have existed as the person she was now without the Academy's training. But it was their training and Riddick's that would enable her to do exactly what she needed. And ironically, exactly what they'd trained her to do.

If she hadn't gone to the Academy would Serenity's path have crossed Niska's in such a way? Mental figuring and calculation of the odds and criminal contacts said yes. Eventually the crew would have crossed Niska's path. Perhaps they would have done the job, perhaps not, but sooner or later Niska would have found fault with them, if only for what they were and their own reputation. Sooner or later, they would have arrived at this point. And someone would have died.

The cold smile that curved her lips was one her husband would have delighted to see. The xiǎo láng was out of the cage and the prey had no notion what was in store for it.

Riddick wasn't positioned in a way that he could see the door, even if he had been interested in opening his eyes and being blinded. But his ears and nose were working just fine, despite his best attempts to stifle his sense of smell, and both of them told him, despite the background noise of the torture session, that Zoe Washburne had come for her men. She smelt like steel and blood and leather, wrath turning her voice flat as gun metal as she spoke to Niska.

From beside him he could hear Wash imploring his wife to run, even as Niska used his jovial, near avuncular, voice to comment on the recent prosperity of the crew.

He had to give her credit, even with seeing her husband, bloodied and tortured, Zoe's voice didn't waver one iota. Niska trying to tease her into hysterics only resulted in interruption as she chose her husband over her Captain and the gun hand.

Riddick would admit to himself that when Niska started talking about refunds he got a little worried about what the lunatic wanted to chop off. It wouldn't be anything huge, like an arm or a hand, because Niska wouldn't want them to bleed to death. But an eyeball would be hard as hell for Simon to put back in, even if Niska didn't crush it underfoot.

Then he heard Mal's scream, smelt the blood very near his own head and knew. Niska had cut off Mal's ear. His own steady, furious cursing was an undercurrent to Mal's painful groans when the scream subsided but he still heard Zoe helping Wash out of the room and whisper one last word designed to be heard only by Furyan ears. "Trojan."
River watched, fury riding her like a horse, unable to keep her face impassive as Wash and Zoe passed her on their way to the shuttle. Now it was her turn to work and she slipped into the skyplex without a sound.

Wash was pretty beat up though, and as the Reader slipped onto the station she took a gentle hold of Zoe's mind again to check his condition. Zoe'd had to help him into the shuttle, blood dripping from various shallow, and not so shallow, cuts. Electrical burns on his chest indicated he'd been shocked repeatedly with high voltage electricity and he was covered in bruises.

It would take a couple of hours for the crew to get Serenity into position and begin their raid of distraction upon the station. She knew Niska's intent and could feel Wash's as he'd passed her. The pilot had no intention of leaving his friends behind. He couldn't know their intentions but he still planned to fight. He was a little discombobulated at the moment though.

It was always odd to hear conversations through someone else's mind. She couldn't exactly borrow Zoe's ears or eyes, but the mental grip she had on the First Mate's mind allowed her to eavesdrop on what was said, at least until she relaxed her cerebral hold.

"He's insane." Wash seemed astonished by this fact.

His wife, however, was stoic in the face of it. River could hear her thought that no one so entranced with Shan Yu could be sane. "I know it," She agreed quietly.

Wash barely seemed to hear her, "I mean, you've told the damn stories. Saved you in the war." His voice stuttered a moment, "I, I didn't know..."

Now Zoe sounded surprised, "You mean Mal?"

The man was still rambling slightly, "He's crazy. He wouldn't break, Zoe." Another painful stutter of words, "He kept me from..."

Now that did sound like the Captain. Malcolm Reynolds was many things, and stubborn to the point of insanity with a refusal to let go of what was his... River smirked slightly. Oh yes, Cap'n Tight Pants was just as crazy as she was. Just in a very different way.

Wash must have been very close to breaking down, because Zoe's voice was reassuring, her mental tone softer, "its okay."

Her husband's voice was choked, "I wouldn't have made it. And Rick, Rick's even worse. He didn't even seem to feel it... He... He was making jokes, talkin' like nothing even hurt." Zoe made a shushing noise, trying to calm him down, and Wash continued. "Niska's gonna kill them."

Zoe's voice hardened and mentally she was preparing to tell her husband about the plan as she spoke. "He's gonna make it last as long as possible. Days, if he can."

River nearly smiled at the effect those words had on Wash. She could almost feel his hardening resolve echo back through Zoe to her as she spoke. "Bastard's not gonna get days."

Zoe's thoughts were tangled with pride and love and determination and River released her grasp on the older woman's mind as the First Mate began to explain the plan they, the crew and River, had come up with.

River smiled to herself as she climbed into the air vents. First stop was the propulsion systems, then
security. Jayne had given her enough plastique to blow up a station five times this one's size and when she'd grinned at him curiously he'd shrugged. "Wanna blow it to smithereens, not just big pieces. Big pieces could make it through atmo and fall onto someun's head down on Ezra. Don' wanna have that happ' nin' iffen we can prevent it."

So as she traversed the air circulation vents she left bits of plastique behind, coded to respond to two devices only. One she had with her. The other resided on Serenity in Kaylee's capable hands.

The mechanic had been a little upset at the thought of blowing up the station and everyone on it until Jayne and River had explained it to her. Ciara had just kept methodically checking the rifles and handguns to be sure they were all clean, unconcerned for any casualties that might occur on the station beyond their own.

"Kaylee, there ain't anyone worth savin' on that flyin' piece of lè sè," Jayne had told her. "Maybe there was oncet but they's long gone now. Either Niska kilt 'em or they've gone bad as he is."

River had nodded as she continued to program the plastic explosive. "Nice people do not last long on space stations run by men such as Niska. I will listen for innocents as I go through and do my best for any I find but I do not believe I will find any."

Jayne had nodded grimly and kept working on the impact explosive with Kaylee. "I heard back when Niska took the place over he made it a kinda haven for people who are generally up to no good. They pay him money, like protection an' rent, and they run their businesses outa there."

Kaylee had been less worried then and so long as River kept an ear out for things like little kids she'd been fine with the idea of blowing up the skyplex after they got their crew off.

River imagined that the mechanic was still more than a little spooked about the violence to come but they'd tried to arrange it so that she was as far behind the lines as Jayne and Zoe could manage.

The Reader pulled her attention back to the present and the vent into the occupied room that was directly in front of her. She was light enough that the vent shafts didn't bend or make noise under her weight, in part because while Niska might skimp on parts for places he sold, he liked his own residence to be solid and reliable. The skyplex was a marvel of up to date engineering and top of the line specs. A moment of consideration and waiting for the men in the room to move around concealed her own stealthy slide across the vent.

Another pause to be sure she hadn't been noticed, a small placement of plastique and she was moving on. She'd have several hours to make her way through the vents to Niska's office and the torture room beyond his plush business area.

It was getting harder to keep track of time. Niska'd gone from electricity to knives. And while he at least didn't have to worry about breaking his teeth Riddick was finding Mal's loss of blood to be of some concern. He was pretty sure it had been at least a couple hours since Zoe had come and gone again, taking Wash with her. He'd decided to save his energy now that he didn't have to keep up appearances to give Wash heart and it seemed Mal had come to the same conclusion. Another moment of agreement, which he'd have to note on the calendar. This day was just full of 'em. As consolations went it was so small as to be infinitesimal.

Of course that didn't mean that Mal wasn't still conversing with Niska. Cap'n couldn't keep his mouth shut if his life depended on it. As was being proven over and over today.
"Hey Rick? You there?" Mal was now trying to talk to him while Riddick was getting cut on. The long slice to his inner arm, narrowly avoiding the larger veins and arteries was bleeding sluggishly and he growled as he forced himself to answer.

"What? Ya think I went for a gorram stroll or somethin' Mal?" He would have rolled his eyes if he'd had the energy. So much for saving his strength.

"Just checkin'. Don' want you ta pass out on me. I'd have a helluva lotta explainin' to do." Mal groaned as a meaty thump echoed through the room.

Niska apparently didn't like being ignored. "Do you know the writings of Shan Yu?"

"Sadistic gōu pì legitimized by florid prose," Riddick growled the words out in irritation. Niska's astonishment at his knowledge would have been amusing if not for the connotations of the question.

Mal just groaned, "We're starting a book club? What? Are you trying to tor-" A strangled cry erupted in the middle of his sentence at something Niska did but he gamely continued when the little rat was done. "-trying to torture me?"

Niska's laugh was altogether disturbing, Riddick decided. He'd had some time now to consider it and he really did not like how the man laughed. It was just creepy. "Yes, today we meet you. Yes, and you are quite a man. An extraordinary man. Yes, but these are not times for extraordinary men. Business is not war. Heroics are unseemly. They complicate."

He moved around to talk at Riddick instead and the Furyan refused to give him the pleasure of trying to meet his gaze. He'd keep his eyes shut thank you very fuckin' much and the little monster could talk to his eyelids. "And you...Mister Richard B. Riddick... another extraordinary man. Such tales they tell of you, the convict who cannot be kept. The murderer who escapes all chains. And yet I have caught him. Your reputation is as well known as your name Mister Riddick. And when I display your head in a glass case to show the entire Underworld who has fallen to me, my reputation will be unassailable."

Riddick growled, the animal ready to break everything around him, ready to destroy the entire station if it meant a chance at killing the little rat who thought he was a lion standing in front of him.

His growls seemed to amuse Niska; further proof the man was an idiot, because the bái mù fèi fèi gāng mén just laughed again. "Soon I will have tortured the mighty Captain Reynolds and the 'terrifying' Riddick to death. And the entire 'Verse will know that none can stand against Niska. There will be no more 'talk' of perhaps Niska's grip is slipping."

The Furyan slitted his eyes open slightly and stared at the little Russian mobster, so self absorbed and satisfied with himself he didn't notice that Riddick was no where near as pained and exhausted as he seemed. "You just keep tellin' yourself that." He told the bespectacled man flatly. "Fallen from his high estate. And weltering in his blood; deserted at his utmost need by those his former bounty fed; on the bare earth exposed he lies with not a friend to close his eyes." He sneered at the fool who read and believed Shan Yu but couldn't seem to recognize Earth That Was literature. "S'amatter? Don' even know Dryden ya pompous windbag?" He shut his eyes in clear dismissal and smirked as Niska walked away from him.

He could hear the little hún dàn walk across the room and then return to stand in front of Mal. Niska seemed to regain his sense of rhythm because he started pontificating again. "For you, I have, uh... special machine..." He paused and Riddick guessed he was doing something Jayne would call creepifyin'. "Very precious."
Whatever he'd done to Mal the last time had taken something out of the Captain because his voice was strained as he replied. "And they say people don't look like their pets."

Niska's creepy laugh filled the air again, "Let us see if we can meet the real you."

Riddick wasn't sure what the hell they were doing but the sounds from whatever it was were not reassuring. A metallic whirring, the distinctive sound of flesh being penetrated, the smell of Mal's blood, dark and rich and the Captain's very loud, tortured scream. And the worst, underneath it all, the frantic, too rapid, sound of Mal's heart going crazy with pain.

It went on for a good five minutes before Mal's voice cut off with a gurgle that Riddick knew all too well and the abrupt stop of the man's heartbeat. The stupid pì yānr had managed to kill the captain. Sure enough he heard the torturer tell Niska after some fumbling around, "Yep. He's dead."

"Yú chūn zì jiāo de dà zì ròu," Riddick told him.

"Bring him back," Niska snapped, and it was the most irritated Riddick had heard the little huài rén sound since they'd been brought in.

It took a few more jolts, Mal being slightly more beat up than Wash had been, but eventually they got him back. Eventually. The sound of the Captain taking a wheezing breath was a pretty good one. He was pretty sure he wasn't ever gonna like Malcolm Reynolds but annoying as he was, he was still crew, and he hadn't done anything, that Riddick knew of anyway, that would warrant him being tortured to death. At least not in anyone's mind but Niska's.

And speaking of Niska, Riddick nearly groaned as the little man began talking again. The only good thing about Mal being dead for a few minutes had been the quiet.

"Mr. Reynolds?" Niska's voice was an irritating sing song, "You died, Mr. Reynolds."

Mal was coughing a bit, and immediately proved that whatever brain damage he might have wasn't anything new, by mouthing off yet again. "Seemed like the thing to do."

Niska made a 'tsking' noise and Riddick could almost hear him shaking his head. "When you die, I can't hurt you anymore and I want two days, at least. Minimum." He paused and there was a faint squeaking sound, cloth over glass. The Furyan nearly groaned in irritation. He couldn't stand lectures. "I think many people know the name Malcolm Reynolds. Many know he crossed Niska. They must know what happens after that."

Riddick could hear the gǒu tuīzi of a torturer moving towards Mal and a nasty sound like scissors slicing together as Niska continued speaking. "They must know that business is still running."

Riddick growled and took a deep breath. This was going to be uncomfortable. "Yeah, like there's gonna be anythin' left a you once we're done. You're gonna be outa business ya little gǒu pī. You just don't get it. We woulda let you go your way if you'd a let us go ours. Money got returned, no harm, no foul. We couldn't get the job done. But you, you just had to decide that wasn't enough. Such a little man you gotta make yourself big by cuttin' better men down."

He was right. A hot set of knives pushed through his side was damn uncomfortable.

River had made several circuits of the space station, winding inward as she went, and found quite a bit of interesting information about how the place was run. Having her cortex with her made tapping
into Niska's network extremely easy and it wasn't as if she didn't have the encryption to his files already. So when Serenity docked and the alarm went off, it was a matter of seconds to cut the power and reroute it to where she wanted it to go.

Unfortunately not everything could be done remotely or with her cortex. Hence the crew creating the distraction for the guards she hadn't been able to lock down in their quarters. Soon enough she heard the faint echo of gunfire and slid forward past Niska's office into the vents above the torture chamber.

She peered through the vent as two men bent over the Captain who was strapped to a semi-reclined rack. She could see her Riddick and smell his blood, dripping dully to the floor from two through and through wounds in his side. Mal, predictably enough, was mouthing off. "Listen... if you got guests, I can come back later."

The little man was giving the bigger one an annoyed look. At that point a timely entrance was called for because she could feel he was about to give an order she wouldn't care for.

Dancer's legs could kick pretty hard. The screws holding the vent cover in place were no match for her muscles and three of the four men in the room were startled when it went flying from the upper right side of the room to the lower left. Swinging down from her perch in the vent was a matter of gymnastics and math and she landed right behind the bigger man.

He was holding some sort of instrument that looked like scissors and it was easy for her to identify it as the cause of her Riddick's wounds. Taking it from him after kicking him in the stones from behind was easy. Stabbing it into his neck was a little harder, her muscles were only so strong after all, but Mal got loose and slammed something that looked like an amputated octopus into his back. After that, he fell down easily enough. Her knife sliced through Riddick's bonds easily and a sweep of her sword upwards killed the lights.

After that it was simply a matter of letting Riddick do what he did best. Niska didn't have a chance. Her Riddick was on the little man faster than a cat on a mouse. Niska's neck broke with an anti-climatic snap. Riddick growled down at the body, "So now you met the real me. Happy?" He looked at River, eyes glowing in the dark. "I think, we mighta worn out our welcome here," Riddick told her quietly.

"Our welcome is quite possibly frayed to uselessness my láng." River shrugged. "Need to help the captain. I'll keep you covered."

Mal was more than a bit exhausted, not having a Furyan's constitution meant that torture tended to take a little something out of you. He pointed at a loosened strap as an explanation for his timely assistance in killing the piglike villain, swaying as he did. "Didn' pay 'tention when they was...recu, resuss, bringin' me back." His words were more than a little slurred and it was obvious that he wouldn't be walking on his own.

River helped Riddick put his goggles on and guilded the captain towards her Furyan. Riddick pulled Mal's arm up over his shoulder and nodded at her. "We leavin' now?" Mal asked groggily.

"Yep," Riddick nodded grimly and began to follow River out.

It wasn't easy, having River do all the shooting, even if he did have Mal half draped over him. He was itching to shed some blood. Wanted to let the animal out and carve his way off this gorram station. But if he did, River's plan would be screwed and Mal would most likely be dead. They had
deviated from their course slightly, in order to pick up a cashbox with the scent of the crew on it, but that hadn't taken long at all.

Following River through the winding route back to the hanger without dropping Mal to attack the guards with his bare hands qualified as one of the hardest things he'd done to date. River's scent blazed with cinnamon and steel, her rage tempered with the discipline that kept her abilities from spiraling out of control.

As they got closer to the edge of the station he could pick up the crew's voices, calling for backup, cursing, and shot directions. Coming around a corner behind River he could see Kaylee and Ciara pinned down by three guards, dangerously close to the ramp of the cargo bay. The rest of the crew were coming from the opposite direction, something he figured River had set up deliberately.

"Stay here with the Cap'n," River murmured and crept forward, her Ladysmith in one hand, her sword in the other. A twirling slice of her sword and two shots later as the guards turned towards their crumpling comrade and the guards were no longer an issue.

Seeing the way clear Riddick walked forward and up the ramp while River shouted down in the direction of the crew. "Clear!"

It took a few minutes, but the rest of the crew, including Wash, Riddick was proud to see, began to trickle onto the ship, some, like Jayne, firing behind them as they came. "Grenade," The big man called as he backed onto the ramp.

"Pin's out," Ciara shouted as she threw it to him and quick as a wink the huge gun hand lobbed it into the station. The resulting explosion was particularly satisfying as all gunfire ceased from that point forward.

"Clear up," Jayne called back.

"Clear down," Zoe shouted and that was apparently Kaylee's cue to hit the button for the cargo bay doors.

Wash was already making his limping way up the stairs to the bridge and Riddick handed Mal off to Jayne and Simon, following Wash and helping him walk when he caught up to the pilot.

"So what's the plan now that we're all back on the boat?" He asked as he eased Wash into the pilot's seat and took his own place.

"We beat feet." Wash was already disengaging from the station. "And then all the work River did gets put into action."

Riddick couldn't help grinning at the satisfied scent coming off the pilot. "I'm guessin' we wanna be far and away from the station when that action happens?"

"As I understand it, Jayne pretty much turned over our entire supply of plastic explosive to her and she planted it all over the station," Wash was chuckling.

"Plus robbed Niska's coffers blind." River said as she came onto the bridge.

"You had this planned pretty well I guess." Riddick smiled slightly. "You come on when Zoe came and got Wash?"

"Waited until she only came back with one man." River shrugged slightly.
"We figured Niska wouldn't accept the money for alla ya," Jayne's voice was tired as he came in and collapsed in the navigator's chair. "But just in case, we set it up so's River'd slip on after Zoe come back on the shuttle."

"Knew it would take time to get close to the room where our crew were being kept," River's soft voice was tired. "Planned it so that we'd have plenty of time to get the distraction set up and I could get to you. Detonator is set so that only Kaylee's controls here, or the ones I have on my cortex can blow the station. No mistakes that way. Even if someone else got to the detonator, it would route through my cortex and I could stop it if I had to."

"Well we're far enough away," Wash slowed Serenity and turned the ship so they could see the skyplex. Flicking the intercom on, he spoke into it. "Ladies, gentlemen and Browncoats, if you'd direct your attention to your nearest starboard window you'll see the Niska space station implode in a glorious burst of fire. In three, two, one..."

He looked at River and she smiled grimly, keying the sequence into her cortex and hitting the button to finalize it. "Done."

It wasn't the first time he'd seen light turn into death but it was among the most satisfying. When all that was left of Niska's station was dust Riddick looked at Wash. "How 'bout we land this boat and get some medical attention 'fore Simon comes and hauls us out of our chairs by the ears that Niska didn't cut off."

Wash chuckled tiredly. "That sounds like the makin's of a fine plan."

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

jiān xié - crafty and evil / a treacherous villain
Yú chūn zì jiāo de dà zi ròu - stupid inbred sack of meat
hún dàn - bastards
Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ. - Fuck everyone in the universe to death.
gu pì - bullshit, nonsense - lit. "dog fart";
Cào nǐ zǔ zōng shí bā dài - fuck your ancestors to the eighteenth generation.
xiǎo huáng dì - lit. little emperor / fig. spoiled child / spoiled boy / pampered only child
xiǎo láng - little wolf
lè sè - Garbage, trash
bái mù - stupid / Lit. white-eyed, blind / not understanding the situation and reacting in a wrong way as a result
fèi fèi gāng mén - baboon's asshole
pì yǎnr - bastard / slob / asshole

huái rén - bad person / villain

gǒu tuǐ zi - dog's leg / fig. one who follows a villain / henchman / hired thug

láng - wolf

Quote Sources:

Fallen from his high estate. And weltering in his blood; deserted at his utmost need by those his former bounty fed; on the bare earth exposed he lies with not a friend to close his eyes. - Alexander's Feast - Dryden
To say that Simon was displeased with the day's events would be a massive understatement. River watched as her brother patched up Mal first and then, at Riddick's insistence, Wash. He pointed out quietly, out of Zoe's hearing, not an easy feat that, that Wash's heart had stopped and he'd had to be resuscitated. Simon had immediately understood the implications and put Wash on a heart monitor to listen for any residual murmurs or aberrations in function that might impede the pilot's continued good health.

Her husband had taken a seat on the counter and let her fuss over him, Simon occasionally calling out suggestions for treatment as he worked on the other two with Ciara's help. Jayne was under Zoe's ministrations, a bullet dug out of the meat of his shoulder. The rest of the crew had some scrapes and bruises but they were relatively unscathed by the battle.

The same couldn't be said of the mule which had served as a kind of battering ram and might have been scavenged for spare parts if they hadn't been forced to leave it behind.

River sat next to her husband as Simon moved from Wash and Mal over to Jayne to check Zoe's work and stitch him up. "Must place orders on the cortex," She smiled into his eyes, pale silver gleaming down at her. "Replace the mule and stock up arms again."

"Yeah, an' now that we've got one less enemy, I'm figurin' Jayne'll wanna take Ciara back home for a visit." Riddick nodded.

Kaylee wandered into the infirmary and took a seat next to them. "Good ta have ya back Rick." She smiled at River a bit teasingly. "That was some pretty fancy shootin', when ya'll come outta the station."

The Reader grinned at her, "Just math."

The mechanic's smile widened to a grin. "Ain't ever heard it called math afore. Sharp shootin' and 'manly heroics' sometimes, but not math." She looked over at Mal and Wash before taking a seat on Riddick's other side. "That mean old buzzard was gonna kill alla ya. I can't wrap my brain around it. I mean I can, but the why of it... I don't understand that."

River sighed as Riddick's free arm wrapped around Kaylee's shoulders and her big man kissed his mèi mei's head. "You're a good woman mèi mei. It's nice that you don't understand that way a thinkin'. Means you ain't ever come up on it before. Rather it stayed that way."

"He was just a mean old man couldn't stand to have anyone get the better of him," Simon offered his perspective from his position near Mal's head. "Try not to dwell on him bāo bāo."

Kaylee's sigh and mumbled affirmative was half hearted but as she sat and watched her crew being healed River could hear the mechanic's thoughts turn to Serenity. "Mayhaps I'll take a look at our girl, now that we're dirtside, see iffen she took any damage to her seals or hull, 'cause of the explosions an' bullets an' suchlike."

River smiled at her friend and nodded, "I will come and help if you like. Bring my cortex and catalog anything we'll need for repairs."
"Do us all some good to breathe fresh air," Riddick agreed easily.

"Don't go too far now," Zoe cautioned them as the three made to exit the infirmary. "An' take a com with you."

"Shì," Kaylee smiled at the First Mate. "Won't be far, just 'round Serenity's feet is all."

Riddick was sitting at the weight bench, doing curls while River practiced her exercises when Simon began to pack up the borrowed medical equipment. Mal, seemingly ill at ease with major surgery being done so quick, entered the cargo bay, fussing with his recently reattached ear. "Sure this thing's gonna stay on?"

Simon looked at him with some exasperation and Riddick got the impression that this wasn't the first time Mal had asked that question. "This dermal mender creates an excellent tissue bond. It should be fine. Just don't... don't fiddle with it."

Inara had drifted down the stairs and River greeted her with a smile and a kiss to the cheek as she arrived at floor level. Mal blinked, and a bit awkwardly, smiled as well. Riddick nearly laughed. The man didn't have a crush on the Companion anymore but when he wasn't trying to provoke her the Captain didn't seem to know how to act. "Be sure to, uh, thank the Councilor for me. Awful nice of her to... pull some strings and lend us his equipment."

Inara shook her head, annoyance wrinkling her brow, "It's the least she could do. I'm just glad Rick killed that old bastard."

Mal glanced at his gunhand/co-pilot and nodded, "I'm fairly pleased with that turn of events myself." He looked at Book and Jayne, taking turns on the second weight bench. "So. I hear you all took up arms in that little piece of action back there." His gaze fell on Simon and his tone didn't quite gentle, but it softened a touch in concern. "How you faring with that, doctor?"

Simon took a deep breath, "I don't know. I... I knew I'd have to at some point. I never deliberately shot anyone before."

Book chuckled, "I was there, son. I'm fair sure you haven't shot anyone yet." While most likely untrue the preacher's quip did serve to lighten the mood and Simon's protest that his aim wasn't that bad, was met with sarcastic rejoinders.

Riddick shook his head and began to follow Mal up the stairs, River joining them as she heard his thoughts about making something to eat.

His woman smelt contented, love and trust underlying the almond scent and when he wrapped an arm around her waist the smile she gave him was like a boon. "Wash and Zoe in the galley, wife soup." She murmured for his ears alone and he smiled down at her.

"Well he did do pretty good."

River nodded solemnly. "Riddick deserves soup too. Will make him some."

"Rather take you to bed and spend some time there, breathin' you in," He inhaled her scent and when she nodded exhaled in relief.

"Quick meal then," She promised him softly. "To augment my Riddick's strength."
When they entered the galley behind Mal, the captain was inquiring of his pilot, "Did you tell her?"

River looked at Wash and then the captain and her wicked grin was reflected in her tequila infused scent. Riddick tugged her towards the cabinets, pulling out some dry rations so they were out of the way but still in a position to enjoy the conversation that was sure to follow.

Wash seemed a bit confused though, "Tell her what?"

Mal turned to his first mate with an air of 'what can you do' as he explained, "Your husband has demanded that we sleep together."

Zoe regarded her captain and then her husband with an appraising eye, and then regarded River and Riddick who were blatantly enjoying the conversation before she looked at Wash again. "Really?"

Her husband, wisely, was protesting, "What? Mal, come on."

Mal nodded with that same air of a man tasked with something he'd rather avoid continued his explanation, "He seems to think it would get all this burning sexual tension out in the open - you know, make a fair fight for your womanly affections."

Wash was standing up in protest now, and shot River a dirty look as she couldn't contain a giggle anymore, but shook his head at his wife and captain. "No. That was the torture talking. Remember? The torture?"

Watching the Captain take Zoe's hands and put one on his hip and the other on his shoulder, while he held her hips in his hands was both unsettling and hilarious and it was with considerable effort that Riddick kept his face straight. Then Mal said in the soberest voice possible, "I know it's a difficult mission... but you and I... have to get it on."

Zoe nodded, her face expressionless, "I understand. We have no choice."

Riddick wasn't sure if the two of them could be any less sexy. The two of them had no chemistry whatsoever. It was almost painful.

He heard Jayne and Ciara coming up the stairs and wondered what on earth the two Browncoats currently entangled in each other were going to do next. Just as his old friend entered the galley with his girl, Zoe's deadpan voice intoned, "Take me, sir. Take me hard."

Jayne stopped, Ciara's hand in his, and stared at the two senior officers before shaking his head like a spooked horse. "Now somethin' about that is just downright unsettling."

River started to giggle, her mirth filling Riddick's nose with the scent of tequila until he was chuckling along with her. Jayne just shook his head and tugged Ciara over to the table while Wash threw down his napkin and firmly tugged his wife away from Mal, the two of whom were mock struggling to kiss each other from a foot away.

"We'll be in our bunk," Wash told them all with a half grin and a slap to Zoe's pì gu as they walked down the hall.

Mal was seating himself at the table with a groan of discomfort and Ciara pushed the bowl of Wash's soup in front of the captain. "Shea sit ye down and I'll make you somethin'. Since I'm guessin' these two are for their bunk as well." She aimed a teasing look at River and Riddick who were still shortling over the bit of awful playacting they'd witnessed.

"You're not wrong," Riddick scooped River up and threw her over his shoulder, making his little
mate shriek with laughter as he strode towards their bunk.

His 'captive' was quite willing once the hatch to their bunk closed, her nimble fingers unbuttoning his pants and pulling his shirt out of his waistband, soft fingers sliding over his skin and spreading heat everywhere they touched. Words weren't necessary as he tugged her own work clothes off her body and pulled off her boots.

Finally nude they fell on the bed and River climbed on top of him, her slender body rubbing against the length of his. "So tā mā de beautiful," He muttered. He couldn't get enough of her skin against his, stroking his hands over the curves of her hips and up to her breasts, kissing her pretty budded nipples until she arched against his mouth. He'd never get tired of hearing the low cry of pleasure that spilled from her mouth when he began to suck on her nipples. The feel of her flesh, tight in his mouth, blooming under the warmth of his lips and tongue as he sucked in long lazy pulls of his mouth.

The way her scent changed, from plums to a mix of plums, honey and caramel, hot desire and joy to blend with her love for him as her pulse sped up and her body tightened and swelled with need as he pleased her. Her sweet moans and gasps couldn't be more perfect in his ears. Two fingers, sliding between her thighs, rubbing and teasing her yīn dì, scissoring it between his fingers until she was biting down on his earlobe and her fingers were tight and mercilessly stroking his diǎo, making him crazy.

"Richard Riddick, need you," His little woman was demanding and he was at the point where he couldn't deny her anymore. "Cào dàn, now Riddick!"

The sound of her demand, her elegant core voice cursing as his fingers stroked her, undid all of his intentions and he tumbled River onto her back, spreading her thighs and driving inside her without pause. "Cào dàn!" He growled the words out as her body gripped and pulsed around him, her fall shaking her body and nearly pulling him along with her. "Tā mā de dì yù," He struggled to keep from moving and losing control, she was hot and wet and so gorram tight around his dick.

"Riddick...more... please..." She wrapped her legs around his waist and tried to pull him closer, the strength in her limbs temporarily unbalancing him so his hips ground down to hers and she jolted, pleasure like lightning bursting through the both of them.

"Fuck yeah," He nearly snarled as he forced himself pull nearly all the way out of her body and then drove back in. "Qīng Xiāng, tell me... tell me I'm not hurtin' you."

"Feels good... don't stop, please, Richard, my bàng jiār harder...it's so good." Her hands gripped his shoulders, heels digging into him, urging him on until he was pounding into her body, groaning and sucking on her neck and shoulders, leaving love bites to shout his claim on her.

Her nails scraped down his back leaving bloody furrows as her fall thundered through her body, jerking his seed out of his balls in blaze of heat and bliss. "Bloody tā mā de dì yù," He cursed low and harsh in his throat as his fall left him with his ears ringing and his spine like a wet noodle for all the support it was giving his body.

His precious slender woman was gasping under him, body still wrapped around his and he forced himself to roll over, draping her over his chest. Her mouth pressed lazy kisses to his chest, working her way down his body and he groaned when he felt River's breath on his jī ba. "Woman you'll be the death of me."
And then his hands were fisted in her hair and the sheets as she sucked her way up and down him, murmuring when she came up for air that she was determined to perfect the art of *chuī xiāo*.

River knew it drove her big mate crazy when she performed *kǒu yín* on him. He was so determined to not push her, to let her set the pace but he could smell what it did to her to pleasure him like this and that just made him crazier to be inside her.

Her senses weren't as attuned as his but she could smell their combined scents on his flesh, taste her own honey as she licked and sucked his *diǎo* deep into her mouth and hummed in her throat as she pushed the head of his cock further, swallowing around it. That particular trick had Riddick cursing the air blue in a mixture of Chinese and English and she could feel how close he'd come to his fall when she'd done it.

"Enough River," His deep voice wasn't quite a command but he wasn't begging either. Richard B. Riddick didn't beg, but with her he'd come close.

Releasing his cock with a sucking pop of her lips and straddling him so she could rub her *yīn dì* against his hard flesh was another little trick that drove him mad. Her big man loved to feel her humping him, getting herself ready on his flesh.

His big hands reached for her breasts and palmed them, callused palms rubbing against her tight nipples and she moaned as heat pooled between her thighs, slickening his flesh. His thoughts were of how beautiful she was, how perfect she fit in his hands and how badly he wanted her.

Climbing off him and turning to put her back to him, kneeling on all fours and presenting her *yīn xué* to his gaze drew a shocked and hungry growl to his chest and he'd barely finished the thought of what he'd do to her before he moved. "Bāo bāo you know what seein' you like that does to me." His *diāo* was already pushing against her *yīn dào* as he spoke and a long cry of satisfaction fell from her lip as he filled her slowly and deliberately.

He was so deep inside her, she could feel where he ended in her belly, and then Riddick's big hands pulled her upright, her spine pressed back to his chest, one of his hands splayed over her belly, fingertips teasing her *yīn dì* while the other cupped one of her breasts, his thick fingers tugging at her nipples. "You're gonna feel me so deep in you *zhī ài*. Wanna feel you fall around me, over and over."

Then, to her frustration, he didn't move. He stayed, deep and hard inside her, and teased and stroked her clit, rubbed and tugged at her breasts, and kissed her neck and lips until she fell hard and uncontrolled to his ministrations. Then, and only then, did he start to fuck her, his hips driving his *jī ba* in and out of her to the rhythmic sounds of their flesh slapping together. "Unghhh...god... Riddick...my Riddick..." She could barely control what she was saying, breathless and driven over cliff after cliff of pleasure as he took her.

"River," His gorgeous low voice muttered in her ear, breath harsh and hot on her skin. "River, *qīn ài*, get on all fours now, I've... The animal... its..."

"Yes... take me...Riddick... my...mine...she's..." Tremors were still chasing over her body from her last fall as she dropped to all fours and rolled her hips back, opening wider for him.

His reaction was instantaneous, driving deep inside her, one hand on her hip, holding her steady and firm while the other snaked down between her thighs and his fingers pulled on her clit hard, yanking...
another fall from her body. Her scream of ecstasy hadn't even faded from the air before Riddick's fingers were ruthlessly pushing her towards another fall as he pounded into her.

She couldn't think, sensation just overwhelmed, her skin tight and sensitive to every touch, heart pounding erratically as pleasure built upon pleasure. Riddick's cock filling her again and again, thick and hard, stretching her until her tissues were slick and wet with the ecstasy he'd so deliberately showered her with. The animal hind brain nearly overwhelmed, the urge to grind back onto her mate, to take him as deeply as she could was taking over her body and she growled low in her throat when his pace slowed and pushed back onto him.

"River," Her mate was growling, raw and ready, his jī ba hot and hard as he rotated his hips and a burst of pleasure made her cry out as another fall sent tremors over her body. "Gonna fuck you so good... Need to... mate...precious beautiful tiān shǐ" His body came down over hers, mouth pressing to the back of her neck as his hips thrust forward sharply.

"Unghhh... Riddick...I'm... oh god..." Just as she was about to fall again Riddick's hips began to piston back and forth in hard deep strokes, driving her harder and deeper, until her orgasm was almost a tangible force in the bunk, winding her body tight around his.

"Yeah, Qīng Xiāng, that's it, my gorgeous River," Her Furyan's voice growled in her ear. "Fall for me. Fall for me good and hard bǎo bǎo." His demand was accompanied by another tug of his fingers on her clit and she screamed as her fall crashed over her in waves and waves of hot, electrifying bliss. She could feel Riddick pounding into her through it, his teeth sank into her neck and shoulder, holding her body under his as he fell in her, filling her with his jīng yè in wonderful hot blasts inside her body.

Wrung out like a washrag, every muscle deliciously limp and satiated. Her man was lying next to her, half on, half off of her body, his diǎo still sheathed inside her. A shiver traveled over her skin and Riddick's big hand pulled her body closer to his, lazily stroking down her front, caressing and teasing her skin as his body hardened within her. Her moan was echoed by his as he began to swivel his hips, his hand putting her fingers to her yīn dì.

"Touch yourself River," His voice was like chocolate and coffee, murmuring in her ear. "Wanna feel you go over one last time."

Her own fingers on her clit were soft compared to his but his hands cupped her breasts, while his mouth caressed her neck and shoulders, hips rotating behind hers. A long slow build of his diǎo sliding in minute care within her as he murmured erotic praise for how she felt around him and how beautiful she looked touching herself until they were both losing control, groaning and straining to fall. Riddick's hand moved from her hip to cover her fingers, stroking over her clit firmly while she clutched at his thighs and quivered in his grasp.

"River...unghhh... tā mā de niǎo, tā mā de di yù," His hips jerked hard under hers, driving his prick deep inside her and her fall came in an abrupt wonderful burst, triggering his in a flood of seed, deep and hot inside her body.

"Ohhhh...Richard... my Richard..." She couldn't think anymore, could only feel as her lover turned her gently in his arms and covered them both with the quilts.

"Shh...I've got you baby. Sleep now my River," Heavy, muscled arms cradled her against his chest and held her safe as she finally fell asleep.
Riddick leaned back in the co-pilot’s chair and slanted a glance over at Wash. "How're you holdin' up?" He kept his tone idle, the last thing he wanted to do was press the man.

"Simon says my heart is fine. No lasting problems from getting the life shocked out of me, literally." Wash was busy with the controls, unnecessarily so, and avoiding Riddick's gaze.

"Wǒ kào," The Furyan retorted. "You don't wanna talk about it that's fine. Just say so. But you don't gotta pretend around me."

The shorter man sighed and shrugged, "Honestly, kinda glad to be dropping Jayne and Ciara on Kerry for a visit. Not much happens there that'll be overly fraught with danger." He kept his gaze on the screens of the console and the Black. "And I'm more than a little pissed."

"At Mal?" Riddick began to gently sharpen one of his shivs. "Guess I can see why."

"Mal and Zoe. Because he got us into it, despite everyone tellin' him that Niska was nobody we wanted to do business with." Wash's voice was irritated. "And Zoe because…"

"Because she had to come and get you." Riddick nodded his understanding. "I can see that." He could smell Wash's rising anger, the fear and insecurities that fed it, and decided to poke a little more. "Guess you're more than a little pissed at me and River too."

"For what?" That seemed to startle the pilot into actual thought. "You two tried to argue, hell you warned Mal that we'd need to be on our guard. If you weren't with us, doubt I'd have made it through the first four hours."

"Maybe you think we shoulda done more to keep it from happening? Coulda argued with Mal or done something to sabotage the deal, get us off Ezra." He looked up as River came through the door and settled in his lap, curling into his arms and shutting her eyes.

"You couldn't have, not without getting thrown off the ship," Wash shook his head, a half smile tugged at his lips as he looked at River. "For all you call her little wolf, she's kinda like a cat you know? Just does as she pleases."

Riddick's fingers were busily unbinding River's braids from the knot at the base of her skull as he replied, "But we could've kicked up a fuss. River could have undone your sequence change in five minutes. Made you stay behind."

"No!" Wash shook his head, "Oh cào dàn no. Then Zoe'd have been the one caught. No, I might be pissed that I had to be rescued and half carried off that station by a woman I swore to honor and protect, but I'd rather that than have her go through that hell. I'll tū mā de live with waking up in a cold sweat and flinching when the lights buzz too loud to keep her from going through it."

"Never even thought of choosing her captain," River murmured. "All her attention on her mister. Won't be without him ever again. Wants pieces of him to carry inside her, so she'll never lose him."

That got Wash goggling at River a bit but Riddick nodded his agreement. "She's right you know," He lifted the shoulder River's head wasn't leaning on in a half shrug. "We told you a long time ago that you aren't second fiddle. If there's anything good that came out of this that's it. You've got proof that Zoe's loyalty is to you first and Mal second."

"I just..." Wash sighed tiredly. "I feel like a wimp. If you and Mal hadn't kept on me I'd have died a
lot sooner than I did. I had no clue what to do when we were surrounded, I didn't even have a weapon!"

"You think I felt much different?" Riddick bit back the snarl that came to his lips as he remembered that feeling of helplessness before he'd raised his hands in surrender. "Outmatched, outgunned and knowing that Serenity was a sitting duck for Niska since we were both gone? That old jiān xié could've sent another crew to take ours. Or just blown the ship. I'm as pissed at Mal as you are about that."

"So it's worse for you…" Wash was studying him now, his eyes seeing far too keenly for Riddick's comfort. "Because you're used to knowin' what to do."

"When you're usually the most dangerous person in the room it chafes to be rescued," He kept his tone dry. "But I can get over that. Hell, everybody needs a hand sometimes. And River's just as capable as I am, just like Zoe is. I just don't like that she got put in that situation. I don't like that Kaylee had to keep a detonation device on her, or that Simon shot people when he's a healer. But I don't have a time machine here to go back and change the past." The Furian sighed and held River a bit tighter. "All we can do is move forward."

"Hates that he was useless," River murmured.

"The way I hear it you weren't useless. You got out of a shuttle and immediately went to war," Riddick looked at the pilot. "Now that takes balls, to go from having your heart stop to strapping on guns and grenades in order to retrieve the men left behind."

Wash sighed, scrubbing his hands over his face, "Yeah, you can say that, and logically I know it's true. But…"

"Hard to get past it." He paused and studied the man across from him. "You will though. You survived a POW camp Wash. Somehow you live with staying behind when Zoe goes out on jobs, and that's more than I could ever manage. We might have needed rescue but at least we got women who are willing to come after us. It just takes time." He smirked, "And of course, you did take the 'kids are good' side of the argument with Mal, so now when Zoe brings it up you're gonna have to counter every one of your own points."

The pilot groaned for an entirely different reason and Riddick chuckled. "Could be worse. I mean, if you and Zoe want kids, the two of you against Mal, you're sure to win. 'Specially if you get Kaylee and Simon on your side."

Wash plainly wasn't ready for that discussion, "So why isn't Mal having a hard time with this? He had to be rescued, and that must chafe at his captainy type pride."

River answered him, her eyes still closed, "Feels embarrassed that the nǐ zì who isn't even crew had to rescue him. But the blow is softened by her husband also needing rescue. In the company of Richard B. Riddick. Requiring rescue to be expected if such a dangerous person was also captured."

Wash's chuckle wasn't quite as strained as it had been in past days. "So he figures if its good enough for Riddick its good enough for him?"

"Goose and gander are sauced equally," River murmured. "Wash should go talk to Zoe. Her worry permeates the cargo hold. Boths Simon about whether or not her Mister is completely recovered physically."

"Well, Simon was a big help with making sure I was all stitched up. Probably should go rescue him
from Zoe. Or Zoe from him, depending on the size words the doc is using." The shorter man pushed himself out of his chair and ambled off down the hall.

Riddick looked down at his other half and found her smiling up at him. "My Riddick is a good man. Has pride of his own, set it aside to get out."

"Can't afford to have a lot of pride in a slam Qīng Xiāng," He admitted quietly. "Too much of pride is cutting off your nose to spite your face. I tended to favor survival over pride. I could always get my own back later if it was that important to me."

Her lips were gentle on his and sweet and he realized just how much she'd been holding back in the past weeks to help him regain his equilibrium as a dominant, powerful male. "You always know what I need, before I need it," He could admit that, pressing his lips to her hair, slender body curled against his. "You've been awfully patient with me lately."

"My lǎng has been much put upon, and needed time to be himself. Stalk through the ship and remember that he is the shadow in the darkness and feared by all who meet him there. Not weak or soft." She pressed her lips to his throat. "Could have torn through all of Niska's men, but Wash and Mal would have died. Chose to be captured this time. Just as he chose to let Johns capture him before and after the Academy, rather than have innocent blood on his hands."

"Yeah, well that's never set right with me." He looked down at her with a half smile. "You could've let Zoe and Mal go out. Found an excuse and kept me behind."

"Could have. Knew that my Riddick would not care for remaining safe in the ship. Not when his friend's wife would be sent into danger." River sighed, "Not an easy choice. She could see that Riddick would not remain."

Her deliberate use of his surname was another way of reminding him that he was someone half the 'verse feared while the other half remained blissfully ignorant. Reminding him that she fell in love with a murdering hún dàn and had no intention of trying to change him. "You're too good for me Qīng Xiāng."

"Doubt thou the stars are fire, Doubt that the sun doth move, Doubt truth to be a liar, But never doubt I love." Her smile was near blinding in its affection and he gave up thinking of all the reasons he didn't deserve her and kissed her instead.

Kerry wasn't as green as its namesake had been reputed to be but it was a gorram sight prettier than Beaumonde with its smog filled skies. The mining operations looked like scars against the rolling hills but apart from that it was a real pleasure to look on. River smiled out at the planet and enjoyed that she wasn't overwhelmed with the minds it contained. It was a far cry from their approach to Jiangyin months ago and she could enjoy the sight of a new planet without being afraid of what it could bring.

"Now don't you miss us too much," Jayne's deliberately gruff voice rumbled behind her.

River turned and smiled at the man who'd become a second big brother to her, his delicate looking sweetheart tucked against his side. "Jayne must make certain he does not forget to wave us. Three weeks until our rendezvous on the station. He has funds enough for a stay if we are late?"

"Got plenty since you stuck all that money a Niska's in our accounts." Jayne's bright blue eyes were amused. "Was hopin' the doc'd see his way clear to checkin' on Mattie if Mal ain't plannin' on takin'
off right away."

The Reader tilted her head and chuckled, "Captain is planning on acquiring legitimate goods as well as illegitimate to smuggle. Could ask Zoe how long this will take."

"Could ask Zoe what," The man in question strode into the cargo bay. He stood for a moment by the spot where the mule used to be, feeling for something in his pockets.

"Mattie's got the damp lung," Jayne told him. "Got it real bad this time. Thought maybe if Serenity was stayin' put for a few days, Simon could come out and have a look at him." He looked back at the infirmary, " Didn't think you'd have anythin' else for him t'do here."

"Never know, might require me a dandified core fella as a beard," Mal shrugged and River narrowed her eyes at him. He wasn't inclined to be obstructive but neither was he thrilled with all of his crew leaving the ship at once.

"Damp Lung is better known as Chronic Bacterial Bronchitis," She informed him quietly, keeping her voice dispassionate. "If left untreated it can lead to pneumonia. Simon will be able to help and he will want Richard and I with him. Wash and Kaylee don't intend to leave the ship so they would be on watch."

Mal heaved a sigh of resignation, irritation laced through his voice, "Well I guess if I said no ya'll'd just take off and try to sneak back a'fore me an' Zoe got here." He scrubbed his hands over his face and looked at her, "You promise me that you're not plannin' anything untoward. No heists, no rescues, nothin' that brings a surprise for me back with you. Promise me that an' you can take the shuttle, an' the doc. And you take Riddick with you too. May as well take our returning prodigals with you. Save 'em the train fare."

"You ain't gonna need the shuttle Mal?" Jayne looked torn between eagerness to leave and disbelief in his good fortune.

"Nah, this here's the space port, shouldn't need a shuttle. We do, you can be gorram sure that I'll be callin' Rick an' River back… might let you keep the doc though." Mal smirked.

"Sure that's a good idea Captain? What with your magnetic personality an' all?" Ciara's teasing lilt inquired.

"That's a fair point," Mal rubbed his chin. "Zoe an' Wash have gotten a mite spoiled with havin' a genuine doc aboard."

"Ah, Captain," Book's avuncular tone sounded from behind them. "I wondered if I might accompany you as far as the market. Kaylee's mentioned that we're low on spices and since your ransom was retrieved we have coin enough to replenish our supplies."

"That's fine preacher, but I can't spare anyone to go with you," Mal warned him. "So don't go flashin' too much coin about."

"Rick, River an' the Doc get back 'fore you go then Rick goes with you an' you can bring Kaylee along."

"That's fine preacher, but I can't spare anyone to go with you," Mal warned him. "So don't go flashin' too much coin about."

"Captain I am capable of taking care of myself," The Shepherd replied. "Though I had thought to bring Kaylee along with me."

"Rick, River an' the Doc get back 'fore you go then Rick goes with you an' you can bring Kaylee along." Mal's tone was getting short and his mood turning irked. Talking to the Shepherd seemed to do that to him at times. Especially when they were dirtside. He looked at River and then Jayne, "Well? What're ya'll waitin' for? Go collect your folks an' fare thee well. Jayne, we'll see you an' Ciara in a month or so, she don't come to her senses and tell you to take a flyin' leap."
River nodded, bowing to Mal slightly, "Our Captain is most gracious. ǒu láo." His irritated flap of his hand was belied by the half smile as he turned back towards the bay doors. River jerked her head towards the stairs leading to the catwalks and the shuttle bays and Jayne, no stranger to Mal's vagaries, gently but firmly began to escort his sweetheart up the steps as quickly as he could.

River took a moment to determine where Simon was, knowing that Riddick was up on the bridge with Wash, having already wished Jayne well on his journey. Her brother was in his bunk, enjoying a rare peaceful moment with a book. She smirked and knocked on his door, he could have peace when they were in the Black.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Sorry for the huge delay in posting. I've been having trouble writing and when I could write, trouble getting back into the swing of this story. Please bear with me, I'm working on things but it's slow going.

Chinese Translations:

mèi mei - little sister
bǎo bǎo - darling / baby
Shì - yes
pì gu - butt
tā mā de - fucking
yǐn dì - clitoris
diǎo - cock
Cào dàn - damn it! / fuck! - vulgar
Tā mā de dǐ yù - fucking hell
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
bàng jiār - lover / partner
jī ba - dick
chuí xiāo - to play the xiao - mouth organ / fellatio - oral sex / a blowjob
kǒu yín - oral sex / fellatio
yǐn xué - underground cave / vagina / female genitalia
yǐn dào - vagina
zhì 'ài - most beloved
qīn 'ài - dear / beloved / darling
tiān shǐ - angel
jīng yè - semen
tā mā de niǎo - goddamn it
Wǒ kào - bosh! / crap!
jiǎn xié - crafty and evil / a treacherous villain
nī zi - little girl
láng - wolf
hún dàn - bastard
Yǒu láo - (polite) thank you for your trouble

Quote Sources:

Doubt thou the stars are fire,. Doubt that the sun doth move,. Doubt truth to be a liar,. But never doubt I love. – Hamlet, William Shakespeare
The Cobh family lived in one of the larger mining towns, a bit further than spitting distance of the space port. From the looks of things the town had grown up around the mine. Not uncommon really but it was strange to see the grimy buildings give way to woods without the buffer of fields in between the two. The railway was a dark scar on the verdant green, leading back to the spaceport, and made for an easy trail to follow should anyone become lost. From the well-worn path beside it, folks who couldn't afford train fare used it as a type of road in and out of town.

"Where'd you learn to ride Cobh, don't see anywhere you'd even keep a horse," Riddick observed from the shuttle window. "Don't even know where I'm gonna set this thing down."

"We're on the far edge of town," Jayne pointed towards the horizon. "Cain't see it from here but there's a little field behind the complex. Folks tend to keep their animals on the first floor of the buildings. Sheltered and close enough that thievin' runs the risk of gettin' caught."

"Guess the shuttle can take a grass landing," Riddick aimed the beetle like shuttle in the direction Jayne pointed. "Your folks expectin' us? And if they ain't, how much do they like surprises?"

Jayne shook his head, "Don't have a cortex except for down at the church and another at the school. We got here faster'n the mail woulda."

"Notice you didn't answer 'bout how much they like surprises." Riddick pointed out as he set the shuttle down on the far edge of the smallish field. He could see a few curious faces in the windows of the buildings.

"It'll be fine." Jayne dismissed his old friend's concerns. "This time a day Da's at work and Ma's not much good with anythin' 'sides a shotgun."

"Now that's comforting," Simon commented dryly. "She will recognize you won't she Jayne?"

"Well, I hope so, but it's been..." Jayne was clearly trying to remember the time of his last visit and how much he might have changed, finally shrugging. "Eh, been a while. An' I ain't had a beard last time I come home."

"Jayne looks enough like his Bà ba that Radiant Siobhan won't shoot him." Ciara said quietly from her seat beside Jayne.

"Well I guess we'll find out," Riddick was shutting the power down and locking the ignition sequence as he spoke. "Once more unto the breach my friends."

Simon shook his head as he stood and picked up his doctor's bags, "Rick that's not the most comforting reference you could have offered."

"Used to say that 'fore we went into combat," Jayne reminisced. "I liked the band a brothers one better."

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers, for he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother," Riddick amused himself by running through the speech in his head as he grabbed the bag of things he and River had bought for Jayne's family.
"Be he ne'er so vile this day shall gentle his condition." Ciara's soft lilt continued the speech with a smile.

"And gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks that fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day." River finished, exchanging a smile with Riddick. He could tell from her scent she was remembering the times they'd traded quotes and recited stories to pass the time stuck in one room in the Academy.

His smile faded as River stood very still and Simon froze on her other side, the doctor uttering a soft curse. "Zhè zhēn shì ge kuàilè de jīnzhǎn. Oh, that we now had here but one ten thousand of those men in England that do no work today."

Looking at the tall angular woman in coveralls pointing a double barreled shotgun at them Riddick could only agree with his dì dì's sentiments. "Somethin' amiss ma'am?" He could make his voice as polite as possible, but he was well aware that there was nothing he could do to look unthreatening even with a complete change of clothes and disarmament.

"Ain't lookin' for trouble," The dark haired woman scowled at them. "We got nothin' here worth takin' and sickness to boot. So ya'll just go on your way."

"We haven't come here to rob you," Ciara's quiet voice replied. "This is Shea Cobh, come to visit. He brought along some friends to meet his family." The shotgun wielding virago narrowed her eyes at them, "What's the names of his family then?" She demanded. "He's come visitin' he'll know who they are."

"My lǎo mā is Radiant Siobhan Cobh, was O'Connor 'fore she married." Jayne said immediately. "She married my Da, Liam Jacob Cobh. They had me, couple years after, Shea. And my mèi meis Jubilation Maire and Salvation Maureen three years after that. Our dì dì is Matthew Aedan. Ma wrote me that he's had the Damplung this year."

"Ailish Sheila Pierce, put that gorram gun down and let my boy come inside." A loud voice called from the second floor window.

Jayne's head tilted back and he grinned up at the window. "Hey Ma! You're lookin' spry an' spiffy as ever!"

"Shea Michael Cobh, I taught you better'n to go shoutin' at windows. Now you come up here and give me a proper hello." Mrs. Cobh punctuated her demand with an abrupt slam of the window sash.

Jayne was rubbing the back of his head sheepishly as if anticipating a smack. "Guess we'd better do what she says." He nodded at Ailish, who was lowering her gun with a chagrinned half smile. "'Preciate ya lookin' out for 'em Ailish. Guess Da's at work?"

"Yeah, foreman's talkin' layoffs an' your Bà ba, he ain't one to shirk. Might could keep his job. Foreman says he's the best welder around." Ailish told him as she escorted them through a dusty hall to the stairs at the front of the complex.

Riddick looked around, noting that the first floor was set up as a stables, hay and stalls open to the hallway on one side. An interested mare turned towards them, ambling over in the hopes of a snack or attention and he patted her neck as they walked by. "Don't guess all this dust would do someone with Damplung any good."

"Nor would this mold." He pointed at the blackish green edge creeping upwards from the concrete floor. "Rain comes in, pools along the wall, mold grows upwards. The livestock wouldn't have much
trouble with it, but people in the building..." He shook his head.

"How many folks got the Damplung miss?" Riddick called the question up the stairs to the now chuckling dark haired woman.

"Near 'bout a dozen." She replied without turning, "Been worse this year than ever. Lotta heavy rains. Couldn't seem to get anything dry. They finally stopped and we dried out but the sickness stayed."

"Is this a town wide problem or just this one complex?" Simon asked from behind Riddick.

"Heard there's a complex west of us, has some sickness, 'bout five or six folks, but dunno about the rest of the town." She led them along a hallway to a door with Jayne's family name painted on it and knocked.

Riddick exchanged a worried look with River and she nodded, slipping out into the hallway. When he followed she was leaning against the worn concrete, breathing deeply. "It's bad isn't it?"

Ailish had gone straight to Mattie's bedside and taken his hand. Jayne's little brother was nearly as tall as the gunhand but more wiry than bulky in his muscle mass. Jayne's whole family bred tall apparently, dark haired, blue eyed, tall men and women with a stubborn streak a mile wide.

River nodded, "The mold... it's toxic. The dust from the animals and the moisture, everything seeps into the walls. Old concrete, it's not like plascrete, concrete is porous. To get rid of the mold they'd have to cover and bomb the whole building with the detoxifying agents. Expensive."

"No way would the mining company spring for that. Not for two dozen people. And especially not if the whole town doesn't have the problem." Riddick shook his head. "It's only these couple buildings I guess." Some careful questioning of Radiant and Ailish had given him a good idea of the layout of the town. "The complexes that are closest to the woods."

"The damp lingers here. Not as much on the far side of town, trees are thinner, the buildings get more sun, less mold." River tilted her head thoughtfully. "Mining company owns most of the mineral rights. Puts up buildings for workers to rent rooms."

"So when this mine plays out, they'll move the whole town to the next one?" Riddick was still trying to figure out the logic of that line of thinking.

"Only need to move towns once every eighty years or so," The girl shrugged. "Not even that often. This is a good mine. Layoffs are only as long as it takes to determine the direction of the next vein. But the land is free. Building belongs to the company."

"So if folks moved to another building in town they'd have a better chance of getting well." The Furyan wondered what the odds were of an apartment being open closer to the mines."

"Don't need another company building," River shook her head. "Stables below, dust exasperates the sickness." She pointed towards the woods. "The woods are lovely, dark and deep."

He could see what she was getting at, and it would take a miracle to pull off in the time they had. Unless they got help.
Kaylee was laughing at Simon who'd rolled up his sleeves and added work gloves to his hands. "Betcha never thought you'd be doin' this sorta work in a million years."

River giggled along with her friend as they carried their spoils from the scrap yard. "Simon is excited. Has never had opportunity to participate in a barn raising."

"We're not raising a barn, we're building a house," Simon pointed out as he shifted his own load.

The Reader shook her head, "Figure of speech. Community comes together and makes a building in a day."

"Ah," Simon nodded his understanding. "I'm just surprised that Mal agreed to do this."

"Did this many times in his youth. Some of the best memories of childhood. Doesn't like to remember though, Shadow is lost and his childhood with it. Memories hurt." River said quietly. "But it feels good to do the work, recapture that feeling for a while." She smiled at Kaylee, grateful that the older girl simply accepted her words and didn't question how River knew such things.

"Well it's good then." Kaylee grinned, "Cap'n I'll have a nice time, we're doin' good works. An' once its built, Jayne an' Ciara'll be able to help 'em settle in."

River nodded, looking around for her husband and bigger brother. They'd gone to find the corrugated tin sheets that would serve as the roof of the house. Apparently it was cheap but hauling it was a pain. They'd taken the shuttle to go pick it up, along with some extra to build a small shed for Liam's tools and wood working business. The mule that Kaylee was driving was courtesy of the mine's foreman. When Liam had told him of the sickness and it's cause the man hadn't been able to help much beyond the loan of some equipment for a few days. It was more than any of them had expected and due entirely to the man's good opinion of Liam Cobh.

The foreman's near invaluable contribution had been letting Mal and Riddick look at the topographical maps of the area for a good site. The mining company kept maps as a matter of course and didn't care who looked at them so long as no one else was planning on mining. The company had a good hold of Kerry and didn't particularly want to let go of it. Luckily they'd found an area near a water supply and with good drainage so the mold that plagued the complexes wouldn't have a chance to take hold.

"All rightie," Kaylee beeped the mule's horn and laughed as folks came swarming over it to carry off their findings. "We're gonna go back for another load Cap'n. Got anythin' else we should look for particular like?"

"Any fixtures you can find little Kaylee." Mal called back in a voice that proved he'd been on farms and battlefields alike. "Might could take the shuttle an' see if the next town over has anything in their yard iffen you cain't find anythin' here."

"You got it Cap'n." River grabbed onto the side of the mule as Kaylee turned it around and pointed it back at the scrap yard.

River was finding that Mattie Cobh was highly practical and had a very good expanse of knowledge regarding the climate and how materials would hold up to Kerry's weather. The sick man was currently breathing through a filter mask to help his lungs heal and looking over the plans River had
made for the cabin they were building. "If it was just a matter a lumber we'd be set," Mattie gestured at the trees around them. "But we'd never get it cured 'fore ya'll had to leave."

"Could acquire sealant," River was looking at their materials and the plan with a frown. They had quite a bit, materials for roofing and weather proofing along with some solar sheeting for extra power. The scrap yards had provided an abundance of pipe and Kaylee was repairing a pump for the well being dug. "Skim off the bark chemically, seal the wood inside. Would make for thicker walls. Better to stand up against weather. She has purchased spray foam insulation from the ship yard repair depot. Cover the foam with plastiboard and the outside with the sheeting and tin."

"Might could do that," Mattie nodded raising an arm to hail his father. Liam had come straight from his job to the site after work that day, eating a protein bar along the way and was hard at work preparing the foundation. "Hey Bà ba, come an' see what you think of this."

Liam was a tall man with salt and pepper curly hair and bright blue eyes and Jayne's build had clearly come from him as he was just as muscular as his gun-toting offspring. Handing off the foundation stone he was dealing with to Mal, and nearly making the captain bend over double at the weight, the head of house Cobh jogged over to his youngest son. "Somethin' interestin' zǐ?"

River watched as Mattie explained her ideas for the walls and gestured at the supplies. The reunion between Jayne and his family had been a demonstration in how tender such masculine specimens could be. There'd been a plethora of backslapping and hugging with thumps on the shoulder. But the elder Cobh hadn't been able to stop looking at his firstborn and the girl he'd left home to find. Radiant was more subtle, urging food on them both and exclaiming over the changes she perceived in the two. But none of the Cobhs, including Jayne's twin sisters Jubilation, who everyone cheerfully called Jubilee for her exuberance, or Salvation, known as Sally, had expressed any surprise that Jayne had found his sweetheart. Nor were they at all shocked or concerned by the fact that their son was a gunhand.

"Well, only trouble I can see is gettin' the plastiboard," Liam mused. "That stuff don't come cheap. And it ain't easy to cut through should we need to add on a room or two later."

River tilted her head and perused the plans again, "Could alter the plans, include a staircase, dormered attic, close in with spray foam and boards. Add walls later as needed."

"Well that'd just be a matter of raisin' the walls an' bumpin' the back wall out for the stairs some." Liam nodded approvingly. He looked at her, his dark blue eyes thoughtful. "In all our gladness to have Jayne home for this visit, ya'll were introduced to us but we never did hear why you'd do this for us."

"Bà ba," Mattie murmured in protest, though his gaze was curiosity itself above his mask.

River smiled, "Knows that Shea joined the Independents after leaving Kerry. My zhàng fu was also in his unit. Both recruited to the Dà Chóngs. Man called Jayne saved my Richard's life. Was saved in return. To my Richard, they are bǎ xiōng dì. Blood brothers. Nothing that he and I wouldn't do for Shea."

"You an' Richard... you're, uh..." Mattie was trying to say something and River laughed when she realized what it was.

"Met my Richard at school. Not as dumb as he talks," River winked at him and Liam chuckled.

"Neither is Shea," The big man chuckled. "Nice to be underestimated though."
"Exactly. Folk look at me and see a nǐ zì." River grinned. "See Shea and Richard and think they are dài ruò mù ji. Big lumbering men with simple faces. Richard looks as if he spends too much time underground and Shea talks like he is stupid. Learn all sorts of things."

Mattie shook his head, chuckling along with his father. "Guess Shea's in good hands. Cain't figure why ya'll call him Jayne though. Don't even sound like Shea."

"Big brother always has had trouble reading and writing. Brilliant at math." River looked at Liam. "Like his Da. Not stupid. But letters jump all over the page. Simon was teaching a little girl to read. Jayne sat with them. Simon found out that Jayne is dyslexic. Neurological disorder which can be hereditary and makes processing language difficult. Began to teach Jayne to read and write using methods developed long ago. Jayne's handwriting no longer looks like chicken scratch."

"You mean folks been callin' him Jayne Cobb 'cause they couldn't figure out what he was writing?" Mattie blinked, looking over at his older brother who was talking amiably with Simon, Riddick and a few other people from town.

"Mattie has grasped the problem," River nodded. "Did not think it was a bad thing after the initial surprise. Did not want whatever he did to blow back on his family." She smiled as the object of their discussion turned and narrowed her eyes at her. She giggled, "Now both big brothers worry that little sister is plotting."

Liam shook his head, "Well they ain't wrong are they." He tapped the plans. "Just figure what sorta height we need on them walls 'fore we get 'em built. I'll get folks to chopping trees. Got plenty of them less we suddenly get termites." He stood and one big hand stroked over Mattie's wavy dark hair. "Got no words for how much we appreciate what you're doin' here."

"Shea is our family," River shrugged. "He would do the same for us."

The afternoon of their second day saw the walls constructed as well as the workshop outbuilding for Liam. Mattie had objected to his father being exposed to the weather and had suggested they simply make the workshop a leanto on the back of the house but Simon had put the kibosh on that idea. "Part of what is keeping you sick is the dust and moisture from the stables on the first floor getting into the living quarters of the complex." He explained in his quiet elegant voice. "Sawdust would have the same effect on you. Perhaps after you're fully recovered, in several years, a short hallway could be built to connect the workroom with the rest of the house."

Liam and Radiant had agreed with Simon, though Mattie had prevailed in getting a covered walkway built as a precursor to the hoped for hallway. River had left her brother talking with the two men while she and Radiant discussed the layout of the large main space, drawing on the stone floor the location of the walls and staircase. "Can simply build walls of the plastiboard and fill with insulation for warmth and soundproofing." She explained. "Build the stairs so they go over the kitchen cabinets, storage under the stairs, no wasted space."

Radiant nodded, "Like that idea...could have the stairs do a turn. Start 'em at the cabinet line, go up four steps, little landin' level with the counter and then have 'em turn an' go up over the upper cabinets. Gives us a big storage area under the landin', make that like our linen closet or for winter gear." Kind eyes regarded River as the older woman smiled, "It's kind a you, makin' sure the bedrooms are of a size for folks like us. God don't build Cobh's small."

River grinned at her, "Good thing too. Shea needs to be big enough to carry all his stubborn around."
That got Radiant laughing and nodding her agreement. The Reader looked around thoughtfully, "We will need to make sure the second level is sound and comfortable. Shea and Ciara will not put their parents out of their bed while they visit. Perhaps..." She looked at the space they had allocated for the bathroom. "If we could find fixtures...could make a second bathroom above this one. Saw a big tub, borrow my Rick and have him help us haul it."

"You found a tub that ain't busted? Big enough for a Cobh?" Radiant blinked in surprise, "Even if it were cracked, there's ways to repair it if the rest of it's sound."

"Yes, at the scrap yard in the next town." River smiled, "Could be a good idea. Made sure to have enough space in the footprint, upstairs and downstairs. Found enough metal sheet for the walls. And they are built high enough to accommodate Cobh height."

"Well it can't hurt to ask," Radiant decided and the two of them had marched over to the men, Mal amongst them, and put the question to the ones who'd be doing most of the building.

Mal had looked at the walls of the house and the amount of sheeting they had before rubbing his chin and regarding Riddick and Jayne. "Gotta say, not the worst idea I've heard," The captain admitted. "Just got a call from our contact 'bout our work. Shipment's delayed by 'bout a day an' a half. And that other work, they're in no rush either."

River grinned at the oblique reference to the smuggling job. As it had been explained to her, the smuggled goods were best concealed behind a legitimate cargo. So if the legal job was delayed, so was the job for illegal goods. "Very fortuitous, for us. Not so much for our contact."

Mal shrugged, "Cain't be helped I guess." He looked at Rick, "Guess we're makin' another shuttle run to the scrap yard. Might as well look for more of the sheet metal and pipe too, can't have too much a that."

The diminutive Reader watched as her other half nodded looking around for Kaylee, "Hey mèi mei, gonna hit the scrap yard again. You wanna come along or you got your hands full?"

Kaylee answer came back at volume belied by her smaller stature, "'M runnin' power an' water! Take Wash!"

The pilot chuckled as he walked up to them, stripping off his work gloves and sticking them in his pockets, "She wants more pipe. Gave me a list."

River slanted a glance at Radiant Cobh who had been watching all of them with a half smile on her face. "Captain is in a good mood. Nice to work with his hands for a change."

Mal chuckled and shook his head, "Well it ain't likely to last longer'n another coupla days. Long enough to finish this up I think. Get ya'll moved in. Get itchy feet after awhile, gotta be movin' again."

Wash chuckled as he led them to the shuttle, commenting to Radiant, "Once we were on Persephone for less than four hours. That's how itchy Mal's feet can get."

Mal's surprise was obvious when Radiant nodded sympathetically, "Get that way in the center of town myself. Crowds a people...gives me an uncomfortableness." She patted his arm, "You're always welcome to come out our way though Captain Reynolds. Kerry's out of the way but she's green and she ain't crowded."

River chuckled when Mal just mumbled something, his discomfort at being welcomed by a near stranger very obvious to everyone, including Radiant Cobh. The Kerry woman just patted his arm
again and made herself comfortable on one of the shuttle seats, seemingly content with his response, however unintelligible it might be.

Riddick kept one eye on the horizon as he and Wash lifted Serenity off of Kerry. The legitimate cargo had finally arrived and was set for Pelorum. The smuggled goods were actually supposed to cool off in transit, which Mal had taken to mean the longer they stayed on the ship the safer it would be to sell them eventually. So they'd try for another job on Pelorum or make a jump to Persephone and pick up some work there.

"Gonna be strange, not havin' Jayne aboard," Wash commented as they hit the Black. "He's positively friendly these days compared to when we first met. Makes life a little less fraught with threats of violence but all in all, a lot more pleasant."

Riddick chuckled and shook his head, "Ship don't feel right without him here." He checked the course Wash was setting and nodded, adding his notes. He slanted a smirk at the pilot, "Guess I'm gonna have to you spot me when I'm liftin' weights."

Wash nearly choked on the sip of coffee he was taking and barely managed to keep from spitting it all over the console. "What makes you think I'd be any help with weights? I'm the wimpy pilot remember?"

Wash's groan was pure dismay, "There's no way I'm going to get out of doing some form of exercise with you is there?"

His co-pilot couldn't help laughing again and shook his head. "Nope. I'm gonna go tell Mal we're on course. Want anythin' while I'm up?"

"A new co-pilot, the one I have is a little too keen on hard work," Wash was still grumbling as Riddick left the bridge and headed back to find the Captain.

It felt odd to look for Jayne and have him be absent. He was used to his blood brother, the presence of the large man in the galley or down in the cargo bay. He found himself wanting to address remarks to Jayne and remember only upon near speaking that his brother wasn't there. He caught Simon doing the same thing, opening his mouth and looking around before closing it again.

It seemed even Mal was feeling the absence of the biggest gunhand. He'd spread all his guns out on the kitchen table, as Jayne was wont to do, in order to clean them. Riddick looked up to see Mal sighting down the barrel of his Peacemaker as Inara came up behind him.

"Hi," Inara greeted them and Riddick shook his head as Mal jumped in shock, a startled noise escaping his mouth. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle."

Riddick nodded at the companion, smiling slightly as he worked on sharpening one of his shivs and listened to Mal attempting to deny that he was ever startled.
"You didn't," He repeated the sound he'd made pointing the empty gun. "BWAAA! That's kind of a warrior... It's a... strikes fear into..." His words faded out as he made one last attempt at being convincing. "Bwaar?" With a sigh the Captain shook his head and gave the whole thing up as a bad job. "You know, it ain't altogether wise, sneaking up on a man when he's handling a weapon."

Inara nodded, unperturbed. "I'm sure I've heard that said. But perhaps the dining area isn't the place for this sort of thing?"

Riddick shook his head but Mal gestured towards the galley table, "What do you mean? Only place with a table big enough."

The Companion, the epitome of grace and refinement nodded her understanding. "Of course. In that case..." She deftly rearranged the guns, "Every well-bred petty crook knows...the small concealable weapons always go to the far left of the place setting."

The Furyan could see Mal bridling at the term 'petty crook' but before he could speak Wash and River entered the galley. "Captain is not a petty crook." River admonished and Inara shook her head, obviously intending to explain her meaning.

Before she could do more than gesture Wash cut in, "Got a distress call coming in. Folks asking for help."

Mal wasn't about to let the petty crook thing go apparently. "Really? Folks asking for help? From us petty crooks?"

Wash rubbed the back of his neck, "Well..."

"Maybe I should take that right away." the tall man looked at the Companion. He began to rise from his chair only to halt at the sound of Wash's voice.

"Well, it's for her." The pilot nodded towards Inara.

Now the captain's face was a study in confusion. "Hunh?"

"They didn't ask for you, Mal." Wash elaborated, "Call's for Inara."

Inara nodded, her pretty face still showing faint lines of regret for her inadvertent insult, "I'll take it in my shuttle."

"I'll send it back there." Wash headed back towards the bridge.

Mal appeared about to open his mouth and insert his foot when River bumped him hard on the shoulder, preventing him from acting like a complete ass. "Bì zuǐ," She told him mildly. "Didn't mean to insult us. Terminology for smugglers and thieves is imprecise."

"Well what did she mean then?" Mal sounded aggrieved. "I've been doin' my best to be polite, or polite as I know how to be, about her job and all. And she turns around and calls us petty crooks?"

"You just ain't gonna let that go are you?" Riddick sighed.

"I don't like being insulted right to my face," Mal grumbled, apparently becoming aware of his ridiculousness.

"Didn't know how to say unnoticed and quiet, not without saying small time or petty," River began to make tea. "Knows that Serenity is good at what she does because we are not trying to be big time..."
crime lords."

Mal sighed, "Just rubs wrong is all."

"Most inaccuracies do," River shrugged.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Sorry this is another slightly shorter chapter but this was just the perfect place to stop. I've got most of the episode written, just needs editing, so that might take a bit of time but we seem to be moving forward again, so I'll take it! Health wise I still need therapy which takes time to arrange but it's an ongoing process. Just writing somewhat steadily again feels good.

Chinese Translations:
Bà ba (Dad, pops, daddy)
Zhè zhēn shì ge kuàilè de jīnzhǎn (this is a happy development)
dì di's (younger brother's)
lǎo mā (mother / mom)
mèi meis (little sisters)
dì di (younger brother )
zǐ (son / child / seed / egg / small thing )
zhàng fu (husband)
bǎ xiōng dì (sworn brothers)
nī zi (little girl) / (coll.) lass)
dài ruò mù ji (dumb as a wooden chicken)
Bi zuǐ (Shut up)

Quote Sources:
Once more unto the breach my friends – Henry V, William Shakespeare
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers, for he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother – Henry V, William Shakespeare
Be he ne'er so vile this day shall gentle his condition – Henry V, William Shakespeare
And gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks that fought with us upon Saint
Crispin's day – Henry V, William Shakespeare

Oh, that we now had here but one ten thousand of those men in England that do no work today. – Henry V, William Shakespeare

The woods are lovely, dark and deep – Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, Robert Frost
Riddick found himself squinting into harsh dusty sunlight and cursing. This was not going according to plan. As per usual with all plans involving Mal things had started to go wrong the minute they stepped on the rock. Now they had a gorram army of idiots, some moron in a hovercraft a mounted machine gun and a woman in labor, all of it happening at once. Bullets flying through the air and burying themselves in the walls around him, dust getting kicked up by the horses made visibility difficult at best and while River was a more than good enough substitute for Shea, he still had the impulse to stop and swear a blue streak. Unfortunately he didn't have time for it.

"Curse later, shoot now," River handed him another rifle, her nimble fingers reloading in between shots. "Simon has taken arms against the sea of troubles."

"Thought he'd be with Petaline still." Riddick shot another man off his horse, mentally counting his shots and discarding the empty rifle for the loaded one next to it.

"Left Inara with her, detailed instruction, uncomplicated birth." River drew down and fired on another rider. "Has an earwig just in case. Will talk her through it."

"How in the unholy fuck did we get ourselves into the gorram mess?" Riddick growled. He was pretty damn sure this whole thing was Mal's fault. It usually was.

River sighed softly from her spot on one of the crates. It wasn't as if she and Riddick were morally opposed to helping folks. Especially folks who were friends of Inara's. But unlike Verbena where they'd been strangers, there and gone, these folk would know them and be in close contact for at least a few days if the way Mal was describing the job was accurate. They'd been on Verbena less than a day all told. The longer they spent with strangers the more likely it was that someone would tip to who they were. Neither of them from first appearances, would seem to be what their warrants painted them as but it was a huge risk. And being there for days, they couldn't use false names the entire time, someone would slip and then it would be truly obvious that they had something to hide.

Zoe was briefing everyone, Mal watching alongside her, "Those who have a mind are welcome to join. Those who just as soon stay on the ship can do that, too."

"Not that I don't want to help Inara's friend, but I'm not sure how beneficial this'll be, long term," Riddick offered quietly. He glanced at River and she nodded, easily reading in his mind the same concern in hers. Close contact with people who were used to socializing could be dangerous. Companions were perceptive, it was their job, and whores were just a watered down version of Companions. Whores, not having the safety and backup of a Guild might actually be more dangerous to them than a Companion. Certainly they'd be more accustomed to dealing with people on the shady side of the law.

Book was doing his 'good works' attitude, clearly ready and willing to help and quite capable of admonishing those who didn't agree right off. "These people need assistance. The benefit wouldn't necessarily be for you."

Riddick shook his head, "Not talkin' about money. 'M sayin' could be dangerous."
Zoe was looking at them both strangely, picking up on the undercurrents between the cortex genius and the convict. No one's gonna force you to go. As has been stated, this job's strictly speculative."

"Inara's been good to us, helped us," River spoke up quietly. "But we're... concerned about hiding our identities. I've hidden us from the eyes of the cortex but as we've discussed, the human eye is something different. And human memory can't be erased."

"Not sayin' you'd have to hang around the house," Mal shrugged. "Sure we can find a way for ya to help 'thout gettin' over friendly." He began to move away, "Wash, plot a course."

River sighed. Mal was set on helping, still feeling stubborn and chafing against the 'petty thief' label Inara had inadvertently given him. Book was the same, Kaylee didn't see the harm and Zoe was backing Mal up as usual. Simon was the only one looking even slightly uncomfortable at the prospect besides she and Riddick, and since all three of them were on the run, that wasn't a surprise at all. Wash at least was giving them a sympathetic look before he headed up to the bridge.

Things had begun to go sideways not long after they'd landed on planet, not really surprising considering Mal's luck. The terrain was inhospitable at best, and gave River an uncomfortable reminder of being On Planet after the Hunter Gratzners crash. The only difference was there weren't three suns and the ground wasn't just sand and rock. Blowing wind, miles and miles of miles and miles with scrub, yellow dirt and a building that reminded her of a frozen food pack. Objectively she knew it was solar sheeting but that made it no less ugly. "Oooh...shiny." She remarked dryly.

Simon was blinking at it and Riddick had taken one look out the bridge window and put his goggles on, sliding Simon's extra pair of blue lens spectacles into his pocket. "I take it that's your friend's place?" Riddick asked as he stepped off the ramp.

Inara nodded, "Yes. Nandi mentioned it wasn't much to look at." Her expression suggested that the building would have to be elevated several levels before it came up to 'not much to look at' in her opinion.

"Why does it..." Simon was clearly trying to find a polite way to ask the obvious question as he adjusted his tinted spectacles.

Kaylee took pity on him, taking his hand, "How come it looks like a frozen dinner pack?" She smiled as sunny as the sky overhead, "It's solar sheetin'. Cheap power."

Simon nodded, "I suppose how the building looks isn't important so long as it serves its purpose." He tugged at his simple clothing. "I look all right? Not too... proper core boy?" He'd made a point of acquiring clothing that was not stylish, simple khaki pants and a buttondown working shirt, no tie, workboots and his gunbelt. Nothing could rid him of his elegant demeanor however and he wore the clothing just as he would one of his core suits.

She grinned at him, "You look very shuài an' still pretty proper but you'll do. An' you won't make folks feel like they gotta bow to ya."

"Heaven forbid there be bowing," Simon shook his head, grinning at her. "I don't know that my sensibilities could take it."

River looked at Riddick and around the area, "Best to go in and make nice before beginning to scout the territory." She suggested, "Don't know that it'll end up in a fight."
Riddick had rolled his eyes behind his goggles while Simon chuckled, "When's our luck ever been that good? Shuǐhuǒ wú qíng."

"Not ta mention the Cap'n's magnetic personality," Kaylee added with a giggle of her own.

The Reader had sighed but conceded her brother's point. "True. Still ought to go in and get an idea of the people. Which ones are safe and which to avoid."

Simon had nodded, "We should still be polite if possible, we'll stand out more if we avoid everyone." He offered the pretty mechanic his arm, escorting Kaylee after the rest of the crew and Book, Riddick and River bringing up the rear.

The inside of the building was better than the outside. Some attempt had been made to make it elegant and comfortable. The furniture was all sturdy and fairly clean. At least it appeared to be. The men and women of Heart of Gold weren't on the raggedy edge but they weren't living in luxury either. Everyone was just a bit worn and tired, the situation plainly wearing at all of them. Even the Madame, who was by far the most beautiful and polished woman in the place, seemed tired worry leaving lines of strain around her mouth and frown lines on her forehead.

Simon had taken one look at the whores and River could hear his brain clicking into overdrive as he realized just how long it must have been since anyone had gotten a medical evaluation. "Kaylee, you're...better with people than I am. Would you help me to offer our services? I doubt these men and women have seen a doctor in some time and making sure everyone is healthy... Even if we can't help the way they need, we can at least do something. And we've still got plenty of drugs left for treatments."

"That's a good idea," Kaylee smiled at him. "Doctors is rare as hens teeth out on the Rim."

River watched as her brother and Kaylee began to talk quietly with the inhabitants of the whorehouse. Inara and Mal, along with Inara's friend Nandi were making introductions between all of them. Being offered food and drinks, alcoholic or otherwise was welcome, and River watched as Zoe and Mal disappeared into another room. "Talking business." She murmured softly to Wash and Riddick as they moved towards the sideboard of food. "Inara's friend is Nandi, telling them about the local quán guì causing trouble."

Riddick was nodding, his keen ears picking up the conversation easily. "Sounds like a prize. Stealing a child from a woman with nothing." He was eying the foodstuffs thoughtfully before he began to fix a plate.

Wash looked at them, "That's the trouble?"

River nodded. "One of the women is pregnant and the quán guì swears it's his. Wants to take the child since his wife can't give him any sons. Lots of money, keeps it all for himself, doesn't build or help. Wants to play cowboy. Acts like a háo qiáng, destroys anyone who stands up to him."

Wash whistled low under his breath and looked around, "Anyone else feel like we've bitten off more'n we can chew?" His bright blue eyes were concerned as he took in the state of the building and its inhabitants. "No one here looks as if they could stand up to a gopher let alone a xiǎo miàn hǔ."

River sighed, "Captain will go into town with Inara and take the man's measure. Bad idea but he will not be talked out of it."
"Feel like it'll just tip the man off that Nandi's got some help?" Riddick asked quietly.

She nodded and looked around, "It's a risk I wouldn't take, given the choice. Might be better to just kill the man. But can't tell if it will increase the whirlwind or let it scatter." It would be better to keep the trouble away from the bordello. The house seemed sturdy enough but it wouldn't be easy to defend or guard.

The pilot frowned thoughtfully, "Be a touch obvious wouldn't it? For the man to get shot dead after Mal shows up?"

Riddick chuckled, his eyes on the preacher, two of the women talking to him, talking to Wash even if he wasn't looking at the man. "Never said the man'd get shot. Could just take a bad fall. Need to know where he lives, what sorta folk he's got around him, but we could do it."

River smiled as Kaylee sat with some of the women, a data pad in her hand, clearly jotting down information for Simon while he spoke with a woman heavily pregnant. "Need to take our measure of the terrain, Nandi's land, exits and entrances to the house... Prepare."

"Prepare for what," Wash tilted his head and began to make himself a sandwich.

"For they sow the wind and they reap the whirlwind." River murmured.

Riddick watched as River narrowed her eyes at one of the whores, shaking her head, "Problem Qīng Xiāng?" He took a bite of the food and conceded that it wasn't awful, eating it quickly and neatly in part to avoid thinking about the smell of stale sex that seemed to permeate the whole building. He was sure they tried to clean but short of reupholstering the furniture and replacing every mattress in the bordello nothing would get the smell out. He wouldn't care normally, but circumstances being what they were, it was just one more irritant. Like being on Higgins moon, his nose clogged up with one smell made it harder to distinguish others.

"Someone talks to the enemy," River murmured. "Can't tell who." She took the empty plate and set it aside with her own, her gaze roving over the residents of the bordello thoughtfully.

"So they've got a snake in the grass and no idea," Riddick scowled in annoyance. "That's just tā mā de wonderful." Following Wash's example he made a sandwich and wandered around the public rooms, mentally counting doors and windows, keeping a good eye on the inhabitants. His woman sighed but dug into her satchel for her cortex and began to pull up all the information she could find on Rance Burgess, his finances and the town while he scouted out the bordello.

Zoe came out of the lounge, a grim set to her face and nodded at him. "Guess you an' River heard?"

He nodded back at her, "Told Wash. Simon an' Kaylee are checkin' the staff over an' Book's eatin' and discussin' religion with a coupla the girls." He nodded towards the back of the house. "Haven't gone much past here, but there's way too many way's in an' outa this place for my likin'. Comes to a fight we'd be better off layin' traps in the yard and gettin' the folk here onto Serenity for shelter. Might could block the rear doors and windows, keep anyone from flankin' us."

"Makes sense, but I don't know that Nandi'll leave, even if the man lays siege." Zoe looked around. "Let's start fortifyin' as best we can or at least make plans for it. River lookin' into the man on the cortex?"

Riddick nodded as they walked towards the back of the whorehouse to inspect the structure. "She
and I had the idea that it might save a lot of time and effort if the man suffered an accident."

"Plannin' on poison again?" Zoe wondered in her mildly neutral tone as she tested the strength of the back door. It was thick, sturdy wood and would probably hold up well enough to gunfire.

"If his medical history allows for a heart attack it's not the worst idea in the world." He shrugged and looked up the walls. They were thick, near a foot thick most likely, and without any adornments to aid in climbing. "From what I've heard a the man me an' River wouldn't lose a bit a sleep over it."

"Well let's go put it to Mal an' Nandi then." Zoe looked around the back of the brothel shaking her head. "Defendin' this place'd be worse than the Valley."

"Least we haven't heard the ǒu niáng yǎng de has air support," Riddick reminded her. "No skiffs like the Alliance, just lotsa fancy toys."

River cursed as she ran out of ammunition again and grabbed another gun. Next to the other window Riddick was cursing steadily as he took aim and fired. "Plan was sound," She reminded him. "Cap'n thought the plan was good."

"Yeah," Riddick ducked as a bullet came flying through the window. "That shoulda been our first inklin' that things were bound ta go really tā mā de wrong." Whenever Mal thought something would go smooth that was a near guarantee that it wouldn't. Mal was worse that Murphy for things going wrong.

"He does have the worst luck." River sighed, closing her eyes and determining where the rest of the crew was. Kaylee and Wash were with the rest of the non-combatants on Serenity, moved far enough away from the Heart of Gold that it looked like they'd attempted to hide her. The ground floor had been deemed most in need of defense, since it had the only way in or out. Book was on the ground floor with Zoe, loading and shooting in between reloading weapons. Mal had taken a position opposite the first mate with Nandi, the two of them doing the same thing, alternating between loading and shooting. Inara was in the middle of the house on the second floor with Petaline, helping her through her labor while Simon had gone to the upper hall and was methodically picking off men as they came closer.

She and Riddick were in the closest they could come to a snipers perch. They'd managed to make themselves a small nest in the cupola at the top of the house and thus far few of the assailing force had determined they were there. That couldn't last forever, one sharp eye, a reflecting scope and someone would tip to their location. At least they'd been fairly well prepared, though this had not been the hoped for scenario. That it had come to a siege just indicated how well and truly screwed up the entire mess had become.

River had stood when her zhàng fu had come back into the main parlor. There were plenty of girls sizing up her mate with the intent of flirtation but he only had eyes for her as he and Zoe strode over. "Find anything interesting?" He kissed her gently, showing off to the women of the brothel that he had a woman of his own and no interest in them.

"Accessed medical records," She grinned up at him. "Several plausible ways to manufacture a demise of natural causes." His big hands cupped her face and gentle lips caressed hers in a tender
kiss that had several whores sighing in envy.

"Well let's go an' tell Mal an' Nandi, see if they're interested in that." Zoe suggested. She gestured for them to precede her into the smaller lounge where Nandi was talking with Inara and Mal.

"Done already?" Mal looked up curiously, his forehead furrowing when he saw Riddick and River. "Don't tell me, you found a sinkhole or somethin' an' we're all about ta fall in it."

"Metaphorically speaking, perhaps not inaccurate," River conceded after a moment's thought.

"You act like its always us bearin' bad news Mal," Riddick shook his head. "You're the one with the magnetic personality." He closed the door behind him and leaned against the sideboard and hutch cabinet that held books and various other implements. River took her place beside him, her warm lithe body pressed against his as he wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Because people shoot at him so often," Inara supplied the punchline to her friend in a dryly amused voice. "Rick's not wrong though."

"River an' I had the idea that we could avoid the whole mess with..." Riddick glanced at his woman with a smirk.

"With a judicious application of drugs and/or poisons." River finished brightly. "Several underlying medical issues which could cause such a demise. Could make it appear entirely natural, if a bit dramatic."

Nandi studied them thoughtfully, "Well I can't say it's a solution that never crossed my mind but I can't see any practical way of getting it done." She didn't appear to be throwing the idea out entirely, though Mal didn't seem thrilled with cold blooded murder.

"Very stealthy. Very sneaky," River shrugged. "Both Rick and I. Also very dangerous." She looked at Nandi, "Captain may have warned you, Furyan ears, hear too much sometimes."

"Yeah, I mighta forgot ta mention that," Mal rubbed the back of his neck, looking a bit sheepish while Inara rolled her eyes.

"River and Richard have a multitude of skills you might find useful darling." The Companion informed her friend in a quiet but firm voice. "You'd be amazed at what River can learn on the Cortex and the places the two of them can infiltrate." Inara at least seemed to have no trouble at all with the idea of Riddick and River assassinating Rance Burgess.

"I'm not sayin' I want it done, but if I did, how would you do it?" Nandi asked finally. She looked at Mal with a half shrug, "I appreciate you wantin' to do this a certain way. Try to be honorable about it. But a woman in my position, with people to protect, can't afford to be particular."

River sat next to Inara and passed the cortex over. "Burgess has not had access to a proper doctor in some time, suffers from gout now and then due to an overly rich diet. Also suffers from angina and arrhythmia, and major symptoms of heart disease. Shouldn't smoke cigars and drink so much whiskey."

She smiled at her mate as Riddick chuckled evilly, "Wouldn't be hard to slip into his house, put some digitalis in his whiskey. Or even give him an air embolism to stop his heart."

"Without being seen?" Nandi was doubtful, hopeful, but not quite sure if they could be believed.

"Cain't be harder'n sneakin' through a camp fulla guards an' into a house in the center of a
compound." Riddick shrugged, making no effort to hide the smirk that was curving lips. "If it wasn't
for the smell it woulda been kinda fun."

The Madame looked at Inara as if for confirmation and got it from both the Companion and First
Mate. Inara simply nodded but Zoe chuckled. "Did it without gettin' a speck a mud on River's face or
messin' up her fancy hairdo."

River shrugged when the auburn haired woman looked at her. "Was disguised as a fancy lady, since
the man had contracted Inara for his son. Thought she was an apprentice, as if a Companion has such
things. Yú chūn zì jiāo de dà zì ròu. Wasn't hard to dose him."

Riddick was nodding his agreement, "Be easier iffen we knew the layout a his place, if he has a lotta
guards or tech ta watch for. Security systems, that sorta thing."

Nandi was thinking now, "He likes havin' the best toys, makes him feel all manly and powerful. He's
just a háo qiáng with more money than everyone else."

River took her cortex back and began running searches for Burgess's financial activities. "Bought
what he thinks is a top of the line security system, but he has trouble getting updates this far out. And
he doesn't seem to know how to use it properly. Xiǎo huáng dì and daì ruò mù ji on top of it.
Wouldn't even be a little fish on Persephone or Osiris. Sir Harrow would turn up his nose at him.
Hope Petaline's baby gets her brains." She sent a dark grin at her mate and Riddick smirked back at
her, "Should be easy to husk, get in, get out..." She began to husk in earnest. "Could even play
Robin Hood."

"Robin Huh..." Mal began to ask and trailed off mid word. "You plannin' on huskin' his accounts?"
River always like surprising the captain. He got such a funny look on his face. "There any point in
me bein' here at all?"

"Still has to take his measure of the man," River reminded him. "And if you meet him at the theatre,
we will be able to tag him, know where to follow. Might even be able to arrange for an accident on
his way home."

"He's got a big spread outside of town," Nandi told her. "Likes to take a coach to the theatre, playin'
cowboy. But to get around with speed he's got a hovercraft."

"So we arrange for something to happen with his coach, he has a little breakdown outside of town
and a little accident." Riddick was clearly thinking outloud. "Though if he regularly attends with his
wife that could be problematic."

River nodded her agreement. "Don't want any witnesses, at least none that know they are witnesses."
She looked at Nandi curiously, "What's the layout of the theatre?"

Riddick growled as the windowsill splintered, shards of wood flying around as another bullet hit the
house. "I'm waitin' for our grand plan to have some gorram effect." He cursed as dust masked his
view of the yard. "Cào nǐ zuǒ zhǒng shí bā dài you yú chūn zì jiāo de dà zì ròu." Another man fell
from his horse as he came into view, clearing the dust. "We put enough gǎi sī work into it."

He could almost feel River's shrug as she reloaded her weapons while he covered them. "Must make
them think we fear their advance. It's not as if there aren't enough of them to spare."

"Leastways we got the doors barred." Riddick consoled himself with that small bright spot as his
bàng jiār began to shoot and he took the time to reload his guns.

"Barred and booby trapped," River sent him a grin.

"Now if Wash would make with the 'thrillin' heroics' we'd be ahead a the game." Riddick frowned as he scanned the sky towards the direction of Serenity's 'hiding place'. "He's overdue."

Nandi had a coach of sorts, more of a buggy than a proper closed vehicle, but Mal had opted to use Serenity's shuttle and park it just outside of town to save them the time and keep the dust off the fancy clothing they'd had to wear. It was a nice evening, the heat of the day faded but not so much that the cold of the night made walking in the air uncomfortable. "Leave your tie alone," She commanded the captain mildly as they walked. "Fussing with your attire is not done. Makes you stand out."

"Gorram thing feels like its stranglin' me." Mal complained still tugging on it.

River stopped and turned in exasperation, her hands going to his neck. Mal, startled by the sudden move jerked back and only Riddick's quick hands kept Inara from stumbling as the captain's elbow nearly dug into her side. "Hold still," River reprimanded him. "Or you'll end up covered in dirt, Inara with you, and Richard and I will be on our own. Can't go to the theatre covered in dirt. Terribly shàng bù dé tài pán."

Mal obediently pretended he was a statue while River fixed his tie, "Still feel like a monkey in this getup."

"Oughta practice wearin' it more," Riddick commented from where he was keeping watch on their surroundings. "Wear it enough that you're comfortable in it. River says that's how girls learn to wear heels."

River nodded, "Practice makes perfect." She ran her finger between the collar and Mal's throat, tightening the silk just slightly. "There, turn your head? No constriction?"

"Much better," Mal craned his neck in all directions and nodded. "Feel like I won't rip somethin' if I need to turn an' run."

"Good. Let us continue. Do not wish to be late." River nodded and took Riddick's arm again while Inara looped hers through Mal's elbow.

"Indeed. That'd be terribly gauche," Riddick drawled in Simon's accent drawing a smile from Inara. River giggled while Mal made a face as they came upon the theatre, brightly lit and almost carnival like. "Āi yā."

The blue prints for the theatre were a matter of public record. And all the gilt and trim in the world couldn't hide basic architecture. Riddick looked around curiously wondering how it compared to Osiris or Ariel for opulence and was rewarded with a derisive snort from the woman at his side as she read the thought. "Ridiculous." She rolled her eyes. "Overdone to make up for lack of perception. As if money thrown at the problem will fix any assault upon good taste. No style or elegance. God the first garden made, and the first city Cain."
Inara nodded in front of them on Mal's arm. "Tacky." She murmured.

Mal was looking around, "I swear to you, it's like money and good taste are inversely proportional."

River poked him as they passed and Riddick chuckled, "Watch it Mal, my woman has money an' good taste."

"Yeah, well go on an' display it somewhere's else, while we find our man," Mal commanded mildly. He tilted his head at River and Riddick, a half smile on his lips. "You do look nice nǐ zǐ."

River grinned before Riddick escorted her to another part of the theatre, his eyes scanning their surroundings behind Simon's blue spectacles. "I think we mighta found the fèi wù gòu niàng yǎng de before Mal an' Inara." He nodded towards a group of people, most of them gathered around a couple dressed a cut above the rest.

Rance Burgess was a tolerably handsome man, perhaps as tall as Mal, clean shaven and groomed to a fare thee well as Jayne might say. His waistcoat was a gleam gold silk brocade and his shirt a pristine white. He seemed to fancy himself a Victorian western gentleman, the cut of his suit reflecting those tastes. His wife Belinda was dressed a bit more conservatively in her dark jet beaded gown of satin but they were obviously intent upon outshining everyone around them.

River agreed silently, nodding and smoothing down her skirt. Nandi had been able to advise them on the manner of dress favored by the townspeople, more Victorian than Cantonese, though the theatre was a mixture of both, and seemingly the worst parts of each. The two of them were dressed even more richly than Burgess and his wife, the prairie harpy Nandi had mentioned, but it was doubtful anyone besides Inara had the experience in Core society to truly notice. The Burgesses would, if only subconsciously, but that was the point. "Best to stay away, unnoticed by the rest of the patrons as much as possible." She suggested quietly. "Burgess will promenade at intermission. Show off."

"Make our move then?" Riddick guided her to the box in the balcony they'd paid for, grateful for the curtains that would block the other theatre goers from getting a good look at them. He could tell Burgess had noticed them but despite the richness of their dress, he wouldn't put himself in a subservient position by approaching them. During the intermission when the patrons were milling about the man would most likely 'accidentally' bump into them in order to wrangle an introduction. Riddick had unearthed the blue tinted spectacles to hide his eyes and with his silk twill suit no one would ever guess he was an escaped convict. Between River's Core demeanor and the quality of their clothing the Burgess's pride would demand some connection. That would be the time to strike.

"Unless opportunity presents itself during the performance," River grinned back at him as she caught a glimpse of the Captain.

"Well everyone'll remember Mal, maybe they won't even think of us." Riddick seated her and took his own chair at her side. "Course, that leads to problems too."

"Deal with them as they come." River sighed

"Yeah." Riddick pressed a kiss to her temple and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, studying the stage. "Mal's right though, puppets are gorram weird."

Her giggle was like music. "Balinese Puppet Theatre. Would prefer kabuki. Or Shakespeare."

"Well who wouldn't," Riddick agreed. "Least its understandable, unlike..." He sneered descriptively, "This."

River nodded and snuggled close, her scent thickening with steel and blood as she began to Read
It wasn't hard to Read Burgess. Disgusting but not difficult. He was posturing for his little crowd of friends before the performance began in earnest. The Puppet theatre was something of a prologue, and nothing the theatre-goers didn't already know. Much like intermission, the prologue had become a time to display clothing, accessories, or other trappings of status. A promenade, it was called most often. It was a custom River hadn't missed since she'd left the Core and was made doubly annoying by the people doing the swaggering here.

She was peripherally aware of Mal and Inara, walking on the outskirts of Burgess's audience. Typically Mal was complaining, "I'll never understand rich folk. All that money, this is what they do with it." He was still looking around the theatre and the puppets, his mind confused and derisive.

Inara was more tolerant though she was fairly unimpressed with the performance. "It's art. Or trying to be."

Mal was not convinced, still looking around as if to make sense of the entire thing, "It's puppets."

The Companion's amusement was clear in her tone, "It's puppet art."

Mal chuckled, "Or trying to be?" He grabbed a drink off a waiter's tray, strangely colored and probably meant to be exotic, taking a sip. "Lan-danjiang!" River had to bit her tongue to keep from giggling as she pictured the captain's face.

Inara was sipping her drink and the Reader could feel her sentiments regarding it echoed Mal's. "They're…colorful?" She offered the dubious compliment.

Captain Reynolds, apparently was not foolish enough to continue drinking, "Maybe you drink enough of this stuff, the puppets start makin' sense?"

River felt Inara's enjoyment of the captain's humor fade as she looked past him and the Captain noticed it as well. "Found our boy?" Inara nodded and Mal turned to look at Burgess lording over a particularly influence crowd. His guests were laughing with disturbing frequency and force, but not with any genuine amusement. River could feel Mal's mood change as he watched the man and his wife, both of them dressed to conservative but ridiculous success. "I've a sudden itch to see how the other half lives." The captain offered Inara his arm and River's hand squeezed Riddick's thigh as the two of them strolled up to listen to the conversation in progress.

Burgess was pontificating, "... so I explained to the boy: you take a clean woman's virtue, you take the woman. And that's for life. Boy said his vows right then and there. Took very little persuading on my part." He patted the laser pistol, hanging conspicuously on his belt and the crowd promptly began laugh on cue, Mal laughing longer and louder than the rest of them until people began to stare.

River listened as Mal began to play his part, "Nice to know there's some places left in the 'verse where old-fashioned values still mean a thing." He patted Inara's hand on his arm, "Isn't that right, dear?"

Inara's smile felt forced, though River doubted anyone there but Mal would noticed. "Mmmm."

River felt Riddick stiffen beside her, his ears attuned to the conversation as much as possible. Mal had wanted a chance to talk to the man, and he was getting it, but it wouldn't do for him to offend Burgess too much.
Burgess was looking at the captain, his expression evaluating and River was doubly glad she'd made Mal wear the suit from his job with Shazza. "I don't think I know you..."

Mal was offering his hand, "Name's Ryan. James Ryan." River spared a moment of thanks to the gracious Buddha that the Captain had the presences of mind to offer a false name. It wouldn't hold up to much but it was better than nothing. Mal wasn't done though, leaning in as he shook Burgess's hand, "And might I just say? She is quite a beauty."

Rance Burgess didn't swell up like a rooster but it was a near thing as he unholstered his gun and offered it to Mal. "Thank you. You ever have an occasion to handle one, Mister Reynolds? Silk trigger active return bolt laser."

Mal had taken the pistol and was evaluating it thoughtfully, "Lighter than it looks. Thought it'd have more heft to it."

Now Burgess was puffing up a bit, as if he'd invented the gorram thing himself, "Don't let that fool you. Won't find technology like that short of Alliance. And even their issues don't yet have the auto-target adjust. Had that one crafted special."

She could feel it, Mal was going to say something to put Burgess's back up. "Didn't think firearms such as this were generally legal... for a private owner, I mean." The Captain's voice was easy but Burgess's wife was the one who responded in arch tones.

"My husband makes a distinction between legality and morality, Mister Ryan."

Mal was nodding thoughtfully as he held Belinda's eyes, "I've said that myself."

If Burgess postured anymore he might begin to rival a peacock, "Bending one unjust law is a small thing when it comes to protecting one's family."

Inara's hand tightened on Mal's arm and he seemed to realize he was millimeters away from true stupidity, which was not their aim. "I think I understand you."

River nearly sighed in relief as Burgess smiled, amused by the taller man's seeming capitulation, "And as you say, she is a beauty."

Mal was handing the gun back, "She sure is." He paused, "'Course, I was referring to the lady." His nod to Belinda was all courtesy, "Ma'am."

River frowned as the crowd watched Mal steer Inara away towards River and Riddick's box. Inara and Mal wouldn't be joining them though, the box was simply on the way to the side exit. A narrow set of stairs for the servants to use but perfect for a discreet escape. "Mal and Inara are out," She murmured to Riddick. "Burgess has a wave on his personal communicator." She narrowed her eyes. "Goes to take it privately."

Riddick was looking out over the audience, people getting settled into their seats, the main performance about to begin. River focused back on her partner after a few moments. "Got the DNA results. Petaline's child was sired by Burgess. A boy. The prairie harpy is pleased. Wants him to go and retrieve her son at first light."

"Well we should be able to put a spoke in that plan," Riddick murmured. In a box near theirs Burgess and his prairie harpy were seating themselves, pleased and pompous looks upon their faces. "Xiào miàn hǔ and his yāo jīng."

River nodded, "Intermission cannot come soon enough."
Author's Note: Okay…moving along. You might have guessed that we're going to see a few changes. I hope you'll be pleased with them.

Chinese Translations:

shuài (handsome)

Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng (Fire and water have no mercy (idiom). forces of nature beyond human control / implacable fate)

quán guì (influential officials / bigwigs)

háo qiáng (despot / tyrant / bully)

xiào miàn hǔ (man with a big smile and evil intentions)

Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)

tā mā de (fucking)

gǒu niáng yǎng de (son of a bitch)

zhàng fu (husband)

Yú chǔn zì jiāo de dà zi ròu (stupid inbred sack of meat)

Xiǎo huáng dì (lit. little emperor / fig. spoiled child / spoiled boy / pampered only child)

daì ruò mù ji (dumb as a wooden chicken)

Cào nǐ zǔ zhòng shí bā dài (fuck your ancestors to the eighteenth generation)

gāi sǐ (damned)

bàng jiār (lover / partner)

shàng bù dé tái pán (too uncouth to appear in public (idiom) / unfit for a public role)

Āi yā (interjection of wonder, shock or admiration)

nǐ zi (little girl)

fèi wù gǒu niáng yǎng de (good for nothing son of a bitch)

yāo jīng (evil spirit / alluring woman)

Script Chinese Translations:

Lan-dan jiang! (Weak ass sauce)

Quote Sources:
taken arms against the sea of troubles – Hamlet, William Shakespeare, originally 'To take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them.'


For they sow the wind and they reap the whirlwind – Hosea 8:7

God the first garden made, and the first city Cain – The Garden. Essay V, Abraham Cowley
Riddick watched as Nandi and Inara sipped saki while Mal threw back whiskey like it was going out of style. “Much’s I hate to ruin a good celebration, we ain’t exactly outa the woods yet.” The three celebrating folk stopped to look at him as if he’d thrown a dead rabbit in the middle of the parlor.

“You said Burgess is dead,” Nandi eyed him and then River. “Dead don’t change.”

“No,” Riddick agreed. “But Rance wasn’t your only problem.” He could hear River’s sigh beside him as the three drinkers stared in confusion and rubbed her back in silent commiseration. He would have thought Nandi would have leapt to the obvious, to he and River at least, conclusion but apparently not.

“Belinda Burgess wants a son.” River told them flatly. “She’s just as self-righteous as her husband, just as entitled and she’ll have no hesitation about bringing a war to your doorstep to take Petaline’s child. We couldn’t know that until we overheard their conversation at the theatre. She called Petaline’s child her boy. Told Rance to ride out at first light and bring back her boy. Only death prevented an assault at daybreak.”

“But we couldn’t know for sure until we heard that.” Riddick shrugged. “Until we met her we couldn’t know if she’d be angry that her husband was going to make her raise his child by another woman. But she’s nuttier’n squirrel shit and a self-righteous jiàn huò to boot.”

“So my first inclination bein’ to pack everyone up an’ run was a good one?” Mal put down the whiskey with a thump. “Can still do that. More’n enough room on Serenity for everyone.”

River shook her head, “Belinda Burgess would use all her money and power, and the long arm of the law to follow. Petaline and the boy would never be free of her. Any other woman, off planet would be out of reach. But not her. Running will only delay the confrontation.” Mal’s sigh as he picked up the whiskey again was heartfelt and Riddick could sympathize.

“It was a good notion, still is, for any non-combatants.” Riddick agreed. “Considering the circumstances.”

“Circumstances?” Nandi’s eyes narrowed as she picked up on the undercurrents between the two of them.

“Talk about it privately.” Riddick shook his head and the Madame stood and with dignity led he and River, along with Mal and Inara to her private study.

River was tilting her head, listening to more than footsteps and breathing, though no one would have guessed, and she closed the door behind them. “Three days grace.” She told the regal ex-Companion quietly. “Morning of the fourth day… it will be bad.”

“Define bad.” Nandi sat behind her desk. Inara took a seat on the little settee while Mal leaned against the wall by the window.

“Mal,” River shrugged, deadpan. “In the Latin.”

Inara nearly smiled and Nandi’s lips twitched into a reluctant grin at Mal’s startled objection of
“Hey!” River grinned at him outright and the Captain shook his head muttering about captainy respect and how he got none.

“Yeah but you’re a great straight man,” Riddick told him with a half smirk before sobering to give the women his attention.

“Besides in the Latin,” Inara asked in her gentle voice. “River, what can we expect do you think?”

Riddick began to shrug off his fancy coat and folded it over his arm while River unplaited her hair from its too stylish updo as she spoke. “Funeral arrangements, mourning… and…” She sighed, rubbing her forehead, “We think there’s a spy. Someone the Burgesses pay to watch you Nandi.”

“A turncoat, in my house, spying on me and my girls, feeding that no good姑娘 yang de information about us?” Nandi looked and smelt furious, rightfully so. But she also looked ready to go out and do some scalping.

“Wèi hǔ zuò chāng,” Inara murmured. Her normally serene face was visibly upset and it was easy to see how much she cared for her friend. Mal was watching both of the women with an affectionate half smile, concerned as he was about their situation, he still seemed to be pleased Inara was spending time with Nandi.

Riddick looked at Nandi thoughtfully, wondering if the woman realized why her old friend didn’t seem to have aged a day. She and Mal were doing a mild version of flirting and Inara was subtly encouraging it. Some things never changed. Imminent death or violence got the blood going but good.

“Will take at least a day or so for the spy to get word to Belinda Burgess that her husband’s death is…suspicious.” River explained quietly. “Better that it is sooner. We can watch to see who leaves.”

“That’s somethin’ I’m good at,” Riddick reminded Mal. “Nobody can touch me an’ River at night. We give this person an openin’ to leave, we can block ‘em from coming back. Make our preparations while they’re gone.” That got Mal’s mind off flirting and friendship and back to the matter at hand.

“But we cannot let on that we know.” Inara realized. “Because then we won’t be able to predict the attack?”

“Counter intelligence,” Mal was nodded slowly and looked at Nandi. “You got anyone a bit discontented with their lot in life? Or spends more time in town than the rest?”

“A few,” Nandi was past angry now; her pretty face was looking worn and tired. Betrayal would do that to you Riddick thought to himself. Having to look at folk you considered your people with the idea that one of them had sold you out would age anyone. “One a the boys, coupla the girls. Not many though. We ain’t very well liked in town you see.”

“Everyone here has private accounts?” River asked as she rotated her neck to ease the tense muscles. “Could take a look, see who’s getting money transferred in.”

“Most of my people work in cash, but a few have accounts, trying to save up.” The Madame wrote down the names. “I don’t have account numbers or anything like that.”

“Won’t need them.” River shook her head. “Just need a place to work. Better if it’s in full view of the staff though.”

“Figurin’ on listenin’ to conversations while you work?” Mal was watching out the window. “Might
could save you the trouble of all that searching. Got someone walking along the fence here.”

“Should be Jake,” Nandi rose from her seat. “He takes care of the livestock along with Brian and Lucy.”

“Those your three?” Mal nodded at the figures moving through the puddles of lantern light.

“That’s them.” The Madame smiled slightly at her people before it faded. “But if anyone was wantin’ to sneak out…”

“Tonight would be the night.” Mal finished.

“While we’re all relaxed and celebrating the ‘good fortune’ of Burgess having a stroke at the theatre.” Riddick ran a hand down River’s back, tracing her neck and spine affectionately.

“Well,” The Captain offered them all a somewhat manic grin. “Shall we get to counter intelligencin’ then?”

River frowned into the distance and shook her head, “Serenity is overtaken.”

Riddick turned to stare at her, just as they heard Mal’s squawk of dismay, the same news coming in over his earwig. “Huò bù dān xíng.” He scowled as he turned back to his rifle.

“Rick, you an’ River got a plan for when this plan goes all ta hell?” Mal was hollering the question.

Riddick growled into his earwig, “Course we do. Just gonna take a minute or two.” He looked at his wife, “I’ll cover you, just get ‘em goin’.”

“Way ahead of you.” She was already lying flat on the floor, pulling out her databook and typing into it. A bullet ricocheted over her head and he could smell her blood as it buried itself in her hip. “Shui tā de wù qíng.” She cursed, “Jiàn tā de guī!”

He was actually enjoying this part of the job. The clothing was pretty comfortable for fancy clothes, once he got the jacket off and loosened the tie. River was using his thigh to prop up her cortex, curled against him, her shoes kicked off and feet tucked beneath her silk skirt. Even the blue specs he’d worn to the theatre didn’t bother him much.

Zoe and Wash were doing something similar across from them, while Kaylee was stripping down an old water pump and repairing it, a contented smell coming from her direction as Simon helped her by handing her tools, a ‘nurse’ to her doctor. Book and a couple of the whores were having a bible study while the rest lounged about. Nandi, Inara and Mal sipping drinks over in one of the more private alcoves. More than once he got the distinct impression that Inara was doing a little bit of matchmaking between her friend and the captain. He wondered how that would work out when Mal had seemed fairly taken with Shazza.

Riddick chuckled at the frustrated looks he could see on some of the residents faces. They had a crew full of potential clients and no one was interested. Kaylee might have been at one point but Simon had finally earned forgiveness and had made a point of walking her to her bunk or keeping company with her in the engine room so she’d know he was still very interested. He was all that was
proper but from Kaylee’s giggling and Simon’s somewhat silly smile Riddick thought his little brother had stolen a kiss or two at least.

Wash looked over in his direction at the sound of his rough laugh, “Something’s funny Rick?”

“Just feelin’ a bit amused, we’re all takin’ up space an’ no one’s makin’ money offa us.” He shrugged.

River’s lips curved in amusement, “My zhàng fu underestimates his attractiveness.”

Zoe looked around, apparently seeing something of what River was, “She’s not wrong Rick. You weren’t happily attached I’m guessin’ you’d have no short of offers.”

“Ain’t just him,” One of the boy whores, Jake, leaned a hip against the arm of a chaise. “Alla the women on yer crew are pretty shiny to look at too.” Riddick nearly growled at the flirtatious expression on the boy’s face as he looked at River.

River looked up and smiled in an absent fashion, “Sweet to think so. But my Rick is the only male who can handle me.” Her lips rubbed over his jaw, soothing the animal’s agitation.

“Same goes for him?” Lucy, a statuesque blonde with a very pretty face and enthusiastic smile, looked at her, “You the only one who can handle him?”

Riddick couldn’t help the lascivious grin that curved his lips, “There’s a time I mighta taken you up on what you’re offerin’, but you’d end up bowlegged an’ worn to a nub.”

River was still smiling, “My Furyan. My láng. Found me and no other can satisfy his appetites now. Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine; or leave a kiss within the cup, and I'll not ask for wine. The thirst that from the soul doth rise doth ask a drink divine; but might I of Jove's nectar sip, I would not change for thine.” Her sharp white teeth nipped at his throat affectionately.

Her husband’s grin was pure evil, “No one can match her. She’s a feast to my senses.” He dropped a wink at Wash behind the blue tinted specs and nuzzled her neck, “Nothin’ tastes better’n my woman. Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety.”

Wash was shaking his head while Zoe was openly smiling now, Mal’s rapidly paling face the obvious reason why. “And you don’t want to get in their way when they’re goin’ at it either,” The pilot chuckled.

“Man like you, look like you could handle more’n one woman at a time,” Lucy was still smiling hopefully.

“Could,” Riddick shrugged. “But I won’t. My woman’s spoiled me for anyone else. She walks in beauty like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that’s best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes; thus mellowed to that tender light which heaven to gaudy day denies. One shade the more, one ray the less, had half impaired the nameless grace which waves in every raven tress, or softly lightens o’er her face; where thoughts serenely sweet express, how pure, how dear their dwelling-place.” He kissed River’s dark head. “Ain’t a one can touch her for sweet taste or the sound of her when she falls.”

“Don’t have to pretend either,” River grinned at him. “My láng is always… satisfactory.”

“Is that all I am,” Riddick murmured against her skin, his mouth rubbing over her pulse and sending her blood pounding in her veins. “Satisfactory?”
She moaned softly and arched her neck for his mouth, the movement pushing her breasts against the neckline of her fancy gown. Soft white flesh against the dark silk was more tempting than he could resist and he trailed his lips down to those creamy swells, inhaling her heated scent. “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals.”

“Rick!” Mal’s irritated squawk was almost enough to kill the mood. “You two got a bunk for that sorta thing.”

River giggled, breathless with desire, “Captain has seen worse.”

“An’ we ain’t anywhere near our bunk,” Rick argued as he pulled River into his lap, her thighs straddling him, silk rustling as her skirt rode up. “Gotta make allowances.”

“It is a House of Ill Repute,” River agreed, “But of good reputation.” She giggled against his mouth and set her teeth to his pulse, drawing a groan of pleasure from him. He growled and pulled her closer, biting down on her throat where it met her shoulder and feeling her buck and shudder against his body, then relax as a tiny fall rolled through her at the sharp pleasure his teeth had given her.

The whores were staring, obviously recognizing exactly what had happened, while River kissed him gently. “You, she… your teeth…” Lucy managed to speak though articulate was apparently beyond her.

“My woman likes my teeth,” Riddick arranged River in his lap so she could continue working while he held her close, nuzzling and kissing her neck. “An’ I like hers.”

“My man does wonderfully unspeakable things with his teeth and mouth,” River practically purred at the feel of his caresses on her neck.

“Aww… go on an’ speak a few,” Kaylee urged with a wicked and cheerful grin from her corner. Simon nearly chortled with mirth and kissed her cheek as he handed her another screwdriver.

Zoe was rolling her eyes while Mal had nearly gone bug eyed in shock. Wash just shook his head. His eyes were sparkling with mischief as he watched the Captain get more and more wound up over their behavior, “If only we’d brought Jayne with us. Before he found his girl he’d have gone through every woman in the place.”

“There wouldn’t have been a body left standin’,” Zoe agreed with a smirk. “As it is we’re a ship full of married folk, courtin’ couples an’ a Shepherd. Not exactly prime customers.”

Mal looked about ready to explode when River’s eyes sharpened and she looked slowly towards the back of the house. Zoe turned slightly, her eyes flicking over to Mal and then to River. “Little one, think it’s about time you and your husband took yourselves off to bed.”

“Might do that,” Riddick nodded, standing and easily carrying River in his arms.

“If you’ll excuse us,” River smiled at the room in general, all courtesy as she was carried off, presumably to have wonderfully unspeakable things done to her.

They didn’t come up behind the turncoat, but they didn’t really need to. A glimpse of a profile and he knew who she was. River didn’t even need that, but it wasn’t like they could tell Mal that truth just yet.
River sighed as she and Riddick walked back into the main parlor. “The spy has gone.” She said quietly. “Now we begin our work in earnest.” She looked around curiously, Simon and Kaylee had disappeared, mostly likely for some mildly unspeakable things of their own.

Nandi stood, her pretty face hard, “Who was it? Who’s been cozied up to us and reportin’ to Rance Burgess all along?” There was a small flurry of whispers and shocked looks as the residents took in this piece of news.

“Woman with dark hair, only met her the oncet but I think her name’s Chari,” Riddick gave her the name. “She’s sneakin’ off in the direction of the road, goin’ round back. Got no excuse to leave far’s we can tell. Less you know of a likely reason?”

The rest of the whores conferred for a moment but the general consensus was that Chari didn’t have a sweetheart in town or family she’d be visiting. And in any case visiting generally wasn’t done this late in the evening.

“Most likely she’ll tell Belinda Burgess that we’ve guests and what they look like.” Nandi’s expression twisted in annoyance, “So she’ll guess that we’ve something to do with Rance’s death.”

“Just sped nature up a bit,” River shrugged. “Would have had a heart attack or a stroke soon.”

“But now that she’s gone we can get to makin’ preparations.” Zoe was all business, Wash’s softly laughing wife instantly becoming the stern second in command.

“Rick, be interested to hear what you and River have to say,” Mal’s prior irritation with them had all but vanished. “Wash, go on an’ fetch the Doc an’ Kaylee, we’ll need ‘em before we’re through.” He looked at Nandi as Wash hurried towards the back of the house to where Kaylee and Simon had apparently disappeared. “River had a point earlier, about a rich woman’s long arm. That bein’ said, you want to run, we’ll load all your people up, anything they can carry, whatever you value, an’ we’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

Nandi was shaking her head, “Captain Reynolds... It took me years to cut this piece of territory out of other men's hands. To build this business up from nothing. It's who I am. And it's my home. I'm not going anywhere.”

Riddick folded his arms around River’s waist and looked at the Madame, “Don’t wanna put more on you or make a hard decision harder, but there’s nothin’ worse than a monster thinks she’s right with God. We might turn ‘em away once, but she’ll keep comin’, won’t stop 'till she gets what she thinks is hers. She’ll kill you.” He nodded at the whores, “Kill every last one of them, it comes to that. And she’ll sleep well that night.”

Mal sighed, “He’s right. I hate to say it, but he’s right.”

Nandi shook her head, “Any of you want to take up the Captain’s offer, you do it, with my blessing.” Her people, to their credit, looked uneasy but resolute, “Petaline, that means you, too.” She looked at the very pregnant girl, Simon having guided his last patient in, taking her pulse as he listened. Kaylee sat on the girl’s other side, a damp cloth in her hands, mopping Petaline’s neck and face.

Despite her pregnancy, or maybe because of it, Petaline was as stubborn as her boss, “No, Miss Nandi. I ain't leavin' the Heart of Gold. Ain't leavin' you.”

The Madame turned back to Mal with a grim smile, “Rance Burgess was just a man... I wouldn’t let any man take what's mine. And his wife’s no different than he is. I won’t kow tow to her any more
than I would him. I doubt you'd do different, in my position.”

Mal shook his head slowly. “Well, lady I must say,” His mouth curved into an admiring smile. “You're my kinda stupid.”

Simon spoke up, “If I may, keeping everyone here, those who can’t use weapons, is simply asking for unnecessary injuries. We could hide some of those less able to use a gun over in Serenity. Keep them out of the line of fire.”

Nandi sent him a grateful look and regarded her people, “The doctor’s right. You help us prepare, do as much as you can, and then you get onto that ship if you’re no good with a gun. Keepin’ out of the way so you don’t get hurt isn’t the same as leavin’ and I’ll feel a lot better about this if you’re safe.”

Mal nodded, “We can make sure that happens. I’ll be wantin’ Kaylee and Wash on Serenity anyway. Them bein’ best suited to take care of her if something goes wrong.”

Zoe checked her gun and cocked it, nodding thoughtfully. “They’ll probably ride in by daylight, but I figure a three point watch, say, four hour shifts, be on the safe side. Don’t want to be caught off guard if they get organized faster than we expect.”

Wash was nodding in agreement, his tone matter of fact, and it might have fooled anyone who didn’t know him well that he knew what he was talking about. “Three-point, four-hour, should do it.”

Riddick was smothering a chuckle over Wash’s antics when Book stepped up, “I’m fair handy with a hammer, Captain.”

Mal didn’t seem to quite get it, “That so, Shepherd...?”

The preacher nodded, “Been following the footsteps of a carpenter for some time now. I think I can do something about our fortifications.”

Riddick nodded his agreement, “River an’ me, we’ve got some ideas for funnelin’ folks into kill zones too.”

“Petaline’s having some small contractions, nothing serious yet, but as she won’t leave, I’m staying with her,” Simon informed the captain in his quiet no nonsense doctor voice. “And despite Book’s opinion of my aim I am another hand with a gun if we need it.”

Furyan senses could be a curse or a blessing but the scent of Mal’s pride in his people, that was something Riddick didn’t mind at all. “Okay then...” Mal nodded and Riddick could smell his brain moving. “We start shootin’, they’ll most like try to burn us out, save their sweat and bullets. Nandi, what’s the water supply here?”

“Underground well. Pump that draws it up’s antiquated, but it don't break down.” She replied, her worried eyes on Petaline.

“Kaylee, think you can swing an upgrade for their waterworks?” Mal asked.

Kaylee moved closer to him, a happy smile on her face. “I’s workin’ on it a bit before. Just needed some minor repairs to work smooth. An’ I fixed that really old broken pump too. But if you want more water real fast, I’ll talk to Serenity, see what she’s got we might use.”

Riddick kissed the top of his wife’s head as River leaned back against him, her body soft under his hands, relaxed even as the tensions in the room wound tighter. “With the proper fortifications, traps and pitfalls and a supply of water and food, could hold this house for some time, pick them off. And
if they’re Burgess’s men, they won’t follow his wife so readily as they would him.”

“Does he have a second in command? Someone who will follow her orders but lead the men?” Mal asked as he looked around the room.

Petaline’s voice was tired but firm, “His foreman, Bowman Crowder.” She looked up at Mal, “Rance trusted him to run the ranch, keep the men in line. Mrs. Burgess’ll depend on him to do what’s necessary.”

“Doesn’t he have a little brother?” One of the other whores asked thoughtfully. “Seems the name’s familiar for some reason.”

“Boyd.” Jake spoke up. “He fought for the Independents. He don’t work for Burgess. Got a little spread of his own, closer to town. Mostly just has enough to eat and live. Likes to be left alone.”

“That I do,” The smooth drawling voice from the doorway wasn’t unexpected, at least not to Riddick, nor to River. Every other gun in the room was aimed at the slender blond man. “But it seems to me that it’s time I gave society another chance if this is the sorta party ya’ll get up to.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve comin’ here,” Lucy glared at the man.

“C’mon now Lucy, what was I supposed to do? Pretend I was happy you were here?” The man stepped inside the Heart of Gold and politely removed his hat. His shirt was buttoned to the collar and at his wrists and his dark vest was near spotless despite the dust in the air. “Told you that you didn’t have to stay. I don’t care what Bowman said. If this isn’t the life you want we’ll figure a way to get you one that is.” His gaze, despite the fact that he was speaking to Lucy, was glued to Petaline’s face. “Miss Petaline. You’re lookin’ well.”

The very pregnant woman half laughed, “You still talk more’n you need to. And more’n half of it horse hockey.”

“Young man, do you want to explain?” Mal’s voice was testy and he hadn’t put away his gun. Nandi was looking similarly put out and Riddick got the impression she wasn’t aware of the newcomer’s history with her people.

River was giggling softly and Riddick wanted to smile himself at her tequila scent, “For every inch, that is not fool, is rogue.”

“I beg your pardon. Please, allow me to introduce myself,” The wiry man bowed, all grace and a strength that wasn’t immediately obvious until he moved. “I am Boyd Crowder, youngest of the Crowder brothers. Lucy is my eldest brother Johnny’s wife, and when he was killed my second older brother Bowman threw her out of the family home. I wasn’t here at the time and when I did get home, rather than presume upon my hospitality Lucy had decided to make her own way.” He nodded politely at the pretty blonde. “Petaline is… a childhood friend. One who, as you’ve heard, knows me a bit too well.” His smile at the dark haired woman was far more than the affection of an old friend.

“And you’re here because…” Zoe’s mare’s leg was still aimed at Crowder.

“Because I heard Rance Burgess got himself dead.” He shrugged, unconcerned with all the firearms pointed in his direction and took a step closer. “And if I know that idiot brother of mine and thatjian huò Burgess married at all, I know they’ll be comin’ here as soon as they can get their brain’s ass in order.” He smiled easily, “I don’t much like my brother and I really don’t like that woman. She ain’t worked a day in her life and thinks she’s better’n those that do.”
“And exactly what is it that you do?” Riddick spoke finally. “If you’re here to help.”

“Oh I’m here to help.” He grinned outright. “My specialty is explosions.”

River wondered if her mother would be more appalled at the language she was using or the fact that her genius daughter was in the middle of a gun fight. “Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pìgu yǎn.” She muttered as she frantically keyed up the sequence. “Shōu bāi zìmăn de tóng lè de jìnzhǎn.” She heard Simon shouting for assistance as the enemy attempted to flank them. “Crowder, we could use an extra gun over here.” Thumping footsteps followed the shout as Boyd hurried from one room to another. He’d insisted on taking a place on the second floor with Lucy and Jake as Petaline was in labor on the same level.

“Is it paranoia or an overabundance of caution we should be thankful for?” Nandi was shouting the question over gun fire.

“Is there a gorram difference?” Mal hollered back.

River cursed again as the power flickered and she had to rekey the sequence again, “Gou tsho de piece of fèi tóng làn tê.” Finally it worked and she hit the button to arm the traps and pitfalls. “See how you like that you bunch of gǒu tuīzi.”

There was a chorus of explosions and screams from the front of the house as the ground seemed to rock and embrace the invaders with rock and earth, blood soaking the dust. She could see far too much light through the boards, riddled with bullets as they’d become and hoped the traps would do the trick. “The soul’s dark cottage, battered and decayed, lets in new light through chinks that time has made. Stronger by weakness, wiser men become, as they draw near to their eternal home.”

“There never was a sweeter sound,” Riddick commented grimly. “At least not durin’ combat.”

“A combat engineer,” Mal repeated. River looked up from her work with a shake of her head.

“Repetition will not change facts Cap’n,” She remarked. “Expertise will be useful in combination with Richard’s especially. There is no problem which cannot be solved by a suitable application of high explosives.” She turned brought up the list of the inventory she and Kaylee had been acquiring from various junkyards and repair shops. The goal had been to fix up some machines to sell while making others to use when Serenity needed a distraction or quick escape. “Kaylee, we will end up going through quite a bit of our inventory but we will have enough to close off and trap the exterior doors.”

Kaylee nodded, hardly looking up from her work, “Long’s we don’t gotta dig into Serenity’s workin’s.”

“Shouldn’t have to,” River shook her head and showed Crowder and Riddick the list. “Replaced most of our plastique after our last job.” She told Mal in explanation, referring obliquely to blowing up Niska’s station. “Controlled explosive devices on exterior doors, to prevent ingress. Mines and trip wires to be armed when the enemy comes close. What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted? Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just; And he but naked, though locked up in steel,
Whose conscience with injustice is corrupted.”

Mal was learning to just listen when she quoted and not try to argue minute points, nodding and looking at Riddick expectantly.

“Plenty of guns, Jayne won’t mind us borrowing from his armory, plus we’ve got Serenity’s as well.” Riddick elaborated, “And if Serenity buzzes the field, lotsa hot air an’ noise from her engines, should spook horses and men.”

“How are we for fortifications?” Zoe was coming from the back of the house with an armload of boards. “We’re going to need more than slapping some wood over the windows. Don’t matter how handy the Shepherd is if we don’t have the raw materials.”

“’Fraid that’s all we’ve got in the way of supplies,” Nandi was shaking her head. “The house is sturdy enough, adobe walls, solid near twenty centimeters thick, but it’s designed for air flow. We’ve got a surplus of windows an’ doors.”

River tilted her head, “Take the barn apart.” She looked at Mal. “Move the horses and stock into Serenity’s bay. Quieter for them there, less likely to be injured. Use the lumber from the barn to board up the windows. Fence rails too. It’s thick and will hold well enough.”

Mal wrinkled his nose, and the entire crew groaned at the thought of the mess but the captain nodded, if reluctantly. “Reckon it’ll be a good long while ‘fore we’ll wanna carry livestock after this but she’s right.” He looked at Nandi. “Can your people see to it? We’ve got some fencin’, and crates an’ such, can make up a few stalls of a sort and a corral for the smaller stock.”

“Chickens stay in their coops.” River nodded. “Bring the stock, take out the supplies for traps.”

The captain was nodding slowly, “With a few adjustments it’s a good plan. Think it’ll work.”

Zoe put her armload of wood down. “Let’s get to it then.”

Riddick exchanged an uncomfortable look with Crowder as they dug. Wash and Zoe were doing something similar, digging small pits, burying the mines River and Simon were making as fast as they could, and laying other traps. While they waited for another set of claymores the pilot and first mate were setting up a slightly less bloody trap consisting of wood and wire. The theory was it would knock men off their mounts and create confusion on the field. River and Kaylee had designed it and Riddick and Zoe had given it their war experienced once over. It should work as intended, and even if it didn’t, it would startle the horses who would certainly shy and just might throw their riders creating a certain amount of confusion anyway.

The work itself wasn’t the trouble. He could have done without the glaring sun but with his goggles on it wasn’t too much of an issue. But Petaline’s condition had seemed to prod Zoe’s own mothering instincts and now she and Wash were having a discussion of a certain intimacy. From the looks of things Crowder shared his preference for being anywhere but near the married couple while they talked. Unfortunately, there was nowhere to go. “Hail, wedded love, mysterious law; true source of human happiness.” He remarked to Crowder sotto voice, dry with irony as he dug.

Wash was carefully seeping dry earth over the wood and rope, securing and camouflaging the contraption as he spoke. “All I’m saying is we’re living pretty deep in the rough and tumble, and I don’t see that changing any time soon.”
“Nor do I.” Zoe crouched as she spoke, winding wire from the spool she held in her hands, slowly moving from one of the stakes to the other.

Wash concentrated on his part, securing the wire to the stake and cutting the excess off, “Well, I'm not sure now is the best time to bring a tiny little helpless person into our lives.”

Zoe was shaking her head, “That excuse is getting a little worn, honey.”

Wash finished his work and stood. “It's not an excuse, dear. It's objective assessment. I can't help it if it stays relevant.”

Zoe began to kick dirt over the lines of the trap. Riddick met Crowder’s eyes, and in mutual understanding, they began to edge away from the other two. Unfortunately that got Zoe aiming a glare in their direction, “Don’t go scurryin’ off, I’m not gonna shoot the two a you.” She aimed her penetrating gaze at her husband. “I don't give a good gorram about relevant, Wash. Or objective. And I'm not so afraid of losing something that I won't try havin' it. You and I would make one beautiful baby. I want to meet that child one day. Period.”

Wash slanted the other two men a slightly sympathetic look but being the fairly intelligent fellow that he was, kept most of his attention on his wife. “And this beautiful baby of ours, you don't mine that it's going to grow up on a spaceship?”

That didn’t faze Zoe at all, “Worked fine for me.”

Wash, nodded, considering that point. “Well, Mal and I got into a discussion of this very subject while him, Rick and I were enjoying that manly excursion. And since I took the ‘for’ side of the debate I really don’t have much of an argument here.”

Zoe’s head spun around to stare at Riddick who shrugged, “’S true. Mal was sayin’ a ship’s no place for a baby an’ Wash decided that arguing it was would be more fun than just agreein’ with him.”

“You did?” Zoe would get whiplash if her head moved any faster to look back at the pilot.

“Yeah well you know how much I like annoying Mal.” Wash shrugged. “And River made a few salient points as well, ‘bout you worrying about losing me, or me losing you, and how a baby would be part of us both. And that pretty much shot down the rest of my debate. So… yeah. Okay.”

Riddick found himself in some small amount of sympathy for Mal when Zoe embraced her husband enthusiastically. It wasn’t that there was anything wrong with what they were doing. But he, and Crowder from his expression, were both feeling a touch uncomfortable. The sensation of being an intruder when they were right in the open and had the perfect right to be where they were was a bit disconcerting. If Mal felt like this every time he caught River and Riddick kissing no wonder he was tetchy. It was his gorram boat after all.

“Wash remind me to make you spar with me an’ Jayne when he gets back,” He called finally before he bent to digging again.

Wash managed to stop kissing Zoe long enough to ask, “Why?”

“Because it’s your fault I know how Mal feels and I’m a little sorry for him. I don’t care for the sensation even one little bit.” Riddick told him flatly.
This whole mess would have gone a lot smoother if he’d gone with his first instinct of sneaking onto
the Burgess spread and murdering the 母鸡 and his prairie harpy 间谍 in their sleep. River
could have husked their accounts and they’d have come out of the whole thing owning half the rock
they were on.

But instead he was shooting through murder holes made up of barn beams that still smelt of livestock
and shit and inhaling the scent of River’s blood. “We don’t end this soon I am gonna lose my
temper.” He muttered as he took aim.

River looked around the bordello and nodded. It had been two and a half days of near nonstop
preparation with meals and sleep taken whenever they could get it. She and Simon, with Riddick and
Boyd’s help, had managed to lay traps at each door. Only the front door gave unrestricted access to
the house. Most of the windows were boarded up, and the curtains were lined with darker fabric to
prevent light from shining through should the attack come at night. The whores were actually really
good at needlework. She guessed it wasn’t easy to look alluring in plain clothing and being able to
sew fancied them up a bit.

Simon and Kaylee were sitting together, holding hands and talking in soft voices while Book read
the bible to the whores. Petaline was nearby, one hand rubbing her belly as she listened. Boyd was
sitting in the chair closest to her, his entire being suffused with contentment just to be near her and
River half smiled as a moment of clarity stilled his thoughts.

“Petaline,” Boyd took one of her hands in his. “I hope, in time, I hope you’ll let me be a father to
your boy? Be a helpmate to you?”

The girl looked at him as if he’d lost his mind, “Boyd Crowder, why on earth would you want a
thing like that?”

“Well, it could be charity. Or it could be duty.” He shrugged, calm as a slowly blown cloud. “But it
isn’t. I’ve loved you all my life Petaline. Since you were five years old and you let me sit next to you
on the swings.”

“Boyd, I’m a whore,” She told him flatly.

“Doesn’t change what I feel for you.” His blue eyes were unflinching. “I wondered if it would.
When I heard you’d taken work here. I wondered if knowing what you’ve had to do would change
how I felt.” He shook his head. “I figured I’d come and help because you didn’t deserve to have
your child taken from you. But when I saw you again, your face, it hit me like a fist to the chest. My
heart like ta stopped. And I knew how I feel for you would never change.”

“Even with another man’s baby in my belly,” Petaline wasn’t trying to soften any blows.

“All I could think was that you look beautiful pregnant and I hope this one won’t be your last.” He
smiled. “Do you think you could see your way to marrying me someday?”

“Oh,” As River watched the dark haired girl flinched minutely, hardly seeming to notice as she
stared at her would be suitor. “I…”

“You can tell me no, I’m still not going anywhere,” Boyd told her kindly. “But I’d be grateful for a
yes.”

“Oh!” Petaline’s mouth fell open in shock. Simon, attuned as always to his patient, sprang to action.
“Her labor’s starting,” He looked around. “We’d better get her to the room upstairs.”

Inara nodded, rising from the couch she was sharing with Nandi, “I’ll help you. I’m not much good with a gun anyway.”

Nandi stood as well and clapped her hands, “This is as good a time as any for the rest of you to get to Serenity. If they come during the night you won’t have the chance to run. So go now.”

Lucy and Jake stood firm, “We’re stayin’.” Lucy told Nandi. “I’m a decent shot, and Jake can handle a rifle pretty well. Enough to help out, or just reload as folks need.”

“That’ll be a help,” Riddick nodded.

Mal came in from the kitchen, as usual, not quite up to speed, “Well we’re set for water, Kaylee the pump works a treat now—“ He stopped and took in Simon’s position at Petaline’s side and the whores in various states of evacuation. “Somethin’ I should know?”

“Labor has started,” River informed him calmly. “Simon and Inara are going to help.”

“Ah,” Mal looked uncomfortable as only a bachelor confronted with the inevitable outcome of pregnancy could. “Well uh, carry on I guess?”

Simon rolled his eyes, “WASN’T really planning on asking permission, but thanks all the same Captain.” He and Inara began helping Petaline up the stairs.

River looked over at Boyd, “But oh! as to embrace me she inclined, I waked; she fled; and day brought back my night.”

Boyd was staring after them a bit helplessly, “So, I guess maybe I’ll get an answer afterwards?” He quipped.

“Think it’ll be a yes, if River’s quote means what I think it does,” Wash patted his shoulder and looked at Mal. “We’re going to move folks over to Serenity now. Everyone’s packed. We’ll close her up tight and move her a bit away as discussed.”

“Frequency’s set already, just keep your coms on,” Mal nodded.

River smiled slightly and sat down with her cortex. “Won’t be very long. Dawn isn’t far away.”

Riddick’s hand slid up and down her spine as he sat beside her. “Figure we can head up in a bit. Got the snipers nest set.” He looked at Mal, “Thinkin’ that’s where we can do the most good.”

“The way you shoot, that’s a fair notion,” Mal agreed. He looked over at Nandi who was hugging each of her people as they filed out the door with their small bags. “She’s going to be a mass of nerves.”

River looked up as Book exited the room, heading for the quiet parlor in the back of the house for some rest. “And though mine arm should conquer twenty worlds, there’s a lean fellow beats all conquerors.” She quoted quietly. “Captain should keep her company. Knows what it’s like to wait.”

Mal nodded slowly, still watching the Madame as the last of her people followed Wash, Kaylee bringing up the rear. “I might at that.”

Chapter End Notes
Author’s Note: So…we’re gearing up for a fight. That should be fun huh? What do you think of the changes I’ve made to the episode?

Chinese Translations:

jiàn huò (bitch)
gǒu niáng yǎng de (son of a bitch)
Wèi hǔ zuò chāng (to act as accomplice to the tiger / to help a villain do evil – idiom)
Huò bù dān xíng (misfortune does not come singly (idiom) / it never rains but it pours)
Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng (Fire and water have no mercy (idiom). forces of nature beyond human control / implacable fate)
Jiàn tā de guǐ (damnit/ bloody hell)
zhàng fu (husband)
láng (wolf)
Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pígu yǎn (May your child be born with an imperforate anus)
Ō, zhè zhēn shì ge kuàilè de jìnzhǎn (Oh, this is a happy development)
fèi tóng làn tiě (scrap metal / a pile of junk)
gǒu tuǐ zi (dog's leg / fig. one who follows a villain / henchman / hired thug)
pì yǎnr (bastard)

Script Chinese Translations:

Gou tsao de (Dog-humping)

Quote Sources:

Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine; or leave a kiss within the cup, and I’ll not ask for wine. The thirst that from the soul doth rise doth ask a drink divine; but might I of Jove's nectar sip, I would not change for thine. - Bon Jonson

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety. - Antony and Cleopatra - William Shakespeare

She walks in beauty like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that’s best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes; thus mellowed to that tender light which heaven to gaudy day denies. One shade the more, one ray the less, had half impaired the nameless grace which waves in every raven tress, or softly lightens o’er her face; where thoughts serenely sweet express, how pure, how dear their dwelling-place. - George Gordon, Lord Byron

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form
and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. - Hamlet, William Shakespeare

It is a House of Ill Repute But of good reputation - Shakespeare In Love

For every inch, that is not fool, is rogue. - Absalom and Achitophet - John Dryden

The soul’s dark cottage, battered and decayed, lets in new light through chinks that time has made. Stronger by weakness, wiser men become, as they draw near to their eternal home. - Verses upon his Divine Poesy – Edmund Waller

There is no problem which cannot be solved by a suitable application of high explosives. - Attributed to William W Hughes and Scott Adams

What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted? Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just; And he but naked, though locked up in steel, Whose conscience with injustice is corrupted. - Henry VI - William Shakespeare

Hail, wedded love, mysterious law; true source of human happiness - Paradise Lost - Milton

But oh! as to embrace me she inclined, I waked; she fled; and day brought back my night Sonnet to His Deceased Wife - Milton

And though mine arm should conquer twenty worlds, there's a lean fellow beats all conquerors. - Old Fortunatus - Thomas Dekker
Riddick stirred as he heard the floor creak in the hallway. He'd slipped easily back into combat habits, though the ability to doze just about anywhere had never left him. River was cuddled against him, her cortex under her arm, she'd fallen asleep after she'd gone through the Burgess ranch files. He indulged the animal and stroked a strand of hair back from her face, listening to the soft noise from the hallway.

He'd known Mal was spending the night with Nandi. Neither Mal nor the Madam were accustomed to being quiet apparently. It appeared to be a Serenity wide issue since Jayne had complained more than once about Zoe and Wash, and Mal had been bitching about River and her Furyan just the other day. It would be funny as hell to give Mal a hard time about the noises he and Nandi had been making. He'd have to do it when Jayne was around though, his old friend deserved to see the Captain get his just desserts.

The soft groan of the hinges and the squeak of the floorboards gave away the Captain's position as sure as if he'd shouted. Trying to be discreet as he left Nandi's room was like closing the barn door after the horse had bolted. Another step, light and graceful, sounded at the opposite end of the hall and Riddick grinned to himself. He'd know Inara's footsteps anywhere, and it looked like Mal was caught.

"Um…" Mal's chagrined voice probably matched his face. Riddick could picture that goofy, 'I've been caught what the hell do I do now' expression easily.

"Well." Inara, to her credit, seemed startled but she wasn't appalled or dismayed. He doubted anyone besides he or River would be able to tell through her normal elegantly neutral tones but they'd gotten to know her as more than a Companion.

Mal seemed to take it as condemnation, excusifying like a teenager caught on a window ledge. "I was just, um, I had to tell Nandi about the... It's near time to... big fight today."

"Mal. Please." The Companion had the eternal patience of an intelligent woman dealing with an idiot man in her voice. It was a tone calculated to make said idiot man feel even more foolish and moronic and it generally worked a treat. River stirred in his arms, slowly waking and Riddick could smell her amusement as she focused on the same conversation he was hearing.

"Hey, no, I've got, I've been up thinking..." Mal was still excusifying, despite Inara not buying it.

"Thinking and pondering the—" Mal stuttered to a stop, "Glad?"

"Yes! She's a dear friend, and probably in need of some comfort about now." Inara, whatever lingering feelings she might have for Mal, was at least genuine in her sentiments and willing to let them show in her voice. "She's been alone for a long time, and so have you. I'm glad to the two of you could be of comfort to each other."

"Well, I..." Mal trailed off. From his tone he'd been caught completely off guard.

The Companion actually sounded amused, "One of the virtues of not being puritanical about sex is
not being embarrassed afterwards. You should look into it." If she'd been any other woman Inara probably would have been laughing at him, loudly.

"Well, I just..." Riddick could practically hear Mal metaphorically shuffling his feet. "Didn't want you to think I was taking advantage of your friend."

She was still amused, "She's well worth taking advantage of, I sincerely hope you did." Her tone softened affectionately, and Riddick could hear the truth of her words. "You are my friend Mal. I'm grateful for that. I think Nandi will realize what I have, that you're a good friend to have. And as you're my friend I hope she took advantage of you as well."

"So you're okay." Mal seemed to realize just how ridiculous he was being and had something of a smile in his voice. "Well, yeah. Why wouldn't you be?"

Now Inara was openly teasing, "I wouldn't say I'm entirely okay. I'm a little appalled at her taste." Her footsteps continued on down the hall leaving Mal without a comeback as she exited.

River began giggling softly, imitating Mal's face for her husband's benefit. "He stares and does not know what to think."

"Inara did pretty good." Riddick smiled down at his genius wife.

"She cares for him, but she's realized there can be nothing between them, not romantically. Too different. Opposites may attract but there is no long-term happiness with them. Nothing in common but proximity and chemistry." River had that steel and blood smell to her scent as she Read the Companion. "A bit sad to realize it fully but grateful they can be friends. Genuinely glad for he and Nandi, even if it is only a short term liaison."

Riddick smoothed another strand of hair away from her face, "Not like us then."

She shook her head, dark eyes fixed on his face, "Nothing like us. Different all the way through, not the same on the inside you and I are."

He pulled her closer and rubbed his lips over hers, breathing in her scent, as the house began to stir around them, Mal having gone down to rouse the rest of the defenders. They'd have to get up soon but they had a few minutes—

"Rick! You an' your prettier half get a move on!" Mal's voice came bellowing from the floor below.

"Nǐ tái mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ." Riddick growled. "Whose bright idea was it to take this gorram job?"

River smiled and kissed him once more before he reluctantly released her. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; or close the wall up with our English dead. In peace there's nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility: but when the blast of war blows in our ears, then imitate the action of the tiger."

River poked her head into the main parlor, the boarded up windows gave it a strange look, dusty light slanting in lines across the floor as the curtains were drawn back. Mal was walking behind Lucy and Jake, both of them with rifles as they set up on the second floor. They'd raided Serenity's stock of earwigs so they were all on the same frequency. "You folks all locked and loaded?" Mal was looking at the two whores and Boyd.
"Yes, sir." Lucy was busily loading extra guns while Jake nodded. Boyd was grim and determined, his calm cracking slightly as Petaline's moans of discomfort reached his ears. "We'll be fine Cap'n." He had a store of bottles, grenades similar to the ones River and Simon had used on planet. Nandi hadn't had the exact same chemicals but what she did have worked nicely in a pinch with some things borrowed from Serenity. The balcony doors had been boarded over but he and Book had made certain the hinges worked just fine still. Boyd had proven himself to have a damn good arm for throwing and very good aim.

"Good. Remember, shoot the man, not the horse. Dead horse is cover, live horse is a great pile of panic." Mal told the two more inexperienced combatants.

River brought the jugs of water into the room and smiled at Nandi over her shoulder as the Madam did the same. Mal nodded at her but Nandi got a smile, "Morning. How're you feeling?"

Nandi cast a look over her shoulder at Petaline's room, "Mite tense."

Mal seemed about to say something but Riddick's voice in the earwigs cut him short, "Mal. Don't wanna interrupt your flirtin' but if you'll take a gander out the window, looks like we got some imminent violence headed our way."

River grabbed her last jug of water and hurried up to the snipers nest to look out over what would be their field of battle. "Hǎo jiā huo!" She shook her head as she took up her rifle.

Mal was talking in her ear as she aimed, "Zoe, Rick, you seein' this?"

"Gotta be fifty to eighty men out there." Riddick replied easily.

Zoe didn't sound overly concerned, "Confirm that. Plus a mounted gun on that hovercraft."

"What's that you said about runnin' for it?" Riddick quipped as he took several shots and the same amount of men fell from their horses.

River could feel Mal adjusting to the new odds before he spoke again, "All right, folks…We got no shortage of ugly ridin' in on us. But that don't change the plan."

Nandi must have put her earwig in because her voice came over the coms. "Anybody here goes down, you drag 'em to the back, then get back to the shooting. Only way to help them is to finish this." She paused, a half smile in her voice, "Morning."

Mal's voice was warm, "Morning."

River slanted a slightly amused glance at her very annoyed husband, "Curse later, shoot now." She handed him another rifle.

Riddick watched as the hovercraft hummed forward, just ahead of the horseman. As he eyed the line of men the lead horse snapped one of the tripwires and the rope sprang up out of the dirt, snapping taut and catching three riders in their throats. They pitched off their horses, one of them easily breaking his neck, the other two lying still, either stunned or unconscious.

The man in the hovercraft could only be the foreman, shouting back to the man on the mounted gun, "Open her up, Kozick—"
Kozick cranked back a lever and began shooting. Riddick ducked in reflex, yelling down the trapdoor to the house. "Incoming!"

Over the massive noise he could hear Mal shouting, "Cover!" Bullets began to riddle the side of the house, eating into the wood covering the windows as people hit the floor downstairs. In his ear, Mal's breathless voice was saying, "Rick, I believe that's our first hurdle. Think you might—"

Riddick bent to his rifle and sighted down the barrel, squeezing the trigger and had the satisfaction of seeing the man flip backward off the hovercraft. "Think I might, Cap'n."

He could smell River scent intensifying with steel and blood, bracing herself against the mental cacophony as Mal called for everyone to open fire. Furyan hearing was a distinct discomfort as the sounds gunfire echoed through the air and bounced around the walls of the house. Men were dropping from their horses but not fast enough. At this rate the plan was going to take too long.

"Plan was sound," River was reloading beside him. "Cap'n thought the plan was good."

"Yeah," Riddick ducked, cursing mentally, "That shoulda been our first inklin' that things were bound ta go really tā mā de wrong."

River cursed again as the small army bearing down on them drew closer. It was not a comfortable feeling, knowing they had to wait. "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes." She murmured. The house was safer than it first appeared, all methods of ingress and egress trapped to kill any would be invader. But simply taking fire and occasionally shooting back was not something any of them were accustomed to doing. Riddick was cursing a blue streak and she wasn't far behind him. Neither of them particularly liked being cornered. It didn't set well with the animals and the instinct to start fighting was growing with each incoming shot.

"Have to wait until conditions are met before moving to stage two," She reminded herself out loud. "Serenity spooks horses and herds the invaders in the right direction, rounding up stragglers."

"Now if Wash would make with the 'thrillin' heroics' we'd be ahead a the game." Riddick frowned. "He's overdue."

She began continued to reload while Riddick covered her, verifying again that all the doors were barred and trapped. Over the earwig Mal was trying to get the air support they'd planned on. "Wash! We're tradin' injuries at the moment… like my sky a little less empty—"

As he watched the hovercraft angled, flying parallel to the house front and someone in the front seat lifted their arm and fired. A continuous laser beam seared along the front of the house, damn near cutting an angle from the ground up to the roofline where he and River crouched in the cupula. Below them he could hear Mal cursing and the rest of them hitting the deck to avoid that fiery red beam. "Ruttin' lasers," Mal finally remembered he had a couple of sharp shooters, "Uh, Rick, River, when you have a moment. Second hurdle—"

River spoke, taking careful aim, "On it Cap'n." Her shot hit the laser-toting gunhand dead center, sending him flying off the hover craft and the laser pistol careening wildly away, nearly setting the roof above them on fire before the beam stopped.
Riddick sent her a grin only to see her staring into space. "Serenity is overtaken."

Mal was shouting into his earwig, "Wash! Where the hell is my spaceship!?"

Riddick turned to stare at her, just as they heard Mal's squawk of dismay, the same news coming in over his earwig. "Huò bù dān xíng." He scowled as he turned back to his rifle.

"Rick, you an' River got a plan for when this plan goes all ta hell?" Mal was hollering the question.

Riddick growled into his earwig, "Course we do. Just gonna take a minute or two." He looked at his wife, "I'll cover you, just get 'em goin'."

"Way ahead of you," She was already lying flat on the floor, pulling out her databook and typing into it. A bullet ricocheted over her head and he could smell her blood as it buried itself in her hip. "Shuǐhuǒ wú qíng." She cursed, "Jiàn tā de guǐ!"

He frowned as the landmines were armed, the traps and mines directly under the field where the invading force was standing, finally close enough for them to take effect. He heard Crowder's whoop of glee as the enemy began blowing to bits. It had taken a bit longer to arm all of them. The hope had been they wouldn't need to set everything off, leaving mines behind the enemy that could be dug up and reused. But without Wash and Serenity pushing the invaders into the heavily mined field they had to use every single trap they'd buried.

There was still a decent amount of men on the field, close enough to the house that they'd gotten away from the mines. He could hear Mal, Nandi and the rest of them blasting away and Petaline's screaming as she gave birth. Boyd's makeshift grenades were creating merry havoc among the enemy. The hay strewn over small holes sowed confusion as men went down with twisted knees or ankles, trying to shoot from where they were sprawled and being shot in return. Panicked horses were stymieing the effectiveness of the remaining men but despite the battle finally turning in their favor something didn't seem right.

Mal spoke in his ear and he knew what the problem was, "Rick, River I lost visual on the hovercraft —"

"Same here," Riddick replied grimly. "Wait…" He paused as dust and smoke blew through the air, "I've got the hovercraft flipped on its side, fella taking potshots at us from behind it. Sounds like there's another around though if the whine in my ears can be trusted. Maybe with Belinda Burgess, holdin' back until the fight's done?"

River was looking through her scope, taking aim at another interloper, "Saw a second hovercraft coming after the enemy, after the mines were detonated. No mounted gun. Three people on it. Can't find it now though."

"We don't end this soon I'm gonna lose my temper." Riddick muttered as he took aim at another invader. His shot hit the gunhand hiding behind the downed hovercraft dead between the eyes.

River peered over the edge of the snipers nest as the whine of a hovercraft came to her attention, "Found the second hovercraft. At the side door. Trap was already triggered." Even as she watched Belinda Burgess and Chari entered the house. The whore turned spy leading the enemy right into the
Riddick shook his head, "I'll keep the rest of 'em busy up here. Yell if you want back up."

She gave him a wicked grin and descended the ladder to the upstairs hallway, the bullet in her hip slowing her down too much to prevent the invasion, but sadly in time to hear Petaline's scream of protest. "NO!"

The hallway outside Petaline's room was crowded with folk, River and Nandi coming from opposite sides of the house to the same end of the hallway while Belinda Burgess retreated out of Petaline's room, her back to the two of them. River stilled and held an arm out to keep Nandi from going forward, murmuring under the sounds of battle, "Laser pistol in one hand, baby in the other arm. Have to distract her."

Nandi called out furiously, "Most of your men are dead, dyin', or run off, Belinda."

The rich woman turned to look at the two of them, the baby crying in her arms, "Don't matter none. Got what I came here for."

"Ain't leaving here with it." The Madam retorted, the promise of retribution in every line of her body.

"Behold, the whirlwind of the Lord goeth forth with fury, a continuing whirlwind: it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked." River stood slightly in front of the red haired woman, her Ladysmith held easily in her hand. The bullet in her hip ached and blood was soaking into her trousers but bracing herself on her good leg she could stand and hold the woman at gunpoint easily enough.

Belinda didn't seem intimidated, "This is my blood, whore. My husband's son." She gestured towards the baby with her laser pistol and smiles at them smugly. "You didn't think Rance bought just the one did you? And if you don't back away I'll burn holes right through the both of you. I'm leaving here with the only piece of my husband left, my son, my blood."

River smirked as a slim arm snaked a nasty curved razor in under Belinda's chin from behind, digging its tip into the side of her throat and drawing blood. Inara had been taken by surprise, judging by the nasty bruise on her temple and cheek, but she'd regained her feet and most of her equilibrium and now it was Belinda's turn to be ambushed.

Inara was as cold dead serious as River had ever seen her, "No. This is your blood." She nodded to Boyd, standing at the other end of the hallway, Lucy beside him, blue eyes burning with fury. "Now you give over that child nice and slow, or I'll spill more than you can spare."

River watched as Belinda reluctantly complied, wincing at the wound, and handed the baby over to the wiry man who immediately slipped past her into the room with Petaline. Petaline's tearful exclamation of relief should have rung tears from a stone. Sadly, it had no effect on Belinda who took advantage of Inara's slight movement to elbow her hard in the stomach. The Companion staggered back and Belinda's laser pistol fired from her hip.

"Down!" River dragged Nandi down with her, a sharp burning pain slicing through the top of her shoulder.

Riddick paused in his shooting as he caught the scent of River's pain and burnt flesh along with it. Dropping through the trapdoor, he barely paused to stand before racing down the hallway, nearly
colliding with Mal as he came from the opposite direction, both of them converging on River and Nandi.

"Simon!" Riddick bellowed and didn't care who heard the panic in his voice.

His little brother hurried from his position at the front of the house to crouch beside the two women, directing Mal to put pressure on River's wound, Nandi's being deeper and lower in her shoulder since the woman was taller than River. "Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pìgu yăn." The doctor cursed no one in particular as he worked.

Riddick met Mal's eyes, "Stay with them." He tore off after the fleeing Belinda Burgess, hearing the whine of the hovercraft's engine as it heated and began to pull away from the house. The balcony was closer and the door slightly open so they could lob grenades out of it. He doubted anyone expected a large goggle-wearing man to jump off of the balcony, which was probably why no one shot at him as he landed with a hard thump on the ground to take off running after the hovercraft.

Running and shooting wasn't something he'd had a chance to practice in a while but he was still good enough to put a few bullets in the hovercraft's engine. That slowed it down some. Of course, gaining on the hovercraft came with its own troubles. Now Belinda Burgess had been alerted to him running after the damn thing and the bitch was standing in the back of it, firing her laser pistol.

The nasty beam of heat and light just missed his skull as he reached the hovercraft and leapt aboard it. He couldn't help the evil grin that spread his lips as he climbed forward. She was aiming her pistol at him again, bracing it on her opposite forearm as he came towards her.

The beeping sound was something of a jarring note to his mind, and to Belinda's too apparently as she consulted the display screen with a startled expression. He was close enough to see the gorram thing was reading 'Check Battery'.

Belinda's curse, calling him, among other things, a stupid dog humping son of a drooling whore and a monkey, wasn't what he would have expected from someone who considered herself a lady. But the plain old pistol she drew was something he had figured on. Fortunately he'd reached her by then and managed to tackle her, knocking her back into the driver of the hovercraft and tumbling them both out of the vehicle completely. The ground was damn near hard as rock as they slammed into it.

He pushed himself off the ground, breathing hard and wondering if this time his belly had actually met his spine. Belinda was moaning pitifully, unable to move at all. She'd had the breath completely smashed out of her and probably a broken bone or two while he'd just gotten a bit winded. They were both better off than the driver of the hovercraft. Knocking into him as they had, he'd been driven straight into the ground, hovercraft and all, and was currently fueling a very nice little explosion and bonfire.

Climbing to his feet was easy enough, Belinda was still panting on the ground and it didn't take more than a half a second's thought to put a bullet in her brain. "Dă xiăo suăn pán bitch." He scowled down at her and began the walk back to Heart of Gold. Someone who gave a damn could retrieve the body.

River watched as Riddick, Mal and Boyd pushed eight men in front of the bordello steps. Wash, Kaylee and whores who'd been hiding in Serenity watched without concern as the bruised and bloodied Serenity invaders were unceremoniously dumped in a pile. Some of them were even alive.
"Sorry Mal," Wash was saying. "We got everyone hidden away but I got cut off from the bridge. Kaylee and I were stuck in the engine room."

Mal was shaking his head, "No plan is perfect."

River nodded slightly, "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy." She leaned against Riddick as he came up on her good side and frowned. She'd gotten off more lightly than Nandi, a deep burned gouge in the top of her shoulder and a bullet, easily removed, in her hip. The older woman hadn't been so fortunate. Simon had done what he could but the laser had burned through muscle and nerves, narrowly missing Nandi's bones. She'd have trouble moving her shoulder and arm for the rest of her life unless the nerves could be regrown.

The Reader glared at the rest of the would be invaders, tied up on front of Heart of Gold, the turncoat Chari amongst them. Counting the eight who'd tried to take Serenity there were less than two dozen men left of the invading force. Some time in the next days would be spent identifying the dead and digging graves if they had no family. Petaline strode out of the house, Boyd at her side, her pretty face hard and cold. "Anyone else wanna try and take what's mine?" As River watched, to a man, they all averted their eyes, unable to meet Petaline's gaze. "You ought all to be shot where ya stand. But Nandi figures it's bad for business to kill all the customers."

Nandi came out of the house, regal even with her shoulder bound in bandages and her arm in a sling. Lucy's arm was around her waist, supporting her as she walked. The ex-Companion was giving the hired army a hard look. "Go on, then. Go home. Next time I see any of you... you best be coming to get your wick wet. You pay up front from now on... and for God's sake, tip a girl once in a while - especially you, Milo." She gave a particularly grimy looking male a hard look and the fellow, who had to be Milo, nodded quickly.

Some of the whores cut the ropes that bound the men and they began to rise to their feet, Chari making an aborted move towards the house. "You go with 'em. You got no place here." Chari frowned, about to speak and Nandi cut her off, "You let that bitch in the back door, River saw it. Now go."

"You can't just make me—" The ominous click of Nandi cocking the hammer of her pistol cut off Chari's protest. Riddick growled and River drew her gun.

"Go, or I will riddle you with holes and we'll bury you with that other trash." Nandi motioned with her gun and Chari fell in step with the remains of Burgess's men as they walked away.

River sat on the parlor settee with her cortex, the crew around she and Riddick, Nandi, Boyd and Petaline across from her on the sofa with little baby Jonah. Riddick had arranged her so that there wasn't any pressure on her injured hip or shoulder, and she could tell he'd be overprotective and hovering until she was all healed up. Mal was in a chair kitty corner from her settee while Inara had taken a seat on her other side. "So what've you got to say nǐ zì, Mal asked, half smiling.

River made a mental note that Mal should have sex more often, it put him in a better mood. "Been husking the Burgess accounts," She nodded at the baby. "Heir to Burgess's holdings. Wanted to be sure there was something for him to inherit."

"So what have you been up to?" Simon was laughing, she could hear it in his voice. He did love it when she got one over on some rich sāo lǜ.
"Holdings were extensive." River smiled. "Transferred much of them to a trust for Jonah. To be administered by Boyd Crowder, Petaline and Nandi. Duly signed and notarized by off world authorities should Burgess and the prairie harpy die without other issue. Wouldn't have been so easy if he hadn't named Jonah as his heir already. Didn't take much husking at all."

"You're…" Nandi blinked and Simon chuckled. Nandi started again, "You've husked the ranch and his bank accounts out from under him and given it to Jonah?"

River shrugged with her good shoulder. "Part of it. Kept a house on Persephone and a couple of his less legal accounts as a fee." She smiled at Nandi, "Didn't think you'd want to play the xiǎo huángdì and treat the world like a gorrám theme park. Mr. Crowder knows how to run a ranch proper. Petaline is Jonah's mother. And you'll know how to invest in the town and make improvements. Make the world better."

"And you did all this for nothin'?" Boyd was staring at her incredulously.

"Not nothin'," Riddick corrected him. "She took her fee. It's a sizeable amount and it'll help pay for the fuel and replacing the supplies we used."

Mal was chuckling, "So where's this house on Persephone? Anywhere near Sir Harrow's?"

River shook her head, "Outskirts of his area. Burgess was not such a big fish on Persephone as he was here. Elegant house, not a mansion."

"But nothin' to sneeze at either." Zoe commented from her spot on another couch.

River smiled slightly, "Be a good place to relax if the ship ever needs repairs. Checked and there's bathrooms with big tubs."

"A tub…" Zoe had a starry eyed expression on her face.

Wash was grinning openly now. "Just say there's enough bedrooms for all of us please."

Zoe was shaking her head, "If there's not I'll sleep in the tub."

River giggled and leaned against her husband, "Elegant home, five bedrooms, three and a half baths, and a master with an ensuite. Plus a nursery on the third floor next to servants quarters. Smaller rooms, tall attic."

Simon was laughing out loud unable to contain his amusement any longer and Kaylee poked his side, her expression demanding an explanation, "Later, I promise." He kissed the top of her head, "Right now we have other things to concern ourselves with."

River rolled her eyes at him and proceeded to explain what she'd done to Nandi, Boyd and Petaline. They were looking a bit glassy eyed at the end of her talk so she smiled mischievously, "Also, put a lump sum into your account. To be distributed equally to your people. Start their nest eggs for retirement. If you wish, could recommend investments."

That started an entirely different hullabaloo and she couldn't help giggling.

Riddick leaned back in his chair at the kitchen table and stretched. It had taken a couple of days for them to leave. Apart from dealing with the dead the barn and paddock had to be rebuilt. Mal and
River had actually had a bit of fun with that between River's genius designing and Mal's practical perspective. It was the best they'd gotten along in ages. And it had helped ease his mind since it kept River off her feet for a good amount of time, resting her hip. The rest of them who hadn't been occupied with building had made sure all the horses from the fight were rounded up. They were actually transporting a dozen or so mares and geldings as part of the crew's payment despite the groaning over the smells. The bordello's livestock and the rest of horses from the fight were living in the newly redesigned paddock and barn.

Now both the bordello and the barn looked like frozen protein packs but the Heart of Gold didn't have to worry about freezing in the winter. Simon had done his best with Nandi's shoulder and given her the names of several doctors he'd trust with her wellbeing. Thanks to River's husking Nandi could afford the medical care and might just regain full use of her arm and shoulder. When she was ready Mal had already promised Serenity would transport her to any hospital she wanted, even one in the Core.

River was uneasy though, her scent streaked through with worry for a problem she could feel but couldn't pinpoint. "We'll figure it out," He offered, hoping to reassure her.

She shook her head, "It's Inara." Dark eyes looked up at his, "She's leaving."

When Inara came out of her shuttle the Companion looked resolved and sad, as much as she allowed herself to express the emotions anyway. Riddick frowned, "Are you going to just drop it on everyone? Not offer any sorta explanation?"

The Companion sighed, "I'd intended to speak with Mal first." She was looking more than a bit hollow eyed and slightly worn around the edges and he could tell the decision hadn't been easy for her. After the stress of what they'd gone through at Heart of Gold her illness was taking its toll as well.

"Speak with me 'bout what?" Mal was in a good mood still. Getting laid did wonders for his disposition apparently. He began to pour some coffee, "I think they'll do all right." He offered. "In case you were worryin' still 'bout Nandi."

Inara nodded pensively, "She taught them well. She's a strong woman. They'll keep things going until she's healed completely."

Mal sipped his coffee, studying her, "Yeah. Why do I get the feelin' that you're not worryin' on Heart of Gold?"

Riddick could see Inara stealing herself as she spoke. "I learned something from Nandi. Not just from what happened, but from her. The family she made, the strength of her love for them. That's what kept them together. When you live with that kind of strength, you get tied to it, you can't break away. And you never want to."

Mal nodded, his eyes intent upon her face as she continued, "There's something that I... that I should have done a long while ago. I've put it off as long as I could because I didn't want to face it. And I'm sorry—that it took me this long. I'll explain it... but right now... as you'd say the bare bones of it is..." She took a breath and exhaled. "I'm leaving."
Of course Mal couldn't leave it at that. And he was more than a little irritated that Inara refused to
discuss it further until the entire crew, which meant Jayne and Ciara, could be there for the
discussion. "Mal, please." She held up her hand, "I know you mean well. I know you're concerned.
But…"

"But what?" Mal gestured at Riddick and River, and Riddick rolled his eyes at his wife. "These two
seem completely unsurprised by this development. But you don't wanna tell me? After alla that talk
about us bein' friends?" His hurt and affront were apparent in every line of his body as he squared off
with the Companion.

Inara rubbed her forehead and Riddick stood, making her some tea and guiding her to a seat. "Cap'n,
maybe—"

"Less loud," River chimed in helpfully. "Inara's head hurts and you are not helping it."

That did draw the Captain up short and he gave the Companion a narrow eyed look that Riddick was
pretty sure saw far more than Inara liked. "That time I walked in on you three an' you was massagin'
Inara. That what this is?" He was thinking back on the last few months and connecting the dots.
"There's been times you've been havin' troubles and these two been helpin' ye cover 'em."

"You're not wrong Mal," Inara offered him a tired smile. "But it's difficult for me to talk about and it
requires… more energy than I have right now. Stressful situations exacerbate the problem and while
seeing Nandi was wonderful I don't think any of us would call it a restful visit. I don't want to say it
more than once. But because we are friends I wanted to tell you before everyone else. So you'd have
time to… well to get used to the idea. I know you don't care for change much."

"Captain is like a cat taking a bath in regards to change." River muttered from where she sat.

"Hey! I resemble that," Mal pointed at her. "You just keep your remarks to yourself little genius
girl."

Riddick shrugged, "You did insist on having this conversation right in front of us Mal. Inara was
gonna take it back to her shuttle an' make you tea."

"Soften me up?" Mal aimed a grin at the Companion and got a genuine, if tired, smile in return.

"Maybe a little. You tend to be in a better mood with some tea and a few sweets." She conceded.

"Sweets?" Mal perked up even more. "If there's sweets I'll carry you to your shuttle myself."

"Greedy guts." River rolled her eyes at him.

"Well…" The captain nodded as if it were obvious. "Yeah."

"Sweets later," River looked towards the bridge. "Monty is calling you now. Disposition of
smuggled cargo is imminent."

"Ah well," Mal shrugged philosophically. "Unloadin' the goods is probably more important than
eatin' sweets." He sighed and contrived to look genuinely regretful as he regarded Inara, "Was there
gonna be honey for the tea an' all?"

Inara shook her head, laughing softly, "You don't fool me one bit Mal. Go do your work. Keep us all
flying."

"Can I have tea with honey later if I work now?" Mal asked whimsically as he headed down the hall
to the bridge. "If I'm real good?"

Inara's giggles were tired but genuine.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So we've changed up some things, and kept others the same. Pretty soon we'll meet Yo-Saff-Bridge again and that episode will be changed quite a bit. I don't want to spoil it for you so that's the extent of my hints for the moment. I'm curious as to how you all feel about this. Once I got to know Inara and Mal I could never see them lasting long term. They're too different, their values, apart from the most basic, are worlds apart and they wouldn't be good for each other. They're much better off as friends.

Chinese Translations:

Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ. (Fuck everyone in the universe to death.)
Hǎo jiā huo (my God!)
tā mā de (fucking)
Huò bù dān xíng (misfortune does not come singly (idiom) / it never rains but it pours)
Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng (Fire and water have no mercy (idiom). forces of nature beyond human control / implacable fate)
Jiàn tā de guǐ (damnit/ bloody hell)
Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pīgu yǎn (May your child be born with an imperforate anus)
Dǎ xiǎo suàn pán (lit. to count on a narrow abacus (idiom); petty and scheming selfishly / concerned with petty interests / selfish and uncaring of the interests of others)
nǐ zi (little girl) / (coll.) lass)
sāo lǘ (jackass)
xiǎo huáng dì (lit. little emperor / fig. spoiled child)

Quote Sources:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; or close the wall up with our English dead. In peace there's nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility: but when the blast of war blows in our ears, then imitate the action of the tiger – Henry V, William Shakespeare

Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes – William Prescott

Behold, the whirlwind of the Lord goeth forth with fury, a continuing whirlwind: it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked – Jeremiah 30:23
No battle plan survives contact with the enemy – Helmuth Von Moltke
"What's wrong?" Riddick looked over at River. His little *nü ren* was curled in the navigator's chair with her cortex, frowning thoughtfully. They were finally breathing fresh air, having unloaded the horses on Deadwood for a good price and the cargo bay had been scrubbed within an inch of its life and aired out. He'd been on edge because of the stench and River due to the collection of frightened emotions the horses projected. The only bright side had been the decent profit they'd made and Mal being in a good mood, for a given value of Mal and good. They'd been able to buy some fresh foodstuffs, and Mal had managed to make roasted corn on the cob over the ship's cooker. That had been a treat had everyone flossing their teeth good afterwards. He and River had bought dried corn for popping and Kaylee had found dried cranberries of all things. Still... the horses had been gone nearly a week and Mal's good mood hadn't faded much. "You've been jumpy ever since we set down and left Mal on that moon."

River was frowning fiercely at her screen. "Meets Monty. Monty will trade cargo with us. Take our goods, we will take his. Good deal. Keeps us working. But Monty has a surprise for Mal." She was focused on something in the distance, her scent rife with blood and steel, wound around silk and plums. Faint wisps of cinnamon threaded through the air as the Reader concentrated and she turned to look at Riddick, her dark eyes worried. "The spider is back."

The growl in his chest was not at all quiet as he switched the comms to Wash and Zoe's bunk on. "Wash, Zoe, you might wanna come to the bridge soon's you're decent. Or dressed. We got us a situation about to occur." He stared out into the black, his mind running through possibilities and what the spider could be planning this time around. "Should've killed her when we had the chance, and to hell with what Mal'd have thought of us."

"Hindsight is twenty twenty," River shrugged and her gentle hand on his knee calmed him somewhat. At least she wasn't afraid, concerned, but not afraid of what would happen. That was something.

He turned at the sound of the two ships officers scrambling out of their bunk, fully clothed but he'd definitely interrupted something, most likely baby making practice, judging by Wash's rumpled shirt and Zoe's swollen mouth. "What?" Wash wanted to know as he practically fell into his chair. "Why?"

"Can I add who and how to the list of questions," Zoe was a bit more collected but there was a touch of irritation in her voice. "You two seem fine." She was matter-of-factly tucking her shirt in and winding a cord around her hair to bind it back again as she spoke, annoyance stiffening her movements slightly.

"Ain't us that's the issue." Riddick looked over at River. "Just tell 'em. We'll sort it out later."

River nodded, "The spider is back."

Zoe frowned and Riddick remembered she hadn't been around for a lot of the conversations he, Wash and River'd had after Mal's wedding. Wash however, looked at him and then River and his eyes darkened angrily. "That prairie harpy that tried to steer us into a net is around here?" He looked around the cockpit as if to verify that the woman was nowhere near his ship or his dinos.
River nodded, "Married Monty. Monty introduced Mal to his new bride. The 'surprise' he had for Mal. Captain did not take it well." She gestured to Wash's shirt, buttoned up wrong and the pilot flushed faintly and began to redo the buttons.

"Cap'n all right though?" Zoe cut right to the chase, already back in the mode of second in command.

"Fine," River nodded reassuringly.

"But Saffron's in the mix with the new cargo," Riddick said quietly. "And she'll have a way of trying to play us." He shrugged, "It's her way. Can't expect it to change."

"We must play her." River smiled and tilted her head, eyes focused elsewhere for a moment. "Cap'n has an idea… to play her game and turn it upon her. Doesn't know all the details of the bait concealing her hook yet. Good notion, despite it being the captain who has it, along with the accompanying bad luck."

"How do you…" Zoe stared at her and River looked down at her cortex uncomfortably. "There's no way you could know all this."

"Could," Riddick smiled at his bàng jiār. "Academy cut into her brain. Made is so she hears everything. All the time."

"It never stops." River nodded, looking up at the First Mate. "Richard taught me how to focus, to use the animal and not let the voices of the living and dead drive me mad."

"Psychic," Zoe breathed the word. She leaned against the wall lockers in surprise, for once caught off guard, staring at River for a few minutes. Then she looked at her husband who rather than acting shocked or horrified was simply rubbing his forehead as if trying to stave off a potential headache. "You don't seem to be surprised by this turn of events husband."

Wash shrugged easily, "Honestly, no. Because I spend a bit more time with these two than you do, and there's things River's said that she couldn't have learned any other way." He half smiled at the Reader, "Not that I mind. Saves me having to talk about it. Makes some things easier."

"Do not try to wake you by tickling your feet." River nodded solemnly. "Bad memories of sticks on your soles. Loud noises are more startling when you're already feeling nerves crawling up your spine. And dirt floors are… unpleasant when wet."

"Exactly." Wash's smile widened as he looked from River to his wife. "If you think about it, you've suspected something along these lines. But you didn't want to really consider it. Because if you thought about it too hard you'd come to the same conclusion and you'd have to tell Mal. And none of us can always figure how he'll react."

"I'll admit, some of the things you've 'heard' I wondered about the probability. Like that would be reaver we ran into." Zoe sighed. "But now the cat's out of the bag. And Mal will have to know sooner or later." Her expression was nearly unreadable but her scent said she was worried about the Captain's reaction.

"One problem at a time," Riddick said firmly, speaking to her concerns, spoken and unsaid. "We play this right Mal'll just be grateful for us bein' prepared."

"Also, have a genius plan," River grinned at the three of them. "Take Mal's notion and elaborate on it. To turn the tables on the spider and catch her in her own net."
"Now that's what I like to hear," Wash was full out grinning now. "It's almost worth the interruption."

Riddick shrugged, "Sorry. Didn't seem like the sorta thing that could wait." He checked the cortex, "Not with us due to pick Mal up in another hour."

Zoe sighed, "All right, what's this genius plan?"

The Reader smiled evilly, "It begins with pretending we don't know about Saffron."

Riddick pulled on the work gloves Simon handed him, rolling his eyes but doing it anyway. Chances were he wouldn't need them but sometimes it was easier to just capitulate than it was to argue with his di di. Book and Kaylee came up behind the doctor, each of them with their own set of work gloves. Zoe already had hers on and was standing by at the controls to the ramp. He watched as Simon began to pull gloves over his long narrow hands, still the hands of a gentleman from the Core despite all the odd work the doctor'd been doing. "Sure you're up to liftin' this stuff?" He grinned back at the crew behind him. "Crates are fair heavy, I gather."

He braced himself as the engines hummed and the bay rocked slightly when Serenity set down. Kaylee was nodding enthusiastically. "I can handle it."

Riddick chuckled, "Wasn't talkin' to you."

Simon's rolled eyes and mock pained expression was still funny as hell. "Yes, yes, I'm the original sissy boy from the Core. So I've heard, ad infinitum." He assumed a deadly serious expression, "Wait, wasn't it you who's been training me? Getting my muscles up to snuff? You're only insulting your own work you know."

The Furyan laughed and clapped him on the shoulder as the ramp began to lower. "You're still gorram fun to tease Simon." He tilted his head as Mal came into view. It looked like Mal's good mood of late had made a firm departure for parts unknown, never to be seen again. The captain was standing in front of a pile of crates, alone to all appearances, with a very unhappy expression on his face. His nose was bloody and had bits of handkerchief in each nostril, apparently to stem the blood. "Woah… Uh, Cap'n? Tell me you didn't get into a fight with Monty?" He'd gotten a look at the mountain of a man during one of the waves that'd been sent to Mal and the captain surviving a fight didn't seem likely.

Kaylee was equally confused, "Really? But I thought we loved Monty!" She looked at Zoe, "Don't we love Monty?"

Zoe was shaking her head. "Sweetie, if he had a tussle with that sasquatch, we'd be in the dirt right about now, scoopin' up the Captain's teeth." Mal stomped up the ramp past Riddick, as Zoe continued speaking. "Ain't that so, sir?"

The slightly battered man gave a credible growl of annoyance, "You know what? I don't particular want to talk about it. Now we got work. Let's shut up and do it."

Simon was staring after the Captain in concern, "Captain, if you'll go to the infirmary I'll see what I can do to stop the bleeding and alleviate the discomfort."

"Later Doc," Was the only semi-polite response and Simon shrugged in resignation.
Zoe looked from Mal to the others and then back again, eyebrows raised and Riddick nodded, tapping his nose. The dark woman's eyes hardened as she studied the crates but she nodded her understanding. Saffron was in a crate, and the plan they'd all come up with waiting to land would be put into effect.

Wash came down the stairs and Riddick had to give the man credit, he was not unobservant. Seeing Riddick tilt his head toward a crate and Zoe glaring at the same was enough of a hint for him. He came to a halt near Mal and spouted the line they'd agreed upon should River's read of the situation be correct. "Inara was asking for you. Wanted to—" He stopped as Mal walked away. "So later with the talking then."

Riddick grabbed the crate he'd pegged as the one Saffron was hiding in and picked it up none too gently, turning it on its side before he and Wash carried it up to the bay. Setting it down with a hard thump he grinned at the pilot and gave it a good shove back towards the wall before continuing with the work. It'd be up to River to explain to Mal what was going on.

Wash, ever irreverent, jerked his head towards Mal's retreating figure and mouthed, "What happened?"

River grinned as Mal entered Inara's shuttle and held a finger to her lips before shutting the door. The Companion was pouring tea and River guided the captain to a chair. "Pretense." She murmured. "Now that the shuttle is sealed, sound will not carry. We will explain. Inara has made you tea with honey." She took her own seat and curled her feet under her, enjoying the soft fabric of the couch on her soles.

"Uh, not that it ain't a welcome change to the day, havin' someone be nice but I'm feelin' a touch suspicious as to the timing." Mal looked back and forth between River and Inara, though he did take the tea and sip at his cup with a slight smile. "Are you two fine ladies plannin' on usin' wiles on me?"

"Mal, if I was going to use wiles on you I'd hardly have River here with me." Inara smiled at him and handed him a sweet roll. "Three is a crowd after all."

"Uh huh," Mal was still looking a bit suspicious, the tiny remnants of dried blood around his nostrils a visible reminder of why he might be a touch edgy around pretty women for the moment. River tilted her head as she Read what had happened that he had a bloody nose and sighed. Further delay would only irritate him since he hadn't taken Simon up on his offer of treatment.

"We know Saffron is hidden in a crate down in the bay." River said flatly. Mal's eyebrows went up in shock. Before he could begin to articulate his questions the Reader held up her hand, "I'll explain how I know later. We don't have a lot of time right now to go over the plan."

Inara spoke up in her soothing voice, "It's a good plan Mal." She smiled. "I think you'll like it, considering Saffron's past behavior. We could have some fun with it. And if we do it right, we could all make some good money without endangering ourselves."

Mal studied River for a moment, "All right. I'll listen to your plan. And if I like it then I'll go along. But after this's over, we're gonna speak and you're gonna be truthful with me as to the how's and why's of your knowledge. Đỗng ma?" His eyes were dark with promise and she mentally sighed. Hopefully a good score and putting one over on Saffron would get him in a proper mood to listen.

"Đỗng de," River nodded and began to explain. "Told Zoe and Wash what was happening with
Saffron. We all came up with a plan. Some parts, the particulars of the job for example, are adaptable according to what we're told. We'll plan out the job just like we would if we weren't going to turn the tables on Saffron. Kaylee and Wash know what to do. But it starts with you and Inara getting into a fight. She grinned at the two of them and was encouraged by a slight upward tug of Mal's lips in return.

River sat with the rest of the crew, trying to stifle her giggles as they listened to Mal and Inara go after each other with gusto. The entire situation was made even funnier considering Mal and Inara had put everything but friendship behind them. Thankfully Inara was a good actress and Mal a very good con man so they were both managing to keep straight faces and sound genuinely annoyed with each other through the fight.

The door to Inara's shuttle being open let the dispute echo through the entire cargo bay and would set the bait for Saffron quite nicely. They'd planned the whole thing out so half of everyone's amusement was in anticipation of the payoff. Saffron would never believe they'd have the intelligence or forethought to set her up so elaborately.

Mal's voice was darkening with suspicion as Inara invited him to sit and River grinned, "Okay, what's the game?"

Innocently bewildered Inara answered him, "I offered you tea."

His voice grew, if possible, even more mistrusting, "After inviting me into your shuttle of your own free will, which makes two events without precedent and which makes me more'n a little skittish."

Deliberate exasperation colored Inara's tones, "Honestly, Mal, if we can't be civilized and talk like —"

"I'm plenty civilized," Mal interrupted her accusingly. "You're using wiles on me."

"I'm using what?" Inara's expression had to be priceless and Kaylee imitated it, nearly sending Wash and Simon into stifled hysterics.

"Your feminine wiles." Mal elaborated on the theme, "Your companion training, your some-might-say uncanny ability to make a man sweaty and/or compliant, of which I have had just about enough today."

Inara nearly sighed, "Maybe this isn't the best time."

"It's a fine time." Now it seemed as if the captain was deliberately being contrary, "Just talk plain is all."

There was a slight pause as if Inara was gathering herself that in reality had been carefully scripted to give them both a chance to mentally adjust if any adlibbing had been needed. It came in handy that everyone remembered ASL fairly well. Mal and Inara were both skilled enough that they were carrying on an entirely different conversation by sign, prompting each other to new heights of lunatic quarreling.

Riddick was preoccupied with listening to the staged quarrel and keeping his attention on Saffron's crate down in the cargo bay. He could still appreciate the laughably crazy bickering though, judging by his amused expression and thoughts.
"I'm not sleeping with you, Mal." Inara said flatly.

It was Mal's turn to sound bewildered, "Uh, no, I think I would have noticed if you were. My keenly trained... senses would have..."

Her voice rolled over his, crisp and plain, just as he'd requested, "You're not my lover. Neither are you my mother, My House Mistress or anyone who has the slightest say in how I conduct my affairs."

The Captain plainly didn't see where this was going, "Well enough. So?"

Now Inara's voice was becoming a bit louder, "So let me conduct my affairs!"

"Who's keeping you from—"

He was ruthlessly interrupted as Inara warmed to her theme, "I haven't had a client in three weeks. Backwater moons, slums frontier planets without so much as a temple built—"

"We go where the work is!" Mal snapped back.

"There's all kinds of work, Mal," The Companion argued.

"And ours is the kind the Alliance shuts you down for. I opt to stay off the radar—" He obviously had a point but he wasn't given the chance to make it.

"There's plenty of worlds where both of us could work. We used to visit them, remember?" She sounded as if she was glaring at him and River looked at Kaylee and crossed her eyes, nearly making the mechanic spit her tea across the room. Book clamped a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing aloud, shaking with the effort of remaining silent.

"Nǐ zài jiāng shén me pì huà," Mal sounded as if he was shaking his head in amazement. "Are you saying I'm doing this deliberate on account of you? There's some reason I don't want you on the job?"

"Is there?"

River tilted her head as she heard Mal beginning to pace, nodding at the slight pause before murmuring to the rest of the crew, "Apologies in ASL for the words to be said. Appropriate for the fight, hurtful were they truly arguing, do not wish to be unkind to each other."

The Captain gave a great gusty sigh, "Well this is one of the crazier things I've heard today and when I tell you about the rest of my day, you'll appreciate—"

Inara's voice cut across his, anxious to have her say, "Mal, I'm not accusing you of anything, it's just —"

She'd barely finished speaking when Mal's strident tones began to ring through the air. "Hey, no, we'll just set course for Planet of the Lonely, Rich and Appropriately Hygienic Man. I'll just tell Wash, we can park there for a month."

Inara had stood from the sound of her voice, she'd become more clear as she drew closer to Mal, "Not all of your work is illegal. And the—"

"What, you're trying to get me off the job now?" Mal interrupted her rudely.

She continued as if he hadn't spoken, "-And the best job you ever pulled was on a central planet!"
"How about I stay out of your whoring—" Mal began in a biting tone.

"That didn't take long—" Inara snapped back.

"-And you stay out of my thieving." Mal rode right over her objection, "I know my business plenty well, thank you."

"Right. You're a criminal mastermind." Inara could do scorn like no other woman in the world, "What was the last cargo we snuck past the Alliance to transport?"

Now Mal was backpedaling a bit as Inara hit her stride, "We made a perfectly good piece—"

"What was the cargo?" The Companion persisted.

Mal's voice was becoming defensive, "They were dolls!"

"They were little geisha dolls with big heads that wobbled!" Inara snapped back at him, her tone riding the edge of derision.

"People love those!" In direct contrast to the angry voices from the shuttle Simon was doing an imitation of the wobbly headed dolls. Wash was nearly hanging off of Zoe he was shaking so hard with repressed laughter and Kaylee had given up drinking her tea altogether. River nearly giggled at her brother's expression and had to pinch herself in a reminder of feigned sobriety. A glance at Riddick showed his lips twitching as he shook his head in amusement.

"And what exactly was our net profit on the famous wobbly-headed doll caper?" Now true scorn filled the Companion's voice.

"'Our' cut? You in the gang now?" Mal sniped back.

River took a breath and sighed, "Now comes the hurtful words." She said softly. "Doesn't mean them, working with Mal's reaction to her mistake in description before seeing Nandi."

Sure enough, seconds later Inara was nearly sneering the words, "Well, since I can't seem to find work as companion, I might as well become a petty thief like you!"

There was a long heavy pause as the air went out of both of them.

Mal's voice was deliberately quiet, "Petty."

Now it was Inara's turn to backpeddle, "I didn't mean petty."

"What did you mean?" The Captain's voice was painfully even.

In reply, Inara sounded nearly meek, "Suǒ xiè?"

"That's Chinese for petty." He informed her bluntly.

"No, that's a narrow... there's nuances of meaning that..."

"Maybe you shoulda stuck with your wiles." His derogatory tone gave an entirely different meaning to the word and contrasted starkly with the teasing tone he'd used with River and Inara earlier.

"Don't put this all on me, Mal. You know you haven't been after serious work in a—" Inara's speech defending her choice of phrasing was cut off.
"Serious work? You wanna know what I—" Mal stopped in the middle of his sentence apparently struck by some thought.

"What?" Now Inara actually sounded confused.

"Nothing." Mal threw the last word back at her as he exited the shuttle, making a grinning and ironic bow to his gathered crew and waving his hands elaborately towards Inara as she also entered the galley.

The crew didn't burst into applause but the wide amused smiles and thumbs up were more than enough to signify that the two performers had done well.

Riddick tilted his head and his smile twisted into a smirk, nodding at Mal, his voice a murmur. "I'd say she's about ready."

Mal shot him a wicked grin and started towards the cargo bay. Time to bring Saffron into the game.

Riddick grinned evilly as Mal and Saffron stood in front of them. Saffron had stuttered to a stop when she'd caught sight of him but when Mal unrelentingly nudged her forward and she didn't see Jayne or River she'd gotten some of her confidence back. Her hair was longer than he'd left it, a soft halo of curls in becoming wisps around her face so she'd obviously had something done to grow it out quickly. Hard to pull a successful con job when you look like you've been scalped by a previous mark. She still smelt of nerves though and that was somewhat satisfying considering Simon and River were holed up with Inara.

The three fugitives had talked it over with the crew and it was decided that since Jayne was gone, River and Simon also being 'gone' could be explained away as a family trip or even a permanent parting of ways should Saffron depart from her narcissistic ways long enough to inquire about them. Riddick was well known among mercs and bounty hunters but the reward for River was on a whole other level. No sense in giving Saffron a closer look at the siblings if they could avoid it. Last time she'd been busy trying to sabotage the ship and hadn't paid much attention to any of them in particular. This time around she'd be working more closely with the crew. Simon and River were distinctive enough that they'd stick in her memory.

Inara had graciously agreed to play host if River would help her with some investments and Simon had agreed to play chess with the Companion as a way of passing the time. Between books, the cortex and card games along with the chess set the three Core folk would be able to entertain themselves tolerably enough for the amount of time Saffron would be on Serenity.

He hadn't liked it much but he didn't like anything that separated him from River as a rule. He could concede the wisdom of the idea though. He'd just vent some of his mood on glaring at Saffron and imagining cutting off her hair all over again.

The Furyan glanced around the table, Zoe, Wash and Kaylee were all gathered in the galley and staring in 'surprise' at Saffron as she and Mal stood before them. Book stood from his seat in the corner and excused himself. "I think it's best that I not be here for the planning of your 'business'. Should you want to confess your sins later, I'll be available." He exited the galley quietly, and Riddick could smell his amusement. Likely Book had left because he didn't trust himself to keep a straight face sitting across from Wash, Zoe and Kaylee. Something about Wash and Kaylee when they got laughing was infectious. They could get the whole crew going once they started and Book was the rule rather than the exception.
Saffron got right to business after an uneasy glance at him, "The mark's name is Durran Haymer. Maybe one of the biggest collectors of Earth-That-Was artifacts in the 'verse. Guy's got warehouses full of stuff. But his prize piece is sitting in his parlor; an antiquity of unspeakable value: The Lassiter. The original hand-held laser pistol. One of only two known to still exist. The forerunner of all modern laser technology. Haymer got lucky, picked it up during the war for nothing."

Mal was shaking his head, "But it wasn't just luck." He jerked his head towards the seated crew, "Tell them."

What came next wasn't entirely a surprise, though Riddick could tell from the way she said it that Saffron wasn't being entirely truthful with them. He'd have to get the full story from River later on. "Haymer's Alliance. Bio-weapons expert during the war. He'd target neighborhoods with valuables, wipe out every living soul without ever damaging the goods. Go in, take whatever he wanted."

"He's living fat on a private estate on Bellerophon." The Captain shrugged as Saffron tossed some cortex discs onto the table.

"I managed to get ahold of his schedule for the next eighteen months;" She continued, "The layout of the estate grounds...and every security code for the place."

Riddick nearly smirked as no one made a move towards the discs. Mal spoke up after an awkward pause, "Saffron's got a notion we can just walk in, take the Lassiter right off his shelf."

There was more staring as everyone took in what they were hearing and the presence of the woman and Wash finally spoke, mischief in his scent if not his tone and face, "I'm confused..."

Saffron nodded, apparently having expected something of the sort, "You're asking yourself if I've got the security codes, why don't I just go in and grab it for myself; why cut you in?"

Wash shook his head, "No. Couldn't care less. Actually... I was wondering..." His gaze turned to Mal suddenly, "What's she doing on the ship? Didn't she try to kill us?"

She rolled her eyes, "Please. Nobody died last time."

Riddick snarled, "Not for lack a tryin'. An' not for lack of interest either." He eyed her up and down, "Ain't too late to change that."

Wash was concentrating his attention on Mal, ignoring the byplay with a quizzical expression, "We're in space. How'd she get here?"

"She hitched," Was the slightly terse reply.

The pilot was still frowning, "I don't remember pulling over..." He looked over at Riddick and Zoe, Kaylee's interest in violence being minimal, "Does anyone else have a not so great feeling about this endeavor considering she's involved?"

Mal was getting frustrated with their bullheadedness and it was starting to show, "Look. Point is, there's more'n one of us here wouldn't mind sticking it to a chiang-bao hoe- tze duh. Alliance bastard. Besides that, this could be a very lucrative venture for all of us. This ain't no wobbly-headed doll caper. This here's history."

It was time he had a turn talking, so Riddick put on a show of thinking hard and then raised his hand with another hard glare at Saffron, "Okay. If you've got the security codes, why don't you just go in a grab it for yourself. You're a conniving jiàn huò so it's a fair question. Why cut us in?"
"Good point." Saffron conceded sarcastically. "Getting through the door and putting our hands on the Lassiter is easy. Getting out with it... that's the tricky part."

The captain was nodding, "It's tagged and coded. Second it passes through the door, alarms, security, feds."

"This isn't a one-woman operation." The conniving bitch continued, "To do this right, I need——"

"Idiots." Inara's voice spoke from behind Mal.

"Partners." Saffron corrected her, turning to meet the Companion's gaze.

"Dupes." The Companion shook her head, her eyes scanning the crew, "And that's what you'll all be if you trust her."

Now Mal puffed up a bit, playing his part and posturing for Inara, "Could be that's so. Lord knows ain't none of us 'criminal masterminds'. So if you got something better, Inara, something not 'petty', we'd sure be willing to hear it." Riddick nearly grinned before he caught himself as he inhaled the crew's scent. Everyone found Mal acting like a puffed up peacock for Inara damn near hilarious and even funnier when Inara was strutting in her most Companion-like manner for contrast.

Riddick hid his smirk at Saffron's expression behind his mug of tea. The bitch was buying right into the 'tension' between Mal and Inara and from her smug expression was feeling pretty pleased with the situation. The Captain seemed ripe for manipulation by a beautiful woman which was just what she wanted, and exactly the impression they'd been trying to give. He exchanged a look with Zoe and the first mate dropped a wink at him before schooling her expression back to impassivity.

Inara, usually the one to get the last word, spun on her heel, "Nee mun doh shr agwa." Riddick could smell how hard she was trying to keep from laughing, her spine stiff as she left the room.

Mal's attention was back on his crew finally, and from the minute tug of his lips he was having a hard time maintaining his own sobriety in the face of the situation. "Okay. So the question remains; how do we get the artifact out without setting off the alarms?"

Kaylee spoke finally, "You don't. Not through the door, anyway." She reached for one of the discs and picked it up thoughtfully, "This the layout?"

"Full blueprints of the entire grounds." Saffron nodded.

"Could be we look hard enough, we find a way." She nudged Wash who nodded somewhat reluctantly.

Mal smiled, that was what he liked to hear from his genius mechanic, "You dig into that, little Kaylee." He focused on his First Mate. "Zoe. You ain't said a word. Time to weigh in."

Zoe nodded slowly, standing to walk in her deliberate way around the table, "Take sounds ripe enough. That's assuming we can fence it."

Of course the scheming biǎo zi had an answer for that concern as well, "I know a guy on Persephone. He's already got half a dozen buyers on the bid. The split is gonna be sweet."

Zoe continued as if she hadn't spoken, taking her place at Mal's side, "But Inara's not wrong." Her dark gaze was fixed on Saffron, "She can't be trusted."

The Captain's answering nod was one of understanding, "I ain't asking you to trust her. I'll be with
And Saffron just couldn't leave it alone, "See there? Only one thing you gotta do if you want to be a rich woman, hon— and that's get over it."

Zoe nodded, "Mmmm. Okay." In one swift move she squared her frame with Saffron's and her powerful right fist plowed into the other woman's mouth. Saffron went down hard on her ass while everyone else stared.

"You, too. Hon." The First Mate nodded to her captain, "I'm in."

"Zoe always gets to do the fun stuff," Riddick complained to Wash and didn't bother to stifle his snicker when no one, including Mal, offered Saffron a hand to help her up.

He was lounging in the shadows by the spare shuttle, watching Saffron who was watching Inara and Zoe have a conversation within a conversation. People didn't realize just how much they gave away with body language but Zoe and Inara were good enough to fool him and from his read of her scent, definitely good enough to fool Saffron. Nobody did impassive and stoic like Zoe and nothing could beat a Companion for projecting whatever impression she wanted to project. If he wasn't Furyan she could have fooled even him.

Inara was headed across the catwalks to her shuttle, Zoe going in the opposite direction, and the first mate nodded at the Companion amiably. "We should be on Bellerophon by oh-six. I figure the job should be—"

Inara shook her head, "Please. I really don't want to know."

Zoe hesitated but nodded again, "At least it's your kind of world. You got appointments made?"

As Riddick watched Inara nodded, "The minute we hit atmo, I'm gone. I've booked a few choice clients, should help me get my mind off Mal's descent into lunacy."

Zoe's curiosity seemed to get the better of her for a moment, "What happens if you got an appointment coming and you ain't finished the one you're at?"

The Companion shook her head, "Overbooking is a cardinal sin. Clients must feel the experience is timeless. Only thing worse is a badly faked fall."

The forthright First Mate shook her head, "See, that's where me and Companionship part ways. I never could work the notion of pretending a man was gettin' it done when he wasn't."

It was Inara's turn to be curious, "So you've never pretended to fall."

"Well, never is a strong word... sometimes it's easier." Zoe conceded. Riddick made a mental note to pay close attention to River should the two of them ever get so accustomed to each other that it could become an issue. Though her scent would give that type of game away should she ever try it.

"What about with Wash?" Inara tilted her head.

"One time. Poor boy was bone-tired..." Zoe shook her head.

"And?" The Companion prompted her and Zoe smelt sheepish. Riddick repressed a sigh and wondered if the two women had cooked up this conversation just to try and make him
uncomfortable. It wasn't that he was embarrassed by sex, but he really didn't care what people got up
to in their bunks. Women seemed to like talking about that sort of thing though. That he didn't see the
need for. Talking with your partner, of course. Other people; what was the point? Unless it was
therapy like he and River still had with Inara now and then.

"He knew. Son of a bitch called me on it."

Inara's smile was easily heard in her voice, "That's the one you marry."

"Damn right," Zoe agreed vehemently.

She turned to leave and Inara touched her shoulder. "Zoe. Don't let Mal trust her."

The First Mate eyed her thoughtfully, "Thought you didn't care about the job?"

"I really don't." She shook her head, "I just want there to be someone around to pick me up when I'm
done."

A dark head nodded her understanding, "Bié zháo jí I got his back. Captain starts thinking with his
jan-doh duh ee-kwai-ro, I'll step in."

Inara sounded exasperated, "The man's a moron. Everything Saffron is, is a lie. She'll get the drop on
him, which as far as I'm concerned is what he richly deserves."

Zoe shrugged, "Ain't sayin' it ain't risky. Don't count Mal out, though. He just knows the estate is—"

Inara held up her hands, shaking her head, "No details. I meant that. Just be careful."

The First Mate grinned, a flash of white in a dark face Riddick could see from his viewpoint, "See
you when we're wealthy..." He watched as Inara disappeared into her shuttle and Zoe up towards the
bridge.

Turning to Mal as the Captain came up behind him Riddick murmured, "She's been listenin' to every
word those two were saying."

"Well that's what we were hopin' for," Mal nodded, his voice just as quiet. "I'll go corral her, keep
her out of trouble." He headed towards Saffron as she made for the spare shuttle while Riddick
watched, withdrawing further into the shadows, "You give me a hand in here. No wandering about,
remember? Or I'll stick you back in your crate."

Riddick chuckled wickedly and smirked as Saffron jerked in surprise, "You've had that Neanderthal
watching me?"

"Didn't 'ave' him do a gorram thing," Mal retorted. "Man don't trust you an' he's got good reason.
He wants to keep an eye on you that's fine by me. Two eyes'd be even better. I don't trust you
either."

Before Saffron could retort Wash's voice came over the com system, "Cap'n?"

Mal was keeping his eyes on Saffron as he hit the speaker button near the shuttle bay, "Yeah?"

"We think we got something..."
Author's Note: Okay, so we're on to Trash! I wanted this to be more funny than fraught with tension because we all know they're messing with Saffron. Surprises to come, so I hope you'll enjoy the episode.

Chinese Translations:

nǚ ren (wife)

bàng jiār (lover / partner)

dì di (younger brother)

Đồng ma? (Understand? Got it?)

Đồng de (to understand / to know / to comprehend)

Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pì huà (What shit/the fuck are you saying)

Suǒ xiè (trivial matters / petty things)

jiàn huò (bitch / slut)

biǎo zi (whore/prostitute)

Bié zháo jí (Don't worry!)

Script Chinese Translations:

chiăng-bao hoe- tze duh (monkey raping)

Nee mun doh shr agwa. (Idiots. All of you)

jan-doh duh ee-kwai-ro (dangly piece of flesh)

Quote Sources: No Quotes! OMG I'm slipping.
Riddick retreated to the galley and lounged back in his chair, watching Kaylee with the data pad and the estate schematics. Zoe had come in from the bridge and she, Mal and Saffron were listening to Kaylee and Wash speak, passing the schematics around for them to see.

Wash was almost jovial, "Bellerophon Estates... Home to the rich and paranoid... gracious living... ocean views..." He pointed at a detail on the data pad. "... and state-of-the-art security, including local patrols, and multi-code-keys needed at all entrances and exits..."

"Which we have." Saffron chimed in, obviously wanting to make sure everyone remembered her providing the intel.

The pilot nodded, "Right. You and Mal will split off in Shuttle II as we make our approach..." He pointed out the area of the estate. "There's a landing port just south of the main house. Haymer's throwing a big party this weekend, so you should have no trouble blending with the hired help who'll be there setting up." He smiled slightly, "All you gotta do is get through the back door."

Mal nodded his understanding, "Shouldn't be a problem, unless someone's been less than truthful." Everyone slanted looks of varying hostility towards Saffron who put on a 'butter wouldn't melt' expression on her face. No one bought it and she pouted for a half second before concentrating on the plan again.

Kaylee took up the data pad and continued the explanation of the plan, "The parlor with the Lassiter's on the ninth floor. You'll have to disable the display. Won't be any trouble. 'Course, once you got your hands on the goods, you can't take it out the front door, nor the back door, nor any door. Every piece of pretty is tagged for the scanners."

Saffron's mouth twisted impatiently, "Right. So what do we do?" She startled a moment at Riddick's low mean growl at her condescending tone towards his méi mei but regained her aplomb fairly quickly.

Kaylee was grinning, her scent bright with pleasure as she looked at Wash, "You wanna tell them?"

He waved his hand towards her, bowing slightly in appreciation, "It was your genius idea."

She nodded and proud as anything told them, "You chuck it in the garbage." She nearly giggled at the thought, "All the estates are set up for garbage collection drones. You hit one little button, and the drone whooshes off with the trash.

"Brilliant." Saffron was practically rolling her eyes.

True to her nature Kaylee just smiled, "Thanks."

"Oh, except it's idiotic." The con woman continued. "Those drones take the disposal bins straight to reclamation. Thirty seconds after we hit the button, the booty'll get incinerated.

Kaylee did roll her eyes. As if it was the most obvious thing in the world the mechanic explained patiently, "Not if we reprogram the bin. Give it new coordinates." She shrugged, "Once I override the standard guidance protocol, I can tell the disposal bin to go wherever we want."
"And where would that be?" Saffron asked in faux sweet tones.

Wash pulled up a topographical map of Bellerophon. "The loneliest piece of desert we can find. Here." He pointed at a slice in the dessert. "Isis Canyon. Drone dumps the bin, we claim the goods when we're all together again."

Riddick watched as the bitch nodded, "How do you plan on getting to the bin to reprogram it?"

Now it was his turn got to sneer and roll his eyes, "Ain't any business a yours. You let us worry about it."

Kaylee exchanged a grin with Riddick, "You get to the loot, we'll get to the bin."

River smirked as Inara's shuttle pulled away from Serenity and prepared the cortex for her wave. It would be scrambled to hell and gone just like the rest of Inara's waves to and from Serenity but a Companion's wave sigil would let the receiver know it was a legitimate address.

"You know that expression makes you resemble Riddick to disturbing extent," Simon informed her with an amused smile.

"Part and parcel of the blood bond," River chuckled. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

"I suppose I wouldn't either," Simon nodded. "He is rather…frighteningly determined to keep you by his side and thus safe. Or as safe as we ever can be. I don't really mind that at all."

She nodded and continued her work, Simon and Inara returning to their chess game while she added one last touch before finalizing her work on the cortex.

A prettily feathered fascinator with a gauzy black veil to blur her face was pinned to her dark braided updo and River slanted a grin at Inara and Simon, both of them watching her now, captivated and amused. "Connecting to Durran Haymer now."

The wave took a moment to bounce around the 'verse before it went through and Haymer's secretary came onscreen. After what seemed like twenty minutes of back and forth regarding the nature of her business River huffed in irritation, "As I don't know precisely how much of which you're aware regarding Mr. Haymer's missing wife Yolanda I cannot confide in you the exact nature of my business. But if you will give Mr. Haymer the message that this is regarding his wife I'm certain he will speak with me."

The blue hold screen came up abruptly and River rolled her eyes behind the veil. "Zhī ma guān trying to throw his weight around."

Simon chuckled, "If you'll recall, you'll find that not uncommon in White Sun mèi mei. Full of spoilt children and people who have a bit of power and want more."

"Still irritating," River pointed out. "Like the Border and the Rim better than floaty island estates."

"Oh there are compensations," Inara smiled. "Good food and culture. Bookstores and proper theatres."

"The ballet," River sighed wistfully. "Wish we could see it."

Before they could remind each other of other things they missed the blue screen disappeared and a
moderately attractive man in elegantly understated clothing filled the screen. "This is Durran Haymer, to whom am I speaking?"

River tilted her head, "I'd prefer not to say. Though the registered Companion Inarra Serra will vouch for my truthfulness." Inara moved into the camera's view and sat beside River, careful to not nudge the Reader's veil.

"Mr. Haymer, my friend is associated with a private vessel. They had... occasion to deal with your wife. It was not a pleasant association but no one had the opportunity to do more than be grateful they were all alive when it was done. She has recently come into contact with the vessel again, this time with a plan to rob someone." Inara inclined her head politely, "After her last meeting with Yolanda my friend began to look into her background."

"I see. Or rather, I believe I see," Haymer frowned at them. "I dislike conducting private conversations via wave. Would it be possible to meet in person? I will guarantee your safe passage regardless of your... friends possibly less than legal associations. To have one's words vouched for by a Companion is no small thing."

Inara exchanged a look with River and when the Reader stared at Haymer and nodded firmly, smiled. "I believe that will suit us well. There are three of us. If you will give us co-ordinates and a landing area that is not immediately visible from the main pad or the service entrance?"

"Of course." Haymer typed something into the cortex and a stream of co-ordinates ran across the bottom of their screen. "They should be coming through now."

Inara studied the numbers and nodded, "We will arrive within the hour."

For the first time, he looked surprised but Haymer nodded, "Very well. I'll expect you then."

River disconnected the wave after the final courtesies were exchanged and looked at her and Simon's clothing, "Should serve well enough to not embarrass you." She smiled at Inara.

"You and Simon are dressed as well as Haymer is, and no one can match a Companion's costume, nor should they." Inara nodded her approval of Simon's elegant suit, the last of his overly proper core clothing, and River's very appropriate wide legged flowing trousers and soft collared jacket, tailored to fit her closely from her hips to her shoulders.

"He won't be expecting us to be a pinnacle of fashion anyway," River shrugged. "It shouldn't take us an hour to arrive though."

"And it won't," Inara smiled at her. "But wouldn't this be a bit easier if he was a bit surprised? He's expecting a Companion and two others, most likely not two others who could match him word for sophisticated word."

"So showing up with us in tow, and a bit earlier than expected, puts him slightly off balance." Simon realized, his expression thoughtful as he stood and straightened his jacket automatically. "And since we'll be in his territory we'll be on more equal footing."

"Exactly." The Companion smiled. "It shouldn't take us longer than thirty minutes actually."

Simon looked at River, "Will he want to search us? It's become...somewhat automatic to carry my pistol. Rick's been hammering me about it so much."

"He will expect Inara's word to hold true for us. He'll have armed guards, to expect us to disarm when a Companion has pledged her honor that we are there to aid him would be a grave insult. At
least in his opinion. And should we not hold to Inara's pledge, her reputation will be shattered and we'd most likely be dead. At least that's what he thinks." River replied as she considered her limited Read of the man. "We knew Yolanda was a liar. Painting him as a sadistic looter. He's honorable, as much as he can be anyway."

"That bodes well for the plan." Simon smiled and automatically shot his cuffs, straightening his jacket minutely.

"It does." Inara grinned.

The floating island estates were, like most things in the Core, elegantly ostentatious. The gardens as seen from the shuttle windows were ordered and beautiful, and the houses were more like mansions. Durran Haymer didn't live on the largest estate but his was one of the most tastefully done, at least in River's opinion.

They were greeted quite properly for Inara's station, by Haymer's officious assistant, and guided into the main house through the gardens. The coordinates they'd been given for landing were situated behind a small guest house and were, as they'd requested, completely hidden from the view of the main landing pad as well as the one designated for the 'help'. River exchanged a grin with her brother. Simon had quite enjoyed helping to plan another 'heist' and joked that if he kept it up he might just grow that curly mustache.

Kaylee had given him a considering look, made a small face, and Simon had grinned and dropped the idea. It had been cute actually, how quickly he'd given up his pretend mustache when his sweetheart didn't care for the notion.

He'd learned during their time in the Black, which battles were worth pursuing and which were simply a waste of time. Mal might get his back up on occasion but Simon was learning to ignore the Captain's digs and more importantly, to see them for what they were. Mal's way of getting a rise out of Simon and watching him get worked up. Sometimes in the hope of learning something new but more often just for the fun of it. It was a good change. River smiled to herself behind her veil. Simon might always be a touch more comfortable on a world like Bellerophon than Deadwood but he'd proven himself adaptable. And far more dangerous than the captain was completely comfortable with. But Mal would learn to adapt as well.

She scanned the main house, a sleekly modern dwelling that still managed to look inviting, as they approached it, finding several guards stationed in key but unobtrusive positions and nodded approvingly. The parlor to which they were escorted was stylishly appointed and adorned with Earth That Was antiques and curiosities, including the rarity of a globe with the countries in different colors. "Oh my," She exclaimed in appreciation, "Inara. Look how wonderful."

The Companion and Simon both looked to where she indicated and as one the three of them hurried over to look at the globe, "What a find." Simon's hands were hovering, itching to touch but he was exercising his usual restraint. "I've read that these used to be common on Earth That Was, used in school rooms for teaching before interstellar travel was possible."

"Can you imagine? A world with so many different cultures? All living together?" Inara was looking at it in amazement. "It seems impossible."

River nodded, committing every bit of the globe she could see to memory, "Different languages, different cultures, religions… Strange to think of a world divided the way the 'verse is."
"And yet they all came together in order to leave it," The voice that chimed in on the conversation was proper and cultured but colored with warmth and enthusiasm for the subject. "I can't tell you how many times I've studied that globe, trying to find information on the different countries and cultures. The mysteries of how things might have been. Simply fascinating." Bright blue eyes smiled at the three of them as they turned at the sound of his voice. "I am Durran Haymer, and you can only be Inara Serra." He bowed to Inara properly and was given a respectful bow in response. "Won't you introduce your companions?"

The introductions couldn't be made with their real names but Rilla and Silas were close enough and since they'd been used on Verbena the ident cards were already associated (somewhat) with Inara and Serenity. Haymer buzzed his assistant to have tea brought and urged them politely to sit. River watched from behind her veil as the man examined she and Simon. It hadn't escaped his noticed that neither of them could be scanned and identified due to Simon's spectacles and her veil. Developments in cornea scanning had advanced in the last few years, making them as simple and unobtrusive as security eyes but they could still be stymied by simple accessories. Their precautions weren't rude, or obvious, but it was made clear to Haymer that they had no wish to be identified. The work she and Mr. Universe had done would work on regular cameras, but those designed to scan the cornea they couldn't fool as easily.

"We'll get right to the point of our visit," Inara could make even the most abrupt declaration sound polite. River smiled as her friend continued, "Several months ago the ship from which I rent my shuttle came across a woman we knew as Saffron on the planet Triumph."

River nodded and took up the tale, explaining that once they'd been tipped to Saffron's schemes they'd returned her to Triumph. "We thought that was the end of it," She spread her hands. "The marriage obviously wasn't legal, nor even consummated, and once it was confirmed that our captain was not legally bound to her we left her there."

"We did not expect to meet her again, married to an old army friend of our captain." Simon shook his head, "Really the man has the worst luck in the 'verse."

"We all joke that Captain Reynolds has a magnetic personality, because so many people he meets end up shooting at him," Inara gave Haymer the gist of the jest. "Things rarely work out…as planned when the captain is involved."

"He sounds…interesting," Haymer smiled slightly. "I take it that Yolanda had also married this friend of your Captain's?"

"She had," River nodded. "Captain Reynolds was not interested in dealing with her again and, at gunpoint, forced her to vacate the area. She'd managed, apart from irritating him to the point of incivility, to give him a bloody nose during the confrontation. When we picked him up he told us what happened and what she'd said afterwards. She had plans for a 'big score' and it called for more than one person to do the job."

"This 'big score',' Blue eyes were dark. "I imagine it has to do with my collection. Since you're here."

"It does," The Reader nodded. "She wants to steal your Lassiter. And she managed to get all of your security codes and your schedule in order to do it. But she needed us to find a way around the tags you have on your collection."

"There shouldn't be a way around those tags," Now he was truly frowning. "That's part of the appeal of Bellerophon's estates."
"We'll make a deal with you Mr. Haymer," River studied him. "If we deliver Yolanda to you, you will tag her, so that she cannot leave your estate, or wherever you choose to put her. She will no longer have the ability to pop up and play merry havoc with our lives." He nodded slowly and she could hear his mind racing, creating and discarding scenarios to contain his errant wife until he found one he believed would suit.

"And the price for this is what?" He inquired finally.

"You mistake me Mr. Haymer, containing her is the price for our delivery of her." She smiled. "What is not free is the information as to how she intended to steal the Lassiter, our method for circumventing your tags."

Irritation glinted in his eyes and tightened his mouth but he also nodded respectfully, "I suppose the old saying is that 'if you're good at something never do it for free'."

"Very true," She nodded. "I'm quite good on a cortex. And I have a friend who is a brilliant mechanical engineer. This information might not be quite as valuable as the Lassiter but you will be able to resell it to anyone with an estate here. I have both the method of circumventing your security as well as a way to safeguard your valuables from anyone who would make a similar attempt."

"So you're offering me the solution to the problem, and the rights to resell the solution." Haymer was regarding her with a very thoughtful gaze. "I don't suppose I could hire you to look over the rest of the estate and point out any flaws?"

"I would have to speak with the Captain, and it would require our mechanical engineer and pilot." River exchanged a glance with Simon. "And unfortunately, I doubt you'd be able to make similar use of our observations, except in the broadest terms as all the estates are personalized."

"No, I wouldn't be interested in doing so," Haymer shook his head. "Though perhaps you'd like me to refer any inquiries to you through Miss Serra?"

River grinned outright at the idea of challenging and legitimate work, "I might like that." She tilted her head. "So the only question remaining is, what is the information we're offering worth to you?"

"Keeping in mind that this allows you to safeguard your entire collection, including the piece slated to be stolen." Simon added quietly. "We were told Yolanda had a contact on Persephone with buyers lining up."

"No doubt." Haymer nodded grimly at the thought and casually named a sum that would have been outrageously large were it not less than half of what the Lassiter was worth. "There are only two in existence, thus the Lassiter is nearly priceless. But I believe the amount I've offered should be satisfactory."

River tilted her head and smiled slowly, "Kǎn jià. You're a clever man Mr. Haymer. But you're lowballing us. Half the price of the Lassiter. If we'd chosen to steal it, you'd never have seen us coming. We're offering yīfēn qián liǎng fēn huò."

His grin was both respectful and delighted, "Were I not already married I do believe I'd ask to court you Miss Rilla. You're a wonderful combination of beauty and brains."

"You're too kind," She smiled at him too sweetly. "But you haven't agreed either."

Haymer chuckled and nodded, "We have an accord. Would you like the money transferred to an account? It is a bit large for a cash payment."
"Transfer please, to this account." River handed him Serenity's bank codes. His data pad gave a chime of agreement when it was done and she smiled. "Our ingenious method of removing the Lassiter involved dumping it down the trash chute and calling for a drone. We'd have had people under the estate, waiting to exchange circuit boards on the drone, which would reprogram its navigation and homing beacon. It would set down in the dessert rather than the trash reclamation center."

Haymer shook his head in amazement, "So simple it's ridiculous but because of that it would work. You'd need nerves of steel and a brilliant pilot, but it could be done."

River nodded, "Both of which we have." She smiled. "And the way to protect against that method is simply to add your electronic eyes to the trash chutes. If something tagged is dropped in, the drone won't come and an alarm sounds in your security office."

Simon shrugged, "Its doubtful many people would come up with such a solution. But it is a weakness in the security system. And you're not paying for chinks in the armor after all."

The older man nodded, "Exactly." He smiled. "I believe we've made an excellent bargain." He began to type into his datapad again and River smiled. He was ordering all the trash chutes, heat and cooling vents and any other form of ingress or egress to the estate equipped with electronic eyes and changes to the alarm system such as she'd described. "And by the time you leave, the changes to security will be well under way. In time for my party I think."

"Very wise," River smiled.

Inara nodded, "What's that other old saying? 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'?"

"Fáng huàn wèi méng," Simon smiled.

"Would you do me the courtesy of...remaining until Yolanda arrives?" Haymer requested. "I'd love to give you a tour of my collection, it's rare that I meet anyone so enthralled as I am with Earth That Was culture. You've planned this out very well, you deserve to be in on the climax as it were."

River nodded slowly as she Read his intentions. He was curious about them and how Yolanda/Saffron/Bridget would react to them, but he also did desire their company for the reasons he'd stated. A quick nod Inara and Simon let them know it was safe to accept and both of them quickly did so.

"We'd be delighted," Inara agreed. "To see such a collection is an experience not to be missed."

Riddick chuckled as Inara's shuttle pulled away from Serenity and exchanged a grin with Wash. "Well this should be fun."

"More fun than the law allows," Wash agreed turning to look at his wife. "We're just about set to commence illegalities if you'd like to inform the captain?"

"Cap'n's here," Mal appeared on the bridge, Saffron being dragged along with him due to his hand being latched around her upper arm. "What's this about illegalities?"

"Figured it was about time to be bad guys again," Riddick shrugged. "Inara's off so there's nothin' holdin' us up."
"We'll just start gettin' ready," Zoe nodded. "Rick, you an' Kaylee are on the hull, you've got the best balance out of all of us. Might want to check your tethers though."

Riddick nodded, smirking at Saffron as he rose and loomed over the treacherous woman. "Good idea. Wouldn't want anythin' untoward happenin' would we?"

"Nope," Mal was fixing the earwig Zoe'd handed him into his ear and handed one to Saffron. "You turn that off and I will riddle you with holes. Not like there aren't places to leave a body around here."

Riddick took his own earwig and turned the volume lower so they wouldn't deafen him when they spoke before tucking it into his ear. "Headed down for a comm check." He told Mal and began walking towards the galley. "Check Cap'n, how's it soundin'?"

"Comin' through good an' loud," Mal's voice returned in his ear.

"Yeah, you're a bit too loud on my end, gimme a minute," Riddick turned the volume a bit lower and stuck the comm back in. "Try it now."

"Still sounds fine on this end." Zoe's voice answered him this time. "How's it sound there?"

"Just about right," Riddick reached the airlock and began to climb the ladder. "Wash, lemme know when we've dropped into atmo, I'll get out and test the connections."

The pilot's voice came back a few minutes later, "We're in the lower atmosphere now Rick, should be fine weather out there."

"Sunny an' mild," Kaylee chimed in, her voice coming in stereo as she joined him in the airlock. "Pretty weather for a heist."

"You people are just disturbingly chipper," Saffron's tones were amazed and annoyed both.

"You wanna put me in a bad mood just keep it up," Riddick growled back at her and heard her nearly inaudible gulp at the sound of his animal making itself known. "You'd look awful stupid without any hair or eyebrows 'til you could get 'em grown back in."

Kaylee's giggle had him grinning at her as he popped open the airlock, wind of their passage whistling around him and making the earwigs a necessity. "You're just a bad bad man aren't ya gē ge."

"I cannot hide what I am. I must be sad when I have cause and smile at no man's jests, eat when I have stomach and wait for no man's leisure, sleep when I am drowsy and tend on no man's business, laugh when I am merry and claw no man in his humor." Riddick quoted with a smile as he tested the rings latched to the hull.

"What's that?" Kaylee was always so cheerful, not even minding admitting her ignorance. It was refreshing in a way. There weren't many folk who would just say they didn't know something.

"Oh, it's some a that Shakespeare I was readin' the other day. This fella, he's been fightin' with his brother, who's also his boss, and the fella's not good at hidin' when he's pissed off." Riddick smiled, "He's the bad guy in the play. But he's honest about it. 'I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain.'"
"Huh," Kaylee was pretty quick on the uptake. "So he's sayin' he don't care what people think of him?"

"Pretty much," Riddick began to climb down, ostensibly to get the tethers from the wall locker on the bridge. "Jon's sorta… self-centered and he's got a pretty big ego. He's smart enough ta act like he's a nice guy but he thinks so much a hissell that he don't want to."

His little sister grinned, "Like how the Cap'n don' like ta act like he's not a Browncoat?"

"Yeah, that's close," Riddick chuckled at the comparison and then had to endure Mal's squawking.

"Hey, I resemble that remark," The Browncoat complained. "I know how to blend in."

"Sure ya do Mal," He shook his head as he retrieved the tethers in case Saffron was keeping an eye out for him. "An' you're only ever lookin' for a quiet drink on U-day."

That got a chorus of laughter from everyone on the coms except Saffron. "He's got you there Mal," Wash laughed before his tone turned businesslike. "Ladies and gentleman we are beginning our final approach, all shuttles bound for the Haymer estate please detach in the next five minutes."

"On our way," Mal's response was completely professional in marked contrast to his next complaint. "And I am only lookin' for a quiet drink come U-Day. We're just never on any Browncoat friendly worlds when I want it."

"Right." Zoe drawled. "That's the problem."

"If I had my mouth I would bite, if I had my liberty I would do my liking. In the meantime, let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me," Riddick grinned at Kaylee.

"He's sayin' if he could he'd do whatever he wanted? But he can't so let him be?" Kaylee puzzled the meaning of the quote out as they headed back to the bridge to put the equipment away.

"Yeah, again, kinda like Mal," Riddick chuckled.

"You're alla ya fired," Mal retorted. "Beginning approach to the estate. Stop your grinnin' an' drop your linen."

"All set on this end Cap'n," Zoe reported with a wink at the other three on the bridge. Book wandered in with a bemused smile to see the four of them smirking at each other.

Kaylee gave him a sunny smile and removed her earwig so Saffron wouldn't hear her explanation, "We're just startin' the 'action' part a the con now. She ain't gonna know what hit her."

Book smiled, "Might I listen in as well?"

"If ya like," Zoe handed him an earwig. "Since supposedly you're all affronted by our theivin' ways don't speak if you don't gotta."

The Shepherd chuckled as he took the comm, "Duly noted." He smiled as he inserted the earwig and Mal's voice sounded in their ears.

"Prepped for landing. You ready?"

"Ready." Saffron's voice came over the coms.

"Ready Mal," Riddick replied. If they were truly attempting the heist he and Kaylee would be under
the estate and balancing on top of the ship to wait on the trash drone. "Okay! We're planted!" He paused a moment and grinned at Kaylee, "Wash, take us up—"

Kaylee chimed in, "That's good! Hold 'er there." She began her little script of 'hand me that, no, that one there,' instructions as if they really were husking the trash drone. Riddick gave some grunts and assents, and an occasional curse to fill in the time and continue the deception.

Riddick listened as Mal and Saffron landed and, presumably their arms filled with flowers for the party, made their way to the door. "These are nice, oughta get some for the galley," Mal remarked with an audible sniff of his burden.

"If you're quite through speculating on your decrepit ship's potential décor?" Saffron hissed. "I've got it open."

"Clear." The Captain's voice came through quietly. "Which way? And my ship ain't decrepit. She's vintage."

"Left."

"Left." Saffron told him and the crew on the ship listened as they made their way through the halls while Riddick and Kaylee continued their scripted pretense of husking the drone until Kaylee judged an appropriate amount of time had passed.

"Careful, that one's live," She cautioned him and Riddick grunted his understanding.

"Yeah, gotcha, no touchin' live wires," He replied dryly. Kaylee gave him a thumbs up and he commented, "That's done it."

"He's right, prettier'n sunrise," Kaylee chimed in with a grin. "All set for ya Cap'n."

There was the sound of soft breathing, most likely inaudible to anyone but him, and Riddick heard Saffron's voice say quietly, "This should be it."

"All right," Mal had a smile in his voice. "Rick, we're on our way in, stand by." There was a brief pregnant pause and then Mal's stunned voice, "Shun-sheng duh gao-wahn."

River grinned outright as Saffron entered the room, Mal on her heels, neatly blocking her in. Haymer had decided to have a little fun with the trap and exclaimed theatrically, "You... You found her... Oh, God, you've brought back my wife!" He moved forward minutely, taking her fingers in his, careful to stay out of any potential line of fire. "Oh, my own sweet Yolanda... I thought I would never see you again."

He looked at Mal, the captain's face quite bemused. "Forgive me... I don't mean to make a show..."

River hid her smirk as Mal seemed to catch on and began to play along, "Please. I'm the one intruding."

"Not at all." The blue-eyed man shook his head as he gazed in an adoring and slightly overdone fashion at Saffron. "I owe you a great debt of thanks."

The captain shrugged and casually hit the button to close the door behind him, prodding Saffron to move forward. "Just gave the lady a lift."

Haymer's eyes were twinkling and it was a wonder Saffron hadn't twigged to the fact that she was
being had. River watched her face as the woman calculated the odds and began to come up with a
new plan of action, another con to pull. "You did much more than that." Durran was telling Mal,
"You returned to me the only thing I truly treasure."

Now the Captain was trying to keep a straight face, "Well, then, this is a day I'll feel good to be me."

"Do I owe you any—" Haymer began, as any normal man would, to offer a reward for the return of
his beloved bride.

"No." Now Mal began to grin outright as River stepped out from the small alcove where she, Inara
and Simon had been sitting. "Trip weren't even out of our way."

"Hǎo jiǔ bu jiàn Cap'n." River waved at him happily.

Mal chuckled. "Well isn't this a nice surprise." He bowed semi-politely towards Durran Haymer, "It's
a pretty swank place. But you don't ever feel like its gonna fall right outa the sky?"

"Durran Haymer, a pleasure to meet you Captain Reynolds." Haymer offered his hand and Mal took
it with a pleased expression. It wasn't often someone as neat, clean and bathed as Haymer shook
Mal's slightly grubby paw without hesitation. "And no, strangely enough, that's never been a
concern…" He glanced around the house humorously, "Well, not until now."

"Durran, darling, I'm… I'm so glad to see you. These…people…they… you wouldn't believe what
they've made me do. They set on me at Parth—" Saffron began a new con without hesitation as it
became apparent that her potential mark and her supposed partners were in cahoots.

It fell somewhat flat when her 'husband' looked at her with a benignly amused expression. "Yolanda,
please, don't insult my intelligence or waste our time."

"Durran, they've forced me to come here, to rob you, they want to take your Lassiter." Saffron
spread her hands, moving towards him as if to embrace her him. The clicking of three separate
firearms stopped her in her tracks.

"Oh she's good," River marveled mockingly. "She's practically believable."

"You don't want to be doin' that," Mal spoke from behind her.

"We're not that stupid you see," Simon concurred.

"And if more than those fingertips touch him I'll put a bullet between your eyes faster than you can
say 'darling dearest love'." River added. "Try not to be entirely pathetic." Haymer, smart man that he
was, backed up several steps so he was completely out of Saffron's reach.

"You've lost." Mal liked getting the last word when he could and River nearly rolled her eyes.

Saffron nearly stamped her foot in rage and instead of attacking Haymer, swept Mal's feet out from
under him. "I've lost? I'm pathetic? Who's the dupe on the floor?" Her heel nearly came down on his
temple before he rolled out of the way.

River sighed and holstered her gun, "I hate to interrupt your crazy time." She strode forward and
methodically punched Saffron in the eye and chin before kicking her in the stomach and forcing her
right hand up between the woman's shoulder blades. "But unless you want a broken arm or a
dislocated shoulder, you'd better calm down."

"Mighty kind of you," Mal climbed to his feet. "Wasn't really lookin' forward to gettin' stomped on,
especially by a woman whose name is kinda suspect."

"Yo-Saff-Bridge," River agreed. "Yolanda will have to do since she'll be Mr. Haymer's problem."

"She was of a House once," Inara spoke finally. She'd been content to observe from her place in an elegant chair. "She bears the Fleur de Lis of House Antoinette."

River nodded and Simon holstered his weapon to retrieve her datapad. "I found her, or I believe I did. There's always a margin of error with some programs. But I believe she began as Jenny Grubb." Simon brought the data pad over to Haymer so the man could see it.

"That certainly bears a striking resemblance to my blushing bride," He glanced at the screen to Saffron and back again. "There's a reward offered for her return. Apparently, she was kidnapped when she was out with some of the other girls." His mouth twisted wryly. "Much as she was kidnapped from Parth it seems."

"As opposed to running off with Heinrich, the young security programmer," Simon remarked sardonically. "A young man who turned up dead."

"Imagine that," Mal shook his head in feigned shock. "Someone you didn't have any further use for ended up dead." He folded his arms as he regarded Saffron for a hard moment before he looked at Haymer. "So Rilla, Inara and Silas got the deal all worked out with you?"

"Indeed, they did. Quite satisfactorily on both sides." The blue-eyed man nodded. "I don't believe there'll be any difficulty in fulfilling the terms of the bargain either." He pressed a button on his ring and after a moment the assistant entered with a hypogun. "She will be tagged far more thoroughly than any inanimate object I possess." Saffron's expression was priceless as she squirmed and tried to escape River's grip but between the Reader, Mal and the assistant, the microchip was firmly shot into Saffron's neck. "And she won't be able to escape via the trash chutes either, thanks to you and your crew Captain."

"Durran!" Saffron was actually panicked. Apparently, the idea that she couldn't come and go as she pleased was more disturbing than being caught in her schemes. "Please... you can't!"

"Actually darling, I can, and I have," He informed her coolly. "And you've the knowledge that had you not decided to target me, had you not tried to dupe this crew, you'd still have your freedom. Such as it was." His smile was cold and satisfied, "Oh, the tag is a special one, designed to do more than simply track something. It's imbued with a particular explosive that, should you leave your designated area, will remove your head from your shoulders."

River smiled. Saffron finally looked shocked. And at a complete loss. "Now you are caught in a net of your own making."

"Well," Mal was considering her as River finally let go of the red head's arm, "She is a brilliant, beautiful, evil double-crossing snake. If a bit oblivious to people plottin' against her."

Inara smiled as she rose from her chair, taking Simon's arm to lean on him unobtrusively. "What, you didn't see it coming?" She gestured to the crew around her, "You know, I put on this big act and storm away in a huff. Then I fly off with Silas and Rilla and inform on you to the man you were going to make your next mark." She tilted her head, "You know, I'm a little disappointed. Some of the crew's performances weren't quite as nuanced as they could have been. I thought they might tip the fact that we were playing you from the second Mal walked onto the ship with you hidden in a crate."
River grinned, "We had a hard time being nuanced when we were trying not to laugh at the big 'fight scene' you and Mal had going. Kaylee nearly started giggling. I thought we were all doing well to keep straight faces."

Simon shook his head, "Book nearly gave himself a hernia trying to not laugh. I'm only sorry Jayne missed it."

Mal nodded, "Especially when Rick pulled the whole 'why doesn't she do the job herself' question." He smirked, "That was genius."

River grinned, "'How is she here?' 'I don't remember pulling over'."

Inara laughed delicately, "Wash had some of the best lines. Although, Zoe got to hit her, which is to be greatly envied."

"I really thought she'd tip to it," River nodded. "Given that Rick was watching her watch you and Zoe talk. All those staged conversations and you never once caught on?"

Inara smiled, "That's what happens when you leave the guild before you're fully trained. Did you think natural talent would make up for years of study?"

"I've played you all and you know it," Saffron blustered. "And sooner or later I'll be back in the game and you'll all have to watch your backs."

River sighed and shook her head, "The guild has a reward for you. They take their time and money invested in your training very seriously. Legal indentures are rare in the Core but the Guild holds most of them, for just this reason."

Haymer was watching them all in amusement, "You really must tell me the whole of your plan. It sounds as if you all had a splendid time fooling her."

"You wouldn't believe the half of it," Mal told him with a grin.

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Author’s Note: So what do we think? I thought an ending that didn’t have them carting a priceless antique laser gun was a bit more plausible. And let’s face it, everyone would want Saffron locked up where she couldn’t just pop back into their lives.

Chinese Translations:

mèi mei (little sister)

Zhī ma guān (low ranking official / petty bureaucrat)

Kǎn jià (to bargain / to cut or beat down a price)

yīfēn qián liǎng fēn huò (high quality at bargain price)

Fáng huàn wèi méng (to prevent a disaster before the event (idiom); to nip something in the bud)
gē ge (big brother)

Hǎo jiǔ bu jiàn (Long time no see)

Script Chinese Translations:

Shun-sheng duh gao-wahn (Holy testicle Tuesday)

Quote Sources:

I cannot hide what I am. I must be sad when I have cause and smile at no man’s jests, eat when I have stomach and wait for no man’s leisure, sleep when I am drowsy and tend on no man’s business, laugh when I am merry and claw no man in his humor – Much Ado About Nothing – William Shakespeare

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain – Much Ado About Nothing – William Shakespeare

If I had my mouth I would bite, if I had my liberty I would do my liking. In the meantime, let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me – Much Ado About Nothing – William Shakespeare

Stop your grinnin’ an’ drop your linen – Aliens – James Cameron
Serenity landed on the main pad and Inara and Mal took a few minutes to get their respective shuttles docked while River and Simon waited with Haymer. The man was regarding them both with a considering look and River's eyes widened at the stream of thoughts flowing through his head. Something in her posture must have alarmed him because he shook his head. "Please, you needn't be alarmed." He bowed to her politely.

Simon had stiffened when she did, his situational awareness had increased with his time on Serenity and in Riddick's company and his hand rested on the butt of his gun in an unspoken threat.

"Please," Haymer spread his hands. "I may have recognized you both, but I have no intention of… attempting to capitalize on the fact." His smile was disturbingly genuine.

"Recognize us?" Simon was trying to bluff his way out of the situation. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Simon and River Tam, son and daughter of Gabriel and Regan Tam of Osiris," Durran Haymer said their names as if he hadn't just potentially signed his death warrant. "I attended one of your mother's dinner parties when you were only twelve," He told River. "You've grown and the two of you have changed, but your faces… those are similar enough." He shrugged, "The cornea scan is easily deceived with such accouterments as your veil or spectacles. You must be quite good, husking the cortex so that none of the electronic eyes could do a proper facial recognition scan. But an old acquaintance like me won't be fooled I'm afraid."

Simon's hand was tightening on his gun while River stared at Haymer, pushing her way into his brain and Reading every thought she could. "And what do you want?"

"Nothing," Blue eyes were regarding her with a kindness she hadn't seen in a stranger in a long time. "I'm powerful enough that I was able to look into your records. Powerful enough to know when I don't want to be involved with or support a program that should never have been begun. Unfortunately not powerful enough to stop it from beginning in the first place." He turned his gaze to Simon, "You needn't be concerned. I'm not going to turn you in. As far as everyone on this estate is concerned you're Silas and Rilla."

"That's a very, very, wise choice." Riddick's voice was a soft growl behind the Core gentleman. "Because that's my family and I won't hesitate to spatter these walls and your precious collection with your own blood to protect them." All trace of a Rim or Border accent had left his voice as he entered the room just ahead of the captain and crew.

"Ah," Durran Haymer should have been unnerved, being confronted with a Furyan. Strangely enough he wasn't, not more than anyone would be when startled. His thoughts spoke of Riddick's files from the Academy and his noted attachment to River Tam. "Richard B. Riddick. I wondered if you'd remained with them after the escape from the Academy. I hadn't been able to access the reports as fully as I'd have liked. One of the problematic side effects of having a conscience I'm afraid."

"River's mine." Riddick moved to her side, silver eyes gleaming behind tinted specs. Everything about him promised violence should River be endangered.
The man simply nodded and gestured to the elegant sofa and chairs. "Please." He sat down in one of the chairs himself. "Surely you can shoot me just as easily from a seated position as you can a standing one?"

River let her gaze leave Haymer for a moment and looked at the crew, Mal at the head of the group. "Be thou familiar, but my no means vulgar. The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel."

The captain nodded slowly and led his crew into the room, Riddick taking a seat on the other side of River and letting Kaylee wrap her hand around Simon's forearm and guide him to a loveseat. Wash had his arm around Zoe's shoulders, careful to not impede her movement or aim and Kaylee had put herself on the opposite side of Simon's gun. Mal politely guided Inara to a seat and took a chair near hers, his posture watchful. When they were all seated their host smiled slightly.

"I am sorry. I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, but I didn't want you to leave without making you aware of my knowledge." He spread his hands. "I'm aware that you're all...incredibly dangerous people, and that's before you add firearms and blades into the mix." His smile was nearly affable. "I want you to understand, should there come a time when I can be helpful, I wish to be. Not everyone agrees with what the Academy was doing. Not everyone likes their methods or aims. But the faction that thought it was a wise idea...has more power in the Parliament. And a great deal of stock in Blue Sun. And quite frankly Blue Sun has quite a bit of stock in the Parliament."

"So the idea is what?" Mal rested his elbows on his knees, leaning forward. "What's your aim here?"

"My aim," Haymer sighed. "Is to offer aid if you need it. Support in the Parliament if it comes to that. To work on your behalf when I can."

River tilted her head and relaxed slightly as she further Read his intentions, "To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?"

"You have the right of it. It's a fine line to balance." The Core gentleman shook his head. "I imagine Yolanda painted me the worst sort of war criminal to...sweeten the deal for a bunch of Browncoats."

"She did at that." Zoe nodded from her seat on another sofa beside her husband. "Something about bioweapons and killing entire neighborhoods so you could scavenge at your leisure."

"She would twist it like that," Book said quietly from his chair, dark eyes on Haymer's face. "I believe that Unification is the best for all of us. But only if all the worlds are equal. The idea of keeping worlds on the Rim deliberately poor and ignorant is...repugnant. The point of it all was to help people. Give them choices. Not force them into one way of thinking." He gestured at a framed picture of a man in a blue and black uniform, pointy ears and an austere face. "Infinite variety in infinite combination. Without individuals the human race stagnates."

"An idealist," Book said quietly from his chair, dark eyes on Haymer's face. "What happened?"

"I am a bio chemical engineer." Haymer told them in a quiet voice. "I was working on a cure for Chronic Bacterial Bronchitis... it's what you'd call—"

"Damplung," The entire crew chorused back at him. Mal chuckled at his surprised expression and spread his hands. "We've got crew with family on Kerry. One of his family had Damplung real bad this year. When you've got a few geniuses on the crew you pick things up."

Haymer nearly chuckled, "I should have known." He nodded, "Then you know how contagious and
insidious it can be.” He rubbed his forehead, deadly sober, "My lab was working with a…mutated strain, it had become airborne and jumped species."

"Xué shàng jiā shuāng." Simon cursed softly. When everyone but River and Riddick gave him a blank look he explained. "He's saying that when they were trying to find a cure, something mutated the bacteria, made it closer to a virus, and it wasn't spread through bodily fluids like saliva or blood. It was spread like dust in the air and animals could get it and infect each other, and infect humans. It's the trifecta of things going so badly wrong."

Haymer nodded. "We'd managed to contain it, kill most of it, and we destroyed every sample we had." He shook his head. "I hoped it would be enough. We'd nearly had a cure and because of someone's blind ambition it was all destroyed to prevent a more virulent disease."

"It wasn't enough though, was it?" Zoe had that dead quality to her voice that said she knew where this was going and she didn't like it.

"It was not." The scientist shook his head, "Thankfully the worst of the worst, the strain that jumped species, that had been destroyed. But they had a disease that was airborne now. One that I hadn't been able to cure. And they used it."

"They weaponized it." Riddick exchanged a look with Zoe. "The disease that everyone gets now, it's airborne isn't it?"

"I've nearly got a cure," Haymer nodded. "I went through town after town, trying to save people. Finding nothing but death. The disease… back then… it was brutally fast. If you caught it, you have maybe four or five days before you were dead. If you got treatment within the first twelve hours you had a chance. But symptoms didn't show until twenty four hours later. The only thing immediate was a headache. Flu symptoms. Nothing that would prompt the average citizen to see a doctor and request antibiotics for a lung infection. Not with the economy the way it was. Medical care…was a luxury."

"That's not what folks have now though," Simon was clearly remembering Mattie and the disease he had. "That's not what I saw on Kerry."

"No," Haymer shook his head. "What infects people these days is a much milder version. I managed to force a controlled mutation. An entire town full of people volunteered for experimental treatment so we could do it. The weaponized version of the disease was eradicated. That was part of the forced mutation you see, the new version was airborne, and it still jumped species, but it was more easily treated and it…attacked the weaponized version of the virus."

"But it leaves you starting all over again for a cure or inoculation." Simon realized, "That's why controlling the symptoms and getting rid of the disease with antibiotics and a controlled environment is so important."

"Exactly." The older man nodded. "It's not a perfect solution but until I can come up with an inoculation, or a cure for the disease itself, it's the best we can do."

"So why's it Saffron was goin' on about you bein' a war criminal who looted dead folks," Kaylee wondered. "You don't seem like the type."

Haymer smiled at her, "Thank you." He shrugged, "I'll admit I picked up a few things. Most of them I managed to get decontaminated and sent to next of kin. Other things, there were no next of kin and I was 'awarded' spoils of war. And some of the patients, the people we tried to help, they gave us their belongings in thanks, or to help fund a cure."
"That's why now and then something amazing from Earth That Was goes up for auction." Inara exclaimed. "You're funding your research with the collection, but you don't want to glut the market."

"Give the lady a prize," Haymer nodded. "I have a trust set up, arrangements made that even if I die, the work will continue on. I became a scientist to help people. To give them choices, unshackled by disease or defect if possible. Not to change them into something they're not."

"An' that don't sound properly villainous to someone like Yo-Saff-Bridge," Mal commented. "Hard to make you out to be a bad guy if you tell the truth. And if you ain't an Alliance villain she'd have thought Browncoats like us wouldn't go for the heist so easy."


"Precisely," He looked at her sadly. "I wish I could have stopped them. I'm sorry I couldn't."

"If you could have, you would," River offered him a smile. "Thank you."

"I hope you'll contact me if there's anything you need, anything I can do for you." He smiled back at her. "In the meantime, I'd like to offer you some refreshments and perhaps you might do that security evaluation for me?"

River grinned, "Be happy to. Even have more expert eyes to offer." She nudged Riddick who'd been quiet, evaluating the man and the truth of his words. Her Furyan nodded slowly.

"I expect it'll be interesting."

Interesting was one word for it, Riddick thought to himself as they set course for the space station where they were due to meet Jayne and Ciara. The floaty island estates were large, circular constructs and subject to mechanical issues like any other feat of technology. An electro-magnetic pulse would do kill any technology but unless there was an all-out war it was unlikely anything would send them crashing into the Bellerophon Sea.

Security was an challenging problem, but he and River pointed out the flaws they could see. Wash and Kaylee had some very creative things to say regarding the technology and how it might be compromised as well as ways to prevent it. A cortex virus or worm could infiltrate the systems and cause problems. Haymer was increasing security even as they left the island, and promising to pass any information they might find useful along to them via the channels he and River had devised.

"Rick, come 'long to the galley would ya," Mal's voice called to him from down the hall. "I'm thinkin' it's about time we all had that talk you an' River promised us."

Riddick groaned and set the autopilot. He'd been hoping that he and River would get some time alone together before Mal decided he wanted the promised discussion. Haymer recognizing River and Simon had put him on edge and he wouldn't be easy without time to reassure himself she was safe. Wash already rising from his chair. "Don't worry Rick, it's not as if things didn't work out well because of River this time. He can't get too annoyed."

"You wanna bet?" He'd let himself fall back into his 'Rim' accent once he was back on the ship. He'd noticed the more properly he spoke the more uneasy Mal seemed. It was as if the Captain couldn't quite adjust to the dichotomy of a killer speaking so elegantly.
"Not the dichotomy," River murmured as she climbed out of their bunk to join them. "The idea that Riddick is so accomplished with masks."

"Interestin'." Riddick drawled softly, taking his customary seat and pulling River into his lap. The rest of the crew and Inara were still gathering. For once the cheerfully painted galley didn't feel warm and welcoming. The painted vines weren't soothing and the lights were more harsh than glowing. He knew the galley hadn't changed but knowing what was to come, and worrying about Mal's reaction, colored every perception. What had been an inviting family space felt worse than a jail cell or defendant's bench with the contrast in what had been and what he was feeling now. "Take it you don't wanna wait on this talk 'til Jayne an' Ciara are back?" He addressed Mal as he rubbed his palm up River's spine.

"I'm figurin' on them knowin' a bit more'n the rest of us," Mal retorted in a not quite relaxed voice. He poured himself some coffee and passed the pot around. Kaylee and Book looked the most confused by the entire thing, Simon had a resigned expression, Inara was politely neutral, while Zoe and Wash had an air of folk waiting for a storm to pass.

Once everyone had their coffee, or tea if that was the preference, Riddick began. "Ya'll know River's a genius type. Ain't ever been a question. An' you know that the Academy experimented on both of us."

"Tryin' ta make River more like you," Kaylee nodded.

"That was one result," River agreed quietly. "But it was not their true aim." Her voice was painfully clear and even but her scent blazed with cinnamon and worry.

"We didn't speak of it much, because there were other concerns at the time," Simon continued. "But when we were on Ariel we did get River's scan done before we were caught. It showed that they deliberately stripped her amygdala."

"What's that?" Kaylee was shaking her head in confusion.

River replied softly, "When you're nervous or scared and you don't want to be? When you want to concentrate on something else, your amygdala is what lets you push that scared or nervous feeling away." She shivered and Riddick pulled her closer, kissing her head, hating the smell of old burnt cinnamon and fear. "They cut into my brain and sliced at my amygdala. So that I had no choice but to feel everything. All at once. All the time."

"What was the point though," Mal shook his head. "Because they could?"

"Partially," Riddick growled. "But they had a goal. One they succeeded at." He rubbed his hand up and down River's spine.

"So what was the goal?" Mal asked the question when it seemed no one else would.

"They wanted…" River took a deep breath and he could feel her, smell her stealing herself against the onslaught of thoughts to come. "They took someone whose brain is more active, works differently than anyone else's; someone who was already highly intuitive. And they ripped me open until everything I was turned inside out and upside down. Until my ears and eyes were superfluous."

"Oh my God." Book breathed as he understood what she was saying.

Riddick watched Mal's face. The Captain was coming towards the correct conclusion it seemed but not quickly enough. "They took someone who could read all the minute changes in body language, in behavior patterns on a large and small scale and they cut into her brain." He told the Browncoat
bluntly. "She was already intuitive. They made her psychic."

The word made River flinch as everyone reacted to it instinctively, their thoughts, even those who'd had an idea of what they were about to say, flying to what they wanted most to hide. "Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pǐ huà?" Mal stared at them.

"Āi yā," River moaned clutching her head and pressing back to his chest.

Riddick's hand smacked onto the table loudly, grabbing everyone's attention, "Cut that shit out right now." He snarled at them. "Think she wants to hear all the lè sè you want to hide? Think she cares? Think of something else." Her trembling eased slightly and he nodded, "That's better. But that's how we knew about Saffron," He told the Captain. "River had a feeling about the 'surprise' Monty had for you. And then she got a glimpse of Saffron. Wasn't hard to figure out what was coming next."

"But psychic…" Mal was shaking his head. "Isn't that like something out of science fiction?"

"Sir, we do live on a spaceship." Zoe reminded him dryly.

"So?" Wash and Mal offered that rejoinder simultaneously and exchanged semi-humorous looks at their rare accord. Wash was grinning outright while Mal just rolled his eyes.

"Alliance would have any number of uses for a psychic," Book said slowly. His dark eyes were regarding River and Riddick in a thoughtful manner and it was obvious he was also thinking of the training River had gone through.

"That's how ya knew 'bout Saffron's net when she stowed away after we left Triumph." Kaylee smiled with an air of finally figuring something out.

"And how you 'heard' the Feds coming after we found the derelict." Book realized.

"It's how we knew the 'survivor' was just a Reaver to be." Riddick nodded. "When you're a teenager your brain is still developing. That's why they wanted kids. They didn't do the same to me. Couldn't really I guess, I wasn't as young as she was. But I know River. My senses… well, when I get going my brain's near as good as hers. And I've had a lot longer to practice."

"So after that brawl in the bar, before Inara's shindig…" Mal was thinking. "When you were explainin' how you'd helped River… that was the truth."

"Of course," Simon rolled his eyes. "My sister feels, hears and sees everything. All the time. Animals… their instincts are constant. Riddick is probably the only person in the 'verse capable of helping her without drugging her out of her mind. I certainly wouldn't have been able to do much beyond that. I have no true understanding of how her brain works now. I can only offer theories based on how the human brain is supposed to work."

"So what's this mean?" Mal regarded them with a thoughtful expression. "Anything gonna change?"

"Might tell you to stop thinkin' so loud," Riddick shrugged. "But mostly River's been trying to… find an even keel you could say. Something happened in the Academy…something that nearly undid alla the work she and I had done gettin' her used to the extra senses. We don't know what yet. You knowin' this… it don't mean you know everything. Just one big secret."

"She's a Reader and that's just one thing we didn't know?" Mal threw up his hands. "How many gorram secrets you two got?"

"Same amount as anyone else," Riddick shrugged.
"And no one goes around asking you yours," Simon pointed out.

"But she don't gotta ask does she?" The Captain retorted.

"Can't hear what you're not thinking." River interjected. "Glimpses, flashes of memory without context, unless you think of the thing you want to hide. Sometimes…your dreams might invade mine." She met Mal's eyes, "I don't want to see. I don't want to know. So I try not to. Can't help what I do see or hear, but I don't have to speak of it."

Mal nodded slowly, his eyes scanning his crew and coming to rest on Wash's face. "I gather this wasn't as much a surprise to some as it was to the rest of us?"

"Kinda surprised you didn't pick up on it sooner," Riddick gave another shrug. "You know sound don't carry through space. Weren't any way we coulda heard the Alliance cruiser comin'."

"Or known about the Reaver's trap before it was sprung," Simon added.

"Gotta say I don't much like all the lies that've been told." Mal was irritated but not nearly as much as he was pretending to be. His expression was more thoughtful than irked.

"Didn't lie," River shook her head. "Did hear them. Just not with my ears. There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave, to tell us this."

"Well let's try to keep that sorta shady talk to a minimum unless we're in company." The Browncoat looked at his first mate. "This got by you too I'm guessin'? Which is somethin' of a surprise in itself."

Zoe inclined her head thoughtfully, "Once I was told, certain things made more sense. I'd noticed a few…discrepancies between things done and said. But I'll admit to not thinkin' too hard on the entire question. River an' Rick an' Simon have made it plain that they'll tell us things as they can. Pushin' before they're ready never leads to anything good." Her bland expression made it plain she was thinking of how Mal had tried demanding answers and gotten nothing but obfuscation and short tempers.

"Well… I guess we all just try to think good thoughts then." Mal sighed rubbing a hand over his face. "Now that we've got that out of the way, what was the score on the Yo-Saff-Bridge job?"

"Serenity is pretty flush," Zoe pulled up the ship account and showed him the numbers. "We'll be able to replace the mule easy enough. And check on some parts to replace ones that've gotten worn."

"Yeah, let's not run the risk of another breakdown," Mal was studying the numbers. "Well it's not as sweet as the take from the Lassiter would have been but pretty sure we're better off not having a priceless Earth That Was artifact on my ship. And we don't have to worry about a split with Yo-Saff-Bridge. We can unload the cargo on the station, pick up our prodigals and be on our merry."

"And we have a new ally, which can't hurt one bit." Wash added cheerfully.

"Now that was a surprise of the heart stoppin' variety," The Captain looked at River. "Woulda thought you'd have seen it coming. Given your…abilities."

"Only able to communicate via wave at first. Then…in person…since he was aware of what they'd done, Haymer was careful to not think of what he knew of us. Didn't want to spook us. Once his knowledge was revealed he was much less guarded in his thoughts. Genuinely pleased with our escape and wants to render aid." River offered the explanation with a sheepish smile. "Told you, can't hear what you're not thinking."
"He didn't even seem concerned about Rick being with us," Simon mused. "Even knowing our history, I would have thought you'd worry him." Riddick found himself the subject of several speculative looks and shrugged in return.

"Powerful enough to access Richard's history when it was learned he escaped with us," River explained. "That's not to say Haymer doesn't find my làng intimidating. A moment of stark fear at the sound of Riddick growling behind him. But since we're all alive the rumors of Richard B. Riddick slaughtering everyone indiscriminately could be safely ignored."

"Odd to think of a man like Haymer not worried about someone everyone else thinks is a psycho mass murderer," Simon was shaking his head. "Father always said Durran Haymer marched to the beat of his own drum."

"Well so long as he don't expect us to come runnin' whenever he calls I think having an ally in the Core would be a good thing. Strange as it is to think." Mal stretched and stood up to get something to eat. "Not entirely sure Badger and Sir Harrow really count."

Riddick studied the tall man thoughtfully and nodded. "Contacts, rather than allies really. Though if you wanted to sail towards Persephone after we pick up Jayne and Ciara, Shazza's last wave mentioned Badger might have work for us. An' Shazza is an ally."

"Badger's been a lot more welcoming of late," The Captain observed as he began to prepare a frozen food pack. "Guess it pays to be friendly with his cousin. How's she doin'?"

"She's well." Simon chuckled, "Apparently Persephone is a little boring after being on Serenity. She sends her regards."

"Dirtsides always borin'," Mal grinned, his mood on the upturn at the news of Shazza. "But if we don't pick up any jobs on the station we'll be in a decent spot to set course for White Sun."

"Maybe we could set down a day or two, see River's house? An' I could flush out Serenity's systems. Been a coupla months since we've done that." Kaylee asked hopefully. "Eavesdown don't charge an arm an' a leg like Ariel do."

Riddick smiled as he smelt Mal considering the notion. "It isn't a bad thought," The Browncoat allowed. "Have to see about Badger's job and how quick he wants it done. But if it's somethin' ain't urgent, don't see why we can't do that little thing. Make a few repairs while we've got the cash."

"Oughta head to Beylix if we want parts, they'll have 'em cheaper than Persephone," Wash suggested. "Kalidisa system ain't too far outta the way. Go to the station and then head to Beylix, get the parts and head for Persephone?"

"Let's keep it in mind," Mal nodded. "Gotta take jobs as they come."

"Well we're on course for the station now," Riddick shook his head at Kaylee when she would have opened her mouth to press the point. Mal had an acrid note to his scent that said he'd had enough of the piloting and course setting by committee and if they pushed he'd dig his heels in and they'd do nothing but jobs for the next four months, the ship falling apart around them.

"An' just 'cause we're flush don't mean we don't all got chores." Zoe added. "So let's get to 'em."

That pretty much ended the conversation and the crew dispersed to their various duties.
He slid down the ladder into their bunk and shut the hatch with a sharp clang of metal before turning towards River. "Captain ain't the only one whose heart nearly stopped," He growled pulling her close and rubbing his lips over her neck. "I damn near killed Haymer."

River's quick hands were already working on his clothing, pulling his shirt over his head. "Don't care for surprises like that," She agreed.

Boots, trousers, shirts and undergarments were methodically stripped in between caresses and finally he was able to tumble her back onto their bed, fix his mouth to her breasts and rub his cock against her mound, feeling her sweet damp heat. "No one will ever take you from me Qing Xiāng." He growled the words against her skin, "You're mine. Mine." He inhaled the scent of her, heady with honey and plums, her spine arching to push her pretty shuāng rǔ to his mouth.

She couldn't reach his jī ba the way he was positioned and for the moment he was glad of that. A near miss like today had the animal howling to claim her. Making her gasp, moan and beg for him would satisfy it some. Her hands were clinging to his shoulders, petting his skull as she writhed under his touch and he couldn't help the possessive smile that curved his lips.

"Richard… please…" Her gasping cry of his name was better than any music and he began to kiss his way down her body, draping her thighs over his shoulders to feast on her. A long slow drag of his tongue from her yīn dào to her clit stilled her body in erotic shock for a moment before he wrapped his lips around her engorged and aching yīn dì and began to suck on the sensitive nub of flesh. River's hips rolled up to meet his mouth with a moan of need and he groaned around her in response.

"That's my woman, my beautiful nǚ ren," He crooned smugly and slide one thick finger inside her, enough to tease but not enough for her to fall.

"Oh… tā mā de dì yù," She pushed her hips up to meet his finger and mewled as it wasn't enough. "Richard!"

"Hmmm…" He withdrew his digit and thrust his tongue inside her, groaning over her taste, teasing her for a bit with his mouth before returning to her clit. His lips surrounding the swollen heated flesh and his tongue lapping at her was just enough and Riddick couldn't help the groan of need in his chest as she fell abruptly, a long deep shudder rolling through her body with a shocked cry of pleasure on her lips.

"So beautiful," He growled and began to tease her all over again, licking and suckling gently on her yīn dì and sliding one thick finger back inside her yīn dào. "My beautiful woman. Mine."

"Yes…" She was shuddering, hips rolling to meet his finger thrusting inside her, her body winding tighter and tighter, "Please Riddick, please…"

Her hands tugged on his shoulders, hips pressing her clit up to his mouth and he finally gave into what they both needed, rising over her slender body and holding her thighs apart with his hands. To tease them both he rubbed the head of his diǎo at her opening before pushing slowly inside her. A guttural groan escaped his lips at how tight and wet she felt, her delicate tissues slowly stretching around his girth as he filled her without pause.

She was gasping, panting in need, her breasts heaving as he slowly and inexorably met her hips with his, sheathing his cock deeply in her body. "Ugmnhhh… Richard…oh…ohhh! Riddick… Riddick!"

A slow deliberate rotation of his hips and he moved inside her, her gasps rising to a near whine of need, her hands reaching for his chest, callused palms caressing his skin before he lowered himself to
her body, kissing her possessively. "My River. My beautiful woman." The scar on her palm met his and something seemed to pulse between them, a hot jolt of primitive need that had him withdrawing and just as abruptly slamming his cock home again.

Her cry of shocked ecstasy filled his ears and her legs wrapped around his waist, heels pressing to the base of his spine. He dropped his mouth to her neck, kissing and sucking on her skin and working his way down to her breasts and their tight rosy tips. His hips withdrew from hers and with another sharp thrust met them again and she whined deep in her throat, pressing up to him. "More… Riddick please…"

He growled, nipping at her skin with his teeth, sucking marks into her skin as he began to move inside her, hard and deep, thrusting almost roughly, accompanied by her screams of his name as she began to fall. Her body snapped tight around his, gripping him like a vise as he fucked her through her orgasm and drove her to another. His own fall came in a torrent of fire, filling her even as he continued on, unable to stop while she was crying out for more.

When the end came it was with a blinding burst of ecstasy as her body drew him deep inside, her cervix opening around the head of his cock, sucking him deep, milking his seed into her hungry womb while they both went limp together.

River woke with Riddick still lying heavily on top of her, his body sheathed within hers, and moaned softly at the sensations of being filled but so gently it was like sweet torture. His arms were banded around her, face pressed to her neck and even as the sound escaped her, his body began to harden inside her.

The feeling was exquisite, his thickness growing, the length of him stiffening and stretching her body, tiny shocks of pleasure sending heat tingling through every nerve ending. "Unghh…ahhh…" She moaned again as his hips moved minutely. He was incredibly deep inside her body, she could feel him pushing past her cervix, opening her further. She'd never had the opportunity to examine how her body felt in detail, the sensation of growing wet and aroused without any other stimuli besides his body in hers. The slow slickening of her flesh, the simultaneous tightening and softening of tissues as her body welcomed his and began to build towards her fall.

One of his hands slid up and cupped her breast, thumbing her nipple while his mouth began to lazily suck on the other. "Hmm…" That wonderful roll of chocolate and coffee in his voice rubbed against her skin. "Thinkin' I ought to try something new with you River."

The image in his mind, of his body filling hers while the toy Inara had given her filled her pi gu, had her gasp in surprise as she Read it. Surprised or not, she couldn't hide her scent from her husband, her interest and curiosity as easy for him to smell on her as it was simple for her to read his mind. "Ooohhh…"

"Somethin' to keep in mind," He growled against her skin. "Less you want to try it now?"

"Yes," She nodded. "It's new… no memories to overcome…" His touch was making it difficult to concentrate. "You… your…"

"My cock belongs in your pretty pussy," He growled, giving a thrust of his hips to emphasize the fact. "Just thought you might wanna try your toy in your sweet little pi gu. See if you like it." He reached under the bed for her box and pulled it out, putting the toy against his skin to warm the plasti.
"Yes…please…” She nodded. "How… how will you…” River moaned as he pushed inside her, losing track of her question.

"Gonna turn you over, put you up on your knees," He withdrew from her body, eliciting a groan of protest from both of them, suited action to words. River shuddered as his hands rubbed over her skin, cool in the air after the warmth of his body against hers, tugging and teasing on her nipples, his fingers rubbing her clit. His thigh pushed between hers, spreading her knees apart. She felt rather than saw when he picked up the toy, rubbing it against her clit and yīn dào, using her honey to dampen it while his thick blunt fingers toyed with her gāng, rubbing and pressing, carefully spreading her open.

River gasped at the alien feeling, so different from anything she'd ever felt, his warm fingers gentle and careful as he began to open her, one thick finger penetrating her, covered with some slick oil. "Uhhghhh… oh!"

His inhale of her scent must have reassured him as to her pleasure at the sensation because he continued, his other hand pushing the toy inside her, filling her with it. "Forgot this has a vibrate setting… have to turn that on when we push it in your pretty ass Qīng Xiāng."

"Ohhh, ohh god!" The second finger combined with the toy inside her was almost shocking in how full it made her. "Oohhh…Riddick…" Heat prickled over her body as he continued to open her, her yīn dào clutching around the toy as his other hand teased her clit slowly. "So full…"

"Be even better with my diǎo inside you," He growled and rubbed the head of it over her ass, teasing her with the sensation of his precum on her skin. "How's it feel… gonna add a third finger…"

"Yes…” She nearly mewled her need, wanting to push back against his slick fingers. "Ohhh… ohhh… ohhh…unghhh!" A third digit penetrated her just as his free hand tugged on her clit and a slow hot roll of bliss shuddered through her, her thighs slickening with honey as she fell.

"Beautiful," Riddick growled and she could feel the volcano of lust for her near boiling over inside him. "So fucking gorgeous River. Gonna fuck your ass and your tight little táo huā yuán real good. My little double penetration queen. Know how rare it is a woman enjoys this?" His teeth nipped at the nape of her neck as he growled. "Are you ready?"

"Yes…yes please… my Riddick… fuck me…please…” Her fall had done nothing to mitigate her need, only teasing her with the possibilities of more. When he slowly removed the toy she nearly sobbed at how empty she felt. The withdrawal of his fingers from her ass was worse somehow, the new stretched feeling already something longed for.

"Your ass first," He told her wiping his hands on something astringent in her nose before she felt them on her hips holding her steady. "Any time you need to, you tell me and we'll stop. I promise."

The toy was warm from her body still, slick with her honey and the oils he’d smeared on it and wider than his three fingers. The round blunt head pushed against her ass, stretched as she was, a slow hot ache and she moaned as it slowly penetrated her, "Ahh! Ohh…unghh… oh tā mā de dì yù…” She gasped as he pushed it carefully inside, stopping as she cried out. "Ohhh…don't stop… don't stop…"

Deeper inside her than his fingers had reached, the circumference uniform, she could feel where it ended inside her body. When Riddick gave the end of it a tap she moaned as it moved and his other hand stroked her clit, "Too much?"

"Ohhh…its… it's big… but… unghhh," She shuddered, feeling her body break out in gooseflesh, nipples painfully tight with arousal.
"Not too much then," His voice was low with need and satisfaction as he inhaled her scent greedily. "You look so beautiful River. Gonna start to push my cock in you. Wanna feel how tight and wet you are. Fuck you like the animal I am."

"Yes… unghhh…yes please…Riddick, please…" She shifted instinctively, opening for him and was rewarded with the hot thick head of his jī ba pressing to the opening of her yīn dào, and slowly pushing inside. "Ohhh…oh Riddick! I…" His fingers paused in their slow stroking of her clit and she moaned in protest.

"You're so tight," He groaned behind her. "Feels so good River." His cock was stretching her, a hot sweet sting as he filled her again, pushing deep until she felt him at her cervix again. "You want more Qīng Xiāng?"

"Ohhh…" That hot flush of pleasure was radiating from her center. "Riddick…yes… more… fill me…fuck me…" She was incoherent with it, the craving for more of him, aching deep inside.

"That's my woman," Darkly satisfied, his voice filled her ears as he thrust sharply forward and filled her completely. "I want to watch you fall, over and over." His hand left her belly for a moment to pat her ass and move between their bodies for a moment. Inside her, she felt the toy stir, a slowly vibrating thrust teasing her until he changed the setting.

"Oh god…." She'd been so overwhelmed at being filled she hadn't considered how it would feel to have her ass fucked, movement in and out of her body sending entirely new sensations over her. "Ooohhh… Oh uunghhh…" Not content with that Riddick began to thrust in time with the toy, his fingers stroking her clit wickedly, playing her body as skillfully as she would a cortex. "Unghh! Unghh! Ridd-ick!" The fall that burst through her was shocking in its abrupt intensity.

Riddick's body was all she could think of or feel or desire. Fall after fall shattering through her as he used the toy to drive all thought from her head, pulling her up to press his chest to her spine and kissing her hard on the mouth, one hand rough and wonderful on her breasts while the other pulled and stroked her clit.

His low, animalistic growls and moans, her desperate cries and pleas for more filled the air of their bunk. She could feel him, falling inside her, their bodies driving each other past reason and purely human endurance or need. The toy drove further into her with his final thrusts and she screamed his name as they fell again.

She was barely conscious, only able to sigh as she felt his hands on her, gently cleaning her up, something pleasantly citrus and sweet in her nose and on her body. Being lifted and cradled against his chest and then carefully laid in the bed, held closely against him as the lights were turned to full dark. "Hmm… mine." She roused enough to kiss his chest. "My Richard, my Riddick."

"My River." He responded, a smile in his voice. "Rest zhì 'ài. Wore ourselves out an' that's not bad at all."

"Hmm… love you." She heard him say it back just before she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So Mal's got some of his answers…unfortunately for him he still doesn't know everything. We'll just keep River's assassiny type triggers to ourselves for now.
Hope folks liked where this went, I really wanted to surprise everyone.

Chinese Translations:

Xuě shàng jiā shuāng (to add hail to snow (idiom); one disaster on top of another / to make things worse in a bad situation)

Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pí huà (What shit/the fuck are you saying)

Āi yā (interjection of wonder, shock or admiration)

lè sè (Garbage, trash)

láng (wolf)

Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)

shuāng rǔ (breasts)

jī ba (dick / penis)

yīn dào (vagina)

yīn dì (clitoris)

nǚ ren (wife)

tā mā de dì yù (fucking hell)

diǎo (cock)

pì gu (butt)

gāng (anus)

táo huā yuán (vagina (lit. "garden of peach blossoms"))

zhì 'ài (most beloved)

Quote Sources:

Be thou familiar, but my no means vulgar. The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel – Hamlet, William Shakespeare

To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them? – Hamlet, William Shakespeare

God the first garden made, and the first city Cain. – The Garden. Essay V, Abraham Cowley

There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave, to tell us this. – Hamlet, William Shakespeare
Time Has A Way You Know

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Checking in on the bridge the next morning got him a smirk from Wash and a semi-strangled looking glare from Mal. "I swear by the dear and fluffy lord that I am putting sound proofing in the walls between the bunks," The Captain told him flatly.

"Problem?" He managed to keep his voice mildly curious even as the animal was howling in triumph. There was nothing it liked better than for everyone to know River belonged to him. And he to her.

"Yeah, you might could say," Mal nodded. "I've got Zoe an' Wash across from me but I don't hear much from them. You're on the other end of the hall and River's voice screamin' woke me out of a sound sleep."

"You don't hear much out of Wash an' Zoe because you're on different shifts." Riddick shrugged. "Your boat, you wanna sound proof the bunks I ain't gonna argue." He kept his gaze on the instruments and did his best to keep his irritation from tensing his shoulders.

"What I want not to wake up thinkin' someone's bein' murdered in her bed," He was told flatly and got an annoyed growl in return.

"Mal," Wash's laid back voice cut through the tension. "Would you try to tell Zoe what she could or couldn't do in her bedroom?" The pilot spun in his chair lazily.

"Not unless I wanted her mares leg pointed in my direction," Reynolds shook his head at the idea of trying to do any such thing.

"Then my advice is to let it go," The pilot flicked a few buttons. "Jayne's been putting up with it since they got on the boat and he hasn't complained much."

"What's Zoe got to do with it then?" Mal wasn't getting and Riddick took a seat, shaking his head over how obtuse the man was being.

"You're trying to tell someone about ten times more dangerous than my wife and just as stubborn what to do or not do in his bedroom," Wash shrugged. "How'd you think that's gonna fly? Especially given that River, by their traditions, is his wife?"

Mal pushed himself up from the navigator's chair with a grumble about looking into the cost of sound proofing. "We're gonna come up with a new schedule that don't involve me sleeping at the same time as you an' River." He told Riddick and left the bridge in an effort to get the last word.

Riddick rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair, "Man acts like sex is a four letter word an' he's a preacher."

Wash chuckled, "To be fair, I was getting a few echoes of what was going on in your bunk while I was up here. So that is a bit loud. Not that Zoe and I have any room to throw stones." He slanted an amused look at his co-pilot.

The Furyan chuckled lazily, stretching his arms as he checked their course. "River an' I can hear you an' Zoe goin' at it every time. Furyan ears don't miss much."
Wash laughed and shook his head, "Maybe you should've told Mal that."

He gave another lazy shrug, "Figured I'd wait on that 'til Jayne an' Ciara were back. Give Mal a hard time about hearin' him an' Nandi goin' at it back at Heart of Gold. That'll tickle Jayne about half to death."

The pilot laughed, nearly spitting his coffee all over the console, "You did not!"

"Oh yeah," Riddick chuckled. "Me an' River both. An' then he got caught by Inara sneakin' outa Nandi's room the next mornin'."

"Now I'm sorry I missed it," Wash was shaking his head and wiping coffee off his chin. "She give him hell?"

"She actually was pleased for him an' Nandi, Mal was the one embarrassed." Riddick shrugged, "Cute as hell watchin' River blush whenever she caught some of the sounds they're making. Woman can take anything I dish out, an' give it right back at me. But she overhears someone else and she's pinker than Kaylee's frilly dress."

"Hope Mal doesn't embarrass her about him hearing the two of you," Wash made a minor course correction.

"Nah," Silver eyes gleamed appreciatively. "She don't get embarrassed about what we do. Just thinks its private what other people do."

"So I guess you two got up to something special last night?" The jovial man tilted his head. "Or was it just the close call with Haymer recognizing our fugitives?"

"Bit of both," Riddick eyed the other man thoughtfully. "You fishin' for gossip Wash?"

He got a grin in return. "Maybe I'm looking for pointers."

Riddick laughed in spite of himself, "Sorry. Your wife can maybe get it outa River, but I don't talk 'bout sex unless its with the woman I'm sexin'. Never saw the point of it. Most of it seems to be braggin' or lyin'."

"And you don't bother with either." Wash shrugged, "Ah well. Had to try." His grin spread wider. "Be at the station in a half day. I can't wait to tell Jayne we got to do battle in a whorehouse and he missed it."

"He'll be more upset about missing the fight than the whores," Riddick grinned in return. "And he'll really be annoyed to have missed another chance to scare Saffron."

"Oh yeah," Wash rubbed his hands together gleefully. "This is gonna be a fun day."

They'd arranged via wave to meet Jayne and Ciara at the post office since the man who ran it was an old friend of Mal's. Mal's old pal had waved Serenity about holding a package for them so they'd have to go there anyway. But Kaylee's attention had been caught by a barker and Simon, wanting to do something nice for her, had purchased tickets. River had nudged him, and so now she and Riddick enjoying some dim lighting and listening to the patter of the barker as he went through his spiel again.
"We are not alone!" The man's voice was pure showmanship. It called up cortex images of old carnivals on earth that was with striped tents, elephants and dancing bears. "Forget what you think you know. Forget what your mother told you when she tucked you in at night, forget the lies of our oppressive, cabalistic Allied governments! Behind this curtain lies the very secret they don't want you to see, the most astounding scientific find in the history of humanity. Proof! Of Alien life. Yes, go ahead and laugh, sir, but what you see inside this room will change your life forever! It will haunt your dreams and harrow, YES, your very soul. For six bits you can unlock—this lady wants to go, I cannot allow her to be near such wonder, such thrilling horror, unescorted. Who will go with her? Who will see the unholy truth, the only captured specimen, in existence, of Alien life!"

Riddick leant against the back wall of the booth, his arm around River's waist and chuckled as the Barker waxed enthusiastic about his subject. Kaylee and Simon were staring at the 'alien' specimen in its water tank sized jar and Simon nodded, "Yep. That's a cow fetus."

Kaylee was trying to see it, "Guess so... Does seem to have an awful lot of limbs..."

Her erstwhile beau smiled as he explained, "It's mutated. Most of the breeding on the outer planets was done by shipping DNA scrip instead of animals. The first herds were grown in labs, then set loose. Every now and then..."

"But cow? How'd you figure?" His sweetheart still wasn't seeing it.

He gestured to the base of the jar, "It's upside down."

Her head tilted sideways and she nodded, "Okay, then. Cow."

Simon laughed self-deprecatingly, "And I'm out twelve bits. I really know how to show a girl a... disgusting time."

The mechanic shook her head and smiled at him, "Oh, it's sweet. Poor little thing never even saw the light of day, now it's in show business!"

Riddick peered at the thing in the jar more closely and shook his head, "Could've at least given it claws or somethin'." He murmured to River. She wrinkled her nose at the thought and he grinned at her.

"You manage to find the bright side to every single thing." Simon told Kaylee admiringly. "I wish I could do that."

She smiled back at him, "Also, we some quiet for five whole minutes..."

Simon glanced at the jar, "We are not alone, remember?"

"He won't squawk. An' neither will Rick or River. Tell me more good stuff about me," Kaylee cajoled.

He kissed her hands, "Well, you're kind of a genius when it comes to machines... you always say what you mean, and your eyes..."

Kaylee smiled a bit teasingly, "Yeah? Eyes, yeah?"

Simon shook his head, "I don't know how to..." He stopped and added jokingly, "Plus, every other girl I know is either married, professional, or closely related to me, so you are more or less literally the only girl in the world."
Kaylee frowned at him, "That's a hell of a thing to say."

He shook his head frantically, "I... Kaylee I wasn't finished—"

She put her hands on her hips, "No, no, I get it. Back on Osiris you probably had nurses and debutantes crawling all over you. But down here at the bottom of the barrel, there's just me."

"But that isn't even—" Simon protested.

"Well, I'm glad I rated higher than dead bessie here." She snapped at him, "Nee gao-soo na niou, ta yo shwong mei-moo?"

Riddick caught her arm as she nearly stormed out, "Mèi mei, let him finish. You don't know what he was going to say." He looked at Simon, "Dì di, you'd better dig yourself out of this hole right quick."

Simon nodded and moved towards Kaylee, meeting her eyes. "Every other woman I know is married, professional or closely related. You are pretty much the only girl in the world. And even if I was on Osiris or Ariel or Persephone, it wouldn't matter. You'd still be the only girl in the world to me. I look at you and I just..."

He shrugged uncomfortably as Wash and Zoe came in, "Oh my god, it's grotesque! Oh, and there's something in a jar."

Kaylee's face and scent had softened from the hard, hurt expression she'd worn but it was clear that Simon had very nearly screwed up again. Zoe took in the situation with a shake of her head, "Simon, you usually make a habit of tryin' to eat shoe leather?"

Simon sighed as he kissed Kaylee's slightly dirty knuckles without a sign of noticing anything but her, "This may come as a shock, but I'm actually not very good at talking to girls. I'm even worse with the pretty ones. And I'm completely out of my element."

Zoe smiled, "Why, is there someone you are good at talking to?"

The doctor shook his head, "As River so often tells me, I'm a boob." He shyly offered Kaylee his arm, "But maybe I could escort you and treat you to an ice planet? I'd like to think I'm better at showing my admiration than I am talking about it. Especially to a girl as pretty as you."

Kaylee's smile was almost as shy, "I'd like that."

River looked at the two of them, "Still require chaperones." She looked over at Wash who was speaking to the cow fetus. "Perhaps we should leave Mr. Pilot man alone to communicate with his new found friend?"

"Do not fear me. Ours is a peaceful race, and we must live in harmony..."

Riddick chuckled, "Yeah, seems like he'll need privacy for this sorta talk." He nodded at Zoe and patted Wash on the back before escorting River out behind the their siblings. "And we can keep Simon from choking on his toes again."

Simon tossed them an amused and grateful look over his shoulder, "It is greatly appreciated."

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River slowed to a halt, her ice cream (such as it was) dripping as she heard Mal calling out, "Amnon, How've you been?" People brushed past her, grumbling in irritation that she was blocking the way
"River," Kaylee had been teaching Simon how to eat an ice planet but he turned to look at his sister when she drew to a stop beside him. "What's wrong?"

"Post office," She murmured. "Prime location for 'wanted' posters. Frequent by mercs often. Images on the walls, screaming to greedy minds. Promises of rich rewards."

"I'm thinkin' we ought to avoid it." Riddick growled his agreement. "Kaylee? Will you let Mal an' the rest know we've beat feet back to Serenity?"

The mechanic nodded and Simon kissed her cheek, "Thank you for a lovely day." He smiled at her. "We'll pick up some more supplies on our way." He slanted at glance at River and she nodded.

"Shouldn't be any trouble," She agreed. "Post office is just…problematic."

Kaylee smiled at them. "We're close enough to hear the cap'n so I'm safe 'nough. I'll let Zoe know an' she'll fill the rest of 'em in."

The Reader smiled, "Thank you. Tell him we'll handle resupply on the ammunition as well. Shouldn't take long."

The sunny natured woman nodded and hurried forward to greet Zoe while the three fugitives drifted backwards towards another wing of the station. Safely out of sight Simon turned and River met his gaze, "Something else is wrong." He stated with certainty. "A few wanted posters wouldn't be an issue, not if the man who runs the place is a friend of Mal's."

"No," River shook her head. "But Mal's friend is not a strong man, not able to withstand pressure. And…" She frowned, the answer to her questions tantalizingly out of reach. "There's something… it'll draw the Feds. Best to not give the postmaster any more information to give up. O swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable."

Riddick turned to look back at the postal center with a growl, "I know a way to keep him from spillin' his guts," He fingered the knife at his belt. "He can't talk if he's busy holding his intestines inside."

Simon shook his head, "I doubt that would help in this situation. Mal would be upset. He accepts that River's a Reader. But he doesn't quite…believe it yet. If that makes sense. And he's not quite as practical about preemptive strikes as Zoe."

"Yeah, upsettin' Mal's somethin' to be avoided I guess." River didn't resist as he pulled her closer to his side.

"He'll be upset enough," River murmured leaning against him. "But I can't see why. It's just a blank."

"Let's just get the supplies like we said and get back to the ship," Simon suggested with a slightly nervous look around. "This station is a lot less fun when we're worried about being caught."

"Truer words were never spoken," Riddick nodded his agreement.
River tilted her head and frowned, pausing mid motion as she was picking up the last of the foodstuffs. Riddick had already finished putting away the ammunition and ordinance they’d picked up and was sitting at the table with tea while Simon took the labels off the cans so she could write on the metal. "Uh oh." She murmured. Simon looked at her in concern while Riddick's frown could have blotted out any of the suns in the nearby systems.

"Uh oh?" He repeated ominously. "River, what are you seein'?"

"Wanted posters were not the only things waiting at the post office." She shook her head and looked at them. "Captain and Zoe are very upset. Dead man had himself shipped to them."

"Through the post service?" Simon actually seemed shocked at the illegality of the action.

"Everythin' we've been through and that's what surprises you?" Riddick smirked at him and Simon sighed in resignation.

"I'll admit, it's not the worst thing we've seen. But it is… very wrong. Mal's friend could lose everything if it came out that a body was shipped through his station." Simon told them seriously and River smiled. Her big brother was a very good man.

"That's not all that's wrong," She told them with a worried wrinkle to her forehead. "And though mine arm should conquer twenty worlds, there's a lean fellow beats all conquerors. I can't… quite See, but there's something…"

"Of course there is," Riddick shrugged. "If Mal's involved there's gonna be trouble."

"Shea and Ciara are with them though," River smiled slightly. "They're close. We should go down and meet them."

Simon took the last canned good from her hand and labeled it before setting the shiny tin into the cabinet. "Good idea."

They opened the ramp to the cargo bay just as Mal and the others were walking up and Riddick grinned as the Captain nearly jumped in surprise at his arrival being anticipated. "Mal," He nodded to the other Browncoat. "We cleared a spot for your friend."

River waved them in and watched as Mal and Zoe set the coffin down, gently opening the lid. Jayne sent Riddick and Simon one of his lightning fast smiles in greeting while Ciara gave River a hug but the somber mood emanating from the Captain and First Mate curtailed any loud enthusiastic welcome.

"Thought ya were gonna meet us all at the post office?" Jayne asked quietly.

"Woulda, but River had a flash, saw the wanted posters they got there. Figured we didn't need to show our faces for a ready comparison." Riddick replied just as quietly, watching as the lid to the coffin was removed.

"Captain, if I might advise caution," Simon began.

Jayne nodded his agreement, asking in his bluntly concerned manner, "How do we know he ain't plague-ridden or some such?"
Zoe shot him a look that should have silenced him. "We know."

Wash spread his hands as if to ward off potential problems even as he argued in his mild voice, "We don't, actually. I mean, I respect you guys have a history, but... What are you doing?"

Zoe had reached into the coffin, and pulled something from the corpses folded hands, a recorder it looked like and Riddick frowned. How many people had the presence of mind to record a message to put in with their body really? Most folks put off thinking about death as much as possible. He glanced at River and she nodded, her agreement with his thoughts plain, "Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign is worth ambition, though in hell: better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

Riddick frowned down at the young man, her words striking a chord of suspicion. "He don't smell."

Mal nodded, "I know. He's been decently preserved."

The Furyan shook his head, "He don't smell like embalmin' fluid or nothin'." He looked at the Captain, "What're the odds he could've afforded a Core type preservation where his body looks fresh as if he's asleep?" Mal frowned as he followed that line of thought and apparently didn't like where it led.

Kaylee was leaning against Simon's side for comfort, "He's so young..."

The doctor wrapped his arm around her waist and rubbed her back gently, looking at Mal, "If you'd like... I could do a proper autopsy for you—"

"Cut him up?" Kaylee was near tears.

Simon kissed her cheek, "It looks as though the Captain will be responsible for notifying his next of kin. Sometimes knowing how someone died, that it wasn't painful, or that it was quick... sometimes it eases the blow to the family." He explained to her gently. "And I feel compelled to offer help and that's the only way I really can."

"Not just yet, thank you doctor." Mal shook his head, his gaze back on Zoe, "What do you got?"

Riddick listened as Zoe turned the recorder on, the voice hesitant and weak at first, like Mattie had been until they'd gotten him an oxygen mask before it settled into a rhythm. The voice, as Kaylee had observed, was young, a rueful tenor. "Uh. Okay. Um, recording... Hi, I guess. It's me. Tracey. This is a message for Zoe, and for Malcolm Reynolds, and I really hope you all are the ones listening to it. Or, I guess I don't. I guess I hope I'm upright and telling you this tale myself, and we're laughing about how stupid I am, but that don't look likely."

Riddick moved closer to listen, River at his side, her head tilted to the side as she evaluated the recording as the voice continued, "No, it's more probable I've gotten myself dead, which is a shame if you're me. I'll spare you the boring details, falling in with untrustworthy folk, making a bunch of bad calls... All that matters is I expect to be shuffled off, and you two are the only people I trust to get me where I'm going. Which is home. I'd like my body to be with my folks on St Albans. We got the family plot there, and my mom and dad deserve to know I died. If you can come up with some heroic lie as to the how, I'd be... no."

River's scent had grown hot with steel and blood as her Reader's brain ticked over and Riddick looked down at the body in the box. The recording continued on even as he stared at the young man, "I'd just like to be able to lie with my kin, and for them to know that's what I wanted. It's funny. We went to war never looking to come back, but it's the real world I couldn't survive. You two carried
me through that war. Now I need you to carry me just a little bit further. If you can. Tell my folks that I'm at peace and all. When you can't run anymore, you crawl, and when you can't do that... well, you know the rest. Thanks, both of you. Oh. Yeah. Make sure my eyes is closed, will you?"

River had moved closer, pressing against his side and shook her head, "Dreams that are not dreams." She murmured. "No heartbeat. Good-night, sweet prince; and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. But no angels sing, and he does not rest. A mystery wrapped in a riddle tied with an enigma."

Behind him, Riddick heard Wash heading for the stairs and Mal's voice calling in question after him, "Wash?"

Riddick kissed River's head, "You an' Simon… put your thoughts to what could be goin' on with the corpse would you?"

She nodded as Wash turned back to explain his sudden exit, "St Albans ain't but two days ride, we burn hard enough."

Mal nodded and Riddick began to follow the pilot up the stairs. He could hear Mal speaking still, presumably to Inara, "This might make your schedule a little—"

Her voice held a wealth of compassion, "It's all right."

River watched as Book read from his bible over the coffin. She couldn't smooth out her frown, couldn't figure out what was wrong with the entire picture she was seeing. Ciara and Jayne were working with Simon and Riddick, weights and hand to hand respectively but she couldn't muster the interest to join them. Book's voice was a low murmur of what was meant to be reassuring words. "Now see that noble and most sovereign reason like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh," She murmured trying to focus her mind and find what eluded her.

"River?" Kaylee's kind voice pulled her gently from her thoughts. "Y' all right?" The smiling brown eyes of Simon's sweetheart were darker with sorrow as she looked from River to the coffin and back again. "I guess you've seen a lot worse."

River nodded absently, "I have. But it's still sad. I just…" She shook her head, "I can't get a handle on what bothers me about it. Besides him being so young and it being sad, I mean." She added the clarification. "Something's wrong but…" She sighed, "I don't have all the variables."

"So do somethin' else an' let the back a your brain work on it," Kaylee suggested. "That always works for me when I'm worried about Serenity."

River nodded slowly, "You're right. Maybe you could give me another cooking lesson?"

Kaylee's smile was wider and happier than it had been since Mal had escorted a coffin onto Serenity. "Now that we can do. If you picked up the spices we was lookin' for."

"Would I forget rosemary and marjoram?" River gasped in mock affront, "You wound me."

"Not yet, but I will if you forgot the cinnamon an' cloves." Kaylee teased back as they headed for the steps.

"We didn't forget anything," River insisted as she and Kaylee entered the galley to find the ship's senior officers at the table with Inara, laughing fit to bust. River smiled and tugged Kaylee over to the
counter with her hoping their presence wouldn't disturb the others. Apparently rice wine or whiskey of some sort had lubricated the conversational wheels nicely. "We can listen and make some dinner for them, soak up the alcohol." She murmured to Kaylee.

For all her lack of artifice, Kaylee did know when to stay quiet and she nodded, opening the cabinets and removing some tinned beef and dried barley along with the requisite spices while the Captain spoke through his laughter. "I really thought I was gonna die."

Inara was trying to clarify something, her confusion obvious, "How could he possibly have even..." Mal was nearly giggleing, "The colonel was dead drunk. Three hours pissing on about the enlisted men, they're scum, they're not fighters, and he passes right out. Boom."

"We couldn't even move him." Zoe shortled, "So Tracey just snipped it right off his face."

The Captain nodded, "And you never seen a man more proud of his mustache than Colonel Orbin. In all my life I will never love a woman the way this officer loved that lip ferret."

"Giant walrussy thing, all waxed up..." Zoe interjected with the description.

"Did he find out?" Inara looked from one to the other and the two Browncoats burst into laughter.

Mal, nearly gasping with mirth, nodded, "The next morning, he wakes up, and it's gone. He's furious, but he can't actually say, you know, 'someone stole my mustache'. So he calls out all the platoons—"

"We thought he was gonna shoot us—" Zoe told her.

"And he's eyeballing the men something fearsome, not a word, and he comes to Tracey..." Mal paused, near bursting with pride and hilarity, "And Tracey is wearing the gorrannn mustache on his face."

Dark eyes sparkling Zoe concurred, "He glued it on."

"Staring the old man down, wearing his own damn... Oh god..." Mal's laugh faltered and he looked into his drink, the reality of the man's death hitting him again.

River swayed slightly as his grief washed over her, grateful that Inara was trying to help, sympathetically attempting to jumpstart the conversation once again, "Well, the colonel must have said something to—"

She didn't get to finish as the ship rocked with the force of an explosion. "Wǒ de mā!" She steadied Kaylee as they both clung to the counter.

Zoe was rising from her chair immediately sobering up, "Are we hit?"

Mal was muttering as they both raced towards the bridge, "Too damn close—"

River looked at Kaylee, "Better head to the engine room. Wash might need your help."

"An' Rick'll need yours," Kaylee quickly put the foodstuffs back into the cabinets and headed back to her domain while River ran for the bridge.
Mal and Zoe were eerily in tune with each other considering that neither of them were Readers or Furyan. She supposed war bonds were beyond description, Mal and Zoe were as close to brother and sister as she and Simon in the way they behaved. But it was very disconcerting to have the same memory of Tracey come at her mind from two different perspectives while she followed them to the bridge. She supposed it was due to the shots fired at the ship, as they echoed oddly through her mind and back from the memory.

The temple might have been beautiful once, but it was an empty bombed out shell now, with a boy she recognized as Tracey sitting on guard. Well, she wrinkled her nose mentally, as on guard as anyone could be who's put down his rifle and decided to have a meal of beans. The Alliance soldier would have made it all the way across the line to cut Tracey's throat if it weren't for Zoe coming up behind the enemy soldier. She drew a knife across his throat before Tracey could even raise his rifle. Blood spattered across Tracey's face and Zoe's being was filled with satisfaction in a job well done, one of her people saved a pointless death.

Tracey sort of gulped down his shock, "Thanks. Didn't know you were there."

This Zoe wasn't Wash's wife, she of the small amused smiles, witty admonishments and warm eyes, stone cold she looked at him, "That's sort of the point. Stealth, you may have heard of it."

"I don't think they covered that in basic." The boy offered his thin explanation as Zoe scooped up the extra rifle.

Dry as dust she eyed him up and down, "Well, at least they covered 'Dropping your weapon so you can eat beans and get yourself shot'."

Now he had the grace to act sheepish, "Yeah, I got a badge in that." He seemed to realize she was out of patience with tomfoolery, "Won't happen again."

"It does, I'm just gonna watch." She sat for a moment cleaning her knife, still alert for any sign of movement.

"Anthing interesting out there, you don't mind my asking?" Tracey put away his beans to concentrate on her.

Zoe nodded towards the line behind him, "'Bout 30 troops behind those buildings. Mortars, but no rollers yet. I expect they plan to pick at us a spell before they charge. They had two scouts sniffin, about ten yards out, but I took 'em down."

River watched Tracey's face change to visibly impressed as opposed to slightly scared, "I didn't hear a single thing."

Her manner was kindly condescending, "First rule of battle, little one. Never let 'em know where you are."

River's perspective twisted somewhat to include the captain's as he ran into the temple, screaming and firing behind him. He dove for cover over a wall and landed near to Tracey, bullets whizzing harmlessly over his head.

Zoe continued dryly, "Of course, there's other schools of thought..."

Mal was laughing as he scrambled over to them, "Oh! That was bracing. They don't like it when you shoot at them. I worked that out myself." He caught his breath, still grinning and River wondered at how bright and optimistic he seemed. Sergeant Malcolm Reynolds still had his faith and he was
lighter for it.

Zoe was all business though, "Did you find Vitelli?"

Mal scoffed, "Vitelli's out of it. That bumblebee laid down arms at the first sign of inevitable crushing defeat. Can you imagine such a cowardly creature?" He shook his head.

Apparently attempting to behave like a grownup soldier Tracey asked, "Northwest quadrant's open, then?"

His sergeant didn't answer the question, "Tracey. Ain't you been killed yet?"

The private sent a sheepish look at the corporal who'd saved his pi gu. "No fault of my own, I promise."

Mal sighed in disappointment, "I really wanted your beans."

Her mind still on something besides dinner Zoe looked around, "They're gonna be coming right through here. They got rollers?"

The tall Browncoat nodded, "They got every damn thing. How's the lieutenant?"

Apparently Tracey had an abundance of bravery and no sympathy for anyone without it, "He started creaming. All of a sudden, about his arms, where were his arms, we hadda go back and find 'em."

Zoe blinked, her inscrutable face confused, "What the hell hap—"

The private shook his head incredulously as he interrupted her, "He ain't even hurt! Got ten pretty fingers like the most of men, but he's screaming they're gone, crying." He indicated the near catatonic figure River could see out of Mal's eyes, "Then he ain't said a word in two hours."

"These kids..." Mal mourned with an angry sigh.

"Sir. Do we hold?" Zoe was looking around, evaluating their chances and not thinking much of them from that particular position.

Tracey shook his head, his abundant courage leaking away somewhat, "I don't want to die here. Forgive me saying, but this rock ain't worth it. Not our lives."

Mal's philosophical nature was evident even in the midst of the war he'd ultimately lose, "Everybody dies, Tracey. Someone's carrying a bullet for you right now, doesn't even know it." He smiled, "The trick is to die of old age before it finds you."

Zoe stood, "We can still cut through to the twenty second at the school system. Make a decent stand there."

Mal nodded as he finished reloading and picked up the rifle Zoe'd taken off the Alliance soldier she'd killed, "We can't do any good here. And I sure as hell ain't laying down arms. Zoe, you heard the Lieutenant give the order to join up with the twenty second?"

Without a qualm Zoe nodded, "I did."

"Round 'em up, then." Mal gave the command and looked at Tracey, "You also heard the lieu—"

Tracey seemed to have a habit of interrupting, "I wouldn't rat you out, Sarge, hell I—"
It was Mal's turn to cut him off, "Ain't me I worry on. Lieutenant gets his mind back in order, he shouldn't have this on his record. Weren't his fault he couldn't take it."

The boy made a disparaging face, "That's more'n he woulda done for—" 

River watched through Zoe's eyes as Mal raised a hand for quiet, his face intent. Tracey didn't get it, didn't hear the growing whine.

Zoe shouted, "Seeker!" She dove for cover as Mal threw a flare from his belt, the heat activating as he flung it overhead, a tiny missile bearing in on the three of them diverted to the flare and exploded overhead.

The light was blinding, shrapnel raining down as Mal dove over Tracey and the boy screamed in pain. River could see Mal's wounds, his back and arm bleeding, as he rolled off Tracey who'd been hit in the leg. Mal was cursing creatively, "Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng. Gorram hún dàn liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi."

The boy was panicking a bit, "Is it bad? Is it bad?"

Mal ignored his own wounds, "It's glorious." He called out to the rest of the squad, "We gotta move!"

Tracey was protesting, "I can't..."

His sergeant was calling out instructions, "Time to run! Zoe! Get the Lieutenant!"

The private shook his head, "Sarge, I really can't run here."

Mal shrugged, "Well, you know the old saying..." He hoisted Tracey over his shoulder just as a tank burst through the wall behind them.

River blinked as the memory faded, what had felt like ten minutes had only been a few seconds as the bridge took the place of the temple. Sergeant Reynolds and Corporal Alleyne were replaced by the Captain and his First Mate. The air of tension though, that was unchanged. She frowned and concentrated on pushing the memory away, grateful it hadn't been worse. Riddick's strong elegant mind was like an oasis and she let herself sink into it for a moment before she centered herself again. If they were being fired upon she couldn't afford to be distracted.

Riddick looked over his shoulder, confirming what his ears and nose told him, Mal, Zoe and River had entered the bridge right behind him. River's scent burned with irritation and from the slightly dazed look in her eyes she'd Read something she hadn't intended. Even as he watched her jaw firmed and her gaze sharpened. Taking his seat in the co-pilot position he looked at Wash, "Just let me know the game plan." He could trust River to keep it together while there was a crisis. And her scent wasn't wildly scattered or burning with fear or anger so likely she was just irked with herself.

Wash nodded intent upon his task, throwing his words over his shoulder as he worked, "They're behind us. Fired over the port bow."

"Warning shot?" Mal asked, worry riding his voice.
"They coulda hit us..." The pilot nodded.

Riddick cursed and looked at Zoe just as she realized the same thing he did, "Feds."

He jerked back as the cortex screen on the control panel came to life with a middle aged face topped with dark hair and a 'don't give a good gorrarn' sneer. The voice was just as unpleasant as the expression, "This is Lieutenant Womack of Allied Enforcement. You are in possession of stolen goods and are ordered to cut thrust and prepare for docking."

"What'n the…" Mal was confused.

"Think Saffron tipped them off?" Zoe wondered, obviously trying to figure out what they were supposed to have stolen.

Riddick frowned at the thought, "Where'd she even find a fed to talk to? Didn't seem like Haymer was gonna let her out of his sight for a good long time. Not to mention we didn't actually steal from him."

River shook her head, coming to stand behind him and her gentle hand rested on his shoulder in silent reassurance. "Durran wouldn't allow it. He doesn't want us endangered. Whatever they want with us, it hasn't come from Saffron. Shots in the dark, trying to break glass."

Mal seemed to accept her word and hit the screen com, "This is Captain Reynolds, I think there's been a mistake."

The Fed's voice was hard, "There's been a lot of mistakes, Captain. The latest of which is you taking that crate."

Riddick looked back at Zoe and the rest of them, everyone exchanging confused looks, as Mal repeated the word, "Crate?" He shook his head and addressed the screen again, "We took in a lot of inventory today. If something got mixed in, we'll sure hand it back, but I don't think we're your men. Let me check through the cargo, is it marked at all?"

Womack's voice turned ugly fast as lightning, "You might wanna think twice about playing games with me. I will blow you out into fragments."

Thankfully Mal did know how to bluff, "You do that, your precious crate gonna be in bitty shards. Now I got deliveries to make, officer, so you just lock onto my trajectory and I'll see if there's anything here fits your description." He turned off the screen.

Wash leaned back in his chair slightly and looked over at Riddick, "Police procedure has changed since I was little."

He shook his head, reaching back to cover River's knuckles with his palm, "Not that much. That's a wrong cop or I'm a lapdog."

Mal was clearly thinking of other things than police procedure, "They call back, you keep them occupied."

"What do I do, shadow puppets?" The pilot shook his head, a bit incredulously.

Book nodded, stepping up, "We'll take care of it." He looked at Riddick and River, "It might be that we'll need River's expertise with the cortex after a while but for now…"

River nodded, "Start without me, more digging later."
Zoe and Mal were discussing the situation and not paying much attention to the Shepherd or the rest of them, "I don't get this. They're after Tracey?"

"Or there's something else in that box." Mal nodded. He tuned into the other conversation and gave River and Book sharp glance. "If you've got a line on a way outa this Shepherd I'll be glad to hear it. But if the Shepherd needs you and we don't, head back on up here nī zi. I 'spect you'll know when that is. Right now, everybody with the extra senses come down and help us sort out what's going on with that crate and Tracey."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: And we're onto The Message. I've decided that with the changes I've made to skip Objects In Space because so many of the issues addressed in that episode have already been resolved. I might take bits and pieces from it and use them elsewhere but we won't be seeing the episode in its entirety. But I added in Dead or Alive so we're balancing out a bit.

Chinese Translations:

Mèi mei (little sister)
Dì di (younger brother)
Wǒ de mā (My mother! Mama mia! Similar to "Oh my God!" in usage)
pì gu (butt)
Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng (Fire and water have no mercy (idiom). forces of nature beyond human control / implacable fate)
hún dàn (bastard)
nī zi ((little girl) / (coll.) lass)

Script Chinese Translations:

Nee gao-soo na niou, ta yo shwong mei-moo? (script-Why don't you tell the cow about its beautiful eyes?)
liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi (script- Stupid son of a drooling whore and monkey)

Quote Sources:

O swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable - Romeo and Juliet - William Shakespeare

And though mine arm should conquer twenty worlds, there's a lean fellow beats all conquerors. – Old Fortunatus – Thomas Dekker
Good-night, sweet prince; and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

Now see that noble and most sovereign reason like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh – Hamlet – William Shakespeare
Riddick was frowning over the crate as he and Jayne took it apart, Mal and Zoe sifting through the packing and coming up with nothing. "Anything?" Mal asked as he threw the last of the straw to the floor.

"Not unless this crate's made a' magical wish-granting planks." Jayne shook his head and turned to look at Ciara and River, both of them carefully going through Tracey's clothing.

"There's no fluid seepage, no stink of decomposition," Riddick shook his head. "He'd been there a week. He shouldn't be fresh as a daisy still. Even if he could have afforded a Core type of preservation. Not much can hold out against nature takin' its course."

Mal looked over at them, instructing needlessly, "Check his pockets."

Kaylee was sitting with Simon, shaking her head, smelling confused and upset, "That ain't right..."

"Neither's being blowd up. There's nothing about this sits well with me." Mal shook his head.

River mimicked his motion, "Empty. The miserable have no other medicine, But only hope." She stared at the body settled so gently on the ground before they'd begun to search him. "He doesn't smell dead. He doesn't feel dead. He isn't saying anything. Even the dead on the derelict spoke. But he says nothing. There's something very wrong."

"I know that," Mal didn't quite roll his eyes. "They want this body for something, and I'm guessing it ain't a proper burial." He looked at Simon, "Well, doctor... I guess you are doing an autopsy after all."

Riddick and Jayne had carried Tracey to the infirmary and stripped him down as carefully as they could, River and Ciara going through his clothing even more thoroughly once off him, feeling the seams and shaking their heads at Mal. "Still nothing." Ciara told him quietly. "Why could they want him? He's dead. Whatever he knew is gone with him."

"Not... quite." River frowned as she stared at the boy on the table, covered with a sheet as Simon prepared to open him. "The undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns."

"You really think there's something in there," Zoe asked quietly. If River's quoting and allusions to death bothered the First Mate she didn't show it.

"Using corpses for smuggling is a time-honored repulsive custom." Mal replied, his gaze not on Tracey but River as she stared hard.

"Maybe it's gold!" Jayne offered trying to lighten the mood.

Zoe snapped her words out, "And maybe this was a friend of ours, and you wanna show a little respect."

"I got respect. But I'm just saying... gold..." Jayne shrugged. "Nobody wants ta cut on the kid, an' he's a Browncoat like us, we're likin' it even less. Just..." He sighed, "Tryin' ta... ya know."
Her dark face softened slightly, "Yeah, gold does cheer folks up."

"He's been opened before." Simon said quietly. His words drew the attention of everyone in the room.

"How's that?" Mal drew closer and Riddick frowned, something teasing at his memory.

"It's good work." The Doctor nodded, tracing his finger down the tiniest of lines on Tracey's chest. "The scar's nearly invisible, but..."

Mal frowned, visibly reluctant to give the go ahead but finally nodded, "Well, let's see what's in there."

Riddick frowned at the sudden sound of another heartbeat as Simon's scalpel drew the first thin thread of blood and River gasped in shock. "Wǒ cáo!"

Her curse was nearly drowned out by Tracey's scream as he sat up straight on the table. Mal, Zoe and Jayne immediately backed up, Simon standing and staring in shock. Tracey was looking in horror at his bleeding chest and then at Simon's hand holding the scalpel. Riddick cursed as Simon instinctively made a move to see to the wound and Tracey panicked.

The primal cry that ripped from his throat was hardly sane as he lunged off the table at Simon, knocking over a tray table and instruments and nearly toppling one of the monitors they'd repaired. "Get hold of him!" Mal dove into the fray and Riddick growled furiously, grabbing hold of the boy and yanking him backward, one arm angled around his throat and tightening in silent threat.

Riddick looked over at River, her scent thoughtful as she murmured, "Awake, arise, or be forever fallen!"

"She's right, he's pretty spry for a dead fella!" Jayne commented dryly and helped Simon up, checking him for cuts and looking around for the scalpel.

Mal came up with it and put it carefully out of reach as he stared at Tracey who was still struggling fruitlessly in Riddick's grasp. "Settle! That's enough!"

"He was cuttin' on me, Sarge!" The boy still sounded half adolescent, his tenor cracking with stress as he struggled against the Furyan's grip.

"I know it! I told him to!" Mal snapped back at him.

"You told him to! What for?" Riddick rolled his eyes at the incredulous tone, watching as Simon began to right the table and along with River and Jayne, clean up the mess.

"You were dead!" The Captain had clearly had enough of this idiocy as his 'I'm out of patience' tone of voice made obvious.

"Hunh?" The boy seemed to come back to himself, remembering something. "Oh. Right. Suppose I was." He caught sight of Zoe finally, "Hey there, Zoe."

Cool as a cucumber the First Mate nodded, "Private."

Mal regarded him thoughtfully, "You feeling a mite calmer now?"

"Yes, Sarge." He blinked, "Sarge?"

"What?"
"I think I'm nekked." Tracey had finally noticed his state of undress.

Mal sighed and Riddick rolled his eyes, "Yeah, you are. And if you can keep from goin' crazy again, Rick'll let go a your throat, you're gonna stand like a person, cover yourself, and the doctor's gonna tend to that gash."

Riddick waited a moment and Mal gave him the nod, finally seeing that the kid was calm enough to be reasoned with, letting his arm fall carefully way from Tracey's throat and lowering him from his tip toes to the flat of his feet. The discarded sheet was quickly grabbed up and wrapped around his waist as Tracey sat on the edge of the table. Riddick flipped his shiv around his knuckles playfully before sheathing it in his belt again, grinning at the shocked look in the boy's face. "Oughta pay more attention," He admonished the kid. "I coulda opened your abdominal aorta an' you never even noticed I had a knife near your spine."

"Uh..." Riddick rolled his eyes as the kid stuttered and finally addressed Simon as he began to tend the wound, "Sorry for jumping on you the way I did. I was a little confounded."

Simon nodded thoughtfully, no doubt recalling his own stint as a dead man on Ariel, "Emerging from that state can be disorienting. Was it byphodine?" He looked up at his patient's completely blank face and clarified, "The drug you took to make it appear as though you were dead. Do you remember what it was called?"

"Never did ask." He didn't seem concerned.

Simon nodded and put some gauze on the wound, "Hold that there." He looked at the crew and nodded towards his supplies, "Someone... Bring that pan, please."

Jayne wrinkled his nose, obviously remembering the same thing Simon had and reluctantly brought a bedpan over which Simon positioned in front of Tracy before moving to his medical supplies.

Tracey continued, as casual as if he was sitting in his kitchen, "Fella sold it to me said I'd be under a week or more. He told me I wouldn't dream. But I did. Dreamt of my family."

Riddick inhaled thoughtfully and frowned as River shook her head. "To be imprison'd in the viewless winds." She stared at the boy thoughtfully, "Death is a fearful thing. And a shamed life a hateful." Riddick nodded his understanding, it was obvious that the boy was lying. He was a self absorbed type, hadn't even noticed River's murmurs or Riddick's cold gaze.

Before the boy could continue the bedpan Jayne was holding came in handy. Jayne wrinkled his nose as he held a bedpan full of sick but manfully stayed where he was until Simon came back.

"This should take the edge off the nausea." He skillfully administered a shot and smiled slightly at Jayne, "You can take that to the waste bin in the wall. I'll deal with it later." Jayne gave him a grin made somewhat strained by his attempt to not inhale any smells before he did as Simon suggested.

Riddick leaned against the door jamb as Simon hooked the boy up to his monitors. Mal was obviously recalling the armed, dangerous and very annoyed Feds on their tail because he didn't wait for Simon to even begin the exam before he started asking questions. "Alright. Now you care to explain why it is you got yourself all corpseified and mailed to me? What're you running from?"

River leaned against his side and he wrapped his arm around her waist while they waited for Tracey to answer the Captain. By her scent his little bàng jiār was trying to Read the truth of the boy's words and not finding him to be entirely honest. "Running to, not from. Just want to get home is all. That's all I ever wanted. 'Cept there's them took exception to that. To me leaving...while I's in possession of
Mal was shaking his head, "What'd you boost, Tracey? More important, who'd you boost it from?"

Simon drew the Captain's attention as his monitors began to flash, "Captain... Captain, I don't mean to... I think we may have a medical emergency here..." He looked from the monitors to Tracey with a frown, "This man... he appears to be in cardiac arrest..."

"What? Tracey, you having a heart attack?" Mal was somewhat nonplussed as he looked back and forth between the boy on the table and his doctor, "Doc, he don't look like he's having a heart attack..."

Tracey chuckled, shaking his head, "Don't pay no attention to your machines, doc. They'll fib to ya. Heart's just fine. Better'n fine. Runs a bit hotter'n normal, is all."

Riddick looked down at River who'd moved towards the monitors, clearly seeing the same as her brother did, "Đại ruò mù jù," She commented. "Tiào chử fǔ dĩ̠jin huỗ kếng."

Simon nodded his agreement as he stared at the monitors, "It's not just the heart muscle... it's everything..."

"All the movin' parts." The boy nodded, "That's what I took, Mal. And that's what they want back."

Mal didn't understand, "Tracey, you want to explain what in the tyen shiao-duh you're talking about?"

Tracey wasn't looking at Mal anymore, his gaze on the door as his heart rate started to beat even faster, "Sure, Sarge... sure..." Riddick glanced towards the door to see Kaylee standing there, surprise all over her face at the sight of Tracey walking and talking.

Simon gave a very credible growl and Riddick moved to intercept the boy's gaze, "Best thing in the 'verse to know is who's toes you're steppin' on." Jayne commented as he left the room with a pat to Kaylee's shoulder.

"He's right," Simon's voice was professional but chilly.

"More importantly," Riddick stared at the dumb kid, fingering his shiv again. "That is my little sister. And if you say one wrong word, put a hand on her in any form or fashion, me an' the Doc'll take all those movin' parts out an' you'll feel every minute of it. The ones who can put you together also know how to take you apart."

"Rick? Simon?" Kaylee's voice was confused, "Weren't he dead not ten minutes ago?"

"He was mèi mei," Riddick nodded and Simon handed Tracey his clothes. "He's fakin' it, like we did when we pulled that job a few months back."

Kaylee, to her credit, might have been guileless mostly, but she did understand about keeping the particulars of a job to herself. "Oh. Must be some story." She came into Tracey's view again, the tell-tale heart monitors going wild. "Simon, you want some tea? Ciara's makin' some with 'Nara an' sent me to ask."

"I would, please," Simon's voice and gaze were warm and soft, a direct contrast to his tone when he spoke to Tracey. "Our... guest, needs to get dressed and he'll be a bit shaky still from the byphodine. We don't know how his system will react to protein or... anything." He sighed in exasperation and shook his head, his scent betraying his frustration over his own ignorance. "River, if you and Kaylee..."
would give him some privacy…"

River nodded and sent Riddick a telling look as she took Kaylee's arm, "We'll bring the tea down to
the passenger lounge." She told them as they left the infirmary.

Everyone besides Inara, Book and Wash had gathered in the passenger lounge. Inara had stepped
down for a moment to speak to Mal quietly and then retreated to her shuttle. From the concerned and
understanding look on Mal's face she wasn't feeling well once again. Kaylee handed Tracey some
water, Simon having put the kybosh on any sort of stimulant, tea included.

"Thank you." Tracey offered Kaylee a charming smile as she took a seat beside Simon and River
frowned thoughtfully. The boy wasn't exactly subtle.

"So your innards... ain't your innards?" Mal picked up the conversation from where it had been left.
The object of the question shook his head, "Mine got scooped out, they replaced every bit."

Jayne, like the rest of them, did not see the point of such an endeavor, "Why'd you wanna go and do
that?"

In contrast, Tracey didn't seem bothered by it at all, "For the money. They're paying me to transport
what they stuck in."

Zoe stared at him, her voice flat, "You're smuggling human organs?"

"But not from a person." He hastened to clarify, "I wouldn't do a thing like that. Grown in a lab.
Only way they can be moved is in a person. Not sure why."

Simon explained quietly, "Because the technology's not ready. The blastomeres are unapproved.
Likely unstable. You're not just a carrier, you're an incubator." He regarded the young man as if he'd
sloughed off several dozen brain cells when he'd been put under.

"Whichever." He shrugged, "It ain't strictly legal, I can tell you that. I was supposed to be at the drop
spot two weeks ago. A clinic on Ariel. They were to open me up, take the goods and put back my
own workings."

Her voice slightly incredulous at his gullibility Zoe asked, "And you believed them? That they'd put
you back together?"

Tracey nodded, "Sure. They want you to make as many runs as you're able. Hell, I met a fella, he's
on his third already."

River looked at Simon and then at Riddick and saw them both swiftly calculating the same thing.
Odds were that Tracey would never have lived past Ariel. Where did he think his own organs were?
In his suitcase traveling along with him? It was much more likely that the 'fella' he'd met on his third
run was in on the scam and meant to reassure the organ runners that they'd emerge unscathed on the
other side. His own organs had probably been sold to some black market doctor. The organ runners
made double the profit on fools like Tracey.

She could see that Mal had his own doubts, "So what happened?"

The boy lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Well, truth is I had a—"
"Change of heart?" Simon asked the question with painfully straight face before the corner of his mouth lifted in a tiny humorous grin.

Riddick and Jayne grinned at him while River smirked her enjoyment of the quip. Kaylee nudged her beau and gave him a tiny smile but his attempt at humor fell flat with Zoe, Mal and Tracey.

"A better offer." The younger man continued, "Another buyer, willing to pay three times the going rate. Enough I could get my folks off that rock they been forced to live on, set them up someplace nice, someplace warm, maybe one of the central planets."

Simon shook his head at this idiocy and only River speaking as he opened his mouth kept him from saying just how stupid Tracey had been. "Where are your organs?" She asked flatly. "Not with you. How were they going to put yours back in if you went to a different buyer? Did you even think that far ahead?"

His blank look told her that he hadn't and Simon rolled his eyes. Mal, in a valiant attempt to keep the conversation on a practical track, surmised, "But your "better offer" went south…"

Tracey nodded, "Got myself into a bit of a pickle, Sarge. The folks I was working for... they musta got wind what I was planning. When I showed up... my new buyer was dead. There was men there, waitin' for me."

"But you got away." Kaylee's voice held half a question, as if she wasn't sure he really had.

He smiled at her, encouraged for some reason, "Only just. I knew they'd never stop looking for me so long as I was alive. Thought my chances'd be better if I weren't."

"So you 'died' and figured then they'd stop looking?" Mal asked.

"Yeah." Tracey nodded again and the ship was rocked with the impact of another explosion.

The crew stood, River steadying Ciara until Jayne got his sea legs under him, Tracey's sudden surge of fear not lost on any of them. Mal shook his head, "Think maybe you figured wrong."

Riddick frowned as he took his place next to Wash. Most of the crew had followed them up to the bridge, along with Tracey and he wasn't sure that was the wisest idea. Another electronic blast rocked the ship as the police cruiser let loose. Book had taken a seat at the navigator's station and was studying something on the cortex. Wash looked over his shoulder at the Captain while Riddick began to back him upon the controls, "I think they're 'about done being stalled, Captain—"

"Firefly Serenity, you will prepare to be boarded or destroyed." Womack's voice over the screen sounded even more impatient than last time.

"He's bluffing. He won't want to damage the cargo." Mal shook his head, studying the man's face.

"There's carg—GAHHH!" Wash swiveled around and caught a look at Tracey standing in the doorway near Kaylee. Book turned and blinked but his scent and pulse remained steady enough. Riddick shook his head as he took over the controls completely, Book did seem to take pride in being near as unflappable as Zoe. Wash on the other hand was almost shouting, "Mal, your dead army buddy's on the bridge!"

The Captain just nodded, "I know it. How close're we to St. Albans?"
"Five from atmo." Riddick answered him as Wash turned back to the controls.

"Pull up the terrain specs." Mal instructed, "Kaylee, take him out of here. And strap in."

Riddick felt more than saw River behind him, taking Book's place at the navigator's station and bringing up the terrain maps on the monitor. Mal grabbed the radio mic, speaking into it in his best 'I'm dealing with unreasonable authority but I'm an eminently reasonable person myself' voice. "This is Captain Reynolds of the Firefly Serenity—"

"Reynolds." The Fed's voice wasn't nearly as reasonable as Mal's. "I hear you picked up some cargo belonged to me."

"That a fact?" Mal was still sounding reasonable. If he got any more laid back the Fed would start to wonder if the Captain had some problem with his brain being missing. River giggled softly behind him as she Read that thought and he half grinned.

"I stepped over a lot of bodies to get to that one you got in your hold. You play this right, and yours won't have to be among them." Womack told him flatly.

"Sarge..." Tracey's voice came from the doorway, stiff with fear.

"Private, the Captain ordered you off the bridge." Zoe was standing behind her husband and barely spared the boy a glance.

"Come on." Kaylee was urging him away, Ciara with her, "We'll have some tea in the galley."

Mal was paging through the maps River had brought up as he spoke, "We'd love to let you boys dock, but that last pop you give us knocked out our fore-couple. We're gonna have to park it if you want the tour."

Womack's sounded more than a little irked. "Fine. Set down immediately."

Mal nodded, "See you on the ground." He clicked off and made sure Womack's connection had been cut before he pointed at the map. "There. Think you can do it?"

Riddick looked over the valley Mal had found and exchanged a glance with Wash before the pilot nodded, "Watch me."

Mal's voice clicked over the ships intercom, "Attention all crew. Sit down and hang on to something..."

"Come not between a dragon and his wrath," Riddick quoted wryly as he strapped himself in, taking the controls so Wash could do the same in turn.

Behind him, River was working with Book on the cortex, while Jayne had braced himself in the corner and was prepping a few weapons, just in case. He guessed Simon had stayed in the infirmary, again, just in case and mentally complimented his brothers on trying to prepare for the worst. Riddick looked up as Wash spoke, "Get ready for hard burn—" He leaned on the controls and instinctively Riddick matched him. "They'd be crazy to follow us in here."

Mal and Zoe were bracing themselves while Book hung onto the back of River's chair. Jayne, fortunately, had braced himself in the corner and between that and his natural balance didn't even seem to notice the ship's twists and turns as he continued to load up.

"I hate ta ruin a beautiful plan with an ugly reality, but they don't gotta be crazy." Riddick pointed
“You seein' what I'm seein'?”

Wash glanced up and frowned, "Okay. Let's just say they're not crazy..."

Mal caught on to what they were saying and River sighed behind them, "No one thinks three dimensionally anymore. Pilot man should know better."

"Yeah yeah," Wash had found what he was looking for and snugged Serenity beneath a huge overhang of rock and ice, hiding them from view as the cruiser rounded a curve above and behind them. "But we have managed to accomplish a disappearing act. Between the canyon overhangs, wind and snow, their visibility is...shall we say lacking."

Riddick turned as they shut everything down to avoid giving off energy or heat signatures, "But we can't hide forever. Womack's not gonna just give up an' go away."

"No," Mal was frowning thoughtfully out the bridge window. "No we can't. So I am open to ideas as to a way outta this."

River looked up from the cortex with a frown, "Womack is...not supposed to be here." She said slowly. "He got his stripes out of the Silverhold colonies. He's very far out of his jurisdiction."

Zoe's expression was thoughtful, "Maybe you an' Book dig into that some more. Right now..." She glanced at Mal.

The Captain nodded, "What's your take on Tracey?" He kept his voice low, conscious of how sound could carry down the hall to the galley.

"Smells like lies." Riddick shrugged. "But you figured he wasn't tellin' the whole truth."

"I did." Reynolds was clearly unhappy with the news but he wasn't irked enough to shoot the messenger. "River? You got anything?"

"This fellow is wise enough to play the fool. Thinks to con you," River said slowly. "His mind turns about, looking for any advantage. Figured to capitalize on your connection, play on your sympathies. Always blaming someone else for his misfortunes."

"Well I wish I could say that was a surprise to hear," The Captain shook his head. "Any idea of what he'll do when he's cornered?"

"Won't hesitate to hurt someone else if it means he escapes harm," River replied promptly. "Can't give you specifics. Just...general impressions. He hasn't killed anyone directly...yet. But in his desperation he left people in bad positions, and they in turn...did not survive. The bodies Womack spoke of, Womack did not kill all of them."

"Reminds me of Saffron. Not killing directly but just...leavin' 'em in a position where they'll die unless there's some sort of miracle," Riddick snarled.

River's voice behind him held a frown, "Not as deliberate as Yo-Saff-Bridge. More...unthinking of the consequences. Concerned only with himself." She sighed, "Not bad but... his recording spoke the truth. He makes bad decisions and then does not want to live with the consequences."

"An' he's in the galley with Ciara an' Kaylee," Jayne growled from his corner. "I do not like him there Mal."

"No, nor do I," Zoe shook her head. "Let's—"
She was cut off by a thundering boom that vibrated the entire ship and valley around them. "Tiān shā de feds." Riddick cursed as his ears ached with the noise.

"Depth charges, percussion shells," Book spoke over the sound of the tapping keyboard, he and River had begun their work again, digging deeper into Womack's past and trying to suss out any advantage. "We're running out of time."

"Thank you Shepherd I had noticed," Mal remarked sardonically. On the monitors Wash set a timer, and Riddick nodded, typing in the direction of the sound. The shells were a slow rhythmic drumbeat in the silence as they waited for the impact and began to plot the area they were hitting.

"Look," River turned her cortex towards him and beckoned Mal over to read. "Definitely not an honest man."

Mal nodded, reading and their quiet conversation was barely audible over the sound of the percussion shells. Riddick frowned as another shell hit, further away, "They can't find us, so they're tryin' to shake us out." He looked at them. "So we've got a bit longer. But if they get lucky…"

"If they get lucky and hit us we're dead." Wash said flatly.

River looked up from her screen and exchanged a glance with Book. The Shepherd nodded, "Might be the only thing we can do is give ourselves up." The older man suggested quietly.

Unfortunately he spoke just as Tracey arrived in the doorway.

River tensed as Tracey eyed the guns Jayne was loading. Before anyone could say anything there was a thunderous boom from above them, a rolling wave of sound vibrating the entire ship and sending a cascade of ice chunks over the bridge window and Serenity's nose.

Wash let out a breath, he and Riddick checking the monitors and exchanging looks, "Wǒ de mà they're comin' close..."

Riddick frowned, "They must have caught a bead on our heat trail—"

River tilted her head upwards and felt Mal's eyes on her. A slow nod in his direction gave him an answer to the question in his eyes. Riddick was right, the feds had their trail now.

Jayne frowned in annoyance at Tracey before examining the debris still falling onto the ship. Just because he'd heard the plan didn't mean he couldn't needle Tracey, "I'm with the preacher. I ain't keen on me an' my girl gettin' snowed-in permanent cause of some jackass kid—"

River kept an eye on Tracey who was staring at Mal and only paying half of his entirely too twitchy attention to Jayne. Mal was still trying to think of a way out of the whole mess, "What about runnin'?"

"We tried that, remember?" Wash retorted dryly. "That's why we're here? In this glacier?"

"'Bout to be buried alive?" Riddick muttered as he checked another screen. "Mal if we take another hit like that one, some of this rock is dense enough to breach the hull. Then we're really stuck. And we'll be gorram cold on top of it."

River counted as another boom sounded from above. The Feds had fallen into a rhythm that made
the shells easy to predict. Without realizing they'd all fallen into speaking between impacts.

The Captain turned back to she and the Shepherd. "Fine. Book. You're sayin' you an' River got an angle—"

River nodded firmly. "We do. It's a good one."

"The only one, Captain." Book concurred with quiet conviction.

She tilted her head and held up a hand to count down until the next impact while Mal turned and looked at Zoe. The look they exchanged didn't need to be Read, the First Mate couldn't think of anything else to do and her nod indicated it without words. Tracey was watching them both, with a look in his eyes River didn't like. He was ignoring her entirely as she rose from her chair and slipped around Book, Zoe and the Captain to stand behind them, closer to him. Mal nodded back finally and River braced herself for what would happen next. While she'd been moving to flank him, Tracey had picked up one of the ship's guns when Jayne's gaze had flickered to another wave of falling debris.

"Wash... Call the cops. Tell them we give up."

Wash nodded, flicking the system on and the screen crackled to life.

"No." Another shell hit, not quite as close as the last but still uncomfortably near as Tracey edged closer, one of the ships guns in his hand, aimed towards the crew. River frowned slightly and mirrored him, edging closer to him.

"Tracey, what are y—" Mal didn't get four words out before he was cut off.

"I said NO!" The boy near shouted, "Those bastards up there are gonna pull this million-credit meat outta me and leave me bleedin—" He turned the gun on Wash, "Now turn off that radio!"

River braced herself as another depth charge exploded, closer and louder than before and Jayne's irritation and worry spiked. More ice shards rained down on the ship as he gestured to the windows angrily, neatly distracting Tracey from her presence near him, "You ruttin' twerp, you're gonna get us —"

Tracey's voice was loud in the quiet between explosions, "Don't you move! No one move!" He turned the gun back on Wash, "Turn it off! We have to run! NOW!"

Book took a slow step towards Tracey as she edged behind the boy and Tracey swung the gun at him, panic riding him as the Shepherd spoke. "Put that thing down, boy. We weren't talking about turning—"

"Shut it, Shepherd! I swear to God I'll shoot you dead if you don't." He laughed, bitter and manic, "Sarge, Zoe... Why you listening to this bible-thumper?"

Zoe had to know where River was but to her credit she didn't give a flicker of an eyelash to let Tracey know, "We've seen the man fight, Trace. Seen him think. And we trust him on both counts."

"Yeah, well, that's just plum stupid, but then you two were always lookin' for someone to spend your trust on..." Tracey sneered at them. He turned towards Mal, whose hands, sensibly, were slightly raised, "Didn't exactly get your war won, did it?" Another depth charge resounded loudly through the air.

"Wash. Call the cops." The Captain's voice was flat and annoyed.
Wash wasn’t quite as good with the poker face as Mal and Zoe but he tried, "Um—"

"I'll kill him, Wash. I'll put a hole right through him." The panicked boy shouted.

Mal's gaze was hard and chilly as he stared his former private down, "You mailed your ugly business to Zoe and me, Tracey, cash-on-delivery. I'll go to Hell before I watch you turn and bite us for the favor—" Another depth charge sent vibrations through the air and ice clattered onto the hull and windows. "Wash. You call them up. Tell them we'll meet 'em topside."

"No—" Tracey objected again.

"Do it." Wash gave his funny 'I'm under so much pressure I should be five inches shorter but look how calm I am' nod and turned towards the radio, reaching for the switch.

Tracey's shout of denial was loud in the small space, and the bark of the gun was even louder. River threw herself forward, jerking his arm up. The shot ricocheted off the metal plating of the ceiling and grazed Riddick's temple, throwing his head back. The Reader growled angrily and pushed him against the wall, ignoring the blood blooming across the side of Tracey's shirt.

"You sh- You shot me..." He was staring at Zoe as she cocked her gun, sending the spent shell flying.

"Damn right I did."

River blamed herself for what happened next as she took her eyes off of her prisoner to check on her husband. "Richard?"

Wash and Book were looking him over as he dabbed at the wound with his fingers. Dry as dust the murderer commented, "Ow?"

Tracey, with a strength born of desperation, pushed past her and ran for the galley, River chasing him with a curse. "Gǒu niàng yǎng de." Ciara was in the galley, cleaning up the remains of the dishes that had broken on the floor with the last depth charge.

"Tracey? What's happenin'?" Ciara was smart enough to be wary of a wild-eyed man with a gun in his fist, even without River on his heels.

Mal was following River, but neither of them were fast enough to keep Tracey from holding his gun on Ciara. "Ciara! Get out of there!"

"Stay back." Tracey held his gun on all of them, backing towards the stairs and going down them.

"Ciara, get to Kaylee, the engine room. Go." Mal knew who would be the most vulnerable to the panicking man. With a nod Ciara headed into the back hall.

"Cap'n," River moved towards the stairs to follow Tracey. "Tell Wash to turn out the lights. We know the ship, he doesn't. Can see in the darkness. Take him unawares."

Mal nodded and ran back for the bridge while she took the stairs down. Tracey was on the catwalk of the cargo bay when the lights went out. His panicked squawk told her exactly where he was even without her eyes piercing the darkness. The wild shot he fired went harmlessly overhead and buried itself in the plating as she moved forward.

"What the—" Tracey's exclamation at the sight of her eyes glowing out at him was cut off as she ruthlessly swept his legs and kicked the gun out of his hand as he fell to the catwalk's grating. Her
foot on his throat kept him from saying much.

"Cap'n, you can tell them to put the lights back on," She called towards the back staircase and soon after Mal's voice on the overhead told Wash to do just that.

"Please, just…lemme have a shuttle, I can—" He gasped for air as her boot settled more firmly on his throat. "I just gotta—"

"Nobody's going anywhere, private." Mal's voice was calm as he approached from the other end of the catwalk, his gun trained on Tracey.

"Sarge… don't… Don't make me—" Tracey was still trying to plead his case.

River watched as the Captain came closer, angry and cool as a cucumber, Riddick behind him. Zoe came down the same steps she had while Jayne had circled around, down through engineering and the life support systems to the infirmary and was headed up the stairs.

"Far as I can see, nobody's made you do anything. You brought this onto yourself. Got in over your head with these stone-cold gut-runners, then you panicked, and then you brung the whole mess down on all of us..." Mal told him in a cool flat voice.

Jayne had eased himself into position on the catwalk across from them, readying himself, his gun in hand while Ciara and Simon took positions in the cargo bay near the lounge steps.

"That ain't how it happened—" The boy under her boot protested.

The Captain wasn't having any of it, "Oh yes, that's how it happened. And I'm startin' to think that trail of bodies Womack was talkin' about, I'm thinkin' some of that trail was left by you... losin' your head, doin' more or less what you're doin' right now—" Mal tilted his head. "Or at least what you tried to do. See there? Hear that quiet? Means the call's already been made."

Tracey began to sob, "You— That call—" He tried ineffectually to shift River's weight off his throat, "That call means you just murdered me."

Mal shook his head, "If you don't live through this it won't be me that's killed you. You murdered yourself, son."

He looked at Zoe who spoke quietly from behind River, "I just carried the bullet for a while."

Wash's voice came over the comm system, "Captain, they say we got two minutes before they start shelling again—"

"Get us up there!" Mal shouted back and shortly thereafter the ship began to move, dragging itself out of the half-collapsed ice.

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Author's Note:** So…here we are. Again. Not sure if Tracey's gonna live or die. And Tracey's not sure either. Hope you're all enjoying this. Sorry it's a little shorter than the last chapter, but this was a decent stopping point.
Chinese Translations:
Wǒ cào (holy fuck)
bàng jiār (lover / partner)
Đài ruò mù ji (dumb as a wooden chicken)
Tiào chū fǔ dǐ jin huǒ kēng (out of the frying pan into the fire)
mèi mei (little sister)
Tiān shā de (Goddam! / goddamn / wretched)
Wǒ de mā (My mother!)
Gǒu niáng yǎng de (son of a bitch)

Script Chinese Translations:
tyen shiao-duh (script- name of all that's sacred)

Quote Sources:
The miserable have no other medicine, But only hope – Measure For Measure – William Shakespeare

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

Awake, arise, or be forever fallen – Paradise Lost – Milton

To be imprison'd in the viewless winds – Measure For Measure – William Shakespeare

Death is a fearful thing. And a shamed life a hateful – Measure For Measure – William Shakespeare

Come not between a dragon and his wrath – King Lear – William Shakespeare

This fellow is wise enough to play the fool – Twelfth Night – William Shakespeare
It wasn't a long trip, just enough time for Book to get down from the bridge and take a place near the airlock. Jayne had positioned himself on the stairs nearby, Vera in his hands. The rest of them had remained where they were, just in case while Wash parked the ship nose to nose with the cop's cruiser.

The airlock's interior doors slid open and Womack entered as if he owned the ship. He and his men had the sense to be somewhat cautious, guns out as they sauntered in, only to be confronted with Vera's barrels staring down at them.

Riddick watched as Womack tried to act nonchalant, "Well now... Somebody left their dog off the leash..." The cop gave a low cold growl, "I been shot too many times to be scared by a gun, boy."

Jayne shrugged, his aim unchanging, "I hear you. Most ever'body I know's been shot least once. S'no big thing."

Tracey's voice trailed thinly from the catwalk, "Womack..."

The cop looked up to see Tracey lying on the catwalk, looking over the edge as blood dripped through the grates. River's foot hadn't moved from his throat one iota. Riddick smiled, despite the dangerous situation his woman was perfect, cold and clear and uncaring of the boy's wound.

"Smith? You squirrely little piece a' go-se, that you?" Womack was a little surprised but trying desperately not to show it.

"I think I..." Tracey laughed, blood loss making him slightly delirious. "I think I broke your junk..."

Mal looked over the railing, his gun on the cops, "Little problem during shipping."

Riddick inhaled and sent Mal a warning glance as Womack began to spout a line of gōu shǐ, if Book couldn't pull this off they were all humped. "Don't think I need to tell you folk the trouble you're in. Wetware smugglin', resistin', fleeing an officer a' the law... an' I'm sure a search of your ship'll come up with another few felonies."

Book stood straight from his position behind several of the ship's crates, walking towards the cops calmly. "You won't be searching the ship, Womack."

"That so?" The gnarled cop's face was amused.

"It is. You won't be taking us in. Nor that boy who's dying up there." Book uttered that exaggeration without a blink, as if discussing the weather. "You're going to turn around, and just fly away." Book informed him in that same calm tone.

"You know, I'm authorized to kill as I like, shepherds not withstandin'." Womack blustered. His men, Riddick took note, were looking slightly nervous on either side of him. Plainly the amount of guns trained their way had not been lost on them.

Book's voice held a smile, "There's eleven armed and dangerous desperados on this ship. You count in at three. Why is it you didn't call in for back-up?" Womack's expression stiffened slightly and
Riddick grinned as his bluff was called. Book wasn't done though. He and River had done their homework. "There's a Fed station eighty miles from where you're standing." Book walked closer, "You got your command stripes at the Silverhold colonies. Puts you about eight solar systems away from your jurisdiction..."

"Listen here, preach—" Womack tried to see out the bluff and was ruthlessly cut off.

"But that doesn't bother you. Whole 'verse is your jurisdiction. Procedure is for stiff's." Riddick could practically smell the contempt Book had for the cop. "You're on the take, Womack, clearing routes through your territory for all manner of black market pirates."

Womack's question was one they'd all wondered a time or two, whenever Book displayed some knowledge a Shepherd wouldn't have much call to know, "What the hell kinda man of God—"

He was ignored, "Took a little vacation time to chase down this piece of change for an extra commission, I'm guessing."

Womack had obviously decided the mouthy Shepherd had deduced too much and began to raise his gun towards Book, his men nervously following suit only to be halted by the sound of several guns being cocked. Riddick stared down at them over the barrel of his weapon, knowing Zoe, Ciara, River and Jayne were doing the same.

Book continued as if nothing had occurred, "Now as I said, we got guns on you that you don't even see. You took pains to keep your presence here secret. I don't imagine it'd bother anyone if we laid your bodies to rest at the bottom of one of these canyons." The cops lowered their guns as Book smiled disdainfully. "Yes sir. I'm fair sure we could make you disappear. You've done most of that work for us already."

Womack looked up at the dying Tracey and spat on the ground, "Damaged goods, anyhow." He looked at his men, "Let's go, boys." They began to back out of the bay slowly.

Riddick knew the minute Womack realized who he was. The cop looked up at the catwalks and met Riddick's silver gaze, Womack's dark eyes widened and his gun hand twitched slightly. "Gǒu cáo de pì yǎn," The man cursed and jerked his head towards one of his men nearly out of the ship. The cop wasn't quite smooth enough to conceal his realization and dissemble long enough to get off Serenity. "Call it in. We've found Richard B. Riddick."

Mal cursed, "Jiào nǐ shéng háizi méi pǐgū yǎn."

Riddick didn't waste time with curses. Oddly enough, his wasn't the first shot, River's gun barked in her hand while Simon's did the same, damn near simultaneously. The cops didn't even get to raise their guns enough to fire before the force of two dozen bullets threw them backwards into the snow. When the ringing in his ears from all the gunfire had stopped Riddick sighed and looked at Book. "So much for not killing the cops."

Book shrugged philosophically, "It had looked like it was going to work. Between River's husking and my experience, it was a good plan."

Mal shook his head, "Doc, get on up here an' plug this leak Tracey's sprung would ya?"

Simon grabbed his back from where he'd set it down and hurried up the steps. Riddick folded his arms and looked down at Tracey over Simon's shoulder. The boy was a little woozy with blood loss but from the expression on Simon's face he'd probably live. "So… That was the plan?"

Mal nodded as Tracey continued with a cough, "That—" He took a breath, "That was a good plan."
Mal looked at River, "I think so."

Tracey shook his head, "Weird preacher, though..." He looked at his wound, 'I'm feelin'... kinda stupid right about now.'"

"Go with the feelin'," Riddick growled at him.

"It's only 'cause you are," Mal agreed amiably.

Jayne came up the steps and patted Riddick on the shoulder, "Doc, you want us ta carry him on down ta the infirmary?"

"Please," Simon nodded. "If one of you would give me a hand with the instruments I should have him patched up in short order."

Riddick growled down at the kid, "If you'd hurt my wife or my sister, you'd be bleeding out an' no one in the 'verse could stop me." He nodded at Jayne and picked the kid up by his armpits, Jayne taking his feet. It wasn't hard to carry the kid down and get him settled on the exam table again.

Simon was frowning over the wound, "Rick, would you mind getting the extractor?"

Riddick nodded, pulling his goggles down against the bright light of the overhead, "Fragments or pieces of the shirt?"

"Both," His little brother shook his head as he took the instrument. "Get his shirt off him would you please?"

Tracey was a bit surprised to find himself being tended by one of the most wanted men in the 'verse, much less the very one who'd threatened him not five minutes earlier. "Uh, that's okay, I'll uh—"

"Sit back and shut up," Riddick began to expertly cut the shirt off his thin upper body. "We don't got the drugs to spare so Simon ain't gonna waste any anesthesia on you, but that don't mean he's gotta listen to you jabber."

He was aware of Jayne and the rest of the crew crowding into the infirmary, to sit and listen as they worked. Tracey was still confused though, "You're, uh—" He tried starting again, "You—"


"How'd you—"

"Wants to know how you're able to help," River picked the question out of Tracey's mind as she stood at his feet. "Also confused as to why his Sergeant hired you on."

"Yeah, that." Tracey nodded, flinching slightly as his wound was probed.

Simon sighed in exasperation, "Rick, would you give him a local? If he moves this will take twice as long." He looked up, "Jayne, it's in the drawer behind Mal, please."

"Here ya go Doc," Riddick took the syringe and the bottle of drugs and measured out a dose, expertly removing the bubbles and injecting the liquid before Tracey could even question it.

"Well we decided a doctor'd be useful. The doc came with his sister. An' Rick came with her. I hired him on because he's handy." Mal's voice was irritated as he provided the partial lie as an explanation. "As for how he knows how to help..." He hesitated for once realizing that some secrets weren't his
Riddick glanced over his shoulder at the Captain, "Go on and tell him Mal. Ain't like folks couldn't find it in my records anyway."

"We're Dà Chóngs," Jayne supplied the answer. "Browncoats, like Mal an' Zoe."

"An' me," Tracey added.

"No," Riddick snarled at him. "We ain't like you." He carefully picked a piece of fabric out of one of the shallower wounds and set it in a basin. "I was Jayne's Sergeant. He's a corporal. So both of us outrank you. And even if we didn't, we don't turn on our men."

"We don't set 'em up ta take fire for us." Jayne said flatly.

"Uh," Tracey didn't want to go down that particular path again. "But Dà Chóngs were… not this."

"Folks who go up behind enemy lines and use subterfuge and sabotage don't usually have access to immediate medical assistance should they be wounded in the line of duty," Simon remarked.

River laughed at the confused expression on Tracey's face and Riddick grinned, "You get shot behind enemy lines you're dead unless you or your buddy knows first aid. Me an' Jayne, we got to be our unit's medics. Mostly by studyin' an' bein' the only ones with any know how at all."

"They're both very good," Simon bestowed the ultimate compliment. "If I was hurt I'd want one of them working on me."

"Huh," Tracey seemed to find that too much to take in because he fell silent for a while.

Wash finally entered the infirmary, "We're all set down outside the co-ordinates Tracey gave us in his cute little fake farewell message." He winced at seeing the blood on Riddick's face, "Rick, maybe you need some medical attention yourself?"

"It can wait," Riddick shrugged. "I've worked with worse."

"Recently," Simon murmured alluding to the time Serenity had broken down. "But we're almost done here. An injection of antibiotics and some of the skin bandages and he'll be ready for his homecoming."

Tracey was staring at them, "After all that… you're… I'm goin' home?"

"We came all this way to deliver you," Wash shrugged.

"What were we gonna do, turn around and take you back to the station? Waste of fuel." Mal agreed quietly.

The boy seemed to choke up, as if this generosity was the last straw to break his composure, "I'm sorry… Every-Everyone… Wasn't never no good at life, anyhow… Couldn't seem to make sense of it… Always running scared..." He shook his head, "I'd be dead if it weren't for you. 'When you can't run anymore, you crawl... and when you can't do that—'" He shook his head again.

"'You find someone... to carry you.'" Zoe finished quietly.

Tracey nodded, his eyes bright, "Guess I did, at that..."
River glanced toward the airlock. Jayne, Zoe and Mal were escorting Tracey off the ship into the arms of his extensive extended family. She was carefully cleaning the dried blood off of her husband's face. "Scared me, to see your blood. Simple chance could have taken you from me. Startled and he got under my guard."

"I'm the same way with you," He reminded her quietly. "I can't stand when you're hurting."

His strong arms pulled her into his lap, forcing her to stop fussing and be held and she let herself just breathe him in. "Inara stayed in her shuttle. Spoke with Mal briefly, offering to help when the cops trailed us. The noise…made her head hurt again."

"Smart of her to stay out of the way. Tracey'd have tried to use her the way he would have used Kaylee and nearly used Ciara if she hadn't had the smarts to stay away from him." Riddick nodded, "If Ciara hadn't been training with us, learning to deal with guns and fighting, he'd have been able to drag her to a shuttle."

"Not very nice," River looked after the exiting figure. "Brought trouble down on Serenity. Only luck that Womack was so stupid. Didn't call for backup. Didn't tell anyone where he went."

"Yeah, we'll have to deal with the bodies and his ship," Riddick nodded.

"Mal comes to speak of that very thing." River half smiled as the Captain's eyes closed upon seeing them, as if trying to avoid the sight of any intimacy.

"Figure we'll head on back to that meetin' place, get rid of any evidence we were around," Mal told them. "Don't figure you an' the Shepherd were wrong about Womack but if Tracey gets to runnin' his mouth, rather there wasn't any hard evidence to give substance to any claim."

River nodded, still pressed close to her husband, "Ample explosives and fuel, could fly the ship out and blow it."

"Sounds like fun," Riddick chuckled, his lips rubbing over her cheek.

"Yeah…about that." Mal was thinking, which could be good or bad, "River, maybe you could take a stroll through their cortex, before we blow the ship. Figure out if he's got anyone who might kick up a fuss if he doesn't come back."

River considered that and nodded slowly, "He or his men. Could…" She paused and then nodded, "Could lay a false trail, make it plain that he was on the take, a wrong cop, and it got him killed."

"Which it did," Riddick growled.

"But better to have it known to his superiors, so they don't wonder about his death," River pointed out. "Qui cum canibus concumbunt cum pulicibus surgent." She grinned at Mal's confusion, "He that lieth down with dogs shall rise up with fleas."

"Heard that before," Mal nodded. "Wash is takin' us back to the cop's ship. If you can make it so no one's too terribly upset about their demise I'd take it as a kindness."

She nodded, "Will do."
The cop's ship was dusty and not particularly clean but it wasn't completely disgusting either, for which she was grateful. Mal hovered behind her as she sat at the cortex and began to punch up the logs. "Might take some time," She warned him.

"Rather it take some time and be done right than have Feds on our tail again," He said after a moment's thought. "That bein' said, don't really wanna spend days here either."

"Should check Serenity's hull for dents," River murmured as she began to scan the ship's entries. "Rocks and ice are not friendly to Fireflies."

"Uh, really not—"

"Cap'n, cannot work properly with you hovering," River stopped what she was doing to regard him patiently. "Know what to do. Know how to do it. Will try to get coin for Serenity as well but cannot do this with you trying to supervise."

"But—"

She sighed and flipped her fingers at him, "Go and talk to Zoe and Wash. See if Serenity needs repairs. Won't be days. Hours perhaps, but the longer you are staring and thinking at me so loudly the longer this will take."

Mal's sigh of exasperation was long and gusty but he retreated.

"Recommend flying the cruiser to another world, leaving it somewhere unobtrusive. Open to the elements. Hopefully with wildlife that will scavenge on the bodies." She told the crew when she reentered Serenity. "In order to leave a path for the Feds to follow, will have to leave some funds in the accounts. But can take part of it. Enough to pay for fuel and keep Serenity flying for a bit. Trip to St. Albans won't cost us."

"Do we want to leave a path for Purplebellies?" Mal asked as he helped Riddick muscle a crate out of the way so a panel behind it could be removed and the bullet impact dented out of it. "Wouldn't we be better off with them disappearing?"

"Would, but one of the men has a wife and child, and a fuss would be kicked up," River shrugged. "Best to leave a trail, a few false log entries to indicate course changes, fake the automated logs, and have the trail dead end where we leave the ship."

"Because sooner or later someone will come lookin'," Mal nodded, not looking happy but not completely aggravated either.

"In the scenario I've created leading to the cop's demise, it will fit if we scavenge from the ship. Look like the thugs Womack was pursuing got the drop on him, then cleaned out the ship. Smart enough to do that, not bright enough to remove the pulse beacon." River shrugged, "Some compatible parts, some food and weapons, cashy money in a lockbox."

"Anybody else got a better idea?" Mal looked around at his crew. Everyone was pretty much present, cleaning up the aftermath of the impromptu gunfight and no one seemed to have anything else to say. "All right. Wash, you figure a planet we can set down on. Preferably somethin' not icing over."

Wash nodded and began to head for the bridge, mumbling about potential moons as he went. Mal
continued as River set down her cortex and climbed up a few of the crates to remove another dented panel. "Rick, I'm guessin' during your many escapes you've flown a cop's boat at some point. So you're elected as the cruiser's pilot. Check her out, make sure nothing untoward'll happen when you get her in the Black and as soon as we have a course you can copy it."

Riddick's hands slid around her waist as River climbed down from her crate and she was given a brief heady kiss before he headed out the bay doors to check out the other boat. "On it Cap'n."

"River, you put that shiny brain a yours to thinkin' of how we can cover our tracks here. Anyone goes looking for Womack they'll follow his trail right to Amnon and then to Tracey." Mal looked at her, "Like I said before, rather this didn't come back on us."

"Womack didn't leave notes, didn't say what he was looking for on the station," River half smiled. "Wrong cops do not like to leave written record of their misconduct. The records on the ship's cortex are the course logs. Can leave cryptic notes showing someone leaving the station for St. Albans and finding a dead body with a clue giving them a new direction to the planet Wash finds for us."

"All cops tend to carry a notebook," Book spoke up quietly. "Womack should have one. It won't be difficult to approximate his notes."

The Captain nodded, "I 'spect that'll be a help."

River slanted a glance at the Shepherd, his thoughts about the illegalities of what they were doing Read conflict. He'd spent a long time shedding the mannerisms and thoughts that had come with his old life, letting the violence and anger go. Now to help Serenity he was slowly regaining those ways and he wasn't entirely comfortable with it. "Won't need much," She offered. "Can gain his pattern of writing from prior entries."

"Putting a wrong cop in the way of right ones isn't something that bothers me," Book's smile didn't entirely reach his eyes. "Better that the light of day shine into the shadows."

"Don't make that light too strong Shepherd," Riddick strode back into the bay. "Some folks are more comfortable in the shadows than in the light. An' not because they're wrongful folks. Just lived there too long."

"I'm aware," Book nodded to him and River moved towards the bodies of the cops that had been rolled onto plastic sheeting to prevent more cleanup from being needed to find the notebook.

In the end they hopscotched the cop's cruiser around St. Albans as if looking for someone and then sent it towards Jiangyin, settling the cruiser down a healthy hike from any true settlement. Bodies were unrolled from their tarps and left near the open hatch while everyone scrounged through the ship. The lockbox full of platinum was added to Serenity's fund. There was some fun in throwing things around as if the ship had been ransacked. And they'd been able to add a few canned goods to their pantry. But the treasure was the cortex link up codes to the station on Silverhold and the charts that came with them.

"Should come in handy?" River showed off her find. "Already husked my way in and made sure no one was looking for us. Lends credence to Womack coming to Jiangyin if he logs in while he's here. Stole some of his money too. Also have the idents for Fed ships, watch lists for pirates and lots of other information that could be valuable."

Wash grinned at her and Zoe unbent enough to give her a big smile. "Should be pretty helpful in the
"Also got a list of mercs known to the Feds. Ones who'll turn the prisoners over for reward," River handed that to Riddick with a grin and was given another long kiss that turned her knees to mush.

"Well this has been a nice little ride," Mal smiled at the list of ships with a BOLO on them, noting that Serenity wasn't one of them. "And nobody wants Serenity for anything."

"Except a ride." River said quietly. Mal's gaze flew to hers and then towards Inara's shuttle and he sighed but nodded.

Dinner that evening was extra special, River and Kaylee doing their best to make something appetizing and filling in celebration of Jayne and Ciara's return. While the meal was being made they filled the two returning crew members in on what had transpired while they'd been gone. Wash had been right that Jayne sorely regretting missing the fight at Heart of Gold, if not the whores. But he was even more upset that he'd missed Saffron getting her comeuppance. His expression was a near pout as he listened to how she was tagged like she was just a bit of shiny. Riddick found himself inhaling greedily the scents of the ersatz chicken stew and fresh bao while the bowls were passed around and decided now was the perfect time to start teasing Mal a bit. It would cheer Jayne up and had the added benefit of amusing he and River.

"So did you ever get a price on that sound proofin' you wanted Mal?" He asked, taking a sip of his tea while he watched the Captain.

Mal nearly fumbled his bowl of stew as he set it down and glared impartially at he and River, "I have not. Not yet."

"Sound proofin'?" Jayne perked up, "Hell that'd be nice. I've only been sayin' it for a year or more." He nodded towards Zoe and Wash, "Those two could deafen a man."

"Mal got an earful of River an' me the other day," Riddick smirked at the Captain. "Since then he ain't been on the same shift as us."

River, her smile wicked, chimed in, "Captain will be glad of sound proofing on all the bunks should he have Nandi to visit him."

"Wha—That's—I don't—" Mal's sentences started and stopped with his embarrassed confusion.

"Just sayin' it didn't seem like either one a you were accustomed to stiflin' yourselves when we was at Heart Of Gold," Riddick shrugged. "Ain't like we couldn't hear what was goin' on. Includin' you tryin' to sneak out an' Inara catchin' you."

"That's not—" Mal shook his head and pointed a finger at Riddick and River, still somewhat speechless.

"Should definitely sound proof all the bunks," Jayne agreed. "Ain't that I care about the type a noise. But it don't make sleepin' easy." He kissed Ciara's head and she smiled at him affectionately.

"And a modicum of privacy is welcome," Ciara added in a calm voice.

"Shazza would appreciate sound proofing as well," River commented and the Captain's cheeks went ruddy with chagrin.
"Now you stop your snoopin' around," He set her bowl in front of the Reader. "That ain't nice." The stew being served put a pause in the conversation though the scent of Jayne's amusement was a nice counterpoint to the meal.

Simon, apparently deciding that he didn't want the Captain to have an apoplectic fit, asked quietly, "Jayne how is your family doing? Are they settling in all right?"

Jayne smiled around his mouthful and remembered to swallow before he answered thanks to Ciara's not so subtle nudge to his ribs. "They're pretty good. Coupla the neighbors are doin' something similar. Leastways the folks with kin that have the Damplung. It's slower goin' but people are still helpin' 'em set up."

"There's talk of the company going into the building and fixing it once the rainy season's over." Ciara added in her elegant brogue. "And they're shuffling some folk about, to get others out of the building and into better ones."

"Minin' company sent one a the higher ups to see Da an' Ma an' Mattie," Jayne nodded. "Talkin' 'bout how they wanna keep folks in good health."

"They weren't annoyed people were moving out of the building?" Zoe asked curiously.

"Oh, they don't figure its gonna harm their bottom line none. They lose more money if they have a shift go short because a sickness." Jayne shook his head, "They're all for anythin' to keep their profits up an' since it didn't cost 'em nothin' for the new place they don't mind."

The conversation regarding Kerry and Jayne's family continued while they ate, the two natives asking in more detail about the crew's adventures while they'd been gone. Second helpings had been eaten, Jayne and Riddick working on thirds as politely as they could manage, until Mal's scent flared with impatience and he looked at Inara.

Riddick stiffened and River stood, fetching the tea and taking Inara's cup, adding whiskey to it before refreshing her tea and returning her cup.

Mal, oblivious to the fact that he'd been anticipated, kept his gaze on the Companion, "You had something to say to us all, and now that we're all here, I think it's time that it was said."

Inara sigh was resigned, she seemed to realize that Mal was trying to restrain himself but he'd waited longer than he'd wanted for an explanation already. "I know it's been difficult for you Mal," She began. "And I appreciate your patience. This isn't easy for me to discuss and I didn't want to do it more than once." That got the attention of everyone at the table, all eyes falling upon Inara and myriad scents clashing in Riddick's nose as worry, curiosity and confusion warred with each other inside the crew.

"You've all asked me, at one time or another, why I left Sihnon, why I left the Core to sail the Black with a ship distinctly not of an Alliance stamp," The Companion smiled slightly, obviously recalling conversations with the crew. "And no matter how bluntly the question was put, you all were courteous enough not to press when I gave you no true answer." She sipped her tea, visibly letting her guard down and gathering her courage before speaking again. "Shortly before I left the Core I was diagnosed with a neurodegenerative disease. Unfortunately, it's a disease that no one has managed to cure yet. Though there are treatments."

"You're sick? Ya don't look sick," Jayne offered the comment with the air of someone at a loss for an appropriate comment but wanting to be supportive.
"Thank you," Inara smiled at him, taking it in the spirit it was meant. "My disease is…debilitating without treatment but for some reason one of the side effects keeps me looking young."

"If there's treatments we can see that ya get 'em, right Doc?" Jayne looked at Simon confidently.

Simon looked at Inara, his gaze kind but piercing with his particular type of knowledge. "You're telling us now because your symptoms are getting worse." He looked at Jayne and shook his head slowly, "It's possible but I'd have to know more about the disease." Kaylee looked stricken with grief at the thought.

"I'm telling you now because Simon's right, my symptoms are worsening. I get terrible migraines and trembling afterwards as my nerves try to compensate for their degeneration." Inara sighed, "I don't want to but the time has come for me to leave Serenity if I'm to have any hope of a normal life." She looked around the table, "I wish there was another way."

"Migraines, trembling…" Simon was mulling over the symptoms mentioned and the ones he'd observed. "A youthful appearance despite the illness… Any memory loss or lack of fine motor control?"

"Not now, but I'm told that may come in time. Without treatment the trembling escalates into seizures." Inara explained quietly.

"Woznyakys Chorea," Simon looked at her and frowned. "I wish you'd told us before the job on Ariel. We could have taken the drugs specific to the disease. I have some so we can begin treatment but…"

"But unless we knock over another hospital they won't last," Riddick finished grimly. He looked at Mal who'd brightened slightly at this news.

"Well if that's what it takes we for sure could pull another job like that one," He nodded. "We're headed for Persephone anyhow."

Kaylee nodded eagerly, "We can get another ambulance rebuilt easy as lyin'." Her hopeful expression as she looked at Inara and the Captain was heartbreaking as it slid off her face.

"Mal," Inara shook her head. "You have no idea how much I appreciate that you'd be willing to do that for me but…" She hesitated and looked at Simon.

"Captain, I'm afraid that drugs are only half of the issue," The Doctor shook his head, "She needs a stress-free environment. Worry, tension, any strain will exacerbate her condition."

"I've spoken with my Head of House and she's arranged for me to take a teaching position on Persephone," Inara explained. "There's no such thing as a stress-free environment but it's close."

Mal seemed ready to argue but Simon cut him off, "Captain, much as we are all accustomed to a certain amount of adventure, for Inara to remain on Serenity… and forestall her symptoms worsening… it would be next to impossible." He visibly cast about for an example, "Imagine if someone had a heart condition. You wouldn't sit them up front with Wash as he and Rick were pulling a Crazy Ivan would you?"

The tall Browncoat sighed and shook his head, "Guess I take your meanin' well enough. Don't mean I like it." He bent an eye on the Companion and frowned. "Wish you'd told us all this a bit earlier. We might could've tried to avoid some stress. Or at least some of the arguing."

"It can't have done you any good to be interviewed by the Feds when we found that derelict," Zoe
"Actually, that was one of the least stressful adventures we've had," Inara chuckled. "A conversation regarding my time on Serenity and my origins isn't all that terrible for someone in decent standing with the Guild."

"So what's this school gonna be like then?" Kaylee asked, "Will they let us visit you?"

"Of course," Inara nodded firmly. "Part of why I requested a place close to the Border was so that I would be able to see all of you. I'll expect you to write me often and keep me up to date. I'll still be able to attend some social functions though some duties won't be allowed as my disease progresses, and perhaps I can be of some help to you with work."

"We'd wanna see you even if you cain't help us with jobs," Kaylee said fiercely and got a round of nods from every crew member as well as Book in firm agreement.

"How soon are they expecting you?" Wash asked obviously doing some mental calculating on the course. "And how much medicine do you have?" He looked at Simon.

"We'll need to do a simple exam, to evaluate your condition," The dark haired man said slowly. "But I believe we have at least a month's worth."

"Even with our quick stop on Beylix we'll make Persephone long before a month is up," Riddick nodded at Wash. "If we need to we can always push a hard burn to make time."

Mal nodded, "And we will do. We take care of our own here. Even if our own are a social step or five above the rest of us." He smiled slightly and nodded towards the counter, obviously ready for a change of subject, "Someone's been tryin' her hand at cake again. Anyone feel up to tryin' a slice?"

"Without Serenity trying to set us all on fire?" Inara smiled back. "How will we pass the time?"

River spoke up finally, tilting her head and grinning at Mal, "Serenity felt left out because she was not offered cake. Threw a fit."

The Captain gave a wary look around at the ship as the Reader threw that bit of news at him before it occurred to him that he was being had. That laughter that rang around the table at his expression eased the tension in the air far more than any amount of whiskey ever could.

The crew, of course, being themselves, couldn't exactly leave well enough alone when it came to Inara leaving. Kaylee was the most upset, Mal and Jayne close seconds. Riddick watch as his méi méi didn't quite pout but she certainly wasn't her usual sunshiny self. "Ain't there anythin' we can do tae make her stay?"

"Listen to yourself," Riddick gentled his tone as much as he could. "She's ill Kaylee. Ain't like she wants to go. We can't 'make' her do anything. And we shouldn't. She's not gonna stop bein' your friend just because she's not here. An' it ain't like waves cost anything."

"We're on Persephone enough that we should be able to visit her often," Simon offered that consolation.

"It ain't gonna be the same," Kaylee replied dejectedly.
"No, it won't," Riddick shrugged. "Won't lie to you and say it is. But you got a choice mèi mèi. You can mope and make her last couple weeks here sad. Or you can let her know you'll miss her by makin' plans to see her soon."

River sighed in exasperation as she and Simon went over the situation with Mal again. While more accepting of the bad news than Kaylee the Captain still wasn't any happier with it than his engineer.

"Would the Captain like to know the definition of insanity?" She jabbed her finger at the chart emphatically, "Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result."

"Yeah but—"

"There is no but," Simon shook his head. "I would cheerfully rob every hospital in the Core if it would help Inara but medication is only half the treatment. A calm, stress free environment is the other half. And Serenity is not stress free. Not even you can claim that Captain."

"There really ain't anything we can do?" Mal didn't like being helpless. And especially not when it meant one of his people was leaving. Change was not the Captain's friend.

"They cannot scare me with their empty spaces, between stars - on stars where no human race is. I have it in me so much nearer home to scare myself with my own desert places." River shook her head as she spoke echoes of Mal's thoughts, "She'll always have us. We'll always be her friends."

"I just… feel like I gotta do somethin'." Mal's hands lifted and fell in frustrated inaction.

"You ain't the only one," Jayne's voice grumbled as he entered the infirmary. "You think any of us likes the idea of 'Nara just walkin' away? She's got a way 'bout her, soothes just by bein' there."

"She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue," River smiled slightly and then narrowed her eyes at Mal upon hearing his belligerent thoughts.

"Wouldn't have thought you'd care much since you can't have sex with her," Mal's unkind words failed to hit their target as Jayne rolled his eyes.

"Same goes for you," Jayne retorted with a shrug.

"Gentlemen, and I use that term loosely," Simon interceded, "Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

Jayne grimaced his acknowledgement. "Just don't set right with me, her leavin'. How'd we know this place'll be good for her? What if they just stick her in a room an' make her set up all by herself? That won't be good for her."

River shook her head, reassuring the Kerry native, "She's in good standing with the Guild. They won't just…dump her somewhere. Even if she cannot practice certain elements of her profession she's still valued. Her skills are many and varied." She looked at the two men, nearly looming over she and Simon and clearly displeased with the situation. "Still… it wouldn't hurt for us to escort her to the school. We could help her move in. Strong men would be a boon in carrying trunks and furnishings."

"Yeah!" Jayne grew a bit more enthused with the idea of being some help. "Oughta look into what she'll need. Help her set up housekeepin' maybe?"
"Ain't a bad thought," Mal stroked his chin. "River, you an' Simon, you pick her brain, an' I ain't particular as to how you come by the information, so's we can all figure what's most helpful."

"Subtle way of telling me to Read her," River rolled her eyes. "But..." She exchanged a half smile with Simon and they both nodded. "We'll look into it."

Figuring out what Inara might need to begin the new phase of her life wasn't hard, not for a Reader. Getting what she needed... that was a little more problematic.

"What's she need a tea service for?" Mal wanted to know. "Ain't she got one already?"

River took a deep breath and counted to twenty in every language she knew before answering, "She has a simple tea set. But she will be serving tea to multiple guests at one time. She needs a proper tea service to entertain."

"They don't got cups of their own?" Mal was clearly not getting the point.

"You asked me to find out what she'd need. She needs a proper tea service," River ground her teeth together. "A nice set of china for dining wouldn't be a bad idea either."

"So's it's really like settin' up housekeepin'?" Jayne was very carefully disassembling a gun. He'd decided on a more practical approach, knowing he couldn't afford to get Inara anything store bought. "River, come an' hold this for a tic. Tell me iffen you think it'll suit Inara's grip."

Obligingly the Reader moved around the table and picked up the gun stock, evaluating it. "Should be good... maybe a bit narrower, but depth and height are good." She showed him where it pressed uncomfortably against her palm and he nodded taking the piece back and carefully sanding at the wood.

"I figure sand it down some, make sure all the parts are in workin' order and seal it up so its strong as steel," Jayne told her. "Rick said he's workin' on some shivs for her? Fancy ones she can wear in her hair?"

"Kaylee's making flash bombs that look like incense sticks," River smiled. "Zoe is getting the incense and Ciara's buying her tea. I'm making her sachets to go in her clothing and Kaylee is taking captures we'll get printed out for her so she can hang the crew on her walls."

"What's Simon doin'?" Mal wanted to know as he stared glumly at china on the cortex screen River had handed him. "Why can't he do the tea set thing?"

"Because he's finding her essential oils that will help in her treatments and going in with me on our store-bought gift," River told him, "What's wrong with the tea service?"

A narrow-eyed look at him had the Captain flushing like a schoolboy. "I don't know which one she'll like."

"Men," River sighed.

Wash and Riddick entered the kitchen just in time to catch her sigh and the pilot laughed, "Zěn me huí shì?"

"Captain is having trouble choosing his gift," River rolled her eyes. "Afraid she won't like it."
Wash shook his head as he made some tea and took it to the table to look over Mal's shoulder. "Well Inara's got her shuttle done up in all those sorta…rich colors. What about that one? Nice deep blue, silver touches and some white."

"Wash you have hidden depths," Riddick commented. "Get four place settings to match and you've got your housewarming gift done."

"I wouldn't want to deprive you of the pleasure," The Pilot retorted with a grin.

"Not much of a pleasure," Riddick shrugged as he brought more tea to the table and gave River a mug before sitting with his own.

River kissed his cheek before explaining to the confused pilot, "Furyan eyes are colorblind to all but the most saturated hues."

"Huh," Mal looked at him. "Don't know why I didn't know that."

"Ain't made it exactly secret," Riddick shrugged.

The captain nodded and concentrated on the screen again before frowning and shaking his head at Wash's suggestion. "I like that one." He pointed at another set.

River turned the screen to look at his selection and Wash made a face, "That's boring. There's no color to it."

Mal slanted a look at his pilot's very colorful shirt, "Not everyone wants a rainbow splashed over everything."

The Reader examined his choice and nodded, "Very elegant, silver with a dark grey and black pattern on white. It won't clash with anything. Very appropriate gift." She selected it for delivery and added gift wrapping before shunting the cortex over to Wash. "Now, choose a dinner service to go with it."

"Black and white?" Blue eyes stared at her as mournfully as if she'd told him to kill puppies.

"Doesn't have to be." River shook her head. "Choose colored chargers for under the plates. White and silver dinner service, to match the tea service. With elegant black stemware and silver trim." She pointed out the options for him, "See? Then all of her china will go nicely together but she can have color with the chargers, or napkins and tablecloth. All things she can change easily if she likes. Without going to the expense of another dinner service."

Ciara entered the galley inhaling with pleasure at the scent of tea and overheard the last of the conversation, "It's a good idea. Inara doesn't do flashy. A traditionally elegant set of china will suit her down to the ground."

Wash grumbled but nodded and began to choose the china. "Fine. Fine." He looked over at River with a frown, "And what are you getting her?"

River smiled, "Hope chest, with linens. The sachets I'm making will go in it."

Wash had a more than slightly outraged expression on his face, matching his thoughts, and appeared ready to comment on the simplicity of her gift when his wife walked in, "Husband, you really wanna go there?"

"But sheets and towels and things? In a box?" Wash protested. "And she's making us pick out
Zoe rolled her eyes at her husband, "Wash, I'm pretty sure that if you traded gifts with River we'd go bankrupt."

"Wha—?" Wash blinked.

Mal looked over at her curiously as the pilot finalized his gift and River examined his choices, locking the purchase in. "Uh… what exactly are you buyin' nǐ zǐ?"

River shrugged at him, "Proper bedding and sheets for life not aboard a ship. Towels and other linens necessary for her well-being. All must be of good quality so as not to agitate Inara's skin. Trembling of nerves will make cheap fabrics feel like sandpaper."

Riddick nodded, "There's a thought that we'd make her some feather pillows but better to have something easy to wash. So, some good foam pillows to support her neck'll do."

Zoe nodded, "An' none of that's cheap."

River considered and added some pretty throw pillows to coordinate with Inara's current furnishings. "Only trouble is determining color. A rich palette like her shuttle? Or something tranquil and soothing?"

"Why doncha call the school an' ask 'em what the place is like?" Jayne asked, his eyes still on the gun he was smithing. "If they're all fancy like her shuttle then havin' something different might be good. Rest her eyes when she's bein' private."

"Good thought," The Reader grinned at him and looked between Zoe and Mal. "But the fugitives can't make the call."

"I'll do it," Zoe spoke before Mal could volunteer and shot him a look that dared him to object. "Ain't like you're known for your diplomatic ways 'round Companions sir. She headed towards the bridge leaving the Captain to sputter under his breath about his diplomatic skills.

"Nonexistent," River told him sweetly. "That's the word you're looking for to describe them."

"I can make nice as well as the next person," Mal argued. "Better than the next person, long's the next person is Jayne. Or Rick." He added after a moment's thought.

She couldn't help rolling her eyes, "Captain can shuō fèi huà with the best of them but jīn guāng dǎng are not diplomatic."

Thankfully his somewhat disjointed retort was cut off by Inara entering the galley. River quickly flipped the cortex screen to stock reports while everyone else tried their best to act like they had nothing to hide. Jayne was the best at it, looking up to say hello and concentrating on his work again. His smile as he looked down at the gun was sly, his thoughts mischievous at the thought of working on Inara's gift right under her nose.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So… Tracey lived, and Inara's leaving a bit ahead of schedule. I have in mind to skip Objects in space as an episode and use parts of it in the plot of Those Left
Behind since I killed off the Blue Hands in Ariel. How do we like it so far?

Chinese Translations:

gǒu shǐ (dog shit)

Gǒu cào de (dog-humping)

pì yǎnr (bastard)

Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pígǔ yǎn (May your child be born with an imperforate anus)

mèi mei (little sister)

Zěn me huí shì (what's the matter? / what's going on? / how could that be? / how did that come about? / what's it all about)

nǐ zi (little girl)

shuō fēi huà (to talk nonsense; to bullshit)

jīn guāng dǎng (racketeers / con artists)

Script Chinese Translations:

go-se (script- dog shit)

Quote Sources:

Qui cum canibus concumbunt cum pulicibus surgent (He that lieth down with dogs shall rise up with fleas) – Poor Richard’s Almanack – Benjamin Franklin

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces, between stars - on stars where no human race is. I have it in me so much nearer home to scare myself with my own desert places. – Desert Places – Robert Frost

She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. – Proverbs 31:26

Words without thoughts never to heaven go. – Hamlet – William Shakespeare
Before Everything Else

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mal had dawdled on Beylix for a while, taking a short job involving the ridiculously easy theft of some cargo, and letting Kaylee play in the scrapyards looking for parts. But after a few days they’d gotten what they needed, the cargo had to be unloaded and he was out of excuses.

Their arrival on Persephone was greeted with mixed enthusiasm. Hitting dirt meant that Inara would be leaving soon and no one was thrilled about that, including Inara. But it also meant seeing Shazza and Ruby and Badger, though Mal's feelings on that were mixed as well. He did a good job of hiding how much he adored Ruby and admired Shazza but made no secret of how much he disliked Badger. Riddick stifled a grin as the Dyton colony natives sent the ship a wave that hit the cortex the minute they docked.

"It ain't enough that I'm on the same dirt as that squirrely little ǒu niáng yǎng de, now he's wavin' me before we even get Inara squared away," Mal complained as he and Jayne carried one of Inara's trunks down to the new mule they'd picked up on Beylix. Well, a new to them mule anyway. It was bigger than the last mule and would sit four comfortably, five if they didn't mind going slower than a snail stuck in molasses, and had the benefit of being fitted with couplings so they could hoist it up on pulleys in the bay rather than take up space on the cargo deck. The cargo bay was looking less crowded and if they got cargo big enough to fill the hold they wouldn't need to haul the mule up the steps into the passenger lounge. Apparently that had happened on at least one memorable occasion.

"Knowin' Badger it's 'cause a Ruby and Shazza," Riddick had a trunk over his shoulder as he followed them down the stairs. "River sent a wave when we left Beylix."

"That's just gorram perfect," Mal shook his head as he set the trunk down. "So he can lie in wait for us."

"He ain't that bad," Riddick shook his head as he put the trunk he was carrying next to the other. "You're just sore because he wouldn't buy imprinted goods off you after you flashed your tail at the feds."

"I do a job I get paid," The tall Browncoat could give a mule lessons in stubborn Riddick decided. "Shouldn't matter if we got tagged or not."

"Does when he's got people to look out for, same as you," He mounted the stairs, the other two following him, Mal still grumbling and Jayne remaining quiet. "You got tagged, imprinted goods would have been the obvious goal of the heist and if they'd shown up on Persephone, this close to the Core...they'd have come down on Badger and his people. Badger's just got Shazza back a few hours before you tried to offload imprinted federal goods on him. He had family to protect. And people who depend on him the way Zoe, Kaylee, Jayne an' Wash depend on you."

"Got plenty a business off him that's been good," Jayne offered. "Them cows brought good money."

"We ain't doin' cows again," Mal shook his head, "I don't care what the cut is..." He paused as the shuttle doors opened again and entered to pick up another trunk with Jayne's help. "All right, maybe I care a little. But it'd have to be a gorram good cut."

"Ain't disagreein' on that aspect of it." Riddick nodded at Inara as he picked up the carpet the girls
had helped her roll up. "But Jayne's not wrong."

"Well we'll see what he's got to say," Mal looked around for a moment as if seeing the shuttle for the first time. It was looking oddly bare, bereft of Inara's lush draperies, soft cushions and elegant fixtures. "Looks like one or two more trips down should do it?"

Inara nodded, "The mattress folds up. The crate it came in is actually the platform."

"We'll get on that," Zoe nodded at Kaylee. "If you an' River can get the rest of those drapes down?"

The Companion smiled, "Of course." She looked slightly amused, "You don't have to treat me like I'm a china doll you know. I'm not dying yet."

"Not a china doll, but treasured just the same," River responded and moved towards the drapes that blocked the controls from the rest of the shuttle.

Riddick nodded as Mal and Jayne exited the shuttle with their load. "She's right. We just want to help is all." He followed the other two down to the cargo bay and loaded the rug on the mule heading back up for the bed in a box and watched as the ladies packed up the draperies and bed. "You don't keep any of this?"

"The finer fabrics are from the Guild and return to them when I'm no longer practicing as a full Companion," Inara explained with a smile. "They'll be cleaned, checked for any repairs needed and the next time a Companion wants to travel they'll be in good condition for he or she to use. They wouldn't be appropriate for my rooms at the school. Not as settled and elegant. A traveling Companion is seen as exotic, beautiful and awe inspiring."

"Hmm…" He helped Zoe push a corner of the mattress into the box. "So, what'll you do for furniture at the Training House then?"

"Oh, there'll be some basic things. Proper for a teaching Companion," Inara and River were carefully folding the brocade drapes. "More elegant and refined. Awe inspiring in a different way. Meant to impress young ladies."

"Sounds like hand-me-downs," Riddick frowned and helped Kaylee with one side of the latching box.

"That's one way to look at it," Inara gave an elegant shrug. "But we're all part of the Guild and part of that is maintaining a certain standard."

"Passin' things around is their way of makin' sure you don't use somethin' cheap or too old?" Kaylee asked curiously.

"In part," The Companion nodded. "And it's a help to younger women who don't have as much in the way of assets. We all share in things like furnishings and furniture. Costumes are traded or given away when a Companion retires completely. And gifts of jewelry or money are made so that she can live comfortably."

"You take care of each other," River smiled. "Rules are there to protect you."

"I disappointed my teachers when I decided to travel. In another four years, I could have been Head of a House." Inara admitted quietly, "But when I explained…they understood. They were sad but they understood."

"Now you'll be able to see 'em more often," Kaylee was obviously trying to find the silver lining.
"An' we'll be able ta visit you too."

"Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud turn forth her silver lining on the night?" Riddick quoted as he hefted the bed in a box onto his shoulder and began to carry it down to the cargo bay.

River smelt like mischief as she worked the cortex; she'd arranged for some furniture of very fine quality to be 'donated' to the Training House for Inara. Badger and Shazza had been pleased to hear from them and saddened to learn that Inara would be leaving Serenity. Riddick would bet dollars to dumplings that the Companion would have a few visitors before long, 'welcoming' her to Persephone.

Hearing that had also soothed Badger's ruffled feathers some about Mal ignoring him. "Here I'm offerin' the man work, lookin' past what's gone under the bridge an' he's not even sendin' a line sayin' yea or nay." The bowler wearing man had griped.

"It ain't you Badger," Riddick had shrugged and when Badger had rolled his eyes corrected himself. "Right, well it ain't all you. We're gettin' Serenity tuned up, an' helpin' Inara move."

"So, you're not in a position to take a job for how long?" Badger let his cousin push him to the side a bit so Shazza's face was also on screen.

"Maybe a week? Five days if we push it. But Kaylee really wants to flush out Serenity's systems good." River answered from over his shoulder. "Mal doesn't like to turn down work, you know that, but until we're all shipshape, we can't go anywhere. He really wouldn't even like us talking to you about ships business."

"You know he's funny like that," Riddick added with a shrug.

"Well..." Badger frowned, "Job I had in mind needs doing in a day or so. But I can find someone to take it. A week? I've got a little chore out on Constance that needs doing in two weeks. Can you make it there by then?"

"Might could," Riddick did some mental calculations. "Has to be two weeks?"

"Nature of the job is the longer it goes after two weeks the more likely it is someone else'll try the same job," Badger explained. "I don't want to go into particulars in a wave."

"Yeah, I got that." He nodded and looked at River who frowned but nodded slowly. "We'll pass it on to the Captain, let you know for sure in a day or so?"

"That'll work," Shazza grinned at them. "You tell Reynolds that Ruby's been askin' after all of you and she's getting a bit stroppy about you not visiting sooner."

"Even if Mal don't want the job we'll come an' visit," Riddick promised.

"Look forward to seein' you," Badger grinned at them and Shazza gave them a wink before the wave cut out.

River smile slightly and leaned into his side, her scent soft and warm as he pulled her into his lap. "We do the job, we get paid." She murmured, "Will have to make sure the second part of the Captain's saying comes true."
"Trouble," Riddick rubbed the back of her neck under her knot of hair. "Type Badger told us about?"

"Possibly double booked," She nodded. "Not Badger's fault. Loose lips sink ships."

The flurry of moving Inara to the training house, helping her get set up, and then gifting her with the things they'd bought or made had kept them all from thinking too hard on goodbyes. The other senior Companion at the training house was an exotic looking blonde named Sheydra and she'd seemed thrilled to see Inara. She'd been polite and welcoming to the crew and solicitous of Inara's comfort which had made them all feel much better about Inara being at the school, since Sheydra clearly wasn't a stranger to their friend.

Unfortunately, that faint comfort had worn off by the time they went to see Badger the next day. Riddick eyed Mal and hoped he wouldn't do anything too annoying and put Badger's back up. The Dyton native had a soft spot for Serenity's crew since he'd adopted Ruby and a softer spot for Riddick, River and Simon since Shazza called them family, but Mal could get under his skin every time.

River had insisted on coming along and Mal had grudgingly added she and Riddick to the group, telling Jayne to use the time to evaluate what they needed for ammunition and stock up as much as he could with the money available. Kaylee and Book were sent to shop for food with the bit of coin allotted. Everyone else was to stick close to the boat. Everyone else being Ciara, Wash and Simon. None of whom really wanted to leave but being told to stay hadn't exactly endeared Mal to any of them.

"I'm countin' on you hintin' to me if Badger's bein' squirrely about this job," Mal told River as they walked towards Badger's place. "Had a few too many things go right on his jobs lately and that means we're due for something to go wrong."

"Can't argue with the Captain's bad luck," River nodded. "But I see no ill intent on Badger's part."

"Just…keep your mind open-like," The Browncoat instructed.

"Teach your mother to suck eggs," Riddick rolled his eyes behind the goggles and held the curtain for River and Zoe to precede him while he brought up the rear.

Shazza had nicknamed Badger's quarters the Warren for all the tunnel-like hallways. Light slanted through awnings in places and doors opened and closed until they reached the area where Badger waited. Before they got in a word of greeting Ruby was racing towards them and hugging River tightly, then embracing Riddick, Zoe and finally the Captain before drawing back and asking a million questions in a flurry of sign language.

"Slow down, slow down," Riddick laughed. "You're goin' so fast how can we answer any of your questions?"

Obligingly she slowed down and tugged on Mal's coat to get his attention, her hands still moving quickly but slower than her previous questions. Riddick chuckled as the Captain's crankiness at dealing with Badger was blunted by the sweet little girl and her conversation.

Badger, thankfully, seemed to have anticipated his adopted daughter hijacking his meeting for a time because he simply poured tea and offered sandwiches before sitting back and grinning as Ruby wound Mal around her tiny fingers. By the time they'd finished informing Ruby in person of all the
things that had happened an hour had passed.

"All right poppet, go on an' find our baker's dozen, let her know they're here. And then you get on with your schooling." Badger instructed her firmly. Ruby pouted and the short man visibly steeled himself, shaking his head, "Go on now. Let Barker know what you'd like for dinner, it's your night to pick the meal remember?"

That put a grin on her face as she hugged them all farewell and raced out of the room. Badger chuckled as he pulled out the information on the job. "I'd put on two stone if I wasn't chasing her around half my days. If she's not learning about the work she's on the cortex reading up on things to ask all of you."

Riddick couldn't help smiling at the thought of Badger chasing his tiny adopted daughter around, "Sounds like you got your hands full."

"Not so full that I'm out of business," Badger retorted. "Got a job, out on Constance. Simple really, but timing is pretty important on this one."

"How important, timing wise?" Mal asked, his good mood fading some without Ruby around.

"As in, gets tricky if you don't pull it off in a week." Badger replied, "Got a bank see? Folks put all sorts of things in it. And every couple weeks they get a fresh infusion of cash to take care of payrolls. Company puts the money in, you take it out before its distributed." He put a floorplan down on the desk. "Main vault's here. Got the codes for it an' all."

"Company'll have to cover the payroll because it hasn't been given out yet," Zoe nodded her understanding. "We ain't robbin' folks, we're robbin' the company."

"I can see some of the rush in that." Mal nodded, "But normally payroll goes in a good five days before distribution. Just in case of any hiccups."

"So why the rush to do it right after its put in?" Badger anticipated their next question, "Because it's not exactly a secret o' when the money goes in. Every day after that money comes in is a day someone else could pull the job. And my codes are only good for one week."

"Change of codes weekly," River murmured. "And rumors of the job fly far and wide."

"Exactly," Badger nodded. "Money goes in Saturday, you go on Sunday and pull it out."

"Tight squeeze," Riddick commented. "But I think we could make it." He looked at Mal, "Steal a mule, leave it abandoned somewhere, make it look like a local job?"

"Need to set up a distraction," Zoe added. "Unless we do the job in the wee hours of the morning."

"We'll figure it out," The Captain nodded. "But I think we can do it."

"Good to hear," Badger nodded. "Split's seventy thirty, as always, and I'll see you in two an' a half weeks or thereabouts. Something goes wrong just send a wave."

"And don't you dare leave without sayin' hello to me," Shazza's voice called from the doorway and River's scent blazed with joy as she went to hug their friend.
console. "Gonna be odd, not havin' Inara here," He observed. "Guess Mal's gonna get a bit tetchy as well."

"He might," Wash shrugged slightly. "He doesn't care for change as a rule and there's been a lot of it since you and your two Core refugees came aboard."

"He got any plans to rent out the shuttle?" Riddick turned his chair a bit sideways so he could look at Wash directly.

"I'd say that depends on how well he adjusts to the change. Though money's always a pressing concern." The Pilot leaned back now that the course was locked in and scrubbed his hands over his face. "Inara brought us a lot of respectability and without her, might be a bit harder to get clearance to touch dirt on some planets."

"Well sure, places like Osiris or Sihnon, but Bernadette and Persephone aren't quite as snobby about it," Riddick argued. "And how often does Mal really want to go that deep into the Core after all?"
He looked towards the hallway as he heard Mal's approach.

"I don't," The Captain answered as he stood in the doorway. "You got that course programed?"

"Just finished locking it in," Wash nodded spinning his chair to face Mal. "We're on our way."

"Good." Mal nodded. "Put her on autopilot and come back to the galley, let's go over the job."

River looked up from the pot she was stirring when they entered and Kaylee gave them a sunny grin.

"We're almost set here Cap'n," The mechanic told him. "Just need to add a few more things an' we'll be at the table."

"We have found a way to make dumplings," River told Mal solemnly. "And Kaylee has approximated beef stew."

"Smells pretty good," Riddick kissed her forehead affectionately as he grabbed a mug and some coffee.

Zoe was at the table with the blueprints Badger had given them, Jayne sharpening a knife as he looked them over. "Gonna be a helluva hike to town if we don't take the mule," He commented.

"Got an idea about that," Mal nodded as he stood at the head of the table. Riddick took a seat leaving the spot next to him open for River while Wash sat next to his wife. Once everyone had taken their places at the table the Captain rubbed his hands together. "Kaylee, you an' Wash'll be on the ship, 'long with the Doc an' Ciara. Figure ya'll bein' ready if there's trouble is the wisest course."

Kaylee nodded, "Simon said to tell ya, he got the infirmary stocked up well as he can with what we had, just in case the job goes sour."

Riddick looked at River who was studying the plans of the bank, "Cap'n's plan… is a good one." She commented quietly. "But it is flawed."

The aforementioned captain frowned, "I ain't even said what the plan is yet."

"Steal a mule, rob the bank during church services while Book preaches." River summed up the plan succinctly. "Won't work, not without... addendums."

"What sorta addenddadums," Jayne stumbled over the unfamiliar word. "That means extras, right?"
"It does," River nodded at him with a smile and looked at Reynolds. "Badger told us true, popular job."

"Someone else is in on this?" Mal shook his head, aggrieved and annoyed. "Well nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ."

"Not necessary to copulate with the 'verse until heart failure occurs in all beings," River corrected him primly and Riddick smothered a laugh as she added. "And not enough time besides."

"Someone else had the same idea as Badger?" Zoe asked in her usual calm way.

River nodded, "Don't know who or how. But if we do not hit the bank before church service, and quietly, we will not get paid at all."

"Well so much for using the Shepherd as a distraction," Mal groused as he sat down.

"Any idea how we can avoid the whole mess?" The First Mate had moved on from irritation to practicalities while her Captain was dwelling on his imminent misfortune.

"Have an idea." River nodded and Riddick grinned at the scent of mischief on her. "Bait and switch."

Riddick tilted his head, "Set up whoever's comin' after us to take the blame?"

River nodded, "Likely that we will run into someone. Or someone will hear of Serenity being on planet. We land at night, while everyone sleeps. We right away, pull the job and get the goods loaded into the shuttle. Go back, preacher preaches, Mal, Zoe and Jayne act like they're pulling the job during church services."

Mal was frowning, "Why would we do that?" He pointed at the vault, "Revisitin' the scene of the crime's just askin' to get caught."

"Because we want the persons coming after us to be caught," River smiled. "You three, in the vault. Other group comes in. You look cornered. Richard and I come in behind them. Kill a couple, take one, hopefully the leader hostage. You three escape and we do something, leave a timed flash bang maybe, to draw attention to the bank after we're in plain sight elsewhere. You go to the church to pick up the preacher, Richard and I dump the hostage elsewhere and everyone blames the gang stuck in the vault for the theft as one of them obviously got away. We walk off free and clear, money already hidden on Serenity."

Riddick chuckled, "Could even 'helpfully' tell the law about seeing a man run out of the bank, give a description and everything."

"And should they find the man later… and he doesn't have the goods on him?" Zoe asked dryly.

"Obviously he was double crossed by his partners in crime, just as he double crossed his gang," River shrugged. "For all who draw the sword will die by the sword."

"Won't be easy," Mal was still frowning. "We all go in the shuttle at night, then we take the shuttle back to town in the morning and you two take the mule?"

Riddick smirked, "Shouldn't be more'n we can handle."

"An' if it's all the same ta you, I'd rather not trust to yer luck Mal," Jayne added. "Ain't ever really your fault but your plans seem to go real wrong at times."
Riddick watched as the Captain sputtered at that blunt assessment but when even Zoe didn't come to his defense subsided with a mild grumble. "Still don't see what's wrong with my plan."

"Nothin'," Jayne shrugged as he finished with his whetstone. "Jus' too many ways for it to go wrong an' we end up not gettin' paid." He slanted a mildly annoyed glance at the Captain, "We like gettin' paid Mal."

"Yeah, we do like the money," Mal admitted with a sigh. "Fine. We'll do it your way Genius Reader girl." He eyed her, "But somethin' goes wrong and you're all bugging out of there. Let's not be stupid about this."

The Furuyan grinned as his woman nodded solemnly, "No stupid bravery. We will only be intelligently brave."

"See that you do." Now that Mal had made sure he'd gotten his captainy respect established he pointed at the vault. "You figure we oughta empty the take out of the bags it comes in? Leave them there and fill them with something heavy?"

Riddick shook his head, "Nah Mal, we'd want the folks in town to think the leader got away with the take. What's the point of leaving the bags behind?"

"Yeah, true," Mal nodded. "Guess I was just thinkin' it'd be good to look like there wasn't a robbery at all if no one else shows up."

River frowned and pulled up her cortex, "A certain amount of money laundering going on through the bank. Possible further action with safe deposit boxes, to be evaluated once inside." She said thoughtfully, "But stealing a great deal more than what is ours…could lead to trouble with the Tongs."

"Yeah, let's not an' not even say we did," Jayne looked alarmed, as well he should. No one messed with the Tongs except other Tongs. They gave organized crime a new definition and not one that was palatable to anyone small time like they were. Sometimes it was best being a smuggler and petty thief rather than draw that sort of attention.

Mal nodded his agreement, "Well just stick with our safe cashy money."

"Sweet is the pleasure after pain." River smiled at them all, "It will be fun."

Getting into the bank wasn't hard and thanks to Riddick's eyes they weren't even seen. Flying the shuttle without running lights hadn't even been difficult for him. River fidgeted while Mal, Jayne and Zoe fetched the cashy money they were set on stealing. Something was coming…

"River," Jayne's voice called to her quietly. "C'mere an' tell Mal which is what. He cain't tell the payroll from the other money."

Jumping out of the shuttle and trotting into the bank wasn't exactly an adventure but 'it was better than just sittin' as Jayne would have put it. "These bags," River went to the loot Badger had sent them for. "They're new, all shiny." She kept Mal from grabbing the wrong ones, "These." She put his hand on the canvas sacks and gently guided Zoe and Jayne as well. "Six bags."

As they grabbed the bags she looked around thoughtfully, formulating and disregarding plans to take everything and finally sighed. "Can only take some cash and jewelry in the safety deposit boxes, but
nothing else. All traceable or property of the Tongs."

Jayne squinted at the locks on the boxes, "Take a few minutes to pick 'em."

River pointed at the two boxes that held cash she was willing to take, "Ill-gotten gains. To be hidden from the spouse and used for nefarious purposes."

Jayne chuckled and cracked the locks, pouring the contents into one of his bags and slung it over his shoulder. "That's everythin'."

"Let's get goin' then," Mal nodded for her to take the lead, Jayne following her, Zoe behind him, with Mal bringing up the rear in the darkness. The vault door shut quietly behind them and River grinned.

"Phase one is complete." She brought up her cortex, the screen illuminating her face with an eerie glow. "No alarms triggered, nothing to give the game away." She smiled at Riddick, "Take us home."

It took a bit longer to do it quietly but the shuttle left town as silently as it had arrived, with no one the wiser.

"Now tell me why we're sticking around here again?" Mal was itching to get into the black. She could sympathize but they had to wait.

"Someone is coming," River didn't look up from her cortex, busily killing the tags on the few pieces of jewelry that were in the deposit boxes. "We don't want them to follow us."

"All the more reason to leave now," The Captain wasn't getting it.

With a sigh, she looked up from her work for a moment, "Better to leave a scapegoat than have the sheriff and a mob looking around for strange folk. Serenity does not go unnoticed, no matter how unremarkable you try to be. Landing at night suggests business to be done in the morning, but if we leave again it will be commented on, remembered for the strangeness."

That took Mal aback some and Riddick growled mildly from where he was sharpening his shivs. "Be kinda obvious if we show up outside of town, the bank gets robbed an' we leave, even if we do have crates we need to drop at the store."

"Best to escort the Shepherd in for services, let him tend to the flock," River continued. "An altruistic reason for our arrival, as well as the cargo we will deliver." She threw in a compliment to soften Mal's attitude, "Smart to have a legitimate reason for being on Constance. No one would believe a cargo ship coming here for only the preacher." She keyed the last of the code in to kill the tags and smiled smugly. The money from the jewelry would buy fresh fruit the next time they were on Harvest.

"So stickin' around makes us less obvious." Mal rubbed at his jaw, "Conjure it's a good thought. Just not so sure I like the whole getting cornered in the vault part."

"If you are not there then the tattooed man will be suspicious. He knows you're in this." River said slowly and looked at Mal curiously. "Tattoos on his face? Bald man?"

"Ott." Mal didn't quite growl but the stream of curses from between his clenched teeth was quiet
impressive. "Gou tsao de liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi."

"Take it you've met?" Riddick inquired in a mild tone, seemingly more interested in the shiv he was carving than the Captain's possible acquaintance.

"Ott specializes in screwin' people out of jobs they've done the work on," Mal ground out. "Seems to like doin' it to me especially when it means I might get pinched."

River smirked, "Plan doesn't seem so stupid now does it?"

Mal's irritated expression eased as he realized exactly what her plan meant for the uncaring gang leader, "No… no it surely does not."

"What's all the cussin' about?" Jayne asked as he walked in, "Could hear you all the way down in the engine room."

"River says Ott's gang are the ones gonna try to steal the coin out from under us." Mal told him flatly.

Jayne's cursing was even more inventive than Mal's and involved monkeys, dogs and an impressive amount of sending Ott's ancestors to hell. His grim expression lightened to a sunny grin as he thought over the plan and nudged Mal, "So Ott's gonna get pinched." He cursed the man again for good measure even as he smiled. "Gao yang jong duh goo yang."

"Yeah, I was comin' to that conclusion my own self, and likin' it just fine." The Captain found himself in rare accord with his senior gunhand. "Betcha the look on his face is gonna be priceless."

"Too bad we ain't got a capture." Jayne chuckled happily as he started to make breakfast. "But I'll settle for thinkin' of him in the lockup."

"It is a cheerful thought." Mal agreed as he poured some coffee. All of them were tired after their midnight heist.

Constance was a pretty planet, if a bit bereft of civilization, which really was just how he liked it. Riddick grinned as River climbed into the mule a wide brimmed hat shading her skin from the sun. "Covered up enough there Qīng Xiāng?" He teased as he started the mule.

"Better to look unremarkable," She shrugged as she pulled a pair of goggles to protect her eyes. "Just as you wear clothin' to blend in with the townsfolk."

It was true, he'd pulled on a rough khaki jacket and a plain shirt over the cargo pants and workboots he favored. He could still move but he wouldn't stand out except for the goggles. And those could be explained away as protection from dust and grit while he was driving. "Nothin' gets in the way." He shrugged as he pulled out of Serenity and headed for the small town that served as a locus point for the farmland and occasional refinery around it. "See anything goin' wrong?"

"Ott has a twitchy crew," River frowned and her scent filled with blood and steel as she tried to See what was coming. "A woman… she's very…eager to shoot and be done."

"Not very forward thinking of her," Riddick commented as he drove. "Dead bodies and no coin would mean someone was alive to run."
River nodded and he caught the motion out of the corner of his eye, "There's a little man…he likes knives… The way everyone thinks you like knives. Pleasure in carving on flesh. Not like you, easy to make and use. Practical. Good at throwing them too."

"Well I'll take the twitchy woman and you take the creepy little man," Riddick suggested. "I think an adjustment to the plan, hide in the bank before everyone gets there. Let's be ready for them. Rather than sneaking in after."

"Can we make it in time?" River looked at the town in the distance.

He shot her a grin, "Serenity ain't the only thing Kaylee's been workin' on." He put the mule into high gear and River whooped in excitement as their speed doubled.

He was sure the architect hadn't intended it as such, but the hallway to the bank vault was very nicely designed if you wanted to set up an ambush. Or in their case, an ambush within an ambush. Did that make it an ambush squared? He shook the odd thought out of his mind concentrating on the job.

Set in the center of the bank, the hallways led around it on two and a half sides with the fourth backing up against the teller's cages. One hall led to offices and ultimately a dead end. The other led around the back of the vault, turning the corner into the lobby. It was an efficient set up and the vault itself was lined with twelve-inch cinder blocks and concrete behind the steel of the safety deposit boxes and money lockers. Blowing through the vault walls wasn't a viable option for would be robbers unless they wanted to explode their eardrums, break every bone and, as if those two things weren't bad enough, inform everyone within five square miles that someone was breaking into the bank vault. Getting into the bank wasn't hard but without the codes to the vault being inside the building would do no good. The back door let out onto an alley for employees to enter and was conveniently out of plain sight due to several dumpsters.

From the impish expression on her face River was following his thought process and mentally determining another way to break into the vault. It was, apparently, a common design for banks. They'd secreted themselves in the shadows of the office hallway. The walls being so thick every door was set into a sort of alcove and even with the doors locked behind them there was more than enough room for the two of them to lie in wait.

From his spot half way down the hall he could hear Mal, Jayne and Zoe as they entered the bank. Mal was quietly grumbling about the plan and how he'd seen the mule parked a block away in an alley. "What's the point of having a plan if they're not going to follow it?" He muttered irritably as he keyed in the code to the vault. "If I have to follow the plan why don't they?"

"Might be that she saw something made it needful for them to get in place quicker," Zoe was clever enough to not use names even though they were alone.

"Ain't like there's any harm done," Jayne seconded. "Long's everybody's in place when the time comes?"

"Guess so," Mal grumbled as they entered the vault. "Just don't like not knowin'."

"Yeah, we're all real well acquainted with how you need to know things," Jayne retorted dryly, his voice echoing slightly in the metal vault.

"Well I know when there's a nice pile of cashy money for the takin'," The Captain had clearly decided that since they were in the vault it was time to behave in a more professional manner. Or at
least discuss the job rather than his crew.

He, Jayne and Zoe passed about forty minutes in idle chit chat regarding the vault, the job and the cashy money until the sound of breaking glass alerted them to the presence of the other gang. Apparently, they weren't too concerned about discretion and had decided to come through the plate glass lobby entrance while everyone was at church.

Riddick inhaled and caught the scent of greed, nerves and a disturbing twist of lust as four different sets of footsteps sounded in the quiet bank. Mal and the other two were murmuring as if unaware of the impending ambush.

"Isn't this convenient," The drawl was smug and grated along Riddick's nerves. "Vault open and everything."

"Well now," Mal's voice was steady though his tone was the all too familiar 'my plan is going very badly wrong through no fault of my own'. "This is a situation."

Riddick and River stole out of their hiding place and eased around the corner, River jerking her head to the right and indicating she would take the left.

Jayne's snarl was also familiar, he didn't care for being held at gunpoint, "Really? And I here I was yi da tuo da bian."

Riddick nodded to River and the two of them stole up to the vault without a sound, coming up behind Ott and his gang as Zoe was speaking. "Sir, it disturbs me that I'm inclined to agree with Jayne."

Mal and the others didn't let on to Riddick and River's presence in the vault doorway by so much as a blink, the Captain replying in his faux easy voice, "That makes two of us." He inclined his head slightly towards the tattooed bald man, "Where were we?"

Ott had a smile in his voice, "You were about to surrender the coin to me, or I was about to shoot you in the face. Your choice."

The Captain still had his gun aimed in Ott's face, "I don't suppose it matters to you, our bein' here first?"

The bald man with tattoos for propriety, justice, bravery and benevolence was not living up to those noble concepts, "You suppose right. Though I do appreciate the preacher you brought along as a diversion. That was almost intelligent."

Dark grim eyes stared into Ott's face, "Yeah, I used to think so."

Riddick gave River a nod as Ott's female crew member snarled, "Can we move this along Ott? I could spray them all down in a micro and we'll be off this miserable rock."

Ott was definitely smiling, "Yes you could." He tilted his head slightly, "It's your call Malcolm."

Jayne was giving a good performance of his own, "C'mon Mal… we can do this, starting with the freaky one. There's too much coin at stake not to…"

Mal was still eying Ott, giving Riddick and River all the time they needed to get into place. "Zoe?"

"I'll back you either way, sir." The First mate didn't even flinch.
"Your decision Mal," Ott's smile sounded more like a smirk. Mal relaxed, kicking one of the bags of coin at his feet, "Actually...it ain't really."

"It's ours," Riddick growled from behind the twitchy woman. His hand gripped her jaw and clamped down over her mouth and before she could react, he drew his shiv across her throat, cutting deeply into her carotid and jugular. Blood spurted and he dropped her, the one round she squeezed off in her death throes burying itself harmlessly in the ceiling. Thankfully it didn't make much more than a pop of noise and wouldn't be heard beyond the bank walls.

River hadn't even spoken, simply buried one blade in the small man's abdominal aorta and taken one of his knives, throwing it at Ott's huge gunhand as he crouched down to take the bag of coin Mal had kicked.

Riddick grabbed Ott and relieved him of his gun, snarling in his ear, "Now you're gonna want to just be nice and quiet. Or you can go the way of your crew." He looked over at Mal, "Big one dead?"

Jayne had crouched beside the sprawled man, the hulking form nearly as tall as he was. "He's alive."

"Better finish him off, don't want him yelling about us," Riddick advised. "Unless he'll bleed out in the next few minutes?"

"Should," Jayne cut the man's throat just to be sure. "Better safe'n sorry." He rose and smiled coldly at Ott. "Could just do him too, easy enough to dump the body out of the shuttle."

River had pulled a scarf off the creepy little man with the knives and stuffed it in Ott's mouth, relieving him of the headset he wore, smashing it underfoot with a smirk of her own. "He's still useful." She tilted her head, "Time for Browncoats to deliver cargo. And Furyans to depart."

"Meet you at the coordinates you gave us." Zoe nodded at them as she, Jayne and Mal slipped past them out of the vault. The employees entrance wasn't far from the offices where Riddick and River had hidden so at least they wouldn't be going out the front door, or through the sewers in the bathrooms. That had been plan C.

He wrinkled his nose at the thought of raw sewage and what it would do to his senses as River cheerfully looted the bodies of any coin or valuables. "Take the guns," He advised. "Make it look the way we want." He busied himself setting the timer on the flash bang for ten minutes, giving Mal and the others plenty of time to be delivering cargo when it went off.

She nodded and gathered the weaponry, adding all of it to a sack. She, Kaylee and the other mechanically inclined crewmembers tended to carry something of the sort, just in case they found parts or other useful things to scavenge. Kaylee had told them mournfully of a time when she'd had to leave behind a treasure trove of parts because she didn't have any way to carry them. River had immediately made burlap sacks part of their usual apparel, folded and stuck inside a shirt or over a belt. Even Simon carried one.

"Mmmgph..." Ott was clearly furious and more than a little afraid as he tried to talk through the gag.

"Bi zu!" Riddick gave him a little shake. "Got my fill of your voice when you tried to horn in on our job." He grabbed the sack River had tied shut and slung it over one shoulder, manhandling Ott with the other hand. "We're walkin'."

River had pulled her Ladysmith out and was holding it on Ott. "Belly wound won't kill you for a day and a half." She warned him. "And you'll still be able to walk."
That more than Riddick's admonishment ensured Ott's silence as they marched him out of the back of the bank and down three alley blocks to the mule. With some rope and a dirty blanket, he was concealed in the back seat of the mule, looking for all the world like someone sleeping off a drunk while his crew drove out of town. River waved cheerfully at Jayne and Mal as they carried some crates into the general store. Zoe was presumably inside making sure they got their coin for the freight and dry goods they'd picked up. The flashbang went off as they passed, a resounding boom echoing through the vault and making it very obvious that something was going on at the bank.

"Went fairly well," Riddick sent his pretty nǚ ren a grin.

"According to plan," River nodded. "Mal, Jayne and Zoe are alibied and we are already on our way out of town. Five minutes for the townsfolk to fetch their guns, another twenty to figure out what happened and start to look for us. We look like everyone else. Discard our outer accouterments and if we are found no one will recognize us."

"Who clued him in on this whole thing?" Riddick jerked his head back towards the silently fuming Ott.

"The twins put their noses and fingers where they don't belong." She smelt of steel as she read the now gangless gang leader. Her scent melted with plums as she looked back at him. "But he has stymied them. They will be cautious should they do business with us."

"Good." Riddick could have looked at her all day and would have but they still had work to do. "Got a bead on the coordinates?"

"Several clicks more," She pointed in the direction they wanted and he turned the mule towards it at as fast a speed as the machine could manage. As he drove River leaned back in her seat and turned her face towards the sun with a smile.

The shuttle arrived after about ten minutes, mostly due to the unloading they'd been in the midst of when Riddick and River drove past them. Shuttles were just a bit faster than the mule and had the advantage of ignoring the obstacles of landscape. "Everything go smooth?" Mal asked as he stepped out of the little ship.

River smiled, "Sorely tempted to slice his throat but restrained ourselves."

Jayne hopped out and with Riddick, yanked Ott out of the back seat, removing the blanket and ropes. "Could kick him a few times if you want mèi mei."

She shrugged, "Tempting." The bald man, so unlike her big Furyan, glared at her and she nearly reeled with the images of what he wanted to do, what he would have done to the crew, what he'd have let his gang do to them. "Fèi wù zhū."

She could feel her crew's concern as she shook her head, pushing the thoughts and images away. "What is it xiǎo jùn jié?" Mal asked, brow furrowing.

"Would have been happy to leave us all for dead. Let his crew render us like cattle." River spat the words out, their taste foul in her mouth. "Cares for no one and nothing but himself. È yǒu 'è báo. È guàn mān yíng."

"Well we knew that," Jayne nodded his agreement. "C'mon an' kick him in the ribs for a bit. That'll make you feel better." He grinned evilly down at the shorter Ott. "I know I'm gonna hit him some.
Still own him for that job he snaked out from under us back on Harvest.”

Mal nodded, "Can the plan take that sorta adjustment xiǎo láng?"

River nearly grinned at one of Riddick's nicknames coming out of the Captain's mouth, "Furyan's are contagious." She considered for a moment and then nodded, "A beating will not look amiss in this plan. So long as we are no longer than five minutes. Need to leave plenty of time to depart."

Riddick didn't wait any longer than her last syllable, his fist rocketing into Ott's belly. The gag came out of the man's mouth as Jayne punched him in the jaw. Mal stepped up and drove his fist square into Ott's nose, breaking it badly. Zoe's turn sent her hard combat booted heel into the tattooed man's ribs. River considered for a moment and then smirked in imitation of her husband before driving her heel into his knee.

Ott crumpled like old paper, falling to the ground and was given a few more kicks in the ribs and back for good measure. Zoe got in the final blow, kicking him squarely in the balls, "Because Kaylee ain't here to do it." She explained when every male winced in reluctant sympathy.

"Yeah, we were all on short rations after he stole the cargo out from under us on Santo," Jayne remembered. "Took us a solid month to work our way back from that. Kaylee was gettin' so thin I could count her ribs."

Mal smiled down at Ott, "This is a nice little piece of nowhere. Take you a bit to walk back to town, given the state of your knee. Assuming the townsfolk don't find you first." He nodded at River, "Finish him off?"

"A pleasure Captain." She bowed politely and kicked him in the forehead, knocking the man unconscious and following his thoughts down to oblivion to be sure he wasn't faking. She nodded and grinned at them, "Now we leave, nice hard burn to show off scorch marks and make for Serenity. Pick up the shepherd and be on our merry."

Mal was grinning, pleased as punch to finally get one over on Ott and they got paid to boot. "We'll just do that little thing. Rick, you an' River, want the shuttle? Take Jayne with you and Zoe and I will drive the mule back to Serenity."

"Don't mind if we do," Riddick scanned the ground. "You two go on though, Jayne an' me, we'll make sure there aren't any tracks to lead back. Won't take long."

"Smart thinkin'," Mal nodded, climbing into the mule and once Zoe was aboard, drove off.

Chapter End Notes

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Author's Note: So I thought this title chapter particularly apt considering after 'Those Left Behind' we're heading on to the BDM and our eventual ending. A little bit of preparation and the benefits of a Reader and suddenly the job goes smooth. And Mal's in a better mood because of it…though maybe not for long.

Chinese Translations:

gǒu niáng yǎng de (son of a bitch)
nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ (Fuck everyone in the universe to death)

Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)

Bì zuǐ (Shut up!)

nǚ ren (wife)

mèi mei (little sister)

Fèi wù (good for nothing)

zhū (hog / pig / swine)

xiǎo jùn jié (little genius)

È yǒu ’è bào (evil has its retribution (idiom); to suffer the consequences of one's bad deeds / sow the wind and reap the whirlwind - Hosea 8:7).

È guàn mǎn yíng (lit. strung through and filled with evil (idiom); filled with extreme evil / replete with vice / guilty of monstrous crimes)

xiǎo láng (little wolf)

Script Chinese Translations:

Gou tsao de (Dog-humping - script)

liu kou shuǐ de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi (script- Stupid son of a drooling whore and monkey)

Gāo yáng jong duh goo yang (Script- Motherless goat of all motherless goats)

yi da tuo da bian (script- a big lump of crap)

Quote Sources:

Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud turn forth her silver lining on the night? - Comus – Milton

For all who draw the sword will die by the sword – Matthew 26:52

Sweet is the pleasure after pain - Alexander's Feast - Dryden
Ending What Had Begun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

River smiled as the mule came buzzing up to the ship, "Cap'n stopped at the Sheriff’s offices after church services." She murmured to Rick and Jayne as they spotted one another with the weights. "Left a description of a tattooed man with a mule hurrying out of town and recalls seeing him near the bank with several others when he was dropping the preacher off for services."

"Law won't believe Ott over Mal?" Jayne wondered as he strained upwards with the barbell.

River shook her head, "Everyone in town saw Mal an' Zoe dropping the preacher off and then delivering goods. Heard the boom while they were at the store, ran with everyone else to the bank, only a few steps ahead. No time for a robbery and the lawman cannot fathom thieves drawing attention to themselves by going near the Sheriff's office. In plain sight the entire time so they cannot be blamed."

"Guess he never read The Purloined Letter," Riddick took his spot on the bench after adding some weight to the barbell.

"Well that makes two of us," Jayne kept his hands ready take the weight should it be too much. "What is it?"

"Story by a renowned author on Earth That Was," River explained absently. "A classic example of how to hide something in plain sight."

"Like to read it," the gunhand nodded. "Less you feel like readin' aloud while we work out?"

"Can do that," She smiled. "But we will leave soon." She looked over at the cargo doors, lowering to allow the mule in and Book's dark face with its slight frown. "Shepherd is…disturbed by our thieving."

"Honest work don't pay too well, an' it ain't easy to find," Jayne shrugged off that concern. "Ain't hurtin' anyone can't take it."

"Does not see it like that," River tilted her head. "But he'll stay a while longer. Doesn't want to go back to the Abbey."

"Rick," Mal hailed him as he climbed out of the mule and began to hook it up to the pulleys. "Gonna head back to Persephone, give Badger his cut. You an' Wash get a course set, me and Zoe'll get the coin divided up."

"I don't appreciate being used as a diversion Captain," Book was glaring at the taller man.

"Weren't doin' any such thing," Jayne told him as he took the weight of the barbell so Riddick could sit up.

"Did you or did you not rob a bank while everyone was listening to my sermon?" The Shepherd glared at the crew impartially.

"In point of fact we did not," Mal retorted. "You wantin' to do some preachin' had nothing to do with what we got up to this morning."
"And what did you get up to?" Book folded his arms. "Those people work hard, and need everything they have."

"But we don't?" Riddick growled mildly as he stood and helped Jayne muscle the bench back against the wall. "Nobody here is willin' to take a lash because your conscience is chafin' you for travelin' with thieves and killers."

For once it was Mal trying to settle everyone down, "Shepherd, we didn't rob the bank this morning. We did it in the wee hours while everyone, including you, was asleep. And we took no more than the payroll was just put in." He conveniently didn't mention the safety deposit boxes, "Company'll have to make that pay up since it weren't doled out to the employees yet. Folks ain't gonna be hurtin' over this. We wanted to we coulda cleaned the place out. But we didn't."

Book studied him as if trying to determine if Mal was lying and River glared at the preacher. "We do not live under your rule or your 'word of God'." She told him flatly. "Business this morning was to stymie another set of thieves. Ones who would have cleaned out the entire vault."

When the Shepherd appeared about to argue Zoe cut in, "She's got the right of it." The First Mate informed him calmly. "Ott and his gang have been trouble for us in the past. They like to steal jobs out from under other crews, don't much care who might be hurt by it. We just took a rule from your book and did unto him as he would have done unto us."

"That's not exactly what the golden rule means," Book returned dryly.

"But you weren't no kind of diversion." Jayne told him. "An' it ain't like you had to ride to our rescue 'cause we screwed up the job."

River frowned at the preacher and shook her head, "Knew who we were when you decided to take passage. Shouldn't let your past decide who we are. Don't have the right to sit in judgement on us and our doings when your shadows come haunting you."

She didn't stomp up the stairs but she knew her spine was stiff with irritation. Book's voice floated up to her as he asked Mal, "Nothing to say Captain?"

"I really don't think I can top that," Mal had a shrug in his voice. "I don't see where she's wrong either."

She was playing with the cortex and moving cash around so she could invest a bit when Mal came up to the bridge. "Cap'n's thoughts are very loud," She commented when he came in. Riddick inhaled as he turned to look at she and Mal and she smiled. "Plums and silk and blood."

"Qīng Xīāng," Her big man smiled. Wash looked up from his instruments with a quizzical expression as Mal leaned against the lockers, the door to the hallway shut behind him.

"Worried about the preacher now?" River murmured her question as she finished with her numbers and shut the program down.

"Wouldn't say worried exactly," Mal shook his head. "Just… lookin' for some insight an' maybe an explanation for what you said to him down in the cargo bay."

"Book don't seem like the type to let his past get in the way of the present," Wash commented.
"He wasn't doin' just that down in the bay? Goin' on about us usin' him as a diversion?" Riddick rolled his eyes. "He stinks of old lies and half-truths. Always has."

River frowned as she considered how to relieve Mal's mind without giving away Book's past. "Sees the Captain as a reflection of what he was. A long time ago. Changed who he was and became his own opposite, worked hard until he retired. But at the core, still the same. Fighting his own nature. She shook her head, "Castigates the crew because he sees himself giving in to his darker emotions."

"So, he ain't pure an' lily white," Mal rubbed his chin.

"That ain't a Shepherd," River heard the words that came from her lips and frowned thoughtfully. "A darkness comes, the past and present twist and collude and hide in a graveyard in space."

"Ô, zhè zhēn shì ge kuàilè de jìnzhīn," Mal closed his eyes as if to deny what he'd just been told. "Someone we know?" Riddick's hand cupped her face, making her solid again, an anchor to the world around her even as ghosts and killers floated through her mind.

"Conspiracy," River murmured. "Looks for someone who shares her hatred for us. Found Dobson… adopted his plan." She narrowed her eyes, trying to focus, "Huò bù dān xíng… cannot See anymore. When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions."

"Her," Riddick had latched onto one identifier. "This Saffron again? She somehow slip her leash?"

"No…” River shook her head. "Yo-Saff-Bridge is firmly tethered with no hope of escape. She looks like Mrs. Claus…but not married to Santa…the Missus is worse than the Mister by far."

Mal was frowning and his thoughts raced trying to figure out who would want vengeance and have the wherewithal to hunt Serenity. "But all this will happen in a graveyard in space?"

"Ships and crew, scattered and broken, victims of Shinigami," River looked at the Captain. "Turned the tide of the war."

"Zhēn tā mā yào mìng." Wash groaned. "She's talking about the Battle of Sturges."

"Would be a good place for an ambush, hard to navigate and easy to hide another ship," Riddick considered. "They'd need a damn good piece of bait though."

River sighed, "Can't See anymore." She rubbed her forehead, "Thoughts are loud."

Mal's thoughts in particular were shouting with the past and bloody with it. Riddick's warning growl at the scent of her discomfort snapped the Captain's gaze to the Furyan and he huffed an irritated breath. "Gorramit," The Browncoat cussed in annoyance. "Ain't all of us so great at controlling our thoughts."

"Think of something else," Wash advised. "Helps if the loud stuff isn't at the forefront, or so I'm told." He added when the Captain's baleful glare swung in his direction.

"Wave Badger, let him know we got the job done, he'll have his cut soon's were dirtside." Mal commanded and took himself off.

Riddick growled his own irritation at the Captain's mood and Wash gave him a shrug, "Mal takes all of the war personal." He commented as he accessed a near wave relay. "You know how he gets when he's reminded of it."
"Oh, I know," Rick nodded. "He just acts like he's the only one."

River sighed, "Lost his home. Lost the war, lost most of his men… Alliance took everything except the Valley." She turned her head, her gaze following Mal through the ship even though he was lost from sight behind steel walls and bulkheads. "Born on Shadow, lived and raised on a ranch. His mother taught him how to play the gentleman at a fancy shindig. Ranch foreman taught him how to shoot his way out of a shindig if need be. He and Zoe, the only survivors of the Fifty Seventh Overlanders after Serenity Valley."

"Shadow," Riddick murmured. "I remember hearing about that rock, back at the beginning of the war."

"Captured and tried for war crimes," River continued as if he hadn't spoken. "For continuing to fight after the High Command surrendered. Alliance released them as a gesture of good will. Could afford it. They'd won the war." She looked at her husband, "Shadow once had prairies that stretched so far under such a clear sky it was said man could see from here to God's plan. One of the first worlds to stand against the aggression of the Alliance. Bombed so destructively nothing lives there now. Only ghosts. Nothing else can survive."

"His family?" Wash asked softly.

"Everything, everyone," River shook her head. "From a world thriving with grain farms and cattle ranches to a place that might as well be a black rock. Alliance did that. To stamp out the Browncoats, teach them a lesson. Taught them all right. Taught them how to hate."

Riddick nodded his understanding, "Like Athens. Alliance couldn't stand that the Independents took it so they bombed the cities. Tryin' to drive the Browncoats out."

"Worked," River made a face. "Dead civilians and the living lost everything. Easy way to conquer a world, make it not worth living on."

Wash finally got the cortex synced up to the wave relay and Badger's somewhat grimy face distracted them all from talk of the war.

Mal still wasn't in the best of moods when they set down on Persephone. Badger waiting for them at the docks didn't exactly improve his disposition but Shazza and Ruby were waiting with he and his men.

"Shazza!" River flew down the ramp and into her big sister's arms, hugging her tightly.

"Mèi mei," Shazza grinned at Riddick and Simon over River's head. "Didn't want to chance that I'd miss you," She explained as Mal stood at the top of the ramp. "Badger's got a job burnin' a hole in his pocket. But we're not sure it's on the up an' up, strictly speakin'."

"Well you might as well come aboard, you three," Mal slanted a warning glance at Badger's men. "Don't much feel like playin' host to the masses."

"Wasn't expectin' you to," Badger waved his men off to wait outside the ship.

Riddick chuckled as Badger and Ruby came up to meet them, the little girl at a near run. "Good to see you nǐu niú." He grinned down at Ruby, "Sproutin' real good aren't you. Jayne an' Kaylee are in the lounge." Ruby raced past him towards the steps, waving at the rest of them as she went and he
shrugged, "Jayne found some stuff when he was home that he figured she'd like. His old abacus and
some of his sister's dolls they said he could take to her. We were in such a rush last time he clean
forgot about 'em."

Badger grinned as he took a seat on a spare crate, "Don't know which she'd be happier about, the
abacus or the dolls."

"The abacus," Shazza smiled at Mal and Riddick had the pleasure of watching the Captain's face
turn slightly ruddy in the presence of the pretty woman. "Mal, good to see you. How've you been
keepin'?"

"Busy, but good enough." Mal tossed Badger a duffle. "Got your cut right here."

"Always welcome words." Badger took the bag and opened it, nodding with satisfaction before he
closed it again. "Any trouble with the job?"

"Ran into Ott," Reynolds shook his head. "Thanks to Rick an' River the trouble was minimal. Ott's
probably being held for the robbery even though he was beaten and left for dead by his
accomplices."

"Well that's just a cryin' shame that is," Badger's sorrow was patently insincere. "Man was just askin'
for someone to stuff his balls in his mouth."

"Or give him a Glasgow smile," Shazza put in. Riddick gave her a quizzical look and she elaborated,
"He and his...people came by the Warren for a job 'bout two or three months back. He got it done
but he always caused more trouble than was worth it for the coin we made."

Badger nodded his agreement, "Some jobs you don't have to do bloody. He didn't seem to
understand that. Always a mess with him, and never in a way that was easily fixed. Blowback comes
it's on me an' mine."

"Time was you'd have said that about me and mine," Mal remarked half humorously.

"Time was," The short Dyton native nodded. "But since you've taken Rick, River an' Simon on,
you've had less o' that sort o' trouble. Manage to come up with profits more often than not. You an'
your people, you're worth a bit of effort. Or at least some latitude."

"We are helpful," River smiled at Mal proudly.

"Little genius girls are helpful, as are burly big brained gun hands," Reynolds conceded. "An' your
brother ain't all bad either." Simon didn't dignify the Captain's comment with a verbal response,
thumbing his nose at Mal in an absentminded fashion that was more insulting than the gesture itself.

"Have to say, I'm hesitatin' on tellin' you about this next job I've got," Badger spread his hands.

"It's come to us through legit sources but the nature o' it... seems less'n likely." Shazza explained.

"What's the job?" Mal got straight to the point. "You tell us and we'll figure out if the job's worth
takin'."

"Battle o' Sturges," Badger began with a nod to Mal's impatience. "You've all heard of it I'm sure."

"Everybody's heard of the Battle of Sturges," The Captain replied stiffly, his eyes darting towards
River for a moment.
Badger nodded, "Figured you might have, an' since I'm not blind to the color o' yer coats I'll leave off any 'istory lesson. But it's what 'istory don' say that's the interestin' bit."

Shazza held up a data chip, "The job source claims that the reason for the Battle o' Sturges is at these coordinates. A stash o' coin all them boys and girls died for. Just waitin' to be snatched up."

"Less our percentage o' course," Badger added.

Shazza shook her head, "Trouble is, seems a bit too good to be true."

"An' if there's a ton o' coin out there amidst all the dead, you'd have thought there'd be rumors."

Badger spread his hands, "Treasure o' any kind…there's always some tall tales to go with it."

Mal rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "You think this's a set up? Come back on us or you?"

"Like I said, my source is one I've gotten jobs from before, but this one is just…" The little man shook his head. "Falls under the 'too good to be true' category in my mind."

"An' we wouldn't have you think we'd give you a job without a warning of that at least." Shazza added with a smile at Mal and the rest of the crew.

"Any time limit on this one?" Riddick asked thoughtfully, staring at the data chip.

"Not so's you'd notice," Shazza shook her head. "If its legit, the coin's been there for years, could be there years more without anyone stumblin' across it."

"If it is somethin' likely to blow back on us or you, might be better to go in and pull the teeth of the trap," Zoe offered her thoughts.

"And a trap usually has some sort of bait," Riddick concurred. "Could be its worth doing just to get a look at whose setting it up."

"Or who they can afford to hire," Jayne nodded.

"It's good to have the warning anyway," Mal nodded. "And we always like the money." He took the data chip from Shazza's fingers with a flirtatious bow. "We'll send you a wave, let you know how it turns out, and if there's a cut for you to collect."

"Fair enough," Badger nodded at Mal, tipped his hat to the ladies of the crew and strolled off the ship, Shazza collecting Ruby after hugs had been exchanged and following him.

Riddick looked after the little crew and Shazza's swinging hips at which Mal was staring with a slightly goofy look on his face and rolled his eyes. Zoe shut the ramp to the ship and he turned and looked at Mal. "So. Trap."

"Looks like," Mal sighed, "Jayne, you take Kaylee with you, get whatever parts she needs, and enough ammunition to occupy Londinium. I get the feeling we're gonna need it."

"Got a list of what we're short on," Jayne nodded and Kaylee grinned happily at the thought of parts for her girl.

"Simon, you an' Ciara, go through the infirmary, anything you need, especially supplies for sewing folks up, you get me or Zoe and fetch 'em," Mal ordered and Simon silently held up his own list.

"River, you, Wash and Riddick, want you to bend your brains on navigation and ways to protect Serenity. We don't know what we'll be walkin' into 'cept a big old mess and I'd like to know we've at
least tried to cover our pì gus."

"And myself?" Book asked quietly. "What would you have me do?"

Mal looked at him with a slightly cool gaze, "Wasn't aware you wanted anything to do with our business Shepherd. You bein' all lawful an' against bein' used as a diversion or wise otherwise."

"Being used unwillingly to help you commit a crime is one thing Captain, but I do still live upon this ship and if you're sailing her into harm's way I'd like to help prevent some of that harm from coming to her." Book stared back at him, all dignity.

"Fine." Mal nodded. "Put your mind to who we could have offended so badly that his wife would come after us. Someone who could find Dobson. And while you do that get us provisioned up for foodstuffs. Last time we were here we didn't have much so let's make sure we're well stocked in case we do run into trouble and can't come back right away."

Book nodded, "I might have some thoughts."

Riddick glanced at Wash and the pilot rolled his eyes at him. "Worried about something?" The shorter man asked with a sardonic grin. "What could it possibly be?"

He frowned and looked up as Book entered the bridge. The older man rarely visited it unless Serenity was in some sort of need. He tended to respect that it was Wash and Riddick's shared territory. River followed the Shepherd and took a seat in Riddick's lap while Book took the navigator's station. "Have some thoughts," River said quietly.

"As a rule, most of the folk you seem to deal with don't have much immediate family. Or close ties to anyone but their own crews," Book nodded to her. "But there are always exceptions. So… if we make a list of everyone Serenity has crossed…"

"Venn diagram," River nodded and began to key information into her cortex while Book worked on his. "See what overlaps."

"I didn't have anything so fancy in mind but I imagine it will suffice," Book half smiled. "I also imagine there aren't many Mal hasn't offended somehow."

"Patience," Wash offered. "If she's still alive after the Reavers hit her little world. We left Dobson there so she could have found him."

"Possibly," Book murmured as he worked.

"Saffron," River plucked the thought out of Riddick's head. "But she is secured. Unlikely."

"From what you saw this plan was in play before we did our job on Constance so it wouldn't be Ott." Wash commented, "The Feds, Purplebellies and Blue Hands are all dead, so it wouldn't be them."

"River…" Riddick frowned, something was niggling at the back of his mind and he spoke slowly trying to draw it out by addressing another topic. "Might could be whoever sent the Blue Hands and Dobson before them, could be sendin' someone else."

"I don't think of myself as a lion. You might as well, though. I have a mighty roar." River murmured
in a voice that wasn't her own. Her gaze turned towards Book, her scent filled with blood and steel, "That ain't a Shepherd."

"River," Riddick murmured and rubbed his hand up and down her spine. "Qīng Xiāng…"

She came back to herself with a blink, "A man, dark of skin and heart, not entirely sane…" She rolled her eyes, "Though I doubt I have the right to cast aspersions. A bounty hunter, like the Blue Hands."

"Whoever's after us did send someone else," He surmised. "I'll make death love me; for I will contend even with his pestilent scythe."

River kissed his cheek, "Now he'll out stare the lightning. To be furious, is to be frightened out of fear." Her smile was like the warmth of the sun without any of the painful brightness. "My Furyan."

"Then we're dealing with a two-pronged attack most likely," Book looked at the two of them. "If River sees this bounty hunter while we're talking of Dobson and this plot…"

"He's right," Riddick looked up at the grim tone to Wash's voice. "River's sounded incoherent on occasion but she's always to the point."

"A trap, something that'll be a distraction most likely, for the real aim, which is for this bounty hunter to take River." Riddick growled at the thought.

Book smiled in a way that looked almost out of place on his kindly face. "Then let's confound them. Completely."

River stared at the Shepherd and began giggling, "He means to turn the tables and put the girl where the hunter will not think she would ever be."

"Like that idea a lot," Riddick nodded and stiffened as the thought he'd been trying to not chase and coax out made itself finally known. "Tā mā de niǎo! Jiào niǎo shēng háizi méi pìgu yǎn."

River stared at him as she read the thought and groaned, "Ō, zhè zhēn shì ge kuài lè de jǐnzhǎn. We are humped…badly."

"Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pì huà," Wash was staring at the two of them.

River shook her head and when she spoke her accent was unmistakably that of Adlai Niska, "My wife's nephew. At dinner, I'm getting earful. There is no way out of that."

"You mean to tell me that the person who's bankrolling Dobson is…" Book was staring and Riddick wasn't sure he blamed him for the goggle-eyed look of shock.

"The Missus. She's worse than the Mister, a thousand times worse." River shuddered, "Makes sugar cookies and then turns around and bakes your bones into a meat pie. Why, there they are both, baked in that pie; whereof their mother daintily hath fed, eating the flesh that she herself hath bred. 'Tis true, 'tis true; witness my knife's sharp point."

"Oh, I hope you don't mean that literally," Wash groaned as he sank down in his chair. "Where is she?"

"Herschel." River replied absently, "Must tell the Captain."

"He ain't gonna like this one bit," Wash groaned.
"I don't like it," Book retorted and Riddick nodded his agreement.

"Nobody does," River sighed. "Now could I drink hot blood, and do such bitter business as the bitter day would quake to look on."

"'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out contagion to this world." Riddick stood, keeping River in his arms, unwilling to let her go with this new threat so fresh in his mind.

"He's mad, that trusts in the tameness of a wolf," Wash murmured and Riddick looked at him in surprise at the quote. The pilot shrugged, "Am I wrong? Between you and River they'll regret ever hearing your names."

"Didn't think you read much Shakespeare," River smiled.

"Only the one thing," Wash shrugged. "Pretty much the only thing to read. Got so we all knew it."

Riddick nodded. Prisoner of war camps weren't known for their excellent libraries. Although if you were stuck with one book, Lear wasn't the worst thing to read.

"You know I don't like to be told my business Genius Reader girl," Mal grumbled as he began to throw things into a pot for dinner. "And regardless of your skill level, taking you into danger deliberate like isn't to my taste."

"Sir, think you might be doin' yourself a favor if you stop and listen," Zoe spoke up firmly enough that the Captain eyed her for a moment and subsided, turning from the stove to look at the Reader, her Furyan and Book.

"All right, start over, and this time, don't jump about. Give it to me plain and simple." He instructed.

"Plainly put Captain, we believe that there are two parts to this trap. One part to kill you, set up mostly by Dobson. The other, to take River." Book was direct to the point of blunt. "Ever since she escaped they've been sending people after her. Dobson and then the Blue Hands after him."

"You think they've sent someone else," Mal rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"And our plan is to confound their trap by making sure River isn't on this ship." Book continued. "I've seen the Battle of Sturges, it's...chaotic. It wouldn't be hard for a small ship to conceal itself among the wreckage and attach itself to us. And after that it's easy enough for someone to board us."

"Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng," Mal muttered with a shake of his head. "All right, what do we do then?"

"Normally you'd take me an' Jayne to go on a job," Riddick pointed out. "You'd go, an' Zoe, an' the two you consider gunhands."

River smirked, "Dobson wants the Captain dead, but we don't give him Reynolds. Bounty Hunter wants the Reader Girl, we make sure she is where he isn't."

"See, that's where you're doin' your genius talk an' confoundin' me again," Mal pointed at her in
"In simple terms then," Book sighed. "You stay on Serenity and help defend her. River goes with Zoe and Jayne, and picks up the treasure, if there is any." He added the last a bit doubtfully.

"And afterwards, we go to Herschel and we deal with the Missus who's bankrolling the whole operation," Riddick finished. "Which could be just a bit messy, depending on how hard or easy it is to get to her."

Mal was frowning as he turned back to the stove and began to cook again. "Let me think about it."
Book opened his mouth to say something else and River shook her head, "Cap'n needs to think." She told the Shepherd. "Without us."

She hustled the Shepherd out of the galley, "Rice is on the top shelf next to the cold unit." She called back in response to some thought of Mal's.

Riddick frowned, following them down to the cargo bay, "Not sure I like the idea of us splitting up Qing Xiang."

"Don't like it either," River agreed. "But if we are to stymie Dobson and the bounty hunter the girl and the Captain must be in opposite places of where they normally would be."

"You See anything else about this bounty hunter?" Riddick watched as she began to go through some of her exercises, slow deliberate movements to practice and perfect her form while he spotted for Book.

"Tall," River frowned, "Of a size with Mal. And...not quite sane."

"Dì yù," Riddick cursed mildly. "Why's it we're always runnin' up against the not quite sane?"

"Like calls to like?" Simon suggested as he wandered out and bowed to his sister. As the two of them began to spar, Riddick considered how far Simon had come. He was still careful of his hands, and despite his new skills with combat, armed and unarmed, a gentle soul. River learned more control of her abilities fighting Simon than she did him, because she couldn't afford to miscalculate a blow with her brother the way she could Riddick or Jayne.

"There's some truth to that," Book offered his opinion. "They, whoever they may be, might be sending people they believe can match the two of you, or at least keep up. A certain amount of... twisted thinking might be required."

"You're sayin' that because sane can't anticipate crazy, and they think we're crazy, they're sending nut jobs after us?" Riddick asked as he considered the notion.

"As I recall the popular theory about you is that you're a sociopath with violent tendencies," The Shepherd replied as he slowly raised and lowered the barbell. "And it takes a special breed of man to go after violent offenders."

"Mercs," Riddick growled the word and ground it between his teeth. "People only ever get hurt around me when mercs are in play."

"I did notice the people who come after you aren't overly concerned with bystanders, innocent or otherwise." Book strained with the weight and repetition and Riddick lifted the bar out of his hands.

"Take a breather before you have a heart attack and put the doc to work." He advised. He and Book
watched River and Simon spar, the two Core refugees looking disturbing elegant as they tried to beat each other up.

"He's improving," Book observed as Simon narrowly evaded River's kick.

"He is," Riddick didn't add that he couldn't have gotten worse. Simon had been so stiff with courtesy and discomfort when they first started that it had taken weeks for him to take the right forms for practice. The contrast between his graceful easy movements now and his early attempts was striking. "That'll come in handy, Serenity gets boarded."

River stopped and ducked under Simon's swing. "We will be." She held up her hands to signal an end to the match as her gaze narrowed in on something only she could see. "He will be Early."

"Early," Simon repeated, a bit out of breath. "Early for what?"

"Early… comes for his bounty," River's scent blazed with blood and steel. "People don't appreciate the substance of things. Objects in space. People miss out on what's solid."

"Early," Riddick frowned. "Qīng Xiāng, let's have a look at that list you husked off the Fed's ship. Somethin' familiar about that name."

Rather than fetch her cortex and run back down to the bay they all trooped up to the bridge and waited while River brought up the list. A simple search didn't take long.

River turned and looked at him, her eyes bright and a smile spreading her lips, "Richard has found him. Jubal Early. Bounty hunter out of Pelorum."

"He got a sheet?" Riddick gently squeezed the back of her neck, rubbing away some of her tension. "Any sorta background on him we can find?"

Her fingers went dancing over the keyboard and information began to pop up on Serenity's screens. "Ought to call Mal, should know who will try to board his ship."

Simon nodded, "I'll tell him on my way back to the infirmary. Chances are someone will end up shot, stabbed or concussed and it's good to be prepared." He exited the bridge and Riddick heard him speaking quietly to the Captain in the galley before his steps continued onwards.

Mal's brain was always turning, twisting on itself and tilting him back and forth between rage and despair. Talk of the war always made the tilting worse and talk of religion tipped him straight into rage. If she hadn't had Riddick to steady her Mal's mind alone might have sent her mentally spinning into incoherence. As it was she winced and pointed back at the Captain as he entered the bridge, "He is loud. Again. Could swell the soul to rage."

Mal halted and confusion calmed the manic turning of his mind long enough to let her breathe, "I weren't sayin' a word."

"She means your thoughts I imagine," Book told him serenely.

"Gorramit," Mal scowled as he threw himself into Wash's chair and regarded the three of them. "How'm I supposed to get less loud?"

"Where thoughts serenely sweet express how pure, how, dear their dwelling-place," River
murmured.

Riddick nearly snorted with laughter, "He ain't exactly walking in beauty either." He pointed out as he smoothed his hand down her braid.

"They cannot scare me with their empty spaces between stars - on stars where no human race is. I have it in me so much nearer home to scare myself with my own desert places." River murmured. "Empty and angry and full of despair. I love thee with the passion put to use in my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith. I love thee with a love I seemed to lose with my lost saints."

Riddick nodded his understanding and Mal was simply staring at her as if she'd lost her mind, thoughts churning behind his eyes as he deciphered her quotes. "Liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi," The Browncoat swore absently. "All that?"

"Told you," River sighed as he finally began to understand. "They made me hear everything, all the time. I can't stop. I can put up mental walls, bulwarks, but I can't stop hearing. Emotions make your thoughts stronger. The more strongly you feel about something the louder your mind becomes."

"I imagine it's like being in the middle of a crowd of people shouting, and pounding on a bell, and River is the bell clapper," Book looked at her and she nodded.

"Good analogy." She kept her gaze on Mal. "Your thoughts are so loud you might as well be shouting. You're a passionate person, even when you pretend you don't care. You're one of the loudest people on the ship."

"Rick an' Jayne ain't loud?" Mal seemed confounded by that idea.

"Different types of minds," River shrugged, "My Richard, his mind is…a labyrinth, passionate but he is also ruthlessly controlled. Jayne has spent so much time hiding who he is behind the mask of being a merc that he also has a certain level of control."

"Wash an' Zoe don't bother you either I guess," The Captain frowned thoughtfully.

"Only sometimes," She shook her head. "Usually I can block them out. Can usually block you out. But you're being reminded of the War and everything you lost. Anger and despair make you louder."

"Wo de ma he ta de feng kuang de wai sheng dou!" Mal sighed the borrowed phrase and shook his head. "Well I'll try. Don't know how well I'll do but I will try."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, that will help," River told him bluntly. "You're not the only one lost everything."

"Last I looked Osiris was still spinning," Mal retorted, his words knife sharp.

"Not a home," She honed in on his pain ruthlessly. "Never had what you did. What everyone here had. All of you, loving families. Peaches cooked in pans with brown sugar and pastry wrapped around them."

"Now I heard tell you grew up in a fine house with parents indulging you," He pointed right back at her.

"Fine house." River nodded, "Cold and empty. Indulged and pushed with ruthless efficiency to be the best. To elevate the family name. No peaches with a mother's love baked in. Nannies and governesses and tutors and school. All very proper. Chilly and polite."
"And I grew up in the slums," Riddick added. "Learned to steal pretty gorrarn quick. Foster system, penal system, think anyone pays attention to street rats like me? Even in the system you're a number, a statistic, not a person."

"You see Captain, you might have lost everything," Book was trying very hard to not think of his own bloody, violent childhood in the slums similar to Riddick's. "But I'm afraid you lost what we have never known."

"Jealous," River kissed Riddick's cheek as she spoke. "Wonder what it's like to grow up under open sky without smog clouding the air and hunger gnawing your belly. With horses and cows and chickens. And a mother who'll hug you and kiss your hurts. Allowed to get dirty because dirt washes off and children must play or what's childhood for."

Mal stared at the three of them and shook his head, changing the subject, "Right. Now that we've got that straight, what was it you called me in here for?"

"Early for the bounty," River pointed at the information on the screens. "Thought you'd want to know who will try to take the girl."

He didn't react very well. Mal had started with somewhat forced good humor to read the screen, obviously anticipating a merc like Jayne, maybe with superior weaponry or a slightly advanced skill set.

"This fella makes you look like a cuddly fluffy lapdog," Mal rubbed his hand over his eyes before looking at Riddick.

"He's a sadist," Riddick shrugged. "I might take a certain amount of pleasure in scaring the hell out of folks but I don't torture them for the fun of it. He's damn near rabid." He tapped the screen, "He's also smart, good at manipulating people and damn fast according to his records."

"And this is the person after River, planning on boarding my boat." The Captain frowned, "There ain't any other way?"

"He'll follow us," River was reading Mal's mind again when he thought of running. "Only with Dobson out of convenience. Believes with the crew split and most of the able-bodied treasure hunting that it will be easy to take the girl."

"Which is why I'm on Serenity with you," Riddick added grimly. "Nothing in the warrants out on River and Simon say a thing 'bout me being with them. I doubt anyone believes that I'd have stayed with River after we broke out. I'm known for being a loner."

"Early is also a loner. Likes to sneak around, incapacitate, scare or manipulate the crew into doing his will," River mused. "Gets paid to kill so he doesn't until he has to. Won't do what he isn't paid for."

Mal was still scanning the cortex grimly. "All right. Little genius girl, tell me your plan again. Using small words this time."

River sighed but nodded and explained again the plan they'd come up with. Mal, with Early in mind, paid her a greater amount of attention than he had the two explanations he'd been given prior.
Riddick wrinkled his nose as they all entered the bridge and slanted a look at Wash. The pilot was
his usual self but Zoe was discreetly buttoning up her shirt. "Seriously Wash?" He rolled his eyes
and River slipped her hand in his. Her eyes were already fixed on the view out the windows, a
veritable slaughterhouse of ships spreading across kilometers of space. It was a killing field in the
dead of the Black.

"Gorram," Jayne swore softly as he looked at the ships.

Ciara's reaction was less restrained, "Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ." Her language
was all the more startling for its elegantly accented pronunciation.

"Wǒ de mā," Simon was staring in awe. "What are we looking at?" His arm wrapped comfortingly
around Kaylee's shoulders as she sniffled, her heart going out to each and every one of the dead
crews and the broken ships that floated silently around them.

"The Battle of Sturges," Mal replied more than a bit grimly. River pressed closer to Riddick's side
and he guessed that Mal's emotions were sending his thoughts far and wide despite his stoic visage.
"More to the point, what's left of it." He looked at Jayne and then River beyond his senior gunhand.
"Let's suit up."

River nodded, "Got the earwigs ready."

"Then let's go," Mal nodded. "Wash hold down the fort."

"Will do," Wash spun in his chair and turned on all of the sensors. Riddick gave him a half smile.
River and Kaylee had been hard at work and everyone with any manual dexterity had pitched in and
followed their instructions. Serenity was as prepared as they could make her.

A half an hour later Mal's voice came over the comms, "Wash, we're in." There was a momentary
pause before he continued, "Grav generator must be knocked out because we're still floatin'. But
breathing too; ship's still got atmo after all these years."

"Well we're just makin' like garbage…” Wash replied dryly. "A bit too convincingly if you ask me."

"I didn't," Mal's voice was repressive even through the slightly staticky comms.

"Really Mal, some of these ships, I think they're in better shape than us." Wash winked at Riddick
and Kaylee who was sitting behind them.

"A bit of respect Wash," Mal replied grimly. "You're among the dead."

Wash clicked off and turned to Kaylee, "Well I'd say it's about time for us to take our places."

Riddick nodded, giving the two of them a half smile. Kaylee and River had done some creative
wiring, making it sound like Mal's earwig was coming from the derelict ships rather than his bunk
with River feeding him information so he could respond as if he were with the treasure hunters. They
couldn't know for certain that Dobson and Early were listening in but these days it paid to be
paranoid.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: So we're doing 'Those Left Behind' as you might have guessed, with Jubal Early taking the place of the Blue Hands, which will be all sortsa fun. I'm planning on using a couple more of the comics, Maybe 'Downtime' and 'The Other Half' to give a bit of space between the beginning of the BDM and the action on Lilac.

Anybody know for certain when Book got off to live at Haven? I can't find anything. Might be because I never liked 'The Shepherd's Tale' much.

Chinese Translations:

Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)

Ō, zhè zhēn shì ge kuàilè de jìnzhǎn (Oh, this is a happy development)

Huò bù dān xíng (misfortune does not come singly (idiom) / it never rains but it pours)

Shinigami (god of death" or "death spirit)

Zhēn tā mā yào mìng. (This situation's really fucked up.)

Mèi mei (little sister)

niǔ niú (little girl)

pì gus (butts)

Tā mā de niǎo (goddamn it)

Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pígu yǎn (May your child be born with an imperforate anus.)

Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pí huà (What shit/the fuck are you saying)

Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng (Fire and water have no mercy (idiom). forces of nature beyond human control / implacable fate)

Dì yù (hell)

Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ. (Fuck everyone in the universe to death.)

Wǒ de mā (My mother! Mama mia! Similar to "Oh my God!" in usage.)

Script Chinese Translations:

Liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi (script- Stupid son of a drooling whore and monkey)

Wo de ma he ta de feng kuang de wai sheng dou! (script - holy mother of god and all her wacky nephews)

Quote Sources:

When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

I'll make death love me; for I will contend even with his pestilent scythe – Antony and
Cleopatra – William Shakespare

Now he'll out stare the lightning. To be furious, is to be frightened out of fear – Antony and Cleopatra – William Shakespeare

Why, there they are both, baked in that pie; whereof their mother daintily hath fed, eating the flesh that she herself hath bred. 'Tis true, 'tis true; witness my knife's sharp point. – Titus Andronicus – William Shakespeare

Now could I drink hot blood, and do such bitter business as the bitter day would quake to look on. – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out contagion to this world. – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

He's mad, that trusts in the tameness of a wolf – King Lear – William Shakespeare

Could swell the soul to rage-Alexander's Feast – Dryden

Where thoughts serenely sweet express how pure, how, dear their dwelling-place – She Walks In Beauty – Byron

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces between stars - on stars where no human race is. I have it in me so much nearer home to scare myself with my own desert places. – Desert Places – Robert Frost

I love thee with the passion put to use in my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith. I love thee with a love I seemed to lose with my lost saints. – How Do I Love Thee – Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Riddick growled as a light went off on the console. "We've got a breach," He clicked the comm to Mal's bunk open. Everyone was going about their business as usual, or trying to, in the hopes that this bounty hunter would take the oh so attractive bait.

"I gotcha," Mal's voice sounded quietly through the comm on the bridge. "Heading up."

Riddick began the process of setting the console and Serenity to sleep mode, one of River's encryption preventing anyone from overriding the controls manually without a crew member's password. "Almost set here."

River frowned as they followed the halls of the ship toward the co-ordinates. "They're here, definitely."

"Thought you had trouble with live folk an' dead folks gettin' mixed up?" Jayne asked quietly. She gave him a half smile knowing that he believed her but needed something to occupy his mind and a question was as good as anything else. He and Zoe were more uneasy than she was, both of their loved ones on Serenity and in the path of a sadistic bounty hunter didn't make for peaceable thoughts. If she didn't know that Early was hilariously outclassed by Riddick, even without Simon and Mal as backup, she might have been just as worried as they were. "Generally do. But dead folks are all...echoes. About what was. Dobson lies in wait...and his thoughts are bloody and full of what he will do. Not what has been done."

"So, if you didn't know he was there," Zoe seemed to have decided conversation was as good a way as any to pass the time. "Would you still be able to tell him from the dead?"

"Would be more difficult," River conceded. "And were I unstable or completely out of my mind I wouldn't be able to do it. Even on a day when I'm very tired or not well I might not be able to do tell the difference."

Jayne shook his head as they came to the main part of the ship and saw the dead littering the air like motes of decaying dust. "All these folk, Alliance and Independents both. Don't seem right."

"Let's get this done," Zoe moved forward grimly and sent River a look of unneeded warning. Now that they were among the dead it was better for her to not speak if she could help it. They didn't want to scare Dobson off.

Riddick looked over his shoulder as Mal came on the bridge. "Kaylee's in the engine room. Wash is down in his bunk. Simon and Book are both in the passenger quarters and Ciara's hiding in one of the smuggling compartments near the engine room."

"Where's our breach?" Mal hadn't even tried to keep up with all the tell tales they'd stuck on the ship.
telling the geniuses dealing with the mechanisms that they could show him after they were all out of danger.

"EVA Hatch near the galley," Riddick pointed. "My guess is he don't want the ship. He'll go back to the engine room, tie up Kaylee an' try to scare her since she's the only one out in the open, far as he knows. Then head down through the ship."

"Warrants don't say anything about you being aboard?" Mal asked quietly. Again.

He rolled his eyes, "For the third time Mal, no. So, he'll try to get to Simon if he can't find River immediately. Which he won't."

"No need to get testy," Mal was actually a lot calmer about being boarded than Riddick would have thought, but he guessed having a plan in place helped. Especially a plan that would actually work. Mal's plans… they had the benefit of being simple but they always depended on other people doing their part. In Riddick's experience that was extremely improbable, thus the general failure of Mal's strategies.

"I'm not testy, I'm impatient." Riddick shook his head, "Better get on your way."

"All right, well you let me know if anything changes," Mal said in his normal voice and began to head back to the galley, presumably for some coffee.

Riddick sighed and began the process of quietly alerting the rest of the crew on board that they had a boarder and so far things were going according to plan. Early should be surprised by Mal's presence aboard the ship and that could give them an edge.

"Well we're almost there," Jayne remarked to Zoe. "Next room and we should be right on top of it."

Zoe nodded and the two of them began the process of fully opening the partially closed doors, revealing yet another room full of the dead. "This should be it then."

River put her hand on his arm and pointed to several bodies floating near the chest which had been bolted to the floor. The bolts and clamps were shiny and brightly new, in contrast with the decrepit ship and decaying bodies that surrounded it.

"And there she is," Jayne pointed. "Course there's always some sorta catch."

"Generally is," River spoke, her eyes glued to Dobson's slowly turning form and was rewarded with a slight stiffening of his posture. "Need to deal with the dead to get to it."

"That's funny," Dobson turned deliberately with his gun trained upon them. "I was just thinking that very thing."

"I suppose we should have expected something like this," Zoe looked at the other men who were giving up their pretense of death.

"Oh wait," Jayne grinned. "We did."

River smirked and turned on the electro magnets in their EVA boots, bringing them safely to the metal deck. "Time to deal with the dead."
Riddick chuckled as Ciara nearly tumbled out of the smuggling compartment while he untied Kaylee. "See why practicing this sorta thing is useful?" He teased his little sister. She'd gotten herself more than half unbound and with a little more time would have managed all of the ropes. "You go an' wait in your bunk. Ciara, you hide in the vent above the galley, you'll know when to make some noise. Early knocked Mal out and dropped him into his bunk then locked him in. You'll want to unlock everyone, but I don't know that you'll need to wake him up just yet."

"You figured on that happenin'?" Kaylee asked softly as she rubbed her wrists.

"Figured with Mal's luck he had a fifty-fifty chance of someone hitting him over the head, me or Early," Riddick grinned at her. "But him bein' here confounded Early some. He'll be a lot more nervy, we hope."

"I woulda bet on you," The Mechanic kissed his cheek and let Ciara help her up. "Don't let him do nothin' to my girl now."

"I'll take care of her," Ciara wrapped her arm around Kaylee's waist and began to walk her down to the crew quarters. "You get rid of the trash."

"Yes ma'am," Riddick nearly saluted. Once they were past the galley he locked up the engine room and took the back stairs past the water reclamation systems and down to the cargo and passenger deck. Early had knocked Book out as he came out of the shower and dumped him in his room and was now coercing Simon into 'helping' him find River.

He could see Early holding a gun on his brother and Simon was giving a good imitation of scared. He'd never like violence but he was much less worried about firearms than he had been. Listening to their conversation did give him a very good idea of just how unstable Early was though, "Dr. Tam... why don't you sit yourself down?"

Simon folded his arms over his bare chest, "Rather die standing."

Early's voice was almost mild, "The intention is not for you to die. The warrant doesn't specify any particular need for you to be alive, but..." He motioned with his gun and Simon sat, "Where's your sister?"

In what was a clear delaying tactic Simon asked, "Are you Alliance?"

"Am I a lion?" Early asked back slightly confused.

"What?" Simon was staring at the bounty hunter, a bit confused himself. Riddick crouched in the shadows of the stairs above them and debated making a move now. But the gun could go off and it was way too close to Simon's head.

Early was considering what he thought he'd heard, "I don't think of myself as a lion." He seemed tickled by the thought, "You might as well, though. I have a mighty roar."

Simon corrected him properly, "I said Alliance."

"Oh. I thought..." Early paused.

"No, I was..." Simon shook his head.

Early tilted his head a moment, "That's weird." He paused and then looked at Simon, "Where's your
sister?"

Riddick had to give Simon credit, the boy could lie with the best of 'em these days. "I don't know. Who do you work for?"

"This is her room." Early stated.

The doctor nodded, another lie coming to his lips easily, "Yes." The lie was made more plausible by he and River having filled the drawers and wardrobe with the clothing she'd worn before buying her own. Sketchpads, pencils and toe shoes filled in some of the empty space and made the dorm look lived in.

"It's empty."

Early seemed to be trying to figure something out but damned if Riddick, and Simon from his confused tone of voice, could figure it out. "I know," Simon was staring at the bounty hunter with an expression that suggested Early was not in possession of all his marbles.

"So, is it still her room when it's empty?" Early elaborated on his question, "Does the room, the thing, have purpose? Or do we…what's the word?"

Riddick nearly laughed at the completely baffled tone of Simon's voice. "I really can't help you."

He hadn't counted on this plan being so gorram entertaining. With River out of danger and everyone else safely, more or less, tucked away, he was having a hard time stifling his amusement. Early was talking again and Riddick focused in just in time to hear, "…plan is to take your sister. Get the reward, which is substantial." He paused, a thought clearly striking him, "'Imbue.' That's the word."

Simon, clearly trying to make some sense of this conversation, jumped in, "So you're a bounty hunter."

Early's mind wasn't on Simon's question, "No. That ain't it at all."

"Then what are you?" The Core boy regarded the bigger man with wary curiosity.

"I'm a bounty hunter. I'm named Early. I'm known to some. Been tracking you since the Feds were tipped off on Ariel." Early explained looking around the passenger quarters thoughtfully, "She sleep with anybody?"

Simon, bless him, gave a good approximation of surprise, "River?"

Early nodded, "Yeah. She grapple with any of the crew? Might be in their quarters?"

Now Simon was all horrified surprise, of the type that he might have felt upon realizing River's attachment for Riddick, had Riddick not been River's bàng jiār, and every bit as attached to her as she was to him, "No!"

"Maybe she does and you don't know about it." Early was clearly thinking ahead, planning out where to look next.

The good doctor was growing truculent however, "This is insane. I'm not going to help you find her, in any case." He rested his arms on his knees and his expression was one of familiar stubbornness.

Early sighed and approached him, squatting down to brandish his gun. "I think this is very pretty. I like the weight of it."
"I thought the intention was not to kill me." Simon asked coldly.

"No. You're missing the point." Early sounded almost reasonable. "The design of the thing is functional. The plan is not to shoot you. The plan is to get the girl. If there's no girl, then the plan, well, is like the room. You are gonna help me look for her."

Simon shook his head, "I don't think my last act in this 'verse is going to be betraying my sister."

Early nodded, almost kindly, "You're gonna help me. 'Cause every second you're with me is the chance to turn the tables. Get the better of me. Maybe you'll find your moment. Maybe I'll slip." He gestured with the gun, a minute controlled movement, "Or, you refuse to help me, I shoot your brain out, then I go upstairs and spend some time violatin' the little mechanic I got trussed-up in the engine room. I take no pleasure in the thought, but she will die weeping if you cross me." Riddick nearly growled at the threat to Kaylee and the lie floating off Early. He liked pain, liked causing it, liked seeing the results, his scent reeked of sadism and cruelty.

Early's threats of hurting Kaylee didn't have quite the effect on Simon that the bounty hunter was looking for, the Doctor's aristocratic face hardened into something cold and dangerous. "If you touch her, lay one finger on her with intent to harm, I will kill you in a manner slow and painful and you will never see me coming."

"Well now, you just keep that spine steely and maybe you'll find your moment," Early wasn't worried, that much was obvious. But Simon had surprised him.

Simon checked Book's pulse as Early double-checked Book's room for hiding places. "He's not killed. Be a while before he comes to, but he'll mend."

"And which part of your plan dictated the necessity of beating up a Shepherd?" Simon regarded the bounty hunter with some exasperation.

"That ain't a Shepherd." Early retorted looking around. "Now I'm on a limited time span here so let's move this along." He motioned with the barrel of his gun towards the lounge and cargo bay. For all his vaunted reflexes and skill, he never saw Riddick walking quietly along behind the two of them.

"Where's Reynolds!" Dobson was almost screeching and River sighed.

"He declined to accept your invitation," She rolled her eyes and shot one of his men. "How much did Mrs. Niska pay you for your plan?"

"Fifty thousand platinum," The former Fed laughed happily. "I'd have done it for free to kill Reynolds." He aimed at her, "Now, where is he? On the ship?"

"Not here," Zoe shot another of his men; Jayne was happily picking off the others.

"You're gonna take me to him," Dobson was clearly not thinking straight.

"We are disinclined to acquiesce to your request," River told him flatly and shot him in the heart. The astonished look on his face was somewhat anticlimactic. "Means no." She moved towards him and shot him several times in the head until she could be absolutely certain he was dead.

"Well, that was bracing," Jayne grinned at the two of them and River sighed, shaking her head with a smile.
"Come and unbolt the money from the deck," Zoe commanded him in one of her milder tones. "Like to get back to Serenity before these bodies start to decay."

River watched Jayne for a moment and since he had that chore handled decided that extra weapons would never come amiss and began to loot the bodies as efficiently as she could. Dobson had a sack on him, with a few bullet holes in it now. Undoubtedly, he'd been planning to carry Mal's head around in it as proof the Captain was dead.

Zoe, true to her nature, kept watch over the two of them, concentrating on her job to keep from worrying about her husband.

"Pilot man will be fine," River assured her absently as she added the last of the guns and money to her sack. "Richard won't let anything happen to the crew. Or the Captain."

"Much," Jayne added the qualifier. He offered a sheepish smile, "Rick likes Wash. He won't let anybody hurt him. Mal though…"

"Wonders how many blows to the head it will take to knock sense into the Captain," River explained.

Zoe's lips twitched in an aborted smile and River caught the thought that Zoe had often wondered the same thing.

Riddick stalked silently behind Simon and the mercenary who called himself Jubal Early. He and Simon had talked it over when establishing their plan of action and his di di was playing his part perfectly. He seemed to be the slightly naïve greenhorn he'd been when they first met. Exactly what Early would be expecting. No one who read one of the warrants on Doctor Simon Tam would believe the young man from Osiris could adapt to his surroundings so well.

Simon was also doing his best to be very irritating but not annoying enough to get shot, "Come on out, River. The nice man wants to kidnap you." He called in a sing song voice.

Riddick paused out of sight in the hall leading to the septic room while Early stopped on the catwalk, shushing Simon, "Shh…" He turned slowly on the catwalk looking around as Riddick watched. "I like the way the walls go out. Gives you an open feeling. Firefly is a good design. People don't appreciate the substance of things. Objects in space. People miss out on what's solid."

It was the second time that Early had spoken the words River had Read coming and the effect was more than a little chilling, despite the fact that Riddick had been half expecting something along those lines. Nothing could match the sound of Early's twisted mind and insane tone.

Early still had his back to Simon and the doctor began inching forward as if to try and take him. He'd barely made it half a step when Early drew his gun and pointed it directly at Simon's head without even turning around. "It's not your moment, Doctor."

Riddick watched as they continued on, moving towards the shuttle bays as Simon spoke, "Serenity's a smuggling ship. If I had a year I couldn't name all the places she might hide."

Early shook his head, "I don't have a year." He looked in both shuttles, hustling Simon from one side of the bay to the other before commenting, "Your sister's becoming a real annoyance."

Riddick smirked as Simon drawled in his supercilious core doctor voice, "I feel for you."
"All right, that's all the hide and seek I got time for." Early took Simon by the arm and began to haul him up towards the bridge. Riddick smothered a chuckle as he followed them. Staying out of sight wasn't hard with Serenity in her 'hiding' mode. Most of the systems were off to keep from giving out too much of a heat signature and that included the overhead lights.

Early's voice came over the comm system as Riddick reached the upper deck and looked down the hall towards the bridge. "I know you're on this ship, little girl. So, here's how this goes. You show yourself...we finish this exchange, or your brother's brains will be flying every which-a-way." He paused and clicked the comms off, speaking to Simon quietly, "You understand, I'm sort of on the clock, here. It's frustrating."

Riddick couldn't help himself, the laugh that escaped him was the one that sent chills down every merc's back.

Early's scent spiked with apprehension, "That's somewhat unsettling."

"Early... Mr. Jubal Early, bounty hunter." Riddick let his voice echo through the corridor, abandoning his rim accent for the sake of further unnerving Early, "Can I call you Jubal?"

"Ain't nobody calls me that." Early shook his head.

Riddick chuckled again, remembering what River had told him about the bounty hunter, "Your mother does. Sorry... 'did'. She's gone now."

"Is that supposed to scare me? Bringing up my mother?"

"You know, maybe it's just because I don't care for mercs. But I don't think your intentions are honorable." Riddick smiled as he spoke. "Take the way you trussed up my little sister."

"Well, no. I'm a bounty hunter. It's generally not considered honorable so much as... I live by a code, though. Which I think is worth—" Early rambled on before being cut off.

"You hurt people," Riddick crooned as he stole forward.

"Only when the job requires it." Early lied.

"You're a lousy liar Early. You like causing pain, you took the job because of it," Riddick spoke against the wall in a near whisper, the sound bouncing off the metal.

"I only hurt people because they keep getting in the way of me finding the girl," Early was getting agitated, unable to track the source of the voice he was hearing. "Tell him." He demanded of Simon.

"You are starting now." Obviously Early was pointing his 'finely crafted weapon' at Simon again.

Simon's voice was obviously insincere, "He's really very... gentle... and fuzzy. We're becoming fast friends."

Riddick laughed again, enjoying how Early's scent was spiking with fear as he spoke, "You folks are all insane."

"Well no one ever accused me of having an abundance of sanity," Riddick moved to the stairs of the bridge, hiding in the shadows. Simon was near Wash's chair, Early closer to Riddick's seat, gun aimed at Simon. "But then I was educated in the penal system."
"Who in the tiān shā de 'verse are you," Early's agitation sent a vibrato through his normally smooth voice.

"Well my woman calls me Lù duān," Riddick watched carefully speaking against the hull so his voice would bounce. "And her lǎng. Furyan's another name I'm known by." He moved towards the armory steps, grateful for the darkness of the hallway behind him and the brightness of the console working against Early's night vision.

"Pet names don't say much," Early called back.

"You really have no idea what you're dealing with do you?" Simon must have been rolling his eyes, he had that tone to his voice.

"Someone on your crew belongs in a bug house?" Early asked with a touch of annoyance. "Likes to play games with a comm?"

"You said you tracked us since Ariel," Simon pointed out. "Didn't you do any research on the crew of this ship? Or were you only worried about your big prize?" The self-declared bounty hunter's mind was too preoccupied to take in the meaning of the question.

"You know, with the exception of one deadly and unpredictable midget, this girl is the smallest cargo I've ever had to transport. Yet by far the most troublesome. Does that seem right to you?" Early remarked as he tried to get his bearings.

"What'd he do?" Simon's curiosity got the better of him.

"Who?" Early was still looking around for the hidden comms he was sure Riddick was using.

"The midget."

"Arson. Little man loved fire." Early answered a bit absently.

Ciara moved in the kitchen and rather than just make some noise, called in a frightened voice devoid of her Kerry accent, "Simon? Simon? Where are you?"

Simon, not being an idiot, caught onto Ciara's game quickly and shouted, "River, run!" He was pushed aside as Early came sprinting out of the bridge, down the steps only to nearly crash into Riddick.

"Well… Jubal Early, looks like you've run into the wrong gorram fugitive," Riddick smiled.

"I'll be goddamned. Richard B. Riddick," Early didn't quite gape at him but his eyebrows went up and his eyes widened with greed.

"You made three mistakes. The first one, you took the job… sloppy work, not researchin' who's on the crew of the girl you're hunting." Riddick punched him and hit his armor, but the drive of his fist still took some of the air out of Early. "The second one… You came light. One person to retrieve River Tam? Insanity and tā mā de insultin' on top of the crazy."

Early hand tightened on his gun and Riddick growled, grabbing the bounty-hunter's wrist, snapping it with an ugly crack before slamming his knuckles into Early's face several times. "But your third, the worst mistake you made… you're hunting my woman. My wife. Three strikes, you're out."

His shiv was in his hand before he even thought, sliding through Early's armor like a hot knife through butter and straight into his liver and the abdominal aorta. The sound of Early's gun going off
was an unwelcome shot of sound echoing through the metal walls and close quarters. Damn thing must have a hair trigger, firing when it was bouncing on the floor.

Riddick sighed as he felt his side begin to sting. "Simon, think you can patch me up before River gets back? She ain't gonna be thrilled with me gettin' shot. Again. Even if it is just a nick." He turned his head and frowned, he could smell more blood than his own wound could account for. "Simon?"

A strangled gasp of pain was his only answer and he moved towards the bridge bounding up the steps easily to see his little brother trying to put pressure on a wound to his thigh.

"She do get testy 'bout that sort o' thing," Ciara commented as she opened all the bunks and let Wash, Mal and Kaylee out, her accent a bit thicker than usual with the excitement. "Wash, ye an' Mal, take out the trash would ye? Me an' Kaylee'll get a line attached tae Early's boat. Might could sell it."

"Ciara, need your help with Simon," Riddick called quietly and used his own hands to put pressure on Simon's bullet hole. "Take it easy dì di, just breathe. Don't want you going into shock."

Ciara hurried up the steps and blinked at the sight of the ship's doctor with a bullet wound. "Well that'll put a bit o' a hitch in yer giddy up." She commented and grabbed the first aid kit from the lockers.

Mal was still groaning a bit about his head but Riddick could hear him climbing up the ladder to his bunk. "Why is it women always think they're in charge of my boat?" He obviously hadn't realized yet that two of his crew were shot and Riddick couldn't help rolling his eyes over how obtuse the man could be.

"Just followin' Zoe's lead." Kaylee told him as she hurried up to the bridge, "Ciara we gotta get that ship…" Her customary cheer fell flat as she got a look at Simon. "Simon! Wǒ de mā Simon! Rick, he gonna be all right?"

"He'll be fine mèi mei," He gave her a quick smile. "Bullet ricocheted, hit me, then Simon. If it hadn't he'd be a helluva lot worse off. But the bullet isn't deep so I'm not too worried."

Kaylee nodded, worry in her eyes as she took in the blood, "What can I do?"

"Go on an' get Early's ship taken care of," Riddick told her easily. "Ciara'll come give you a hand in a minute. Just gotta get Simon down to the infirmary first. You can come visit him after." He grabbed a few more of the bandages and tightened them firmly around Simon's thigh, "Well looks like I get to operate on you Doc." He commented dryly.

Simon sighed echoing Mal sardonically, "It never goes smooth. Why don't it ever go smooth?" He winced as Riddick and Ciara helped him to his feet and began walking him down to the infirmary, Kaylee hovering until she had to split off from their little group to do her own work. "But we'd probably better get ourselves patched up before River gets back. She'll never let us out on our own again."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea," Mal commented and took Simon's other side so Ciara could run ahead and open doors. "Really don't wanna face a genius Reader when she's annoyed. She's testy enough when it's a good day." He shook his head, "Whyn't you tell me you both got shot? There I am grousin' an' goin' on about my head and you two got holes punched in you."

"Mine's hardly more than a mosquito bite," Riddick shrugged with the shoulder that Simon wasn't braced against.
"And I was trying to not scream and scare Kaylee," Simon admitted. "Getting shot tā mā de hurts."

"Well it don't tickle," Mal agreed mildly. "Guess you'll be on crutches for a little while Doc."

"Most likely," Simon sighed. "River will never let us hear the end of this."

River froze in place, "Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pìgu yǎn." She cursed in annoyance.

"What?" Jayne and Zoe stopped to look at her, worried expressions startlingly similar on such different faces.

"Richard and Simon have gotten themselves shot." She fumed, "That yú chūn zì jiāo de dà zi ròu Early shot them. Same bullet."

"Bad?" Jayne asked tugging the chest of cash along.

"Richard's is a mosquito bite," River shook her head. "It is the principle of the matter. I told him not to get shot. And Simon's wound is more serious. Painful but not life threatening."

"Rick never was the obedient type," Jayne chuckled.

She rolled her eyes, "Of this I am very well aware." She began moving again, her voice dry as dust. "But I still don't like him getting hurt."

Zoe had a smile in her voice as they made sure their helmets were properly fastened. "I doubt he took a bullet out of boredom. Likely the fella just got a lucky shot in."

"Or Richard did something reckless." River sighed and fastened the bag of weaponry and money to her belt securely in preparation for their exit into the black.

"Can't be too reckless or he wouldn't get to mess with Mrs. Niska," Jayne reminded her. "He and Mal have been arguing about who gets to kill her the most ever since we left Persephone."

"Not even in the running," River exchanged a satisfied look with Zoe. "Spouses have first rights since they went through the worry of the men being tortured. And Richard got to kill Niska."

"You an' Zoe?" Jayne didn't sound upset or disbelieving. His tone was almost gleeful. "Can I bring a capture so we can watch it over and over?"

Zoe's throaty chuckle echoed through the comms as she tapped into Serenity's systems. "Have to see about arranging that."

A somewhat blurry eyed Mal greeted them in the bay and relieved River of her now heavy sack while Jayne dragged the chest of cash in. "There was actual bait in the trap huh?" Mal took the other handle. "Gorram, what's in this thing? Rocks?"

"Had it bolted to the deck. Makes it a mite heavier," Jayne grunted, and River headed for the infirmary after stripping off her EVA suit.
Simon was sitting up on the exam table while Richard worked on him and her Furai gave her a grin when he saw her, "I'm fine Qīng Xiāng, just nicked me."

"I told you that you are not to get shot," River reminded him as she entered the room and watched her brother carefully. "And you," She looked at Simon. "You were not to be injured either." Her brother was distracting himself from his own surgery by trying to bandage Riddick's side.

"Wasn't on purpose," He leaned forward just enough to kiss her forehead and irritate Simon.

"Rick, moving when I'm working on you is counterproductive," He reminded the larger man. "It's only a few weaves and you'll be done."

"Told you to just slap a bandage an' some tape on an' I'd be fine. Just take a deep breath and wait, I'm barely bleeding. You're the one with a bullet in your leg." Riddick rolled his eyes. "How'd it go on your side of the plan xiǎo lǎng?"

"No injuries," River replied promptly. "Killed Dobson and his men. Confirmed that the Missus is behind all of it. Dobson's payment was the bait, so we took it and the guns and money, off he and his men."

"Good score?" Riddick hugged her after he finished stitching up Simon's leg. She could feel him breathing in the scent of her hair.

"Fifty thousand plat, plus whatever his men were carrying," River shrugged. "Enough to keep us flying for a while."

"Not long the way Mal flies," Riddick shook his head. "But it'll hold us for a bit, minus Badger's percentage."

"Still need to go to Herschel and deal with the Missus." She looked up at him and smiled, "Zoe and I are going to have fun on our outing. Girls day."

"Somehow, I don't think you'll be having the same type of day Mother would have with her friends," Simon grinned tiredly as Riddick bandaged up his wound and put a brace around his thigh to keep him from moving it much. "Pedicures and a spa," He elaborated when Riddick sent him a quizzical look.

"Still much fun for Zoe and I," River shrugged.

Fun wasn't quite how Riddick would have described it, though River and Zoe had bonded to a certain extent due to their shared worry and determination to exact their vengeance.

Zoe, in part due to Mal's suspicions and in part her own more than slightly jaded nature, hadn't warmed up to River and Riddick as much as she had Simon. Riddick had caught the scent of jealousy on her more than once and River had finally caught enough of her thoughts to understand it. She hadn't felt threatened by them but she was jealous now and then of his and River's easy relationship with her husband. They had a friendship with Wash that didn't include her and that Wash had actually covered for them back on Higgin's moon hadn't made her feel any happier about it. She put on a good act and she was scrupulously fair, but until she and River had planned their assault on Niska's station it had been only partial acceptance and a slightly grudging one at that.

Maybe it was due to Zoe having finally fought at River's side, a bit during their rescue and then at the
Heart of Gold. Zoe struck him as someone who learned more from how someone fought than their behavior in any other way. The woman was highly observant, and suspicious of just about everyone until she had reason to relax. Wash's liking for Riddick and River had eased her watchful nature somewhat, even as it had hardened her in others, but now she finally seemed to accept the two of them for what they were.

River smiled up at him, "She has seen both of us fight, plan for battle, work to protect the crew and Mal, and now can make up her mind. Still uncomfortable at times, knows there are things unsaid, hidden, but trusts that we would do nothing to deliberately endanger the crew. Appreciates that we think of the ship's safety and security as much as she and the Captain."

"And now you two are bonding over killing Mrs. Niska," Riddick shook his head, unsurprised.

River grinned, "Much planning. Thought about wandering around and getting captured to get in but deemed that too risky."

"Yeah, got the impression from what you two were sayin' that the place is a fortress." Riddick began to brush and braid her hair, enjoying the scent and feel of her. "Cameras, sensors and electrified fence."

"There's always a weak point," Zoe commented as she brought one of the data pads into the galley and sat at the table next to them with a cup of coffee. "I've been studyin' the plans you husked and I think I might have our way in."

Riddick smirked down at his little wife when she perked up in excitement. "You said the magic words."

River poked him in the side, "He must not deny that he is also intrigued." She smiled at Zoe, "Haven't had the time to look at the plans, but had a thought about the cameras. Movements aren't entirely synchronized."

"You're right," Zoe agreed as she used her fingers to open the plans up to provide more detail. "'Cordin' to this, they started out with stationary cameras. Then they added movement. But the movement left 'em some blind spots. They vary but one of them leaves a near three-minute window."

"Where?" River leaned over to see, "Open area beyond the fence… have to run for the trees near the house."

"And there's guards," Zoe pointed out the stations. "And I read somethin' about random patrols."

"Randomization of patrols provided by a cortex calculation," River poked an area of the plans and a window obligingly popped up. "That's good for us."

"Good how?" The First Mate frowned as she scanned the plans. "If we don't know where they'll be we can't avoid them."

River chuckled, "But you have a husker. And if we can get their plans, we can get into the program that sets the patrols."

"So…what's random to them will be what we need to get in and out," Zoe grinned. "No wonder Wash thinks you're so shiny."

"Girl is a genius. Just a little…wobbly sometimes." River offered with a half-smile. "Sometimes things don't go so smooth."
"You'll need some downtime after this," Zoe looked at the two of them. "We take our time it's a two-day ride to Herschel. Might be you oughta rest up some beforehand?"

River nodded, "Hard to hold out all of the dead when I'm not beside my láng."

Riddick watched as Zoe studied his bàng jiār, "You've seemed better lately."

He let his hand rub the back of River's neck, "Easier since we're not hiding what we are. But River's abilities are…"

"Problematic," River finished softly. "There are things I don't remember. And there are things that aren't mine and they can't be quantified and I shouldn't have to carry them!" Her voice rose as she spoke and Riddick banded his arms around her, hauling her into his lap to be soothed.

"Don't look at them," He rubbed her back, and she pressed her face to his neck. "Just listen to my heartbeat Qing Xiāng and breathe." He looked at Zoe, "She's still…"

The dark woman nodded, "Right. I'll let Mal know she needs a couple days before we hit Herschel."

It took a bit longer to get to Herschel, mostly because they were trying to avoid any and all tells as to their presence. Hiding from ground sensors in the moon's shadow was one way and breaking atmo in the shuttle rather than Serenity was another. They couldn't land too close to the Niska estate/fortress or their quarry would be alerted.

Riddick slanted a grin at Jayne, "Remind you of anything?"

"Gettin' past the lines at Du-Khang," Jayne chuckled. "Lotsa walkin' then too."

"More trees and buildings though," Riddick recalled.

"Hopefully less talkin' too," Mal sniped at the two of them.

"Doesn't hurt to talk yet," River was leading the way since her eyes were nearly as good as his and she had the added benefit of a genius brain to recall the terrain. She and Zoe had studied satellite maps until they had the area damn near memorized. Being a Reader trying to hone in on Mrs. Niska didn't hurt her sense of direction either. "When we see the lights of the fortress, then they must be silent."

"Does remind me a bit of patrols scouting territory," Zoe remarked conversationally. "Never could get Tracey or Jedediah Bendis to shut up. Even when there was shootin'."

"Those two would complain about anything," Mal recalled quietly. "Bendis moanin' about how 'we're all gonna die' an' Tracey saying whatever rock we were on wasn't worth it."

"We'd get wherever we were goin' and dig in, then they'd complain about digging a foxhole or whatever." The First Mate nodded, "Never even noticed that all we had to do was hold the ground."

 Jayne snorted with laughter, "Only you'd think that was the easy part Zoe."

Riddick shook his head, "Way I heard it, we weren't doin' too badly, until Sturges. Near killed the entire fleet with those damn skiffs. And ground forces couldn't hold up to 'em much better."

"I do recall," Mal's voice was testy.
"Wasn't easy," Riddick frowned. "Wasn't just the warships, we lost half our transport as well. End up sitting on some rock waiting for pickup."

"My favrit was takin' fire from our own side," Jayne offered his opinion. "We wasn't exactly supposed to say who we were."

"Yeah, that always livened up the day," He put a hand under Mal's elbow as the captain stumbled over a half washed out gopher hole and kept the taller man upright. "Thankfully most of the sergeants had the sense to listen to us even if their lieutenants were hollerin' about the area was s'posed to be clear."

Zoe's chuckle drifted back to them, "I recall bein' in that same situation once or twice. Scout a path to meet up with another unit and damn near get shot when you get near 'em."

"Very hospitable," Riddick agreed and fell silent as the lights of their goal came into his sight. His and River's eyes were better than the rest of them but it was wiser to be safe than sorry.

"Another click and we must be silent," River called back to them softly. "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts."

"Well we all know our parts in this," Mal nodded and they fell into the single file formation they'd agreed upon. "Let's get it done."

The house was a grand old mansion in the Antebellum style of Earth That Was but on steroids. Huge columns eight across on all sides supported massive porches and balconies surrounded by rolling lawns and gardens. The house itself was arranged in an H shape with four different wings three stories each. Outbuildings housed the hired hands and staff that didn't 'live in' and the guards that patrolled the grounds.

Double doors with arched transom windows were framed with leaded glass panels on either side with black shutters surrounding the tall windows staring out from the house like blazing eyes against the white stone.

"Gorram," Jayne swore softly. "This like where ya grew up?"

River shook her head, "Different style, larger house..." She shrugged, "Parents wanted to impress, but didn't want to appear ostentatious."

"I dunno," Zoe was looking over the house appreciatively from where they were all crouched behind an ornamental hedge. "I could get used to ostentatious if it looked like that."

"Built to impress and scream power and wealth," River murmured. "Make all who come near it know who to fear, to whom they should kowtow."

"Be nice to have the time to wander around, look at everything," Mal was looking a little awed himself, the sight of the massive columns and sprawling porches doing their work.

Riddick wasn't as impressed, but he'd grown up in Londinium where estates more massive than this one were commonplace. He might not have lived in one but he'd seen plenty of mansions, enough to know that the pretty exteriors could hide a core of rot. "Looks easy enough to get in."
"It is," Zoe nearly snorted in derision. "You get this far, all you gotta worry about is the occasional 'security' person doing a round on the main floor. All the security we walked right through, they figure that's enough to keep anybody out. The house is supposed to be safe."

"Illusion," River smirked. "Which we will walk right through." She stared at the house and listened as hard as she could. "Her mind is..." She frowned, "She is baking cookies for two of her guards that were her good boys. Tormented and tortured someone to death for her and didn't spatter blood on her clean white apron. They sit in blood and sweat and wait for sweets."

"So, two guards in the kitchen with her." Zoe summed up the situation.

"One maid, readying her bath, laying out her night clothes," River looked up towards the master suite. "Butler in the pantry, taking inventory. All other staff ensconced in their quarters for the night."

"Well, let's get this done then." Mal suggested. "Zoe, you and River want to flip a coin now to see who gets to kill her?"

"Will give Zoe the pleasure." River smiled, "Less accustomed to her husband being in danger. Deserves the catharsis of killing the missus."

"An' what'll you be doin' then?" The Captain eyed her curiously.

"Husking accounts and robbing the coffers blind," River smiled wickedly as she patted her portable cortex. "Perhaps plotting ways to legitimize the business interests and take over the properties. Would make a nice hideaway for Serenity."

Mal gaped at her while Riddick had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing aloud. "Can you just picture Serenity landing on that stupid bush shaped like a bird?" He finally asked with a grin.

"Find much amusement in that yes," River smirked.

"Hell, if you can do it, go to," Mal finally grinned.

Riddick paused as River stopped on the porch, her fingers flying over her cortex pad, "Electronic locks?" He asked quietly.

"Hmm..." She made an affirmative sound as she husked the security programs. "Locking all doors."

"Why'd you wanna do that?" Mal objected.

River gave the Captain her patented 'you're an idiot' look and continued, "Unlocking main door. All doors in our path will unlock upon our approach. No one to scurry about and take us by surprise. No one will leave the area they are in. No cat and mouse tonight." She looked at Zoe and Mal, "Please keep the noise to a minimum until she has husked all the house systems."

"No bullets?" Zoe nodded matter-of-factly, "Not if we can help it."

There was a soft click from the front door and Riddick pulled it open quietly, the hinges didn't make even the faintest creak. "Let's have some fun."
River had tried to warn them but nothing could really prepare any of them for the sight in the kitchen. A little old lady with fluffy white curling hair and bright blue eyes wore a pristine apron over a blue and white striped dress complete with bustle. She had roses in her cheeks and cameos at her throat and ears. She was the picture of a sweet old grandma and she practically reeked of evil and cruelty.

The two guards who were sitting at the table opposite of her stank as well, old blood and sweat and the dirt that comes along with killing rose like a miasma around them. Their guns had been carelessly left on the shelf by the door and before any of the three people in the room could sound the alarm Riddick had a shiv in the first's sweet spot while River had thrown one of her knives into the other's back, piercing his heart.

Mrs. Niska looked a lot like the old pictures of Mrs. Kringle or Mrs. Claus or whatever the Christmas lady's name was. It was a little creepy, truth be told, to know and smell how terrible the woman was and contrast it to her sweet demeanor.

"Plays up the image," River said quietly. "Harmless little old lady." Zoe's mare's leg was already aimed at the woman but River still had her pistol pointed right between her eyes. "Carries a derringer in her pocket. Doesn't want to shoot a hole through her dress but will."

"Let's just relieve her a that then," Jayne approached Mrs. Niska with appropriate caution and frisked her in his most thorough and professional manner, taking the derringer along with several wickedly sharp hair pins.

"I don't know who you think you are," Mrs. Niska's voice was like sugar cookies baking, warm and sweet, browning around the edges into something scorched hard. "But you will regret stepping foot into my house."

Riddick chuckled, "Guess your husband don't bring business home much?" He looked at Mal, "How's it feel knowin' she wanted you dead an' she don't even recognize you?"

"I'm a mite hurt, truth be told," Mal put a hand over his heart mockingly. "And after her husband made sure we enjoyed his hospitality to the fullest."

"Reynolds," Mrs. Niska's tone burnt the name in her mouth. "I paid good money to see you dead."

"Well seein' me alive is free," The Captain grinned. "This here's Richard B. Riddick. He's one of the other fella's your husband wanted to torture to death."

"I got the pleasure of killin' him," Riddick smiled coldly. "But its Zoe here who'll be takin' care of you."

River chuckled, "Doesn't believe us. Thinks we'll ransom her." She returned the old woman's incredulous look with a mocking stare. "What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted? Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just; and he but naked, though locked up in steel, whose conscience with injustice is corrupted." She shook her head, "She doesn't understand."

"Well let's see iffen we can help with that some," Jayne leaned against the kitchen door, having removed anything the woman could throw or otherwise use against them from within her reach. "See, we don't gotta ransom ya. Got us a genius at huskin' an' other things, gonna just steal this place out from under ya."

"You truly are stupid," Those bright blue eyes were hard as diamonds. "You think no one will notice you're here? That my people will just let you waltz in and out without any notice?"

"Well, yeah?" Jayne nearly laughed. "How'd ya think we got in? Dumb luck?"
"Dumb certainly fits," She spat the words out as if they tasted bad.

"Aww… now ya done gone an' hurt my manly feelin's," The big gunhand chuckled.

"Thinks her people are loyal," River commented from her perch on the counter nearby. "Thinks that fear commands loyalty even after the cause to fear is gone."

"Well that's the most idiotic thing I've ever heard, and I've heard some doozies," Mal declared. "With you dead, some cleaning house, I don't guess anyone will much miss you."

"Appoline Marie Niska," River shook her head as she typed. "Married to Adlai Heinrich Niska for over fifty years. Arranged marriage. Repaid your father by having your husband kill he and your mother so you could inherit their holdings." She frowned over something, "Had your brother killed when he began to investigate. Husband killed your nephew. Scolded him for it but didn't truly care. Wanted power and Adlai Niska learnt to use your brain and build his empire with you as his second. Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign is worth ambition, though in hell: better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Riddick looked at the woman who still showed no fear. "She ain't afraid of us though. She capable of feelin' anything?"

"Self-interest only, ǒu xiǎo suàn pán. Didn't even really like Adlai Niska. Tolerated him, valued his ruthlessness but found his theatrics tiresome," River hardly looked up from her work. "All her feelings are for herself. Tiě shí xīn cháng."

"Hail, wedded love, mysterious law; true source of human happiness," Riddick quoted dryly. "You 'bout set?"

"Shì," She nodded and hopped down. "She requires the use of the office now."

"Don't you dare touch—" Zoe's knife was one she'd had since the war. The tip of it pressed against Appoline Niska's carotid and halted the rest of her rant.

"We'll touch any gorram thing we please," The First Mate said coldly. "Won't matter much to you after a few minutes anyway." Her eyes flickered over to River and Riddick, "You two go on, this won't take long an' we'll come along after you."

"As for that heinous tiger, Tamora, no funeral rite, nor man in mourning weeds, no mournful bell shall ring her burial; but throw her forth to beasts and birds of prey: her life was beast-like, and devoid of pity; and, being so, shall have like want of pity." River stared at Mrs. Niska coldly before inhaling, "Must take the cookies out of the oven." River slid her cortex into her satchel before taking up an oven mitt and removing two trays of confections from the hot oven, setting them on the cooling racks.

"Smells good," Jayne took an appreciative sniff. "Think they're safe to eat?"

"She has not ground the bones to make bread," River shook her head. "Sweets are safe."

Riddick grinned and pointed at his old friend, "Don't eat 'em all."

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: So we made it through 'Those Left Behind' with a bit of 'Objects in Space' stuck in there. I couldn't use the Blue Hands since we killed them in Ariel but Early fit the bill nicely and his dialogue is too much fun to just drop. Only a chapter or two more and we start 'Serenity'. Hope all of you are still enjoying this. I worry my rhythm and 'voice' of the story has changed a bit since I had such a long hiatus in writing and I hope it doesn't bother anyone.

In other news I finished the 2017 Creatin' Contest Dollhouse and submitted it and I'm plotting and planning for the next one. If you're curious head on over to my blog and take a look. I'd be interested to hear what you think.

Chinese Translations:

bàng jiār (lover / partner)
dì di (younger brother)
tiān shā de (Goddam! / goddamn)
Lù duān (Luduan, mythical Chinese beast able to detect the truth)
láng (wolf)
tā mā de (fucking)
Wǒ de mā (My mother! Mama mia! Similar to "Oh my God!" in usage)
mèi mei (little sister)
Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pígu yǎn (May your child be born with an imperforate anus)
yú chūn zì jiāo de dà zi ròu (stupid inbred sack of meat)
Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)
xīǎo láng (little wolf)

dā xiǎo suàn pán (lit. to count on a narrow abacus (idiom); petty and scheming selfishly / concerned with petty interests / selfish and uncaring of the interests of others)

Tiě shí xīn cháng (to have a heart of stone / hard-hearted / unfeeling)

Shì (yes)

Quote Sources:

We are disinclined to acquiesce to your request. Means no. – Barbosa, Pirates of the Carribean

All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts. – As You Like It, William Shakespeare

What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted? Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel
just; and he but naked, though locked up in steel, whose conscience with injustice is corrupted. – Henry VI, Part II, William Shakespeare

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign is worth ambition, though in hell: better to reign in hell than serve in heaven. – Paradise Lost, John Milton

Hail, wedded love, mysterious law; true source of human happiness – Paradise Lost, John Milton

As for that heinous tiger, Tamora, no funeral rite, nor man in mourning weeds, no mournful bell shall ring her burial; but throw her forth to beasts and birds of prey: her life was beast-like, and devoid of pity; and, being so, shall have like want of pity. – Titus Andronicus, William Shakespeare
"Logistics wise, I don't know how practical stealin' this place'll be," Mal was musing as River worked. "It ain't like we'll be here to run the ranch. And bein' the head honcho always means someone'll come after you to take what you got."

River sighed, "The Captain thinks the girl hasn't thought of all this?" She pointed at a name on the screen before her. "Perfectly good foreman. Housekeeper and butler to keep the house going. Ranch pays for itself. All business can be run from the cortex. It is very difficult to take from a ghost. A low-profile ghost at that. Only Mr. Universe could find the girl if she doesn't want to be found. And he would not."

"Mal, you're talkin' like this is your choice," Jayne shook his head. "You ain't stealin' it, or doin' the work ta steal it. River's doin' that. She wants this place you really think you can stop her?"

"You aimin' on becomin' a crime lord then nǐ zǐ?" Mal frowned.

"Enjoy my business of false papers and idents," River shrugged as she continued to work. "Considering other lines of work. Niska's businesses are not all...as distasteful as he is. Owns a great deal of land on Ezra and Herschel. Many pieces of many pies. Enough money to keep Serenity flying with a small share to supplement regular jobs. Willing to share out the ranch and profits among the crew."

"So what are you aimin' for?" Zoe's tone was milder than Mal's for once. Curiosity lit her dark eyes and she seemed almost amused as she listened to the conversation.

"There's a storm coming," River murmured. Riddick frowned as her scent changed, blood and steel rising. "A storm to shake the 'verse. Serenity must be a leaf on the wind or she will be blown to bits."

"Sounds like more of Early's ilk," Zoe commented and River's gaze zeroed in on her sharply.

"No. Much much worse than Early. It's how they think: sideways. It's how they move. Sidle up and smile, hit you where you're weak. Sorta man they're like to send believes hard. Kills and never asks why." Book's accent sounded strange coming out of her mouth but somehow what came next was worse, "If your enemy should go to ground leave him no ground to go to. Where are you hiding... little girl?"

Riddick let her words turn over in his mind, the ones with Book's accent were a clue to what was coming, "They'll be sending someone from the Parliament." He said flatly, "Someone beyond the military. Any boots on the ground, they'll be supporting him or her."

"How can you know that's who's lookin' for her?" Mal looked at Riddick, "Last I heard you weren't a Reader."

"Only people who'd have the power to send someone like that is Parliament," Riddick shrugged. "Sideways. Kills and never asks why... that's someone beyond military thinking, regs and codes. Leave him no ground to go to... suggests someone with no compunctions 'bout killing anyone in the way. Innocents, women, children, bystanders. It won't matter." He paused, "And I know because that's the sort of ǒu niàng yǎng de the Academy thought I was. What they wanted to turn River and me into."
"Leave no ground..." Mal sounded vaguely alarmed. "That gives me an uncomfortableness."

"Because you ain't stupid." Jayne snorted, "An' that's why this place'll be worth its weight in platinum once River's done her work on hidin' she owns it."

"Shea has the right of it," River nodded as she worked. "A place to hide that no one knows. A bolt-hole. For when the storm is done. Preparations to make in order to delay the tempest and ensure that fewest possible are harmed."

"I don't like the sound of that last bit. The no ground part," Mal looked at Zoe. "That sound to you like..."

"Like anybody we know's gonna be in danger," Zoe nodded her agreement. Riddick folded his arms.

"Can't cut ties to everyone, gotta get work from somewhere." He pointed out.

"Can funnel money from Niska's business to Serenity's coffers through shadow accounts and shell companies," River spoke quietly from the desk, her fingers still moving light lightening across the keyboard. "Send messages advising allies to prepare hidey holes. Reduce contact and interaction to the minimum required to find jobs." She turned and began to work on a separate cortex. "Secure uplink, untraceable and practically invisible. Highly illegal in civilian hands. Black ops hardware and software. Advising Badger to publicly cut ties with us. Sending him his share from the treasure hunt and telling him it was a trap."

"If we go to the twins for work now and then it'll look like we're shuttin' Badger out," Zoe nodded. "Gives credence to the idea that we've had a falling out."

"Considerin' the last job he gave us was an ambush, we let that slip and no one would think he'd even give us the time a day. Or have anything to do with us again." The Captain agreed, "We let the rest of our contacts know to prepare for the worst and we keep contact to a minimum. Whatever jobs we get, we do 'em and we don't linger afterwards."

"Could work," Jayne was rubbing his chin in that thoughtful way he had, and River smiled.

"Shea is having a very smart thought."

"Yeah, well dunno 'bout that, but I did have the notion of layin' some false trails," Jayne shrugged. "There's folks turned on us in the past, done their best to do us in. Seems like we could do somethin' ta point anyone lookin' in their direction."

Riddick smiled wickedly at the thought but Mal was less enthused. "Don't know that I want to be responsible for bringin' the might of the Alliance down on anyone's head," He said slowly. "Though I gotta say there's some I'd mind it less than others." He admitted after some thought.

"Ain't gotta decide now," Jayne shrugged.

"Make a list," Zoe suggested. "Folk we wouldn't mind seein' come up against a hard place at full speed."

Jayne smirked, "That'll be an easy list."

River chuckled wickedly, "Have arranged for the ranch to be run in our absence, already text waves come in with gratitude for the change in ownership."
"Guess we can call Serenity in to land on the lawn." Mal smiled.

She nodded, "Eager to show everyone the house. Room enough for all of us. Water from a well, purified and clean for cooking and bathing, no worries about shortages." She frowned over her cortex, "Security personnel are submitting to background checks. Most will be...dismissed. Morally reprehensible."

"Any hard feelin's comin' 'bout that?" Jayne wondered.

Riddick laughed, "If there are they can come and complain. Be happy to enlighten 'em as to how much we don't care."

"Many bodies burned in the incinerator building," River was staring through walls. "Records of business dealings, legal and otherwise." She keyed up a few screens and showed Mal, "Could make use of these. In addition to the information from the law enforcement files."

"That could be a very nice source of income," Mal chuckled as he looked over the information and explained to Zoe. "Little genius girl's found a few places with cargo to be smuggled into the Core or out to the Rim. Agents in place and everything."

"Good jobs then, so we're not sailing aimlessly," Zoe smiled thought her eyes were still dark with concern. "And not much to do with our regular folks."

"And Mr. Universe will like some of these goods as well," River pointed at a shipment of the latest cortex equipment. "What we do not need ourselves." She smiled wickedly, "Run a nice little business out of the shuttle if we rent it. Without ambition one starts nothing. Without work one finishes nothing."

"It's a thought," Riddick kissed her head. "Let's think about that."

"Like to let everything settle for a while before we go makin' any more changes," Mal opined. "Don't enjoy the feeling of the ground shifting under me."

"No one does," River nodded her agreement as she continued her work and opened a channel for Mal to wave Serenity, pointing to another cortex for him to use. "Time to call home."

It was beautiful and terrible, a green and blue planet, slowly dying as white blossomed over the surface and moments later ships, huge, intricate space freighters, came roaring up from the surface passing her by with a thunder of flames. "Earth-That-Was could no longer sustain our numbers, we were so many."

The solar system had a white sun, like the one that had been left behind, planets surrounding it in greater multitudes than anyone had ever seen. Planets surrounded by moons and proto stars with their own planets and moons. "We found a new solar system: dozens of planets and hundreds of moons."

The terraforming station was ugly and wonderful at the same time, a sprawling bunker-like complex, miles and miles across with air billowing out of it, the chained lightning of electricity running over it. "Each one terraformed, a process taking decades, to support human life. To be new Earths."

A city rose from the planet's surface, beautiful, gleaming spires and cool glass towers, the envy of anyone who saw it. "The Central Planets were the first settled and the most advanced, embodying civilization at its peak."
The empty desert plain would be envied by no one, the planet near empty, on the edge of the galaxy, lonely and alone. "Life on the outer planets is much more primitive and difficult. That's why the Central planets formed the Alliance, so everyone can enjoy the comfort and enlightenment of true civilization. That's why we fought the War for Unification."

Professor Rao stepped in front of the large cortex screen showing the inhospitable rim planet, addressing the class of twelve-year olds. It was one of the open air classrooms, an elegant tent, small wooden desks with embedded screens, one for each child. The lawn around them was grassy and green, bushes sculpted into fanciful shapes. People walked about in suits and gowns, their clothing stylish and tasteful while vehicles glided quietly overhead. It was almost utopian.

One of the students, Songmin, raised her hand, "Now that the war's over, our soldiers get to come home, yes?"

The instructor nodded with a serene smile, "Some of them. Some will be stationed on the rim planets as Peace Enforcers." Professor Rao looked around the class for other questions. Predictably Borodin had one.

Borodin commented, "I don't understand. Why were the Independents even fighting us? Why wouldn't they look to be more civilized? It seemed more than half of his sentences started with 'I don't understand' so Rao was used to it if not thrilled with this level of participation.

"That's a good question," Professor Rao smiled, even though it really wasn't. "Does anybody want to open on that?"

"I hear they're cannibals." Jeanne offered.

A second boy, Marvin, scoffed, "That's only Reavers."

He was soundly refuted by another girl, Hannah, "Reavers aren't real."

Marvin turned to look at Hannah and argued right back, "Full well they are. They attack settlers from space, they kill them and wear their skins and rape them for hours and hours—"

He was cut off by Professor Rao sharply, "Bai duo, an jing yidian!" That silenced Marvin, which was always a good thing. In a calmer voice she continued, "It's true that there are... dangers on the outer planets. So let's follow up on Borodin's question. With all the social and medical advancements we can bring to the independents, why would they fight so hard against us?"

"We meddle," The solemn quiet voice was familiar, painfully so.

"River?" The instructor inquired, "Shuh-Muh?"

She was smaller than the other children, younger, and working with a stylus and keyboard simultaneously as she answered the question, a strange, unfamiliar planet appearing on her cortex screen while she spoke, "People don't like to be meddled with. We tell them what to do, what to think, don't run don't walk we're in their homes and in their heads and we haven't the right. We're meddlesome."

She clung to the stylus but Professor Rao took it away, gently but firmly, "River, we're not telling people what to think. We're just trying to show them how."

River screamed as her instructor violently plunged the stylus into her forehead.
She rarely woke screaming anymore but when she did their entire bunk stank of her terror and it took him hours to soothe her. When she finally remembered where she was River clung to him and he pulled her tight to his chest and murmured, "Bad one? Same thing?"

"Classroom again," She shuddered, and he ran his hands over her skin, warming her up. She always felt so cold after one of the nightmares, shivering until he was ready to set fire to something to warm her up.

"Feel like sparring some? Warm up? Have some tea afterwards?" He kissed her and smiled when her lips clung to his. "Or I could warm you up some other way."

"Like that idea my láng." River's hands slid over his chest boldly and he growled down at her, tumbling her onto her back to worship her throat and breasts with his mouth.

"So tā mā de beautiful," He sucked slowly on her nipples, loving how she moaned, her hips moving instinctively against his, thighs parting to cradle his body between them. Soft sweet skin, little buds tightening in the cool ship air and blooming hot and swollen under his tongue. "Gonna make you forget everything but falling as hard as you can."

"Riddick," Her hand slid between their bodies to wrap around his diǎo and he groaned, pulling back and rolling so she was over him, pulling her body up his so she was straddling his mouth.

"Play with those pretty tits for me bāo bāo, gonna make a meal of you… fill you up good." He loved watching her hands on her gorgeous shuāng rǔ cupping them, fingers tugging and pinching her nipples and moaning at the sensations. "That's it River. You wanna get filled up good? Everywhere?"

"Ooohh…yes please… Richard, my Riddick…" He could smell the wave of desire flood through her scent. His gorgeous little woman had taken to anal play with gusto, and loved when he'd use one of her toys in her tight little gāng. Her thighs were slick with need over his mouth and her clit swollen, flushed red and begging for his tongue.

A swipe of his fingers through her nether lips and she moaned knowing what was to come. "That's right zhēn 'ài, I'm gonna give you what you need," He crooned and began to lick and suck her clit before thrusting his tongue up into her hot tight táo huā yuán. She was sweet and wet and moaning with need as he tongue fucked her, one thick finger rubbing and slowly entering her pì gu, stretching her and readying her for the toy.

"Unghh… oh…Riddick," She gasped, trying to lower her body to his mouth and was stymied by one strong hand on her thigh, keeping her just where he wanted her. "Richard please…"

Speech was impossible, but he didn't really mind, his sweet sexy little wife was all he wanted, his imagination running wild with everything he wanted to do with her. Another finger joined the first, stretching her ass and she shuddered hotly. A slight adjustment and his tongue was rubbing in slow deliberate strokes over her hot yīn dì and she gave a guttural moan. Her hips were twitching against his hand and he judged it wouldn't be much longer until she fell.

A quick tug on the bedside drawer and he had the oil and toy, a new one he'd been dying to try, wider and longer than she'd had before. A thin coating of the oil over the slick rubber and it was ready for her, pushing against her hot gāng. "Unghh… Riddick…" She was panting now, rolling her hips back for him and he sucked hard on her clit as he slowly pushed the toy inside her.
She shuddered, his nose picking up the sharp hot scent of her pleasure with the twist of pain they'd discovered made everything sweeter, his lips nipping at her clit again as the toy filled her, stretching her hot and tight and reaching deeper. Hot guttural moans fell from her lips as she pulled mindlessly on her tits, "Unghh… Richard…I… ohh… oh… I’m…"

He loved how she felt and sounded, so close to her fall, hot and spicy sweet in his nose and mouth. Just to tease her he left her clit and began to lick and eat her pussy, her lips soaking and sweet with honey. She wouldn't fall, not from this, but her pleasure would wind tighter and tighter until he sucked on her yīn dì again.

"Ohh…Riddick…please…please… unghh…" She was starting to beg and there was no sweeter sound. He pushed the dildo into her ass hard, filling her completely and fixed his mouth to her clit, sucking and licking until she couldn't help grinding her body to his mouth, falling with a scream of pleasure that rang in his ears and soaked his mouth and chin with her honey.

Dragging her down his body to rub his cock between her nether lips had her gasping for more and he growled his need, sitting up to suck and bite at her shuāng rǔ while she clutched at his shoulders, shuddering and moaning for more. "Tell me…what do you want River. My River." He shuddered with the effort to not simply drive into her mindlessly.

"Unghhh…please… please…fuck me…" Her voice was a siren song and he growled, spreading her over his diǎo and pushing into her slick, hot, tight yīn dào. The toy in her ass made her even tighter and he groaned as she slowly took him in, gasping and trembling as he finally went balls deep into her.

"So tight," He growled, kissing her, his tongue thrusting into her mouth in rough demand as his hands grasped her hips and ass. "Love how you take all of me." He reached behind her and gave the toy in her gàng a tap, flicking the switch on and listened to her shriek of pleasure as it began to thrust into her. "That's it… my sexy fucking wife."

He lost time inside her, his animal roaring to the fore, dragging her up and down his cock and taking in every gasp of pleasure and moan of need, loving how wet and slick she became as she fell around his diǎo over and over. He couldn't count how many times she fell, dragging him with her, his jīng yè flooding her over and over.

He bit her shoulder at least once, marking her as his again, and felt her teeth bite into the skin of his neck in return, before they fell one last time, her body limp with repletion even as he cleaned them both up, putting the toy away and holding her tightly against him. "Mine." He kissed the pulse in her neck.

"And he is hers, always," She clung to him, half asleep already and he smiled into the darkness.

"Complaining will do you no good," River spoke into the silence and was given a confused look by everyone but her husband and the Captain. Mal closed his lips over whatever he'd been about to say and sighed huffily.

"It does bear repeatin' that you need sound proofin' in your bunk," He snapped.

River shrugged, "To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them." Mal wasn't in the best of moods due to the list to which the crew had been contributing,
"He retorted, his irritation sending spikes of annoyance out like a mean spirited halo.

"Sir, we do have some downtime and the perfect place to take it, might as well get the sound proofing done sooner rather than later," Zoe pointed out in her calm reasonable voice.

"It ain't even like we'd have to pull stuff out of the bunks," Jayne concurred. "They spray that stuff in between the walls. It's not but two or three millimeters thick so it won't gum up Serenity's workin's."

"Captain doesn't like the idea of strangers on his ship," River commented as she worked her cortex. Whitehall was on her list and she'd been sending programs to Mr. Universe in order to lay several false trails. Patience had tried Mal's patience once too many times. Apparently the Reavers that hit Whitehall hadn't been all that enthusiastic after they'd chased Serenity and the old woman had lived to double cross another day.

"No, I don't," The tall Browncoat agreed. "How's your work comin' anyway little genius girl?"

"False trails laid towards Patience and also to Ott's stronghold." She frowned, "His people got him off of Constance, blew out the back of the jail, killed a deputy." She shook her head, "More crew than those in the bank." She rubbed at her forehead for a moment trying to get Mal's pokey annoyance out of her skin. He felt like prickle burrs when he was irritated like this.

"Yeah, he always did know how to find lowlife scum who'd do anything for coin," Jayne made a face. "It won't look odd, showin' him as friendly to us?"

"Shouldn't," River shook her head. "Back dating trails, multiple paths…" She frowned as she considered how the data would be perceived. "Prior interactions will not be interpreted as good or ill. People who would threaten or harm others simply for being perceived as friendly are not the type to question information when it comes to them. It is simply acted upon. Kills and never asks why. Beast-like, and devoid of pity. But should not mistake that for stupidity or lack of sophistication."

"Which is why we had another thought, expanding on what Jayne talked about at the ranch," Wash nodded towards Jayne and Riddick. "Know there's jobs we don't take, slavers, drugs, that sorta thing. But there are our type of jobs from folks who are less picky about their income. People of Niska's temperament but less powerful. That gives us a place to start laying a trail."

"See, we get work from disreputable types who aren't all cuddly like Badger, anything leads back to 'em we don't feel bad about it." Jayne nodded.

"And it makes things look more plausible, new work sorta meshin' with the old stuff River's puttin' out there," Riddick finished.

"Let's start lookin' then," Mal nodded after thinking it over. "Zoe, you sent the word out to the folks who've been decent to us?"

"Warned 'em all, make themselves some hidey holes, bunkers or escape routes and not to talk about 'em to anybody." The First Mate nodded. "Badger and Shazza were particularly appreciative. Got the impression they're plannin' on visitin' Inara and makin' sure she's not going to get caught out. Even if she can't leave the House she'll be warned as to the possibility of problems."

"That's a good thought." The Captain was more appreciative than he liked of Badger's way of
thinking and it showed when he stood. "If we want the work let's act like we have a purpose." He stood and handed Zoe the list of chores allotted out to each crew member.

River rolled her eyes as he left the galley, "As if we are all clueless as to our duties."

Riddick's chuckle was rough and warm in her ears as he stood, "C'mon Wash, let's go find some folks to take money from."

River sat at the table and sipped tea, trying to meditate in the face of Mal's displeasure. "He is not helping." The sparring which usually calmed her hadn't worked today and Mal had witnessed it, unfortunately. So she'd taken herself back to the galley to do some work with her cortex, feeding information into the machine to simulate the trails leading away from Serenity. Meditation had become necessary after an hour's work, the glare of the screen and purely cerebral work wearing upon her nerves.

"I ain't doin' anything," He was glowering in her direction, displeased with what he believed was a lack of consistency in her difficulties.

"He is thinking loudly again. And believes she is making up her difficulties because they are not predictable and thus not quantifiable and easily understood." River sipped her tea and gave up on the meditation. She'd never be able to calm her mind with Mal glaring at her and his thoughts shouting his displeasure.

"It don't make sense. You were fine this mornin', then you nearly took a fit and would have sliced Rick open when you were sparring, and now you're calm as can be," Mal pointed out. Thankfully he hadn't noticed that Riddick had needed to put his teeth against her neck to release her from the state she'd been in. The nightmares didn't quite trigger the assassin's protocol but it was very close at times. She was grateful that her husband knew how to get her out of it without sending her into sleep.

"He doesn't understand," River sighed. "You have been healthy…most of your life? Except for injuries, but none were debilitating. Correct? Sickness is something that passes quickly?"

"Well yeah," He shrugged. "So?"

"Can't understand then. No frame of reference." She rubbed her forehead.

"You're the genius girl. Make me understand." He wasn't frowning as harshly now, his thoughts softening, worry lacing through his irritation as he took in the strained lines of her forehead and around her eyes and mouth.

"It's…" She looked around for something to help her make her point and got up, going to the drawer of flatware and gathered up all of the spoons. "Here." She handed Mal a bouquet of spoons. "You have these spoons. And the spoons make you like me."

"Spoons," The Captain repeated dubiously.

"Wěi," She nodded. "You're heathy and when you are healthy you don't have think of whether or not you can do all that you plan in the day. You know you can." River pointed at the spoons. "Count them please."

She could give him credit for going with it, he began to count them out, asking curiously, "An'
why'm I countin' the silver?"

"The spoons represent what you can do during the day, now that you're like me." She watched until he'd counted out twelve spoons and took the rest away.

"Hey, I want those," Mal objected and River smiled.

"That's my point. You can't have more. You're like me, you're sick. You only get twelve." She pointed at them. When he looked disappointed River very nearly grinned. He might understand now, once she explained, he would realize why she had such trouble.

"Now list everything you need to do in a day," She ticked things off on her fingers, counting for him as he listed his chores, meals to be cooked, the job and his shift on the bridge as well as prepping for the job. "So are you planning on doing all this naked and dirty and unarmed?"

"Huh?" Now he looked a little confused and she shook her head.

"When you're sick, you have to count up your everyday things. Getting dressed, showering, shaving, putting your weapons on. Getting out of bed." She shook her head. "You wanted to read a book in the evening. Maybe you wanted to play horseshoes in the bay?"

"Well yeah," Mal nodded.

"Can't." She pointed at his spoons. "Last night I had a nightmare, a flashback while I was sleeping." She took one of his spoons away. "My Richard was able to bring me back to myself, soothe me, make me feel real again, but I lost sleep. That mean I lose a spoon. I don't have the energy to brush my hair or make breakfast."

"So… I lose a spoon, I don't have the energy to read or play horseshoes," Mal nodded and crossed those off his list.

"And food makes you feel ill, so you can't finish breakfast. You have a headache all day, so you have to give up two more spoons. Because you can't concentrate on anything complicated," River explained.

"That means if I have to count each meal separate I'm not gonna have enough spoons to manage all my work," Mal frowned at the stingy number of spoons he had remaining.

"Exactly," She nodded. "When you're sick, physically or mentally, you have to think of everything. You have to keep in mind that if you make dinner so you can eat you might be too tired to clean up. And tomorrow will be harder because you'll have leftover dishes. You must plan for tomorrow when you go through today because whatever you do today will affect you tomorrow. If you try to do everything on your list today, and you run out of spoons, you won't be able to do anything tomorrow because you'll be too tired, or sick, you'll only have two or three spoons for the next two or three days because it is like an avalanche, growing worse the longer you push yourself."

"Even with folks helpin' out? And your sparring and meditatin' and suchlike?" Mal was frowning at the spoons.

"Activities designed to let me earn spoons, or keep the ones I have," River nodded. "But I sparred yesterday, meditated, and then had a nightmare. And therapy with Inara helped, because she was good at making me narrow down what would actually bother me, what I could and couldn't do. Today, sparring helped but I had a flashback during it, so it didn't earn me a spoon. So sometimes chance will take away my spoons. Like being shot, or Reavers coming after us. Change is difficult, it decreases my stability. Routine helps me keep spoons. Not hiding who I am means I don't have to
use a spoon doing that."

"So does your genius brain help at all with that?" The Captain was still studying the spoons as if he could duplicate them somehow and she could hear his thoughts wondering over how anyone could live like that. How she didn't go completely crazy with all the variables and changes on Serenity that happened without warning.

"At times," She half smiled. "And there are times it's just as much a problem as the flashbacks. Being a genius gives me greater capacity to plan things out, but I tend to also have an excess of information and that can become problematic. O swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable. Sometimes things just don't make sense."

"How do you do it?" Mal was actually getting it now, comparing her to Inara and what seemed like erratic behavior on the part of the Companion and now made a great deal more sense.

"I've learned," The Reader pulled a spoon out of her pocket. "Always keep a spoon in reserve because there might be an emergency, I might need it."

"I… I can't imagine living that way," The tall man was shaking his head in appalled amazement.

"I've gotten used to it," River shrugged. "I've been forced to think about everything I do. Do you know how many spoons people waste every day? I don't have room for wasted time or wasted spoons. I'm here because I choose to be."

Mal nodded thoughtfully and gathered the spoons up, replacing them in the drawer and leaving her to meditate. River sighed and closed her eyes again. At least now he had some notion of why there were times she couldn't do things.

It was a few days later that Mal had come back from the meet grousing and in rare agreement with Riddick. "Damn fool needs to bathe more often," The Captain grumbled.

"Felt like I couldn't breathe for the stench of him and the cologne he thought should replace soap and water," Riddick wrinkled his nose, breathing deeply of the ships air as they strode up the ramp.

"Breathe through your mouth," Zoe advised.

"And have to tā mā de taste it and smell it?" Riddick looked at her like she was crazy.

River smiled from her position on top of the crate near the ramp where she'd been keeping watch for them. "Will let Wash know to set the course," She hopped down. "Roundabout, easy languorous journey? Or at all speed?"

"All speed," Mal sighed as he realized she'd Read him again. "Might be you want to let me say things before you go and say them to someone else?"

"Could, but it wastes time," River grinned at him and Zoe cracked a smile, something rare without her husband's presence.

"Can't have that sir," The First Mate mounted the stairs. "I'll tell him, River, you better go over the plan with the Captain."
"Snags?" River tilted her head, listening and grinned, "Oooh, double-booked."

Mal's grin was mischievous, "Figured two for the price of one was a good deal. Since we're headed there anyway."

"She will help with the plan, if need be," The Reader chuckled. "A chance to try out the new winter gear."

"Yeah, and fresh air," Riddick shut the ramp on the sounds and smells of the docks. "That'll be a nice change."

River found Zoe to be scary sometimes. She was very simple, uncomplicated in her motivations. She had only two foci in her mind: Malcolm Reynolds and Hoban Washburne. Nothing else mattered insofar as it related to the two men in her life. Not that there was any competition or conflict. Zoe's dedication to the Captain was of a wholly different feel than that of her dedication to her husband. The only similarity was that she would happily die for either of them. And she would be just as happy to kill for them. Zoe was, to River's mind, one of the scariest people on Serenity. And she wasn't sure just what would happen if one of Zoe's two foci were to be removed from her life via death or some other outside force. It was only of the only things Zoe feared. And in dreams fear could rule her. Dreams were as much the enemy to Zoe as the Alliance was.

Zoe had thought she had seen the worse possible ways to die.

She believed that the Alliance didn't have the right to control all the known worlds. The Alliance, naturally, had something to say about that, so there was a war. Zoe had fought, going where they told her to, shooting what they told her to shot. That was what she did. Zoe had no illusions—she was a follower. She was particular about who she chose to follow, mind, but she knew her limitations. Unlike, say, Malcolm Reynolds, she had no leadership skills.

But she had a fair portion of fighting skills, and she was sure to put them all to good use against the Alliance.

She thought she had seen all the worst ways to die during the war.

That was before the fighting stopped.

It had been two weeks. A fortnight since Command said Serenity Valley was 'too hot' after they'd held it for so long. Fourteen days since they were told to lay down arms.

Two weeks since they'd been left there to wait until the armistice was signed.

Two weeks to watch people die.

There were no proper medical facilities on this part of Hera, and they had no way to get to the places that did. No ships flew overhead while they waited, no chatter came over the radio.

So people died. They died of wounds that got infected. They died of colds that they might have shaken off in a day if they weren't exposed and exhausted and bleeding. They died when they fought over what little food remained. They died when they decided eating their pistols was a better end than waiting in Serenity Valley for hope that would not show itself.

For Zoe's part, she dealt with it by shutting off her feelings. It was the only way to surround yourself
with suffering—and also the only way to inflict it on other people. It didn't get to her because she refused to let it.

Throughout it all, Sergeant Mal Reynolds kept the troops going as best he could. Anyone else in charge, Zoe was sure they'd all be dead. But he managed to keep everyone going, with jokes, with inspiration, with anything he could throw at them.

Except, she noticed after the third day, for hope. The hope that he had instilled in the troops from day one was gone. Had Zoe not been so concerned with whether or not she'd starve to death, she might have mentioned it. As it was, she was content to let him be.

On the fifteenth day, Kiri said, "I can hear something. Does anybody hear that?"

Zoe refrained from answering that the only things she could hear were, alternately, her stomach grumbling or Tedesco's labored breathing as he tried to gasp air with a chest that was riddled with bullet holes.

Sergeant Reynolds called out, "Corporal! Zoe! Signal flares!"

Struggling to rise, Zoe asked, "Whose colors?" As she forced her limbs to crawl through the fatigue, the injury, the agony, she noticed that Tedesco wasn't breathing at all. That in fact he'd been dead for two days since being shot in the face. 'So why did I think I was hearing his breathing?'

Kiri said, "It's a rescue ship, sir! They came! They came…" Kiri sounded like she couldn't believe it.

Zoe couldn't believe that no one answered her question. "Whose colors are they flying?" She also couldn't get up. Her legs, on which she hadn't called often these past two days, had taken to that state of affairs and simply refused to function.

And then, there was the sergeant, offering her a helping hand. There were few things in the 'verse Zoe could count on. Malcolm Reynolds was one of them.

"It don't matter none," he said in a quiet voice. "One side or the other, it makes no difference."

Zoe couldn't believe her ears. If it didn't make a difference, what had they been fighting for?

Sergeant Reynolds turned to Kiri and Bourke, who was standing next to him. "Both of you, pass the word. See who's still with us." Then he bellowed, "Look alive, people!" We got med-ships en route! We need to prepare for extraction!"

It took all Zoe's willpower to keep from bursting out laughing. "Extraction", indeed. Well, actually, it took no willpower, as she could barely stand up, but still, the notion was crazy. They weren't being "extracted". You were extracted when you were being removed from an op that was over. This—this was just vultures picking over the bones to see if there was any good meat left.

She rooted through a supply bag for the flare, then looked up at the sky. The ships were starting to come into view now, but they were still pretty much just specks against the clouds. Then she handed the sergeant the flare and asked the question she was afraid to ask, yet had to: "Are those really med-ships? Are we really getting out?"

He took the flare and said, "We are."

For the first time in two weeks, Zoe allowed herself to feel something: relief. "Thank God." She let out a long breath, and even thought about the possibility of smiling a little.
Sergeant Reynolds looked at her with as disgusted an expression as she'd ever seen on his face. "God?" he lit the flare. "Whose colors he flyin'?"

Zoe shot him a look. 'He really has lost it.'

Then she remembered the old saying about how there were no atheists in foxholes. By the same token, there weren't many worshippers in charnel houses, and that's what Serenity Valley was. The dead outnumbered the living by at least ten to one. Zoe had gotten so used to the odor of death that she suspected that the inside of the medship—and it was a medship, she could see that now as it came closer—would smell peculiar.

Either way, the war was finally over. And they had lost.

A hand came down on her shoulder and River started, looking up into Jayne's concerned gaze. "Rick's askin' for ya on the bridge. Said he's wantin' you to pull up some better maps if you can?"

She nodded, "Shì, she will go now."

Jayne patted her shoulder gently, "Guess someone's nappin'?" He'd seen her caught in someone else's dream often enough to know the look.

"She dreams of the aftermath, after the surrender." River murmured, "Two weeks of waiting, dying and starving, for help to come. So many died that could have been saved."

"Yeah, did our fair share of that too," Jayne nodded grimly and she caught a glimpse of a crumbling stone wall and a firepit filled with ash and not much else, bloody bandages on someone's leg and bloody hands tying it tighter. He took a deep breath and forced the memory away. "Sorry about that mèi mei."

River shook her head and gave him a quick hug, "Memories are… difficult to push back. Not your fault. Or hers." She shrugged as she took a deep breath to regain her equilibrium. "Can't control dreams."

Mal caught her on the way up to the bridge. "Gonna need your help on this one, little genius girl. Gotta make a good showing as to crew, but the side job'll need the muscle more than the 'legit' cargo haul."

She gave him a sunny smile, "She likes to be crew when it is possible. Meditation again today, sparring and with the Captain's permission, will rest up the day before the job."

"Gotta have the spoons to work," He remembered. "You're down to cook lunch the day before I think. You can't and you need to just rest an' eat, tell me or Zoe, we'll swap with you for another day."

"Li shí," River promised. "Snow could make landing and take off problematic. Must employ cortex readings and land by the numbers. Eyeballing the terrain will not be reliable."

"Yeah, that's a problem with snow." The tall man nodded his understanding. "But we got the best pilot in the 'verse and a damn good co-pilot with him, so I think we'll be all right."

River watched as he headed for the galley while she walked up to the bridge, "Famous last words."
St. Alban's moon *Pi Gu* was, if it was possible, even less hospitable than the planet it orbited. The climate was the equal of St. Albans, meaning constant blizzards, ice storms and mountainous terrain. But whereas St. Alban's had a somewhat insular population, suspicious until you were a friend of one, whereupon you became a friend of all, *Pi Gu*'s population was... just suspicious.

And with good reason. *Pi Gu* seemed to be populated with St. Alban's rejects. A nastier, fouler, more than likely to stab you in the back, bunch of folk he'd never met outside of a Slam. The people they'd done business with had definitely met the new requirements that had been established. Nobody on the crew, with the possible exception of Kaylee, would feel bad if trouble came following them.

Unfortunately, while Mal was pulling one job, of the semi legitimate type, Rick, Jayne and Zoe were performing a heist. River and Ciara had gone with the Captain to act as his 'harmless' crew while Book, Simon, Wash and Kaylee stayed on Serenity. He hadn't liked River going off to work without him but there'd been no denying the heist needed muscle and guns. River qualified as guns and brains but for sheer muscle no one could match Jayne, Zoe and Riddick.

"They back yet?" Riddick frowned as he pulled off his gloves and pushed his hood back. Jayne sneezed as he unwound his muffler.

Zoe shook her head, indicating the empty hangers where the mule should be hoisted. "Should be anytime though. Let's get the goods stowed."

"Yeah," He nodded and between the three of them they got the extremely valuable and slightly unwieldy packages off the shuttle and into one of Serenity's hidey holes. *Pi Gu* had only one area of superiority to St. Albans. The mines had Osmium, which was worth its weight in platinum to anyone manufacturing electronics, as well as the newfangled offshoot of Osmium. Some genius had jokingly called it Ozymandium, after Ozymandias, king of kings, because it did what Osmium did but five times better, thus the 'look on my works ye mighty and despair' descriptor. Cortex circuit boards made with Ozymandium functioned on a level exponentially higher than Osmium. The only thing worth more was naturally occurring silicon. That was rare as hen's teeth and guarded better than any jewel.

They'd managed to get three good sized bags of Ozymandium ore out of the locked and guarded storeroom where it was held before being processed. Getting in and out hadn't been difficult, but even for three people accustomed to stealth, keeping the ore from making any noise as they did so was difficult. The metal wasn't exactly light weight either. But one ounce was enough to build half a cortex server so the trouble they took would be well worth the effort.

*Pi Gu*'s main town had a factory district where circuit boards and other tech were manufactured with some of the Osmium mined. Mal and the girls should be on their way back with five crates in tow, ostensibly to be dropped on Beaumonde. If they ever got back.

Serenity's ramp began to lower with a groan and the Furyan exchanged a concerned glance with Zoe. "That doesn't sound great." Jayne sneezed again, and Riddick slanted a look at his brother, "And neither does that. Better go have the doc give you something. You don't want to be down with a cold if we have trouble."

"Yeah," His voice was dull with congestion; it was an indication of how lousy Jayne was feeling that he didn't argue, heading down to the infirmary with an uncharacteristic shuffling of his feet.

Riddick exchanged a resigned look with Zoe and began to head down to the cargo bay, getting the doors open and shut behind the mule and its cargo. "Gorram, cold as a witch's tit out there." He commented as the snow began to melt on the warmer metal grate floor. "So?" He eyed Mal and the
"Success?" The crates piled on the back of the mule would indicate a positive reply but he'd learned that there was no such thing as a sure thing on Serenity.

"Bundled up like snow bunnies but very successful," River leapt off the mule into his arms and he grinned, brushing the snow off her hood. "The clothing Richard made for her is warm and pretty."

He grinned, kissing her nose and helping her out of the warm quilted leather and fur coat. "Glad you like it. Ciara? Yours work out all right? Shea's been worried." The two of them had gone hunting the last decent planet they were on, managed to get a couple of bucks. Fresh meat for the freezer was nothing to sneeze at and once they'd cured the hides buckskin made for very nice coats for River and Ciara. Neither of them had anything warm enough for the weather on St. Albans or Pi Gu. Between the hides, the rabbit fur they'd lined the hoods and cuffs with and the wool quilted lining the girls could go outside without risking immediate frostbite.

The Kerry woman nodded, "Very warm. Gloves were good too." She looked around, stripping her outerwear off and making sure the aforementioned gloves were stowed in the pockets. "Where is Shea anyway?"

"Seems to have caught a chill," Riddick nodded towards the infirmary, from where he could hear coughing and sniffing.

Mal wasn't paying any attention to the three of them now that the mule was aboard, calling to his engineer. "Kaylee?"

"Hey Cap'n," Kaylee's sunny smile seemed to warm the chilly bay as she came out onto the catwalk and headed down the stairs.

"Why ain't we flyin'?" Mal was stripping off his outerwear as he spoke.

"Ain't on my account." Kaylee shrugged as she headed for the infirmary and Simon now that she'd seen her crew back safe. "Ship's hummin' Mal."

"Wash!"

Riddick winced as Mal's bellow echoed against the steel hull. "He's up on the bridge."

River sighed as Mal headed for the bridge, tugging Riddick along with her. "Cap'n is unhappy."

"Yeah tell me somethin' I don't know," Riddick shook his head and let himself be tugged up the stairs. When they arrived in the hall of the upper deck Wash was just exiting the bridge on the cue of Mal's next bellow of the pilot's name. Zoe was climbing out of their bunk sans outerwear which explained where she'd disappeared to.

"Mal!" Wash snarked, "Malcom! My dear old pal Malcom."

"Why ain't we flyin'," Mal was in the rare position of looking up at his pilot since Wash had remained on the steps.

"Were we supposed to be going somewhere?" The sunny natured man asked with a half-smile.

"I ain't in the mood for any hilarity Wash. Tell me why we're still on the ground." The Captain glared as Wash descended the steps.

"Snow." Wash told him succinctly.
"Snow?" Zoe echoed, a rare confused tone to her voice.

"Coming down hard, can't see a thing. Because we couldn't land at the rinky dink docks this rock laughingly calls a space port." Wash nodded. "I'd try to fly through it but there's the possible mountain and us crashing into it... Body parts everywhere...some of them mine..."

"What about the plan," Zoe regarded her husband thoughtfully as she asked the question.

"There was a plan?" Wash was doing a good job of acting confused. Riddick shook his head as he and River approached the trio, their bunk door a few steps away.

"Yes." Mal ground the words out from between clenched teeth. "Step two of which was run the hell away."

"You could call this plan B." Wash explained with a cheerful smile.

"I've seen you fly full throttle through minefields. You can't navigate a couple of snowflakes?" Zoe was looked at him skeptically.

"Honey, remember the conversation we had about taking sides?" Wash looked at his wife expectantly. She seemed to recall something and her expression and tone changed to one of complete support of the pilot's statement.

"Oh right." Zoe nodded and looked at Mal. "What he said...about the mountain and the body parts."

"Home run, my dear," Wash leaned an arm on her shoulder to murmur in her ear.

Mal was gathering steam for another outburst and Riddick sighed, "He's right." He told the Browncoat in resignation. "Minefields we can see what's in front of us. Snow just blinds you completely and the cold isn't doing Serenity's sensors any good. We can't fly out of here by the numbers with the ship half frozen. Not the way we flew in. We weren't iced over then, River could use the cortex to read the terrain. Now, there's an unknown amount of ice and snow built up and the damn mountains could be meters bigger than they were when we landed."

River sighed when Mal regarded her expectantly, "She would like to say it can be done." She assured him. "Do not want to be here when scoundrels come looking. But the girl cannot Read mountains and snow and wind. Stuck until we have visibility and can eyeball the surroundings."

The Captain regarded them with the frustrated air of a man who wants to rant and can't because he doesn't want to be thought of as completely unreasonable or insane. "We got a hull full of mighty precious cargo and this rock is teeming with the lowliest sort." He pointed out grimly and looked back at Wash. "As soon as it clears I wanna be feet up."

"Aye aye cap'n," Wash nodded. Mal stalked off in high dungeon and Wash looked at his wife.

"We could be stuck here for hours, even days," She commented.

"It's so very cold," Wash grinned at her.

"How will we keep warm?" She grinned back.

"By having sex on the bridge again," Riddick rolled his eyes. "Do me a favor and don't."

"Where's the fun in that?" Wash shook his head. "And Cap'n wanted us feet up the minute it clears."

"She will keep watch," River suggested. "While my Riddick changes his clothes for dry garments."
The pilot and first mate didn't need any further encouragement to head for their bunk. Riddick sighed and kissed River gently. "We get off the ground and you and I got an appointment of our own." He promised her.

"Look forward to it," She smiled and began to walk towards the bridge. "Should check on Shea when you're dried off. Simon will want to give him a shot."

"Oh, that's gonna go real well." Riddick groused and hurried down the ladder to their quarters. Shea hadn't ever liked needles and put up with the standard inoculations needed to go planet-side only because he couldn't work without them and that meant no pay. Said inoculations went a lot smoother with a pressure syringe but the only one they had was busted. Ciara would be able to keep him calm for a while, but Simon would have a devil of a time giving him the medicine he'd need.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Well we're nearing the BDM as maybe you can tell from some of the flashbacks/dreams River's having. I have a copy of the script and the novelization so I'm trying to figure out how to do multiple viewpoints for the opening. I suspect it'll be half Riddick and half River's POV, it's just a bit problematic right now so there might be a bit of a delay while I work that out.

In the meantime, how do you all like the bits of the comic that have been put in? I decided to use 'Downtime' for some of the 'bad' jobs. I hope everyone is enjoying it. Mal seems to be mellowing a bit huh? Not sure if that will continue or not. I'm thinking a bit of not. When everything is going well he's pretty good but when things start going badly wrong he doesn't take well to anyone questioning his Captainy authority.

Here's a question for you. The finale of the movie on Mr. Universe's little moon, where River fights Reavers and Mal fights the Operative, each facing their own particular demons, I'm thinking of having River by herself against the Reavers and Riddick going up to help Mal just because he needs to do something while she's stuck on the other side of that door.

Anyway…here's the rest of the notes...

Chinese Translations:

nǐ zi (little girl)

gǒu niáng yǎng de (son of a bitch)

láng (wolf)

tā mā de (fucking)

diǎo (cock)

bǎo báo (darling / baby)

shuāng rǔ (breasts)

gāng (anus)
zhēn 'ài (true love)
táo huā yuán (vagina (lit. "garden of peach blossoms"))
pì gu (butt)
yīn dì (clitoris)
yīn dào (vagina)
jīng yè (semen)
Wěi (yes)
Shì (yes)
mèi mei (little sister)
Lì shí (right away)

Chinese-Script Translations:
Bai duo, an jing yidian! (We will enjoy your silence now)
Shuh-Muh (script-I'm sorry)

Quote Sources:
Without ambition one starts nothing. Without work one finishes nothing. - Ralph Waldo Emerson
To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them. – Hamlet – William Shakespeare
Beast-like, and devoid of pity. – Titus Andronicus – William Shakespeare
O swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable. – Romeo and Juliet – William Shakespeare
Spoon Theory – Christine Miserandino ( /category/the-spoon-theory/)
look on my works ye mighty and despair – Ozymandias – Percy Bysshe Shelley
Sure enough, by the time Riddick got down to the infirmary Shea was trying to back his way out of it. Coming up behind him and taking the taller man's arm in a firm grip got a wild-eyed look from his brother. "Shea, it's not gonna hurt that much. It's a little pinch and then it's done. A day of sneezing and sniffling and then you'll start to feel better." He reasoned.

"Can't I just take some pills or somethin'," The big gunhand nearly moaned.

"Darlin' I'll be with you the whole time," Ciara took his other hand. "And Simon'll be real careful. Won't you Simon?"

Simon smiled at the big gunhand who'd turned into a five-year-old at the sight of the syringe. "I promise. I'm using my thinnest needle and I'll make sure it'll be as easy as I can." Unsaid and completely absent from his tone was the implication that Jayne was being unreasonable.

"I don't like needles," Jayne protested as he was sat on the table again. "They sting and burn and I feel like I cain't sit right for a week."

"This is just some antibiotics," Simon coaxed. "And they go in your arm not your pi gu." He pulled one of the bottles from the locked cabinet as he spoke. "I'll numb the injection site with some topical anesthetic so you won't feel it."

"I still don't like it," Jayne was nearly pouting, and Riddick smothered a smile at the huge man acting like a child.

"I know," Simon nodded in sympathy, no mockery in his voice at all. "They're a necessary evil. But our pressure syringe is busted and the last place we stopped didn't have a good medical supply depot." He was very carefully loading the syringe with the medicine.

"Cain't we order one?" Jayne asked desperately. "I can wait 'til it gets shipped."

"I have, and when it arrives Amnon will wave us," Simon patted his shoulder. "But if you don't take something to get rid of this cold we'll all catch it. You don't want Ciara to get sick do you?"

"No," The gunhand still sounded about five. "Still don't see why I cain't have pills instead."

"They won't work fast enough," Simon was gently swabbing the area with alcohol and then the anesthetic as he spoke. "We need the meds in your system and working as quickly as possible so you can't spread this virus." He waited until Ciara was gently kissing her bàng jiār on the jaw before smoothly injecting the needle to Jayne's arm.

"All right Doc," Jayne sighed when Ciara's lips pulled away from his cheek. "Do yer worst."

"Already done," Simon grinned at him. "Sorry I don't have any candy as a reward for good behavior." He patted the big man's shoulder sympathetically.

Jayne turned bright red at the implication that he'd been childish but nodded as if in agreement, blew his nose into a tissue and went to wash up.
Riddick smiled as Ciara went after her lover, looking over at Simon, "Good of you to set him at ease about it."

"I wasn't misleading him," Simon smiled sheepishly. "I really don't like shots either. Not to mention that using a needle for inoculations increases the chance of an air embolism if it's done incorrectly. That pressure syringe can't get here soon enough. I might order a couple extra, just in case."

"Do it," Riddick nodded. "Can't hurt."

Simon nodded and Riddick turned and began to make his way back up to the bridge.

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He and River were cuddling lazily in one of the bridge chairs watching the snow fall outside the windows and talking about why Mal hadn't stopped at the general store on the way back to the boat when she stiffened. "They think they have found a juicy rabbit lost in the storm." She murmured.

"Someone followed you three back from the outpost?" Riddick sat up and River nodded. "Tā mā de dì yù," He cursed. "How many?"

"Five for certain, possibly six," She half smiled. "Hardly worth the effort of getting out your rifle."

"Humor me," He stood up with her. "I'll cover you."

"Sounds like fun," River nodded and pulled her discarded sweater on over her shirt and cargo pants.

"I'll grab my sniper rifle," He headed for their bunk and pulled out his coat and her boots. "Put these on. I don't want you in the snow in your bare feet."

"If I must." She sighed and nodded pulling the lightweight combat boots on reluctantly as he donned his coat.

"Yeah, you must." He rolled his eyes and followed her as far as the stairs, climbing through the shuttle and taking the snipers perch on the upper hull of Serenity. "Got you covered Qīng Xiāng, not that you need it."

"Won't even need to use my knives, cold enough that if I knock them down they'll freeze to death." She commented as the men drew in around her, six of them in all.

"They won't be the only ones if we don't make this quick, dǒng ma?" Riddick commented.

"Dǒng de," She replied absently and began to dance.

He loved watching her fight, grace and strength wrapped around fierce purpose, her beauty exponentially more so when she fought. When she was done six men lay in the snow around her, blood spatter staining the pure white. Not one was conscious, and he doubted they'd live even if they didn't freeze to death.

The seventh that came from behind her took his bullet right between the eyes as Riddick fired. "Quiet one I guess?" He asked as she turned and looked at the fallen man, blood seeping down his forehead.

"Thoughts were mixed in with others. Hard to count until they were silent," She replied and began to move back towards Serenity's open ramp. "Assistance is appreciated."
"That's what I'm here for," He chuckled and waited until he heard the ramp creaking upwards in the cold before he climbed back down Serenity and entered the same way he'd exited.

River entered the galley at about the same time as he did, both of them damp and chilled. Jayne was complaining mildly over the lack of provisions since they hadn't had time to shop after the job, Mal having disliked the look of the folk they were dealing with. Hence his not wanting to stick around and subsequent bellowing when he learned they were stuck. Kaylee, Book and Ciara were teasing Wash and Zoe about the happy glowing sex look they were sporting when Simon looked over at them.

"Wǒ de mā! Have the two of you been outside?" He exclaimed over River's chilled state. "Why?"

River nodded, "Saw a blackbird." She smiled slightly as she stripped off her coat and hung it on the back of her chair before taking a seat across from the Shepherd.

"A blackbird?" Simon shook his head as he fetched them both hot tea.

"Outside?" Wash asked in surprise.

"The storm must be clearing," Zoe added.

Mal looked at his engineer, "Kaylee, start her up."

"Yes cap'n," Kaylee hurried out of her chair and back to the engine room.

"You're soaking," Simon muttered as he brought the tea to the table. "I'm going to get you both some warm blankets. Sit, drink your tea."

Wash rose and headed for the bridge, Zoe on his heels. Riddick took a seat and looked at Mal, "You were followed. Even an air vehicle leaves some sort of trail in snow like this. Experienced tracker like Jayne or me, could follow you. Stands to reason the people here are practiced at it too."

"Why would you go outside though," Mal frowned. "If the storm was clearing enough…"

"It don't do to be identified," Riddick reminded him mildly. "And River was itching to stretch her legs a bit." Riddick tilted his head, listening as ice cracked and fell off Serenity as her posture changed, the ship shaking slightly as she lifted off and smoothing out as they hit the atmosphere.

"Went out to see the snowmen," River smirked into her tea. "But they all fell down."

Mal frowned and headed up to the bridge, presumably to wave their buyer now that they'd lifted off. Riddick sipped his tea and watched his little wife as she studied the Shepherd sitting across from her.

"Did you knock them down?" Book asked thoughtfully.

River shrugged, "It was easy. Turned out the lights." She tilted her head, "Hmm…"

"What?" Book, to his credit, didn't look uneasy. It was in his scent but not his posture.

"You're keeping a secret," Riddick commented quietly.
"And what's my secret?" The preacher looked at the two of them, his unease bleeding into his eyes, tight at the corners with tension.

"It's easy for you too." River told him, standing up to refill her tea.

Book went slightly pale, his dark skin pasty and stood, making a dignified retreat.

River shook her head as she brought the teapot over to the table. "He'll leave soon."

"Yeah, didn't figure on him stayin' much longer." Riddick looked after the older man. "Figure when he goes, make sure he can't be traced back to us?"

"He'd be in danger, and everyone around him as well, if I didn't," She sat in his lap after refilling their mugs. "Don't know where though."

"We'll see soon enough," Riddick cuddled her against his chest. "But we oughta let Mal know."

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River managed to corner Mal alone on the bridge a day or so later. "Cap'n," She nodded at him politely and took a seat in the navigator's chair. Riddick took his usual seat, Mal having already settled himself in Wash's place.

"Somethin' 'bout to go wrong?" Mal asked with a half whimsical smile. "Things have been goin' a mite too smooth for us lately."

"Depends on what you mean by wrong," Riddick shrugged.

"Well let's have it little genius girl." The Captain regarded her seriously.

"All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another." She sighed when Mal didn't understand, "Shepherd will be leaving soon. Decided on it finally, just needs to find a place where he's needed." River was working on the cortex as she spoke. "If we want to keep him safe, best to mask Serenity when he's being dropped off."

"That'll be the trick won't it, with Serenity's name on the side of the ship," Mal sighed. "Won't be like before where we weren't 'round people we knew. See the name and figure ship's changed hands and no one bothered to paint it over."

"Might be wise to invest in some of that programable paint," Riddick suggested. "The type they paint up advertising signs with? Cortex graphic paint they call it."

"Has nanites in it, changes color according to how its programed." River nodded. "Expensive, but worth it if we are to continue to stymie trackers."

"Can we afford it?" Mal was pulling up his books on the cortex and frowning.

"Could if we take a few more jobs," Riddick looked over the numbers. "Right now, we're sorta… coasting?"

Mal made a face, clearly not liking the description but not arguing it either. They'd all agreed finding jobs that fit their new criteria was more important than finding constant work. The income from Niska's former holdings was keeping the wolf from the door but that chafed at Mal's sense of independence. Only the fact that he felt Niska owed him eased his pride. That and the fact that he
only held a third of the property in Serenity's name. The rest was divided up with a full third going to River and Riddick while the rest was split among the crew, including the Shepherd. "He that is proud eats up himself: pride is his own glass, his own trumpet, his own chronicle." River murmured softly.

"Yeah…" Mal scrubbed his hands over his face. "Bright side of that is if we do buy the paint, we could take some less sleazy jobs, drop the preacher off, no harm done. Downside is we'll be workin' constantly for a while."

"Could accept a loan," River offered quietly. "Pay me back after the storm has passed. Buy the paint in bulk and we could keep some of it for the ship on Mr. Universe's moon. Cheaper that way and we'd have some to use later."

"I don't like owin'," The Captain frowned thoughtfully. "But you have a point."

"A third less the cost if we buy a greater amount," River showed him the pricing on her cortex. "Borrow from the girl, pay us back over a few years, or with a share of the ranch. Serenity has a third of an interest in it now. Drop that to a bit less and you're not in debt but it's not a cash outlay."

"That's something I like the sound of a bit more," Mal nodded. "Won't make a huge difference in the money we see month to month, but I won't be indebted. Let's do that then."

River nodded and arranged for the paint to be delivered to their next port of call where they'd be dropping off their cargo, both legal and illicit. "Paint will be there in a few days."

"We'll take a bit of time dirtside somewhere to paint Serenity up."

"Could go to U's moon, paint Serenity there, leave the rest of the paint in the other ship. That way it don't take up space in the hold for long," Riddick suggested.

"And we can see if Universe has anything for us," Mal nodded. "Send him a wave, let him know we'll be comin' by."

"Shi, " River nodded and began to type, her fingers flying gracefully over the keys as she wrote the text and encrypted it.

"Now we just gotta figure a place where we can let Book off the boat," Riddick began to study the cortex and their jobs.

"He might have some ideas a his own," Mal chuckled.

"Hmm…" Riddick nodded and River half smiled sending Mal the files via the cortex for the shifting of shares and the paint ordered.

"So, we can program the paint from the bridge?" Mal was looking over the specs.

"Key the nanites to the ship's cortex," She nodded. "Could also make it password protected if you liked."

"That's a sound notion," Mal nodded. "You set all that up and we'll be a lot safer."

"That's the idea Mal," Riddick muttered. "What the hell is this job where they paid us half up front?"

"Yeah," The Browncoat shrugged. "Almost never happens, but we just pick a fella up and deliver
him to another spot. Looks to be a land job with Serenity meeting us halfway for pickup. Guess he's got some warrants out or somethin'."

"I don't like it," Riddick shook his head.

River frowned at the job in question. "Need to split the crew, half on the coach, half on Serenity." She said quietly.

"Yeah, I got a bad feelin' about that one." Riddick nodded and River echoed his movement in agreement.

"Well they're payin' half up front and that's nothin' to sneeze at. Came through Lowry over on Boros," Mal shrugged. "Gotta do the job or the middle men stop wavin' us with work."

"Hmm…” Riddick made a sound in his throat to indicate he understood the idea. But he still didn't like it.

"We'll be prepared," River promised quietly.

The paint didn't take up space in the hold for very long, Universe was glad to see them so long as they didn't stay more than a few days. He valued his solitude too much for week long visits.

"Still ain't quite sure how this stuff is supposed to work," Mal admitted as he and River painted Serenity's side with the flat grey paint. "It don't even look like it's got metal in it."

"Doesn't," River was busily covering her portion of the ship with the paint. "It has nanites which aren't mere metal. Small enough to enter the blood stream undetected and without ill effects."

"They put these things in folks?" Mal sounded appalled and River allowed herself a grin.

"For myriad reasons," She nodded and set the portable fans to blow on the paint. "Healing, genetic engineering, assassination… Very useful little things."

"That's just all sortsa creepifyin'." Mal opined as he finished his portion.

"Ay me! What perils do environ The man that meddles with cold iron." River quoted dryly.

Mal shook his head at her wit, "And we don't need another layer?"

"Only one coat necessary," She shook her head. "Multiple coats could result in a less than optimal image."

"Say what now?" He was climbing down Serenity's side and reached up to help her.

Rolling her eyes, she let him assist her in climbing down the ship, explaining as she did so, "You don't want to layer the nanites on top of each other or the picture will look wrong."

"Huh," He considered that while they gathered their tools.

"Now he must decide if he wants the nanites programmed to respond to the ship's cortex, a portable datapad or both." River put the brushes in the cleaning solution and firmly stuck the lids back on the paint container.
"Why'd we need them programmed to somethin' besides the ship?" Mal was washing his hands in another special solution and she joined him. It wouldn't do to have stray paint lighting up their skin at the wrong time.

"If a job goes south, best to change Serenity's designation so she isn't found." River suggested, "Set up multiple images and names, select one on the run, voice coded perhaps."

"That ain't the sorta thing would get broke while we're running around?" The Captain wondered.

"Could," River nodded. "Doesn't have to be big, palm pad would work. Set to open with your voice and thumbprint?"

"Or Zoe's." Mal nodded. "Let's do that then. Like the idea of Serenity bein' safe if things go sideways on a job."

"Like they do," River muttered as she began to key the nanites to Serenity's cortex with the option to add the palm pad when they got one. "Might want to ask Mr. Universe if he has a suitable palm pad he is willing to sell. Something sturdy."

"Think I'll send Wash to do that little thing," Mal grinned at her conspiratorially. "Why should we have all the fun and fresh air."

River grinned back at him, enjoying the Captain's so rarely seen mischievous side. "Why indeed."

She knew this dream, knew it as well as she knew her own. But still she couldn't wake up. Sergeant Malcolm Reynold's life had reduced itself to the critical imperative of running.

He pumped his legs as fast as he could through the uneven ground of Serenity Alley, his boots slamming down on rocks and dirt. With a determination born of faith and righteousness, he ignored aching muscles, the fingers that desperately wanted to relinquish their grip on his weapon, and the bodies of so many of his fellow soldiers as he dashed back to base camp. Not to mention the mortar fire lighting up the night sky all around him.

'Base camp' was probably a more highfalutin name than the pile of sandbags in the dirt deserved, but that was what they had. The tattered remains of the Independent defense was headquartered there.

For five weeks, they had held the valley. Serenity Valley was the key to Hera, and Hera was the key to the war. Whoever controlled this particular ball of rock would be in the position to do considerable damage to the other side.

Doing damage was a notion Mal Reynolds could surely get behind.

He stumbled up the incline that led to base camp, throwing his arms down at the last minute to cushion the impact as his body hit the ground. 'That,' he thought, 'could've been ugly. Might've split my lip or something."

It was a weak joke, but such were powerful funny when you were watching alliance aircraft mow down platoon after platoon after platoon.

To some extent, Mal was flattered by the attention. The Alliance calling in air support meant that they took the Browncoat's defense of Serenity Valley seriously—something they probably commenced to doing after a month had passed without the Alliance taking Serenity in twenty-four
hours like they had planned.

So they sent in more troops. And more air support.

As Mal watched, an Alliance skiff took down dozens of his people, plowing through bodies like knives.

Stumbling into base camp, he wondered where the hell their own air support was. The Alliance had been too clever by half, and made sure to target officers instead of grunts. Mal wasn't all sure, but it seemed fair to certain that he was the highest-ranking Browncoat left in this gorram valley.

'And we're still holding it.' He smiled. These Alliance folk were getting a hard lesson in the power of positive thinking—in this case, the people were positive they didn't need some government completely taking over their lives. The Alliance was welcome to the central planets, but keep your grubby mitts off our outer worlds, thank you so much. 'Once our air support shows up, then you'll really see what we can do.' Until then, though, that Alliance skiff out there was not going to let up until all the Browncoats were dead.

He went straight for the corporal whose name he could not remember, but who he called 'Grin' on account of how he never once smiled. Grin was from Sergeant DeLorezo's platoon, until Sergeant DeLorenzo—and three-quarters of his platoon—were wiped out by the first Alliance airplane to show up.

At Mal's questioning glance, Grin said, "Sergeant, Command says they're holding until they can assess our status."

Mal's jaw fell open. "Our status is, we need some gorram air support. Now get back online, tell 'em to get in here!" 'What is it about Command that they must insist on having their heads firmly implanted in their rectums?'

Even as Mal spoke, Zoe Alleyne leapt in from above. "That skiff is shredding us, sir."

Zoe had been with Mal in the 57th from the beginning of the war, and it hadn't taken long for him to count on her as his right hand. Mal knew he was a decent soldier, all things considered, but Zoe was brilliant. There were times when Mal was convinced that, had Zoe been on the Alliance's side, this war would be over, and the Browncoats would be done for. And had there been more like Zoe, he suspected that a lot more of his people would be alive. As it was, only he, Zoe, Bendis, and McAvoy were left of the original 57th, though he had inherited plenty of others, including the entire company under Lieutenant Baker's command, owing to Lieutenant Baker lying dead with several dozen bullets in his chest not three meters from where Mal was crouched down right present.

Grin was fixing Mal with his usual serious expression. "They won't move without a lieutenant's authorization code, sir."

'Firmly implanted in their gorram rectums.' Mal ran over to Baker's corpse, muttered a quick prayer and an apology—Ben Baker wasn't a bad sort for an officer—and ripped the ID patch off the lieutenant's uniform arm. On the underside was etched the man's code.

Handing Grin the patch, Mal said, "Here—here's your code. You're Lieutenant Baker, congratulations on your promotion, now get me some air support!"

Mal then gathered Zoe, McAvoy, Johannsen, Tedesco, and Bendis to his side. Mal had put McAvoy in charge of one of the squads, which was made up entirely of the remnants of fifteen other squads. Since the air support was taking its good sweet time, they needed themselves a Plan B. Luckily, he'd
seen the makings of that plan down the hill a ways, since the Alliance had been right neighborly enough to not blow up the GAG when they wiped out the 32nd.

To Johannsen and Tedesco: "Pull back just far enough to wedge 'em in here. To McAvoy: "Get your squad to high ground, start pickin' 'em off."

McAvoy nodded, but Zoe looked pissed. "High ground is death with that skiff in the air," she said.

"That's our job." He gave her a cheeky grin. "Thanks for volunteering." Then he looked at the youngest member of the squad. "Bendis, give us some cover fire—we're goin' duck huntin."

Suddenly the entire base camp rattled and shook as mortar fire landed close enough to send everyone sprawling. Without even thinking, Mal threw his hands over his face to protect his eyes from the dust and dirt and shrapnel.

When he removed his arms, Johannsen lay dead in front of him. Bendis was staring at the corpse, eyes wide, lips quivering, his hands gripping his rifle so hard his knuckles were even whiter than his face.

Mal grabbed his shoulder. "You just focus!" He looked in turn at each of the others. Tedesco didn't look so hot, either, and McAvoy was biting down on his lower lip so hard he was drawing blood. They'd come too far to start giving up now. "The Alliance said they were gonna waltz through Serenity Valley, and we choked them with those words. We have done the impossible and that makes us mighty." He smiled, hoping to give them the confidence he felt, because Mal knew that soon this battle would be over and they would be the victors. "Just a little while longer and our angels will be soarin' overhead raining fire on those arrogant cusses, so you hold."

He looked Bendis right in the eye. "You hold!"

After a moment, he said, "Go!" McAvoy, Bendis, Tedesco, Zoe and the others all moved to ready their weapons.

As she reloaded her weapon, Zoe shot Mal a look. Mal had come to know—and appreciate—that as Zoe's 'I-know-you-want-us-to-feel-better-but are-you-just bullshitting-us?' expression. "You really think we can bring her down, sir?"

Mal grinned. "You even need to ask?"

His weapon already primed, Mal took a moment to pull the crucifix out from under his shirt. Kissing it, he whispered a quick 'Our Father'. Mal wasn't arrogant enough to think of the Independence cause to be the same as the way Christ had defied the Romans, but he was also wise enough to see the similarities. The Alliance swallowed planets with technology and rule of law and conformity. Mal had nothing against technology, and rule of law certainly had its place in the 'verse, but conformity was not a concept he could get behind, any more than Christ could.

Prayer completed, Mal got to his feet. "Ready?"

"Always." Zoe was, of course, right behind him. God and Zoe were the only two things in the 'verse Mal Reynolds had counted on, and neither one of them had let him down yet.

The same could not be said for Bendis, who was not right behind Zoe. In fact, he hadn't moved a muscle since Mal told him to hold.

"Bendis!" Zoe bellowed in a voice that could command the stars to change alignment.
But Bendis still didn't move, even after two more yells from Zoe.

McAvoy had already moved off, and his people would be in position in five minutes. They couldn't afford to wait—or to babysit Bendis. Mal nodded to Zoe, who hauled herself and her weapon above the sandbags and started laying down Bendis's cover fire.

Mal ran out from behind the bags and started his run toward the GAG.

Ground-air guns were a handy weapon to have when faced with air strikes by Alliance skiffs. The Alliance, however, knew that, and so made sure that the solders assigned to the only GAG the Browncoats had in Serenity Valley were their primary target. Mal's goal was to get to it and take that gorram skiff down before it picked off the entire damn company.

When he got to the rock-line—Zoe, naturally, right behind him—he peered down to make sure what he saw half an hour earlier still held true. Sure enough, there was only one Alliance soldier guarding the GAG. Mal wondered if it was overconfidence, or if it was just that their troops were spread too thin. Then Mal decided he didn't rightly care all that much, long as it remained so.

Pausing to take aim at the soldier—who at least had the sense to be under some cover—Mal fired.

The Alliance soldier lay dead moments later.

Mal recollected something a shepherd had said to him round a year or so back: The commandment was not 'You will not kill,' as it was often mistranslated. It was, in fact, 'You will not commit murder'.

As far as Mal was concerned, though he'd killed many a person since this war commenced, he'd yet to murder a single living soul.

He ran down to the GAG, Zoe staying behind to watch his back. Settling into the shoulder harness, he activated the weapon—thanking the Good Lord that the Alliance hadn't actually sabotaged the thing—and swiveled it up and around toward the skiff that had been making their lives a ruttin' hell for the past hour.

The compglass lit up with targeting information. Mal let the computer do its job, setting the GAG's sights on the skiff and staying with it once the garget was acquired.

Then, when a low beep, barely audible over the shell fire all around him, told him that the skiff was in range, he fired.

Two barrels loaded with two-hundred-caliber ammunition fired at full strength into the skiff at Mal's command, tearing through that flying deathtrap as easily as the skiff's own bullets went through Mal's people.

Stepping out of the GAG, Mal whooped and cheered as the skiff when hurtling down—

-right toward him on the ground.

*Tzao-gao*

Turning, Mal ran as fast as he could, pumping his tired, aching legs as hard as he could. 'Cause it would be right embarrassing to go to all that trouble to shoot down the skiff and then get oneself crushed by its flaming, descending hulk. That sort of thing could ruin a man's day.

"Zoe!" He cried as he ran towards her. She whirled to see a crazed sergeant barreling right for her, a fiery skiff heading toward the ground at a great rate right behind him.
Even as Mal grabbed her, she herself leapt to the ground, hoping to avoid the wreck.

Mal felt the heat of the explosion on his back, and for a moment, he feared his coat would catch fire.

Then the explosion started to die down. Mal rolled over on his back and started laughing.

Zoe gave him her 'you're-ruttin'-insane-sir' look.

They ran back to base camp. Mal couldn't stop laughing. 'We are going to take this valley, we are going to take this rock, and we are going to win this thing!'

As they ran back behind the sandbags, Mal saw Bendis, who had yet to budge from his spot. Zoe looked like she was going to spit at him. "Nice cover fire!"

Mal, however, couldn't bring himself to be angry. "Did you see that?" He ran over to the radio.
"Grin, what's our status on-?"

Then he saw that Grin was lying down on the job. Not really his fault, mind, seeing as he had a bullet hole where his left temple used to be, Baker's patch still clutched in his hand.

Looking away, Mal called for Zoe and pointed at the radio. She nodded and ran over to Grin's corpse, taking the headpiece out of his right ear.

Mal instead went over to Bendis, who looked like he had soiled himself a dozen times over. "Hey listen to me, Bendis." Gritting his teeth, he yelled, "Look at me!" Bendis finally looked up at him. Mal saw considerable fear in the boy's eyes. "Listen—we're holding this valley no matter what."

For the first time in what seemed like days, Bendis spoke, in a dull monotone. "We're gonna die."

"We're not gonna die. We can't die, Bendis, and you know why? Because we are so very pretty." He grinned. "We are just to pretty for God to let us die. Huh?" He grabbed Bendis's chin. "Look at that chiseled jaw. Huh? C'mon."

The beginnings of the possibility of a smile started to consider appearing on Bendis's face. But before Mal could commence to trying to cheer the boy up further, the sound he'd been waiting all night for finally made itself heard through the weapons fire.

Air support.

He couldn't tell if it was one big ship or a whole passel of little ones, and he didn't rightly care. Looking up and grinning even wider, he said to Bendis, "Well, if you won't listen to me, listen to that." He looked at Bendis. "Those are our angels, come to send the Alliance to the hot place."

Turning back to the radio, he said, "Zoe, tell the 82nd—"

"They're not coming."

At first Mal assumed he heard wrong. 'Of course the 82nd's coming, I can hear them, they're—'

Then he heard it. The tone in Zoe's voice. He recognized it on account of Zoe not normally having much by way of a tone. On anyone else, it would've just sounded like a monotone, but there were nuances to Zoe's speaking patterns that one learned to suss out if one got to spending enough time with her.

And what Mal heard now was despair as deep as what he saw in Bendis's eyes.

"Command says it's too hot," Zoe said. "They're pulling out. We're to lay down arms."
'Lay down arms?'

'No.' Mal refused to believe it. 'They were winning, gorramit, they were beating back the Alliance, and God was on their side, and they were winning!'

Besides, he heard the angels. "But what's-?"

Then he realized.

Even though he knew he couldn't bear to see it, he forced himself to stand up and look over the sandbags. Bendis stood up next to him.

It wasn't the 82nd he heard, though he had in fact, heard angels. They were the seven angels who heralded the end of the world.

'The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.'

For all the weeks they'd been holding Serenity Valley, the sounds of battle had become so much white noise to Mal. Now, though, it was like all his senses were more acute than ever.

He smelled the acrid ozone of the bullets flying through the air, including the one that struck Bendis in the chest, killing him instantly as he stood next to Mal.

He felt the ground shake as the alliance vessels' thrusters slammed against the ground to permit them a soft landing.

He tasted the bitter adrenaline combined with bile at the realization of what was happening.

He heard Zoe say that the Independents were asking the Alliance for a parley to discuss terms of surrender.

And he saw hail and fire being hurled down upon the earth, and mixing with the blood of the people Mal Reynolds had called comrades.

She woke then, because Mal woke, he always woke when he got to this point in the dream, because what followed was worse than a nightmare. The clocks read two am ship time, which meant they had another five hours before they needed to even start moving and preparing for the day and the job they had waiting.

"You okay Qīng Xiāng?" Riddick's chocolate and coffee voice murmured the question.

Her sigh was resigned, "Mostly. Mal's dreaming of the Valley again. It's harder to shut that one out, it's so vivid."

"Yeah," Riddick sat up with her and began to rub her shoulders and neck. "Guess we oughta be grateful I wasn't there."

"If you had been it might be easier. You fought in the war…but…it wasn't as personal to you as it was to Mal," River leaned against his chest as his deft fingers rubbed knots out of her shoulders. "His dreams are overwhelming with pain and rage."

"Guess he can't do anything about dreams," Her bàng jiār conceded. "Makes me wonder about staying on Serenity though."
"Thinks we'd be better, just the two of us?" River looked up at him curiously. "Willing to leave our brothers and sisters?"

"That's part of the problem," Riddick admitted. "Gotta say, part of me thinks it's a good idea, split off and hide on our own. Let them keep sailing. Someone comes after us we can deal with them."

"Without our friends being hurt in the crossfire," She didn't need to Read him to understand that line of thinking. "Tis said that courage is common, but the immense esteem in which it is held proves it to be rare. Animal resistance, the instinct of the male animal when cornered, is no doubt common; but the pure article, courage with eyes, courage with conduct, self-possession at the cannon's mouth, cheerfulness in lonely adherence to the right, is the endowment of elevated characters."

"Was also wondering about taking the fight to them," Riddick admitted as he considered her words. "Wouldn't be hard to figure who's top of the heap at Blue Sun and who's in their pocket in the Parliament."

"It is a thought," River nodded slowly. "Like to consider it some more."

His mouth pressed against her pulse point, "Hmm… we'll think on it then. Meantime, how's about I distract you from that dream?"

She turned to kiss him. "His wife is always willing for her husband to distract her." His growl of pleasure vibrated through her as he pulled her down to the mattress and she giggled.

"Beaumonde was smelly, polluted and noisy. But it did have a lot of what they needed in the way of jobs, cargo and most importantly to Mal's mind, sound proofing for the bunks. He'd allocated the arranging of that chore to Wash and River while he took his gun hands and co-pilot on the job of fetching their cargo from the disreputable types Fanty and Mingo had arranged to meet them."

"I don't care if I gotta borrow 'gainst the ranch and the ship, you get that sound proofin' in," He wagged his finger at her while Riddick and Jayne chuckled behind their hands. "If I wake up one more night to hear you shriekin' bloody murder I'm gonna go bughouse crazy."

"Yes, sir Cap'n Daddy," River replied impishly and was rewarded with a groan of pained dismay from Mal.

"An' none a that!" He shook his head, "Don't care if I am old enough to be your Daddy, gives me an uncomfortableness to hear you say such things all innocent like the morning after a night like last night."

"Could've been worse sir," Zoe pointed out stoically though River caught the gleam of mischief in her eyes. "Could a been your name she was screamin'."

Mal visibly shuddered, "Gah! I can't have those thoughts. I need bleach for my brain. Zoe, no more a that... that... luàn xiàng." He practically fled the ship, while Jayne and Riddick laughed and Zoe smirked as she sauntered out behind him.

River giggled and looked up at Wash, "Told you he wouldn't care about the coin once we pushed him."

"I never argue with a little genius girl or my wife," Wash held up his hands in surrender. "Well, not anymore I don't."
"Because we are always right," River grinned. "Found a place with a good price and they should be arriving in a little while.

"So all we had to do was drive Mal crazy," Wash mused. "Why didn't I think of this years ago?"

"Wouldn't have worked," River shrugged at him. "You and Zoe don't bother him. Still tweaks his conscience about the little girl sexing the big bad convict. Knows it shouldn't bother him. Does anyway. So he wishes to block out the sound."

"What'd you like as a reward? Paper flowers? Oranges? Fruity Oaty Bars?" Wash asked whimsically as they settled down to wait for the sound proofing service. "My first born?"

The Reader giggled as his offers continued in that vein, becoming more and more outrageous as he went on.

When Book finally left the ship they were traveling under the name Black Swan. River had borrowed Book's ident card and created a trail that led from Serenity dating several months back to a ship of that name so anyone interested wouldn't realize Serenity's crew had any idea where the Shepherd was. The only jobs Serenity took under her own ident led back to less than friendly folk.

"I don't truly see how this is necessary," Book protested mildly when she handed it back to him along with his manufactured itinerary.

"Don't you?" Riddick leaned against a hydraulic as he watched the Shepherd. "Wherever God erects a house of prayer, the Devil always builds a chapel there; and 'twill be found upon examination the latter has the largest congregation. You remember this life well enough or you wouldn't need to leave so badly."

"I'm not needed on Serenity anymore," Book smiled slightly. "But on Haven, I can be of use."

"Cashed out your share of the ranch," River handed him a bag of coin. "Should help you get set up."

"Thank you," He wasn't too proud to take the coin she noticed. Book had always been practical minded' it was one of the things she liked and disliked about him. "I'm sure it will come in handy."

"You need us, just give us a wave," Mal told him.

"And should you need me, you'll always be welcome." The silver haired preacher smiled, more relaxed than she'd seen him since the early days on Serenity.

"Shepherd," Kaylee was teary eyed. "You'll write us won't you? Let us know how you are and if you need us?" She eyed the dilapidated pump on the well, visible even from Serenity. "You know anything needs fixin' I'm just a wave away."

"I treasure your friendship," Book kissed her forehead.

"Remember to take it easy until you're used to normal gravity again," Simon cautioned him. He had one arm around Kaylee's waist in support, and held the other out to be shaken. "You're healthy but it's best not to press things until you've acclimated."

River smiled as Book nodded, his thoughts were at peace, gratitude for their care and friendship uppermost in his mind. "I'll be careful. And if I have any difficulties I'll wave you for advice."
"Shepherd," Jayne hugged the smaller man. "Gonna miss our chats. But I'm glad you're settlin' with good folk." Ciara was at his side, smiling at the preacher but quiet. As a latecomer to the crew she hadn't known him as well but she knew her man would miss Book.

Wash and Zoe were looking around the sparse settlement as they waited their turn for farewells. Haven was a small town, eking out its existence by mining for rhodium. The metal wasn't worth too much so the town wasn't really prey for pirates and scoundrels but folks could make an honest wage. Everything was a little run down, but nothing was falling apart just yet.

"Well this is it," Mal shook the preacher's hand after the Pilot and First Mate had said their goodbyes. "Still ain't heard how it is a preacher know so much about crime but I don't guess now's the time for stories."

"No," Book smiled easily, his expression at odds with the implacable tone. "But I'm sure we'll see each other again."

"Hope that's true," Mal nodded. "I got no use for God but I do consider you a friendish type of person."

"I'll take that as a semi-compliment," Book chuckled and began to wheel his little cart of luggage down Serenity's ramp.

River exchanged a mischievous glance with Jayne and Ciara and began to follow him, picking up duffle roll while Ciara did the same and Jayne and Riddick began to wheel some crates out of the hold.

Book's quizzical expression had her grinning. "We must give you our housewarming gifts."

"Your—but…" He shook his head, "What have you four done?"

"Oh, we're in on it too," Kaylee laughed as she and Simon brought their own things, descending the ramp while Zoe, Mal and Wash did the same, lowering the mule so it could be unloaded.

"After all, you're gonna need to live here," Jayne pointed out. "An' that means you gotta have a household. Know you're gettin' set up with a place but you ain't got a stove or bed or chair to your name."

"On second thought, let's just drive the mule over with this thing," Mal told Wash. "It's pretty gorram heavy."

"Sound notion," Wash seconded.

Book's astonished expression at the sight of the hybrid solar/wood stove sent Kaylee and Zoe into peals of laughter.

"Ain't gonna be the same 'round here without Book," Jayne sighed at dinner that night. They'd spent the better part of the morning getting the preacher settled and had to leave just before lunch in order to make their next job on time.

"Won't miss feelin' guilty an' judged," Mal retorted and then sighed, conceding. "But the man wasn't all preachy and annoyin' like some folks can be."
"I'll miss his cooking," Riddick chuckled.

"He left me recipes," Kaylee smiled. "And we can wave him whenever we want."

"Guess that'll have to do," Jayne ate his meal quietly. "And with what we're sailing for, best to not have him in harm's way."

"You make a good point," Mal looked surprised at the words coming out of his mouth. "Wash, switch our ident back over to Serenity when we pass a comm buoy. This next job… it's on the odd side."

"This is the one where we're smugglin' a person out from under the law?" Jayne was trying to remember the particulars of the job in question.

"That's the one," Mal nodded. "Half up front."

"Still don't have a good feeling about this." Riddick scowled down at his meal.

"Half up front's nothing to sneeze at," The Captain admonished mildly. River regarded him thoughtfully. He had a bad feeling about the job too. Enough of one that he would make sure River was where she could be of the most use. "Little genius girl, gonna need you to take it easy the next day or so, until the job. Want you ship shape as much as you can manage."

"Courage and perseverance have a magical talisman, before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish into air. She will make sure there are spoons enough," River nodded and concentrated on eating and listening to Mal's thoughts.

"Spoons?" Zoe regarded the two of them, a sniff of jealousy in her thoughts that someone had a private language with Mal that she didn't understand.

"Me an' River had a talk a while back, 'bout why some days she's fine an' dandy an' others she's takin' to slice at folks with kitchen knives." Mal explained amiably, his easy manner concealing his unease at the next job. "How some things make it harder for her to deal with life than others."

"Well we all know that," Wash was rubbing a hand slowly up and down Zoe's back, reading his wife's tension as easily as River did. "What do spoons have to do with it?"

"I didn't," The Captain looked irked that he'd been the last to know. "Had no clue why she couldn't work one day and she'd been just fine the day before."

"And she explained it with spoons?" Zoe sounded both dubious and confused, as much as her stoically even tone would allow.

"Handed me a bunch, made me count 'em, took some away and said that's how many things I could do for the day." Mal picked up some chopsticks and laid them out, demonstrating. "One for shaving, one for getting dressed, showering, making a meal, cleaning up after, prepping for a job and then doing it…"

Simon smiled, "She's been so much better since a routine has been established." He looked at her fondly. "I'm hoping we'll figure out other things that will help."

"Yeah, she said ya'll've figured things that give her more spoons," The Captain nodded. "Anyway, she was tellin' me what all can happen when things go wrong, how she loses spoons and can't work, can't even make a meal when she's feeling poorly. Nightmares'll take spoons away, that sort of thing."
Jayne was doing a not so great job of hiding his amusement that Mal had to have River's difficulties spelled out. "So when you two're talkin' 'bout spoons…"

"We're discussing what she'll need to in order to be able to work." Mal shot a glare at his gunhand. "You're another one who's healthy as a horse, how's it no one had to explain it to you?"

Jayne smirked at him openly, "Ya'll met Mattie. He's never been as sturdy as the rest of us. You get ta know what'll start him off coughin' or when he needs to rest."

"I know because I'm a doctor," Simon shrugged.

"And the rest of you?" Mal looked at all of them, openly curious now.

"I'm her husband, her bàng jiār," Riddick shrugged. "I knew her before it became an issue, and we both had to learn how to deal with trouble when it comes along. Academy wasn't real tolerant of weakness of any type."

"I grew up with Shea and Mattie, at least until I was sold, so I had an idea and from the way he and Rick behave around River it wasn't hard to figure out why," Ciara smiled up at her big man.

"I've known folks with PTSD," Zoe had relaxed a bit now that she understood what Mal was talking about and the possessive jealousy had blow away before it could take root. "Wasn't hard to figure there'd be days River couldn't work, depending on what was going on."

"But you," Mal looked at Wash and Kaylee. "How'd the two of you know?"

"Just paid attention's all," Kaylee shrugged. "River an' me's friends. Got to know her and could just tell when she's havin' a bad day."

"Same here," Wash nodded his agreement. "She and Rick were talking with Inara for a reason. So I knew there was something that might bother her. And I've had some experience with PTSD too."

"Well now why do I feel like an idiot?" Mal sighed.

"It's only because you are sir," Zoe offered dryly. "I'm sure it'll pass soon enough."

"Thanks Zoe, that just makes me feel all warm and fuzzy," Mal retorted. He sighed and pulled out the data crystal with the jobs particulars on it. "Let's go over the job and see if we can keep things from going wrong in a spectacular fashion."

"Things going wrong in an unremarkable way is all right though?" Simon quipped and in return received one of Mal's patented sour looks. "Guess not."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I've actually started to write the BDM now. I'm hoping to proceed at a decent clip. My goal is to have the entire story completely posted in the next six months. Time will only tell how that goes but it's good to have goals. I hope you're enjoying these little bits and pieces between the series and the movie. Mal is… sadly not going to be as understanding about River all the time. Needs must when the devil drives after all.

Chinese Translations:
pì gu (butt)

bàng jiār (lover / partner)

Tā mā de dì yù (fucking hell)

Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)

dǒng ma? (Understand? Got it?)

Dǒng de (to understand / to know / to comprehend)

Wǒ de mā (My mother! Mama mia! Similar to "Oh my God!" in usage)

Shì (is / are / am / yes / to be)

luàn xiàng (chaos/madness)

Script Chinese Translations:

Tzao-gao! (crap)

Quote Sources:

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another. – Anatole France

He that is proud eats up himself: pride is his own glass, his own trumpet, his own chronicle. – Troilus and Cressida – William Shakespeare

Ay me! What perils do environ The man that meddles with cold iron. – Hudibras – Samuel Butler

The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.’ – Revelations 8:7

'Tis said that courage is common, but the immense esteem in which it is held proves it to be rare. Animal resistance, the instinct of the male animal when cornered, is no doubt common; but the pure article, courage with eyes, courage with conduct, self-possession at the cannon's mouth, cheerfulness in lonely adherence to the right, is the endowment of elevated characters. – Society and Solitude – Ralph Waldo Emerson

Wherever God erects a house of prayer, the Devil always builds a chapel there; and 'twill be found upon examination the latter has the largest congregation. – The True Born Englishman – Daniel Defoe

Courage and perseverance have a magical talisman, before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish into air. – John Quincy Adams
The bad feeling Riddick had gotten when Mal got paid fifty percent up front was proven painfully accurate when they were pursued by Reavers and the coach they were driving took fire. It was compounded by the fact that Mal had proven, spoons or not, when he needed River on a job he'd make it happen. It was going to take everything she had to get through this job and stay on an even keel and Mal knew it. That hadn't stopped the Captain from telling her what job she had to do. He and Jayne were on the top of the coach, grappling with the cannibalistic monsters while Mal was attempting to shoot them before they boarded. "Where'n the gorram hell did they even come from?" Riddick shouted the question as he threw another over the side.

River and her brother were inside the coach, Simon was working on the man they were escorting, trying to keep him alive, which was no easy feat considering the fellow had taken a wound to the belly.

Jayne was cursing a blue streak as he punched a Reaver in the face, "Liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi!"

He spared a moment to be grateful Zoe was driving, she managed to do evasive maneuvers without toppling them over the side and her calm was so complete as to be almost disturbing.

"You know Zoe, it just ain't right that every once in a while, we actually get a chance to earn our platinum!" Mal shouted to his First Mate.

"And every time we do sir, you try to cover for being scared out of your head by talking down the situation. Is it that bad?" Zoe called back.

Well that explained a lot of her calm, if she wasn't look at what was following them, a big ass Reaver ship, like Serenity on steroids and the bad attitude to go along with them.

"Don't eat me!" Jayne shoved a Reaver off the top of the coach.

"What do you think?" Mal's question prompted her to look back and some of her calm disappeared though her face never changed its stoic lines. "How's the ship?"

"Wash's on his way. I'm more worried about our cargo. That last Reaver shot could have made this trip a big waste." Zoe was eyes forward driving again and Riddick threw another Reaver off the coach.

"Why do you think I insist on half up front?" Mal retorted.

"Half up front this time," Zoe shot back.

"Well, just because I insist doesn't mean they agree." The Captain quipped as he shot down a Reaver trying to board them.

"Press there, River. Keep up the pressure," Simon's voice was low and calm as he worked and she
obediently pushed where he told her, hands stained with blood. "Mal couldn't care less about his life, only in keeping him alive until we can get the other half of the transport charge." He frowned grimly over his instruments.

"Heard that Doc!" Mal's irritated voice called from outside the coach window. "Just keep him alive long enough—Yeow!" River caught a glimpse of a Reaver swinging onto the side of the coach, startling the 'manly yelp' out of the Captain.

"Do your job Mal! I'll do mine!" Simon called back as he began to work on closing the wounds made by bullets and shrapnel. He looked at River, "River, what is it?"

River stared down at the man she was keeping alive, images from his mind flowing into hers, "Not what we think." She looked up at a shout from Jayne and half smiled.

"Gao yang jong duh goo yang! I'd rather be dealing with the whole of the Alliance than these cannibals! Mal!" Jayne shouted a warning as a Reaver drew on the Browncoat, another behind him. Riddick helped him heave two of the Reavers over the side, knocking one of the two advancing on Mal off the coach.

Mal's gun was empty, though he did manage to knock the Reaver's firearm into the coach through the broken window.

"How good was this money again?" Jayne hollered.

"Good enough," Mal pistol-whipped the Reaver who simply snarled menacingly back at him. Another was coming up behind him, unseen. "Well hell, saw that workin' out different."

River freed one hand from the man's chest and drew her Ladysmith, shooting the one behind the captain just as Zoe shot the one in front of him.

"Keep your eyes on the road Zoe!" Mal shouted, "And don't you go thinking I'm goin' to pay you any extra for saving my gāi sǐ hide!" He paused to dislodge the dead Reaver from the coach. "Thanks for that by the way." He looked into the window of the coach. "How is he?"

"I can barely tell with all this shaking," Simon told him.

River stared at the man and shook her head, "Upside down…blood slowly…” More images invaded her brain, "bones breaking…minds snapping…” She grabbed for Simon, pulling him down as the window behind him exploded into gunfire.

The man on the bench seat was up to no good. Images of betrayal, of so many ships and crews taken in traps, people killed outright for the crime of smuggling, their boats blown to bits, crews simply gunned down. And all he could think of was who she might be and how he'd be rewarded if he could turn she and Simon in.

Riddick growled as he kicked another Reaver off the coach, "Tell me we're at the gorram meetin' place Mal."

"Almost," Mal was climbing back up to the top of the coach just as a something streaked burning orange through the air above them and blew the Reavers ship to teeny tiny itty-bitty bits. "Zoe? That you?"
"No," Zoe was grinning, he could hear it in her voice. "Wash."

Riddick exchanged a grin with Jayne as they looked up at Serenity, Ciara and Kaylee waving from the open cargo bay doors. It was against Alliance law for a non-Alliance ship to carry ordnance or any sort of weaponry. Which meant that if you wanted to defend yourself you had to get creative, or creative about hiding your weapons.

It wouldn't work in the black unless they were suited up and everything the bay tied down, but the rocket propelled grenade launcher worked a treat in the atmosphere. He, Ciara, Jayne and River had worked hard to fix the broken piece of junk they'd found in a scrapyard and Kaylee, once she'd gotten over the idea of guns on her girl, had figured out a way to hide it when it wasn't in use. It folded down pretty small and the grate it was mounted on swiveled so the gun hid underfoot when it wasn't needed. Upside down it looked like another piece of Serenity's working parts.

If the Reavers hadn't been flying without containment the ship might have survived but now it was nothing but very small shards of scrap metal.

"How's everything down there?" Mal called to Simon and River. "No answer."

He began to swing down again, Riddick already ahead of him as Zoe asked, "That last Reaver blast?"

"He's dead?" Jayne sounded aggrieved. "Chòu mǎniào."

"There was a lot of shot flying around," Zoe commented. "Lucky it wasn't us."

Riddick wrapped River in his arms and kissed the top of her head. The bullet wound to the man's heart looked a little small for the guns the Reavers had been using and she nodded absently in confirmation of the thought.

"Lucky?" Jayne grumbled as they all piled out and left the coach. "Couldn't we at least get another twenty five percent for deliverin' the body?" He looked at Mal, "There any fine print in the deal? Fifteen percent? I'm talking about final offers." He shook his head, "This couldn't be worse."

Riddick looked down at River and she shook her head, her dark eyes hard and cold. "Coulda been a lot worse."

Mal turned and looked at the two of them, Riddick's arm protectively around his woman's waist. "You all right?"

River looked at him and the chill faded from her eyes as she nodded. "Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign is worth ambition, though in hell: better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

Mal took a breath, "You knew why I put you down there in the first place didn't you? Had a bad feelin' 'bout all this. You weren't the only one." He looked from her to Riddick, "Nobody ever agrees to pay half up front."

"Guess we got another set of names to add to the list," Riddick half smiled. "Since we were set up by an intermediary."

"That we do," Mal nodded at River, "Welcome to the crew."
Riddick, rubbed his lips over River's cheek as she worked on her datapad and glanced over at Simon. His didi was doing some work of his own, checking their inventory of drugs and medical supplies while Kaylee was putting together another crybaby. "Simon, you never said, how'd you even get into the Academy?"

River grinned at her brother, "Gē ge was very resourceful."

"I was desperate and mad with it," Simon corrected her with a half-smile. "And incredibly lucky that I'd drawn the attention of the right people along with the wrong ones."

"What were ya doin' Doc?" Mal asked as he walked into the galley. "Wanderin' around after curfew?"

"Actually yes," Simon chuckled. "Among other things." He finished his work and set the datapad down. "After I'd figured out River's code I spent the next two years trying to get into the Academy. I went into a Blackout Zone to try and talk to someone who might help but all that did was get me arrested. Oh, and Father yelled at me." He added as an afterthought.

"Dì yù Doc, I was jokin'," Mal sipped his coffee and took a seat.

"I'm not." Simon shook his head, "The arrest didn't even slow me down. River's letters were becoming more and more incoherent and her handwriting was atrocious, at least to anyone who knew her well. I'm amazed they let the letters through at all since it was obvious there was something wrong. But maybe they didn't think it was that obvious at all?"

"Yeah, we did that on purpose, wanted to see if it would get anyone's attention," Riddick chuckled. "Glad it worked."

"Oh, it worked," Simon smiled slightly, "My supervisor was irritated with me. I'd been performing poorly due to my obsession with finding my sister, not sleeping will do that. So he sent me down to see the low-priority patients. I got one claiming gastric distress."

"You were low on the totem pole," River shook her head in amusement.

"Well, this fellow whose chart said he was Guillermo Garcia, greeted me by saying 'So you're the infamous Simon Tam!'," Simon shook his head. "I wasn't aware that I was infamous, or even famous and I said so. But then he mentioned that if one walked in the right circles I certainly was, as was my sister."

Mal whistled slightly at that and Simon nodded. "That definitely got my attention. He told me that I wasn't the only one with relatives in the Academy. But I was the only one who was wealthy. Disposable income he called it." He shrugged, "I was still naive enough that I didn't understand. But he just hopped off the exam bed, said he was feeling better and thanked me. Said if I found myself at a certain bar around midnight he'd buy me a drink."

"Settin' up a meet," Riddick nodded his understanding and Simon flashed him a grin.

"Smart about it too, when I looked up Guillermo Garcia I found he was a ninety-six-year-old man who lived in Shomen Heights and hadn't visited a hospital since he'd gotten a new kidney. Ten years before." Simon shrugged, "And he had no history of gastric trouble."

"Take it you went to the meet?" Mal asked.

"Of course," Simon nodded. "He'd mentioned River, how could I not? But I found them. Didn't bother to let them introduce themselves since whatever names I was given would probably be
another story." He chuckled, "When I told him I knew he wasn't really Mr. Garcia and why he
laughed and said I wasn't as dumb as I looked. To which I said I really couldn't be." He looked at
Mal, "Greenhorn though I was when I first came aboard I was five times worse then. I'd never even
set foot off a Core world in my life."

"So who were these folks?" The Captain was interested, more than he had been when he'd first
heard River and Riddick's story of the Academy."

"I was told they were folks representing a group of people who weren't overburdened with patience
regarding the Alliance," Simon grinned. "When I asked if they were Independents 'Garcia' just made
a face. No Browncoats there. He said they don't fight the Alliance. They work beneath it. The
straight and narrow wasn't so beneficial as working outside the law."

"Kinda like what we do now," Riddick commented with a grin. "So what was their stake in getting
you into the Academy?"

"One of the women there, she had a son in the Academy. Another man had lost his wife to it."
Simon's voice darkened grimly. "Garcia said they had the means to get someone inside to work an
escape. But what they didn't have was disposable income. That was where I came in."

"What all did you do?" Mal's curiosity was getting the better of him.

"Oh, well we got Martina's son out, and Stanislaus's wife, and that got us information too, about the
rest of the Academy," Simon explained. "But then they moved River to their most secure location,
underground and away from everything else. Very hard to get into."

"Burned through his entire fortune," River murmured.

"It was worth it," The Doctor's voice was fierce. "Money didn't mean a thing to me." He rubbed his
eyes a moment before continuing. "I had no idea whose credentials let me in the door or whose
uniform I was wearing, but as a government inspector I got in. Right into the room where they were
experimenting on River. The baton had a bouncing betty, a grenade, concealed in it and when I set it
off the doctors were all knocked out."

"Went to get my Riddick and the rest is...history." River smiled up at him and kissed his cheek.

"With a stop on a slave ship and desert planet inhabited by carnivorous monsters," Simon nodded.

"Never understood why you didn't go home to your folks," Mal studied Simon thoughtfully. "Would
a figured you for holing up on your fancy estate and using your parent's money to get out from under
the trouble."

"When they completely dismissed my concerns?" Simon rolled his eyes, his tone derisive. "Father
outright laughed at the idea of a code hidden in River's letters and Mother dismissed it as some silly
game. And if we'd gone to them after I got her out, we'd both have been right back where we started,
only worse because they wouldn't lift a finger to help us. We couldn't have brought Riddick to them,
and River wouldn't even leave the Academy without him."

"Simon learned what she had known for a long time," River sighed. "Inseparable children, because
we were all we had. Parents had no interest in us beyond impressing society."

"Mother was worried about my future, about throwing my career away. Father only really began to
pay attention to the conversation when I said I didn't care." The dark eyed man set his jaw. "No.
River and I were on our own. Well, Riddick, River and I." He amended the statement. "We weren't
children to them. We were something to talk about at parties. Status symbols."
"That's…" Mal didn't seem to know what to say.

"Told you," River murmured.

Riddick nodded, "Can have all the money in the world and not have a home." He looked at the Captain. "We told you that you grew up with what we'd never had."

"That you did." Mal nodded and wandered out of the galley towards the bridge.

"Begins to understand why we are all so important to each other," River's voice was soft. "Can't begin to understand treating flesh and blood the way our parents did."

"Well he don't need to understand so much as believe it," Riddick cuddled her unashamedly. "Won't ever leave you alone Qīng Xiāng." Simon looked up and flashed him a grin. "Yeah, you neither, dì di."

She was watching herself, watching through someone else's eyes, seeing the nightmare of the schoolroom again and the reality of what was happening while she remained in her drugged sleep. The sterile environment and steel chair were terrifyingly familiar, the Academy lab where she'd been experimented on again and again as well known in her memory as Riddick's face.

The needles in her forehead where held in place by a halo, her hands and feet strapped down. From this new perspective she could see the technicians, Waits was adjusting the needles while Siegal monitored her brain patterns. She shivered as she watched, the cold blue steel lab was insidiously clean.

Even as she shivered the technician monitoring her brain activity spoke, "She's dreaming."

Waits studied her grimacing face, "Nightmares?"

Technician Siegal sounded briefly sympathetic under the professional mask, "Off the charts. Scary monsters."

Doctor Mathias spoke, his voice like a whip through the air, his irritation at such unprofessionalism obvious, "Let's amp it up. Delcium, eight-drop." River frowned as she watched him, through this new perspective the doctor was not instantly likable, nor gradually likeable either. His cold, self-satisfied manner only served to alienate the fellow observing the proceedings, his clipboard and lab coat trappings of his rank but as effectual as giving a chimpanzee a quill and inkpot.

The fellow watching Mathias and the procedure was making the doctor nervous, something obvious to anyone who knew him. Standing partially in shadow so his face was veiled, his uniform indicated substantial rank of his own, along with the eagle crested baton clutched in his gloved hand.

Mathias, in an effort to conceal his tension, began to pontificate, "See, most of our best work is done when they're asleep. We can monitor and direct their subconscious, implant suggestions..." As he spoke, River saw herself convulsing, mewing in misery, and the Inspector started forward slowly as Mathias continued to speak, his smile both gentle and condescending, "It's a little startling to see, but the results are spectacular. Especially in this case. River Tam is our star pupil."

River watched as the Inspector step into the light, rigid, cold and staring at the girl in the chair with no emotion at all. He finally spoke and she smiled, "I've heard that."
Mathias continued, oblivious to anything but his own discomfort and need to show off to conceal it. "She's a genius. Her mental capacity is extraordinary, even with the side-effects." He winced, obviously wishing to take back any negative words.

That caught the Inspector's attention, much to Mathias's dismay, "Tell me about them."

Mathias reluctantly elaborated, "Well, obviously she's unstable...the neural stripping gives them heightened cognitive reception, but it also destabilizes their own reality matrix. It manifests as borderline schizophrenia... which at this point is the price for being truly psychic."

The Inspector moved towards the 'psychic', his face expressionless, "What use do we have for a psychic if she's insane?"

"I don't have to tell you the security potential of someone who can read minds. And she has lucid periods… We hope to improve upon the..." The doctor cut himself short, digressing from his explanation with barely concealed annoyance. "I'm sorry, Sir, I have to ask if there's some reason for this inspection."

The Inspector turned, his face cold and set, "Am I making you nervous?"

The answer was obviously yes but Mathias would never have admitted to such, "Key members of Parliament have personally observed this subject. I was told their support for the project was unanimous. The demonstration of her power—"

He was cut off ruthlessly as the Inspector turned back towards the girl in the chair, "How is she physically?"

Mathias grew a bit more enthused, "Like nothing we've seen. All our subjects are conditioned for combat, but River... she's a creature of extraordinary grace."

The Inspector's voice softened, almost wistfully, "Yes. She always did love to dance." Mathias looked at him in surprise but he was too late. The Inspector dropped to one knee, slammed his baton to the floor and ignited the energy grenade, a flat circle of light bisecting the room and knocking out the doctor and his assistants.

She watched as he rushed to her side, removing the needles and swabbing the sites of injection carefully, whispering, "River. Wake up. Please, it's Simon. River. It's your brother. Wake up..."

Even as she stirred in the chair, a noise drew him to the door, looking out as he removed the Government Inspector's uniform, revealing an orderly's tunic beneath it. A uniform similar to the one Jayne had worn on Ariel. She was moving and he came to help her out of the chair, nearly stumbling as he took her weight and she almost went down with him.

"They know you've come," River whispered, the echo of it was strange in her mind. A guard was looking at a monitor, middle management rather than the thuggish hands on guards. And they were moving through the hallways at as fast a pace as she could manage, shaking off the drugs. Simon saw one of the orderlies coming and grabbed a chart; River scrambled up the wall and braced herself between the walls and the ceiling of the hallway. Dropping down she grabbed her brother's hand and began tugging him towards Riddick.

"No, River this way," Simon shook his head and gestured in the other direction.

"No, cannot leave without him," River folded her arms and stared at her big brother. Stubbornness was writ all over her face and speculation rose in the watcher.

"Without who?" Simon didn't receive an answer as River darted off down the hall. She tore the
cover off the door controls and hot-wired it to open and stick.

Riddick looked up as River burst into their room and grabbed his hand. "Come, quickly," She tugged on him as if to tow him in her wake.

"Where we goin' nī zi?" Riddick was huge compared to the two of them, his eyes alight with his affection for her. She could feel him, beside her in reality and in dreams, watching the watcher watching she and Riddick and Simon.

"Time to go," River told him as she raced down the hall, Riddick easily keeping pace.

That sounded promising, though the new doctor in the hallway looked appalled. For a half second Riddick wondered if he'd have to break the man's neck but River shook her head. "Simon came to get her. She won't leave without you," She explained.

"Appreciate that nī zi," Riddick nodded as they came to a halt beside the man.

"We'll talk about how unexpected this is later," Simon nodded at him. "Right now, we're running behind," He pointed towards the open door at the end of the hall. "And we have company," His eyes were on something behind Riddick.

Riddick cursed and shook his head, "Run." He told Simon, "River an' me got this, just make sure that door don't close."

Simon nodded and raced for the door, holding it open as Riddick and River turned and dealt with the three guards in a manner that had his eyes widening. His sister had leapt and kicked out with her dancer's legs, striking two men simultaneously, the man she insisted on taking with them had thrown one punch at the third guard and the man had fallen to the ground unmoving. River's tiny fists struck unerringly, her aim lethal; her guard had a crushed windpipe and a ruptured spleen. Her big partner had simply grabbed the guard reeling from River's kick and expertly broken his neck. Before Simon could call for them to hurry the two were racing towards him more guards behind them.

Riddick grabbed onto River's waist and leapt with her through the door. From there it was a short distance to the ventilation shaft and the window entrance. It wasn't large, fifteen feet square maybe, but it supplied air to the entire underground Academy complex. Simon wedged his baton into the handle once they got through it, the guards shooting harmlessly at the glass. The wind whipped her hair around her face and the force of it was hell on Riddick's sensitive eyes, though he didn't show it. Daylight was visible above them, slowly being blotted out by a small ship hovering over it.

Cables dropped a small lift down the shaft and stopped when it reached their level. Behind them the guard was using the butt of his rifle on the glass of the window. "Get on!" Simon shouted and River leapt for the lift, Riddick behind her and Simon jumping just as the guard cracked the window glass. The lift began to move upwards as Simon looked at his sister, crouched on the floor of the lift, her hand around a cable. The big man stood behind her, his hand on her shoulder almost protectively.

"Stop." The voice was strange, aristocratic and cool, the voice of a Core native. As elegant and refined as Simon's had ever been. The action froze, and the voice spoke again, "Lovely. Lovely. Backtrack." She watched as the action reversed, taking the recording back to the moment of the three of them on the lift just before it rose. And that cool voice commanded again, "Stop."

She watched herself, frozen in that crouch, and a figure stepped through the hologram. Tall and dark of skin, thoughtful and removed from what he was viewing. His suit was too nondescript to be a uniform and too elegant for a true government Inspector. His wire rimmed glasses were equally simple and elegant as he examined the hologram again. He looked around and she could see he was
in a Records Room, long and bare of anything but endless drawers and the holographic projection field for viewing said recordings, and a table and chair with some paperwork and a cortex.

He moved towards the table as he spoke, looking over some papers, "Biograph. Simon Tam." Text began to stream over his glasses and his eyes flickered as he read it. "Remarkable children." For a moment his tone sounded admiring.

River didn't quite flinch as Doctor Mathias stormed into the records room, two new security guards on his heels along with a nervous young female intern. She was pleased to see Mathias looked grey and more gaunt than the last time she'd seen him. "Enter the Doctor." The dark man murmured as Mathias spoke.

"Excuse me! No one is allowed in the records room without my express permission."

The dark man's tone never altered, "Forgive me. I prefer to see the event alone, without bias." Part of her nodded approvingly, that was the proper way to learn about any situation, investigations required the gathering of facts before the formation of theories. And the other part of her chilled at the complete neutrality of his tone. He was indifferent to the suffering she and Riddick had gone through. This man was not an ally.

Mathias looked at the hologram and his face became even more grey as he realized which one it was. "I need to see your clearance."

"You're right to insist." The dark man complied, placing his hand on a screen, "I know you've had security issues here."

Mathias frowned as he looked at the read out and his bluster dropped like dirty laundry, "Apologies. An Operative of the Parliament will of course have full cooperation." He looked at the screen again, "I'm not sure what... I see no listing of rank, or name."

The Operative was untroubled—An Operative, her blood went cold, that mean trouble the likes of which they'd yet to know. She shuddered as he spoke, "I have neither. Like this facility, I don't exist. The Parliament calls me in when..." The Operative smiled, "When they wish they didn't have to." He focused fully on Mathias, and for a moment she felt a twisted sympathy for the doctor. That gaze was worse than Riddick's at his most furious. Implacable and without concern for anything but his objective. The smile fell off his face like an icicle dropping, "Let's talk about the Tams."

Doctor Mathias wasn't quite blustering but he did give off the air of someone stalling for time, trying to determine the best way to please this person who could end him and his work with a word. "I assume you've scanned the status logs..."

The Operative didn't nod, or smile, he might as well have been an automaton for all the human mannerisms he showed as he spoke, reciting the facts, "You've lost others as well, though none in so spectacular a fashion as River Tam. And neither from such a secure facility. A boy, a woman, smuggled out from other locations and carefully written off as losses to experimentation on your books. But that was before the program was moved to this facility. None of your remaining students ever eclipsed her. And all of them have self-destructed in one form or another. She is the only one left. River was your greatest success. A prodigy—A phenomenon. Until her brother walked in eight months ago and took her from you."

In painful contrast to the Operative, Doctor Mathias was nearly sweating, "It's not quite so simple."

"I'm very aware of that," He wasn't distracted, simply disinterested in excuses, coldly evaluating the man before him.
"He came in with full creds. He beat the ap-scan, the retinal..." The doctor protested. "There was no way I could—"

"No, no. Of course." The dark man did nod now, "The boy spent his fortune developing the contacts to infiltrate this place."

"Gave up a brilliant future in medicine as well, you've probably read." Obviously, Mathias couldn't conceive of such a thing. "Turned his back on his whole life. Madness."

"Madness, no. Something a good deal more dangerous." He indicated the hologram still paused behind them. "Have you looked at this scan carefully? At his face?"

Mathias looked painfully uncertain as the Operative continued, "It's love, in point of fact. He loved his sister and he knew she was in pain. So he took her somewhere safe. And with her one of the most notorious murderers in the galaxy. A man who had evaded capture for more than ten years, not including time spent in cryosleep. And she has surely learned every technique he had to teach. A man with whom your reports say River Tam became very close."

He paused for a moment to look at the hologram for a moment before he spoke again, "Interestingly enough, Richard B. Riddick is, from all appearances, every bit as great a phenomenon as River Tam. His intelligence, like hers, is off the charts. Were you aware of his military record? Recruited into one of the most elite units the Independent military had when he was practically a boy. A unit unmatched by the Alliance command until the inception of the Academy program. The Da Chongs succeeded in such harassment of Alliance forces that there was some talk of the Independents winning the war until Sturges. His time in the military only sharpened his instincts and intellect. But you treated him as if he were an animal, a tool to be used as leverage against her. Until you determined she could be used against him. And yet you never managed to implant suggestions into his brain. Not even when he complied with your tests."

The Operative regarded Mathias steadily, "I'm surprised you didn't make any mention in your reports of the obvious emotional attachment the two of them had to each other. It's obvious in this scan and the others I've viewed that Riddick would kill for her, and she for him. You managed to take two of the most dangerous people in the Alliance and make them even more dangerous. Your only method of control over them was torture. Even that became ineffective as the two of them learned more about you than you learned about them during those sessions."

"Why are you here?" Mathias seemed highly disturbed by the Operative's conclusions.

"I'm here because the situation is even less simple than you think," Dark eyes regarded Mathias. "Do you know what your sin is, Doctor?"

"I... I would be very careful about what you—" Mathias nearly stuttered.

For the first time she heard true emotion in the Operative's voice. Not the interest in her capabilities or faux sympathy for the situation she and Riddick had been in, but true sorrow. "It's pride."

He touched a small control stand near the hologram and the image jumped back to the Doctor and Simon in the lap, Mathias's voice repeated, "Key members of Parliament have personally observed this subject. I was told their support—" The display stopped with Mathias's mouth frozen open, making him look foolish.

The Operative shut the recording off, "Key members of Parliament. Key. The minds behind every diplomatic, military and covert operation in the galaxy, and you put them in a room with a psychic." His tone wasn't quite derisive, though there was a touch of that, he seemed honestly puzzled at such
a level of foolishness.

"She was... she read cards, nothing more." Mathias shook his head.

"It's come to our attention that River became much more unstable, more ... disturbed, after you showed her off to Parliament. Only Riddick's intervention kept her from descending into madness, and there were times when even he was sorely tried." Those dark eyes were regarding the doctor coldly. "Did she see something very terrible in those cards?"

Mathias was practically scrambling to cover his ass, "If there was some... classified information that she... well she never spoke of it." He added hurriedly, "I don't know what it is."

"Nor do I. And judging by her deteriorating mental state I'd say we're both better off." He shook his head slowly. "Secrets are not my concern. Keeping them is."

"Whatever... secrets she might have accidentally gleaned... it's probable she doesn't even know she knows them. That they're buried beneath layers of psychosis." Doctor Mathias didn't like where this conversation was headed, and truthfully neither did she, the truth of it like a painful splinter in her mind.

"But they are in her. Her mind is unquiet. It's the will of the Parliament that I kill her. And the brother. And Richard B. Riddick. Because of your sin." He moved towards his briefcase, "You know, in certain older civilized cultures, when men failed as entirely as you have, they would throw themselves on their swords."

Mathias's tone was no longer conciliatory, "Well, unfortunately I forgot to bring a sword to—"

The air rang crisply as the Operative pulled out his sword. "The Parliament has no further interest in psychics. They represent a threat to the harmony and stability of our Alliance."

"I would put that down right now if I were you," Mathias ordered.

"Would you be killed in your sleep like an ailing pet?" The dark man shook his head, "Whatever your failings, I believe you deserve better than that."

She wished she could close her eyes as the agents of the Academy began to move and were cut down as quickly and ruthlessly as she'd ever been taught to be. Graceful and deadly, only she or Riddick could match him and in a matter of moments the guards were dead, Mathias pinned to the wall as he attempted to bolt.

A half moment more and the Operative had paralyzed Mathias with a jab to a strategic nerve cluster at the side of his spine. A moment later the doctor was slowly falling onto the sword the Operative had placed before him. Mathias' face was horrified as the Operative turned away to address the terrified intern by the door. "Young miss, I'll need all the logs on behavioral modification triggers. We'll have to reach out to River Tam and help her to come back to us. No matter how far out Simon has taken her, we can—"

He was nearly startled as the doctor's body fell beside him, sliding down the sword blade and was distracted momentarily, whispering almost gently, "This is a good death. There's no shame in this, in a man's death. A man who's done fine works. We're making a better world. All of them, better worlds."

The words sent a shudder through her as the Operative pulled the sword out of Mathias's body and began to wipe the blade down, speaking again to the intern, "Young miss, I need you to get to work now. I think I may have a long way to travel."
She left the records room at a near run and the Operative walked back towards the hologram, once again showing their escape from the Academy. "Where are you hiding…little girl?"

She couldn't contain her scream any longer.

Riddick checked their settings and Wash gave him the nod as they pulled into Lilac's orbit. The moon wasn't one of the worst out there, but it wasn't the best either and the back of his neck itched when he thought about the job that was waiting for them. Mal standing behind him wasn't exactly a relaxing presence either, though the Captain seemed to be in a fairly good mood.

That could, and did, change very quickly as something ripped off the nose of the ship, flying up and away into the atmosphere at a great rate. "What was that?"

Riddick frowned as Wash exclaimed in surprise and the ship bucked like a bronco trying to shake off a rider, despite having two pilots with their hands at the wheel. "Whoah! Did you see that—" His astonishment didn't keep him from trying to hold the ship steady as they descended.

"Was that the primary buffer panel?" Mal demanded to know in outraged tones.

"It did seem to resemble—" Wash began to answer and got no further.

Mal's good mood was rapidly deteriorating. "Did the Primary Buffer Panel just fall off my gorram ship for no apparent reason?"

Serenity gave another buck that despite his strength and Wash's experience nearly shook them off the controls. "Looks like." Riddick answered grimly and out of the corner of his eye he saw Wash nod meekly, or at least in a good imitation of it.

"I thought Kaylee checked our entry couplings!" Mal sounded outraged, trying to keep his dignity even as he had to bend his knees to keep from falling over. "I have a very clear memory of it—"

"Mal that was at least three months ago, if not more," Riddick told him flatly as he took over half of Wash's job so the man with the actual pilot's license could keep them from crashing.

"Yeah well if she doesn't give us some extra flow from the engine room to offset the burn-through this landing is gonna get pretty interesting." Wash cut through the reminiscing with some very to the point information.

"Define 'interesting'," Mal was shaking his head, Riddick could tell without even looking, the man just had that sound to his voice.

"Oh god, oh god, we're all gonna die?" Riddick answered him as Wash did his level best to prevent that very thing from occurring more immediately than not.

He sighed as Mal decided to share that happy news, hitting the comms and announcing over the speakers ship wide, "This is the Captain. There's a little problem with our entry sequence; we may experience slight turbulence and then explode." He began to leave the bridge, asking, "Can you shave the vector—"

"Teach your mother ta suck eggs," Riddick muttered as Wash rolled his eyes and answered.

"I'm doing it! It's not enough," The usually cheerful pilot hit the comms. "Kaylee!"
"Just get us on the ground!" Mal commanded.

"That part'll happen, pretty definitely," Wash retorted.

"Yeah whether we like it or not," Riddick growled as he held the vector while Wash tried to work his magic. Despite the noise of the atmosphere rushing around them at a rate of speed not entirely comfortable for anyone he could hear Jayne climbing up out of his bunk.

"We're gonna explode?" The big Kerry native asked, adding facetiously. "Mal, I don't wanna explode."

The Captain, predictably, ignored the part of the conversation he didn't like, commenting on something else instead, "Jayne, how many weapons you plan on bringing? You only got the two arms..."

Jayne did sound a bit sheepish, which he only tended to do when he was overreacting to something, "I just get excitable as to choice, like to have my options open."

"I don't plan on any shooting taking place during this job." Mal was using his 'I'm being reasonable and you're being a lunatic' tone of voice.

Riddick still had trouble thinking of Shea as Jayne, especially when his old friend's Kerry gift for understatement made itself known. "Well, what you plan and what takes place ain't ever exactly been similar."

"No grenades," The Captain ordered and his senior gunhand groaned in disappointment. "No grenades."

"Are we crashing again?" Zoe's voice indicated she was coming towards the two men and the bridge.

"Talk to your husband. Is the Mule prepped?" Mal asked without concern.

"Good to go, sir. Just loading her up." She must have been looking at Jayne, "Are those grenades?"

"Cap'n doesn't want 'em." Jayne sounded almost sulky.

"We're robbing the place. We're not occupying it." Zoe's voice did have a certain amount of sympathy for the bigger man's need for arms and ordinance. Overprepared was better than underprepared.

River was occupied keeping the engine from sparking too badly while Kaylee worked on giving Wash and Richard the extra power they needed to keep Serenity from exploding or landing so hard that there'd be a nice Serenity shaped crater on Lilac and they'd be in so many pieces explosion would be less messy. She sighed as Mal came in, yelling loudly, "Kaylee!"

"Zǎo shàng hǎo," River greeted him and was given a distracted nod.

"Kaylee, what in the sphincter of hell are you playing at?" Mal demanded to know. Kaylee reached up for a tool which River promptly handed her while the Captain blustered, "We got the Primary Buffer——"

Kaylee was like Wash, if she was doing her job she was calm and nothing bothered her, not even the
threat of imminent explosion or crash landings. "Everything's shiny, Cap'n. Not to fret."

"You told me—" Mal had to steady himself against the wall as Serenity jolted unhappily. "You told me the entry couplings would hold for another week!"

Kaylee was busy working and didn't reply immediately so River told him what she was thinking. "That was six months ago, Cap'n."

River sighed as Mal immediately became more unreasonable, trying to salvage his captainy dignity, "My ship don't crash. If she rashes, you crashed her."

Despite her best efforts Serenity shot a wave of steam and electricity at her Captain which backed him up. "Captain is in the way. Less talking, more helping if he wishes to land. Or go." River looked at him as she handed Kaylee another tool. "Elsewhere." She clarified.

Mal began to back up and nearly crashed into Simon behind him, "Doctor. Guess I need to get innocked 'fore we hit planet-side." Simon nodded, irritation in every line of his body and Mal continued, "Bit of a rockety ride. Nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried," Simon shook his head.

"Fear is nothing to be ashamed of, Doc," Mal was being patronizing which only irritated her gē ge. Simon gave a long-suffering sigh, "This isn't fear. This is annoyance."

The Captain actually laughed, "Well, it's kinda hard to tell the one from the other, face like yours."

Serenity's doctor snarked back at him, "I imagine if it were fear, my eyes would be wider."

"I'll look for that next time," Mal nodded wisely and Simon rolled his eyes.

"I shouldn't have to go hunting for you Mal, I've gotten everyone else inoculated except for you," Simon remonstrated. "You should be setting an example to your crew. Instead you're one of the worst patients I have. And I have Riddick and Jayne and River!"

River sighed as they moved out of earshot, their minds drifting downward as Simon lectured the captain on the dangers of going dirtside without proper inoculations. Underneath it all Simon was worried about her going on the job after the bad night she'd had. Riddick was worried too. She was worried. If she didn't have enough spoons then the trouble she'd be would make the job impossible.

Riddick stalked down to the cargo bay as Wash got Serenity landed finally. Mal was demanding of Zoe, "Zoe, is Wash gonna straighten this boat out before we get flattened?"

"Like a downy feather, sir. Nobody flies like my mister." Zoe assured him proudly and seconds later was proven right as Serenity landed gentle as you please. By rights Riddick should still be on the bridge but Wash had shooed him off when Kaylee got them the extra power they needed saying his irritation was a distraction and he'd feel better if he saw River off.

Riddick glared at Mal, "You're not taking her."

Mal was busy prepping the already prepped mule in an effort to ignore him. "No. No, that's not a thing I'm interested in talking over with—"
"She's not going with you. That's final." Riddick growled.

Mal proved to the Furyan once again that he had absolutely no common sense by turning around and glaring back at him. "I hear the words 'that's final' come out of your mouth ever again, they truly will be." He turned away again, "This is my boat. Y'all are guests on it."


"She wants to be crew, she don't get a choice as to when she is and when she isn't," Mal retorted.

"She had a bad night, dreamt 'bout that storm we got coming," Riddick made an attempt at reason. "You know this won't be an easy day. But you still want to put her on the job."

"Didn't say 'want'. Said 'will'. It's one job. She'll be fine."

Riddick growled, "She's still adjusting, still trying to deal with the nightmare."

"She's a Reader. Sees into the truth of things; might see trouble before it's coming. Which is of use to me." Male seemed to think he was being reasonable, didn't seem to have any clue how close he was to simply being gutted as he turned his back on Riddick again.

"And that's your guiding star, isn't it? What's of use," The Furyan sneered. "So much for your 'understanding' of her difficulties."

Mal glared at him across the mule, "I look out for me and mine. That don't include you less I conjure it does. Now you stuck a thorn in the Alliance's paw and that tickles me a bit. But it also means I gotta step twice as fast to avoid them, and that means turning down plenty of jobs. Even honest ones." He opened one of the mule's compartments, rummaging through it as he spoke, "Every year since the war the Alliance pushes further out, fences off another piece of the 'verse. Come a day there won't be room for naughty men like us to slip about at all. This job goes south, there well may not be another. So here is us, on the raggedy edge. Don't push me and I won't push you. Dōng ma?"

Riddick flexed his hands, "Then I need to go too. She'll do better with me there. You know separation makes it harder for her."

"Right," The Browncoat rolled his eyes as he began tossing duffle bags into the mule. "I'll just take the most wanted man in the 'verse out to a bank job in broad daylight. Because your goggle wearin' face won't be noticeable at all."

That he was right just made it more annoying. Riddick snarled and moved towards his mate, lifting her from the stairs she was descending and kissing her hungrily. She smelt of nerves, burnt cinnamon and blood and steel, frayed silk and plums.

"She will be fine," Her soft little hands petted his bare scalp and jaw. "Will keep a tight hold on your mind my láng. Death closes all: but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods."

"If somethin' goes wrong..." He held her tightly against him.

"I'm the brains of the operation," River smiled up at him and sent Mal a smirk.

"Frightenin' thing is even when she's half gone, she's still smarter'n Mal," Jayne snarked as Zoe handed Mal a pair of goggles.

"Keep the engine turning over," Mal ignored the jape addressing Riddick, "I expect we'll be fixin' to
make a quick exit."

"Do we ever make a slow one?" Riddick rolled his eyes.

Mal held the goggles Zoe had handed him and the first mate prompted him to put them on, "You'll need those, sir." River took a pair from Jayne and fastened them around her head, checking her weapons again as she waited.

"I have to wear 'em?" Mal sighed.

"No sir, you don't 'have' to do anything." Zoe shook her head, "That's one of the perks of being captain"

"So I can leave the goggles?" Mal looked hopeful for a moment. He'd been surreptitiously eyeing Jayne who looked powerful silly with his goggles on and given that Jayne was one of the scarier individuals aboard the ship that was doing something.

"Of course, sir." Zoe replied blandly. "I'll just make sure to put aside some of our loot for the seeing-eye dog you'll need when the grit in the air tears your eyes out." Riddick smirked as he helped River adjust hers, sliding the strap under her chignon and tightening them to her face.

"Fine," Mal began to put them on. "I'll wear 'em. But I'll look like an idiot."

"I should think you'd be used to that, sir." Zoe replied calmly and winked at Riddick before continuing, "We should hit town right during Sunday worship. Won't be any crowds." She looked at River, "Hopefully that'll make it some easy for you too."

Riddick handed River one last piece of equipment, the slender sheathed stiletto he'd made for her to tuck in her hair like an ornament. She smiled at him and gave Zoe a nod to indicate she understood.

"Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

"If Fanty and Mingo are right about the payroll, this could look to be a sunny day for us." Mal was starting to sound optimistic.

"Mal, I'll ask one last time," Riddick growled, his tone of voice not at all conciliatory. Simon approached the mule and kissed River's cheek in farewell, nodding politely at the rest of them and waiting hopefully for Mal to change his mind.

"Rick, I'm taking your wife under my protection here. If anything happens to her, anything at all, I swear to you I will get very choked up. Honestly. There could be tears." Mal peeled out of the cargo bay.

Riddick scowled and looked at Simon, "I swear. Every time… every gorram time, he gets in one of those chipper, everything's great moods, and it's like the entire 'verse turns against him. You shout because it makes you brave or you want to announce your recklessness."

"Well when you put it that way, guess I'd better make sure the infirmary is set for guests." Simon sighed and gave Kaylee a smile as she came down the stairs.

"Don't mind the Captain none. I know he'll look out for her." She tried to reassure the both of them.

"It's amazing. I bring River all the way out to the raggedy edge of the 'verse so she can hide from the Alliance by robbing banks." Simon sighed, humor tinging his voice as he kissed Kaylee's cheek
affectionately. "Captain said to keep the engine turning. So, I guess whatever our issue was with entry, we ought to try and fix it?"

"Ain't like we keep a spare buffer panel," She shook her head. "I can cobble somethin' together but not by the time they get back."

"If I give you a hand could you do it?" Riddick asked. "Wash won't need me on the bridge for a bit."

"Could try," Kaylee nodded.

Simon tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, "If you need me, give me a call. I'm going to prepare for the inevitable casualties."

"Good idea." Riddick headed towards the engine room with Kaylee in the hopes of rigging something to serve as the Primary Buffer Panel until they could order a new one.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So we're officially into the BDM. If you've read the novelization of Serenity you might recognize some of the history or wording. My aim isn't to simply regurgitate the book and script but to insert Riddick and our various changed characters into them and it's proving to be a little more interesting that I'd anticipated.

That being said, I'm actually making decent progress. I hope you're all enjoying this and I've sufficiently explained how Mal can simultaneously understand that River needs her 'spoons' but also make demands of her that might jeopardize her health. Needs must when the devil drives and for Mal I think the devil drives quite often.

Chinese Translations:

gāi sǐ (damned / wretched)
Chòu mǎniào (Stinking horse piss)
dì di (younger brother )
Gē ge (big brother)
Dì yù (hell)
Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)
nī zi (little girl)
Zǎo shang hǎo (Good morning)
Qù nǐ de (Go to hell!)
Dǒng ma? (Understand? Got it?)
láng (wolf)

Script Chinese Translations:
Liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi (script- Stupid son of a drooling whore and monkey)

Gao yang jong duh goo yang (Script- Motherless goats of all motherless goats)

Quote Sources:

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign is worth ambition, though in hell: better to reign in hell than serve in heaven. – Paradise Lost – Milton

Death closes all: but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. – Ulysses – Lord Alfred Tennyson

Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. – Ulysses – Lord Alfred Tennyson

You shout because it makes you brave or you want to announce your recklessness. – Underworld – Don Delillo
River regarded the town thoughtfully, the buildings were a mix of adobe and wood, metal and plastic, thrown together with whatever was to hand and made sturdy with spit and baling wire. The streets were mostly empty which was good for them.

The mule pulled up outside the trading station and Jayne's irritation at his lack of grenades showed in his voice, "What are we hoping to find here that equals the worth of a turd?"

Zoe tethered the mule while Mal answered and Jayne absent mindedly helped her down from the floating vehicle. "Security payroll. Alliance don't have the manpower to 'enforce the peace' on every border moon cluster. They hire out to the private firms, who will not work for credit. They get paid in cashy money, which once a month rests here."

Jayne smiled as River showed him the contents of her little belt pouch and thankfully Mal thought his senior gunhand was simply appreciating the cash only rule of thumb as something he agreed with. "Don't that lead back to the Alliance anyhow?" He wanted to know, his question occupying Mal and Zoe's attention and distracting them from whatever River might have on her belt.

Zoe shook her head, "No private firm would ever report a theft of its own payroll. They'd appear weak, might lose their contract."

Mal nodded his agreement with the First Mate's assessment, "We're as ghosts in this. Won't but rattle the floor."

Jayne grinned and cocked his gun, "Shiny. Let's be bad guys."

Mal turned to River, "You ready to go to work, little genius girl?"

River rolled her eyes, "There's no pattern to the pebbles here, they're completely random. I tried to count them but you drove too fast. Hummingbird." Mal's expression tilted into near horrified while Jayne tried not to laugh and she made a face at both of them. "Joke. The girl is…not optimal but she will do. My poor body…requires it: I am driven on by the flesh; and he must needs go that the devil drives."

The Captain sighed, "Right. Great. Let's go."

River entered the trading station last, it having been determined that she was not exactly an intimidating sight and found that Zoe had already shot out the camera. That was helpful. You never knew who was watching. Of the fifteen people in the store there were only a few who would be a problem. Everyone looked dirt poor, the store workers, farm folk, even the children seemed poverty stricken. She guessed Lilac was not the farming mecca of beautiful bountiful prairies it claimed to be.

Jayne had explained a Trading Station to she and Simon a while back, a combination post office, general store, bank and any other official function needed, nearly every small town had one. When the traveling judges on circuit arrived, they would office out of the Trading Station and when the parish sheriff was in town he would use this place as well. It was the hub of the town more so than
even the church or school.

Mal took advantage of the stunned attention Zoe's shot had brought them and shouted, holding his gun to the ceiling, "Hands and knees and heads bowed down! Everybody, now!"

Two of the farmers tried to rush the Captain and were brought up short by his gun. It was a very convincing in making them stop their forward momentum. Another tried to tackle Jayne. She could have told him that it was a pointless endeavor. Jayne's mass made him very difficult to move when he was planted in place. Jayne clotheslined him hard enough that he spun upside down, which Jayne took advantage of by grabbing his legs and bouncing his head off the floor.

"Out cold," River murmured her appreciation. "He will be concussed for at least a week. The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed." Jayne sent her a grin and she smiled in return while Mal continued his 'bank robbery' speech.

"Y'all wanna be looking very intently at your own belly buttons. I see a head start to rise, violence is gonna ensue."

The farmers who'd rushed Mal complied with that order and the one Jayne had knocked was dumped unceremoniously on the ground. River exchanged a look with him and he knocked on the man's chest. It was harder than your average ribcage and Jayne pulled the fool's shirt open to reveal a security uniform, most likely body arm. "Looks like this is the place." He took the shiny official pin from the guard and left him on the floor.

Mal nodded, "You've probably guessed we mean to be thieving here, but what we are after is not yours. So let's have no undue fussing."

River moved from her place by the door, drawing her gun slowly and keeping watch while Jayne checked the back office and found the small vault locked, "Yep, she's locked up."

The stirrings of an unquiet mind, filled with thoughts of glory and heroism reached her and she looked around, pointing her gun at a trying too hard to be tough young man. Zoe nodded as she saw the youth slowly reaching for the weapon on his belt. When the end of Zoe's mare's leg nuzzled his cheek his movements stopped. "You know what the definition of a hero is? It's someone who gets other people killed. You can look it up later."

He dropped his weapon and slid it across the floor. River smiled slightly as she picked it up and tucked it into the back of her belt. "Any other weapons, best you slide them on out now," She called in her best 'I'm pretending to be Jayne Cobb' voice. "Lest ya end up riddled with unsightly holes. Yet I argue not against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer right onward."

Thank fully only two more appeared and neither of their owners seemed to have remembered they had them until she'd said something. Jayne sent her a look of concern over the constant quoting and she shrugged helplessly. Using someone else's words to communicate was easier when she was unsettled. She could save the bulk of her energy for the job.

Mal was making himself useful, dragging the Trade Agent from behind the counter and towards the vault. Jayne and Zoe moved closer to him and River leaned against the counter to keep an eye on the rest of them. The old man protested, "This is just a crop moon, don't think you'll find what you—"

The Captain's voice was tight, "Bee-tzway. Wrong wuomun fah-tsai." River half smiled as the old man saw the wisdom of Mal's words, coupled with the wisdom of the very large guns and punched in the code.
What opened was a tiny wall safe. There were some bundles of bills, some scattered coin. It was very distinctly unimpressive. River glanced over as Jayne and Zoe peered into the safe behind the Captain. Zoe looked at Mal, "At last." She said dryly, "We can retire and give up this life of crime."

Jayne reached in for the bundles of cash and River stopped him, "Unwise ge ge. Bills are tagged."

"Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ," Jayne cursed unhappily and Mal reached in and pulled a lever. The floor opened, a six foot hole appearing, white tile and gleaming steel stairs leading to a corridor bathed in blue light.

Zoe grinned back at River while Jayne peered down the stairs and Mal addressed the Trade Agent, "Is there a guard down there? Be truthful."

The agent nodded as River answered the Captain, "Yes."

"Y'all are Browncoats, hey? Fought for Independents?" The old man was trying to get their sympathy, not that it would work.

"War's long done. We're all just folk now." Mal answered absently and yelled down the shaft, "Listen up! We're coming down to empty that vault!"

The voice of someone not terribly experiences in guarding floated back up to them, "You have to give me your authorization password!"

River shook her head at Jayne as he nearly fired down the stairs, "Noise maker, also bullets ricochet. Best to not have either. For those that fly may fight again, Which he can never do that's slain." She called down sweetly, "Got a coupla grenades could throw down ta keep ya company. That password good enough?"

The voice was a bit hesitant but clearly capitulating, "Okay..."

Mal looked at Zoe and they headed down into the vault. River stopped paying attention to them, frowning as she looked around. Jayne's eyes met hers, bright blue in a tanned face and he tilted his head, "Somethin's wrong?"

"Yesterday, upon the stair, I met a man who wasn't there he wasn't there again today I wish, I wish he'd go away... When I came home last night at three the man was waiting there for me but when I looked around the hall I couldn't see him there at all..." She couldn't help the words that spilled out of her mouth as she nodded, casting her mind outward, outward, blocks away, part of her conscious of Mal and Zoe loading up bags in the vault while Mal talked to the guard about a wound to show off so he wouldn't look like he gave in too easy. Zoe was bringing up bags, giving them to Jayne, he took them to the mule and came back inside while Zoe made another trip.

Mal was amused, Zoe was all business and Jayne was tense as his attention came back to her. A woman was walking towards the church, her son beside her, running late because a chicken had escaped the coop and had to be caught before they could leave their homestead.

Then she wasn't talking to her son anymore. Her eyes were filled with the sight of a creature, poisoned with radiation, scarred and pierced, an ugly jagged blade slicing at the woman and slashing both she and her child to pieces.

"Jayne," She gasped his name like a scream. She was shaking, her entire body trembling violently. "Reavers!"

"Liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi," Jayne cursed and ran down the steps. "Cap'n," Jayne
had the thought that Mal wouldn't pay attention to a respectful title and bellowed, "Mal!"

"Every heist," Mal's voice echoed weirdly against the steel walls, "Every heist he's gotta start yellin' my name."

Jayne blurted out the news of the Reavers and River reached out and grabbed hold of Riddick's mind, his rock steady center calming her as she jumped down from the counter and began to hustle everyone down to the vault. "Go, into the vault, now, it's your only chance."

"You two get on the mule," The Captain ordered his crew and began to give the guard the same orders as Zoe hauled out the last of the bags, Jayne taking a share and slinging them over his shoulder, everything that was calm and ordered now a rushed and hasty run. "Does that open from the inside?"

River was already pushing customers down to the vault while Jayne and Zoe came up, loading up the mule. The guard was confused, stuttering as Mal gave him his orders, "You get everyone upstairs in there and you seal it. Long as you got air you don't open up, you understand?"

River pushed the last man, the fool who'd first tried to pull a gun, towards the stairs as Mal came up, shouting down to the guard, "Get them inside the vault!"

River climbed onto the mule, Jayne pulling her up while Mal kept issuing instructions, "Zoe take the wheel—"

River pulled her gun out as Jayne got her belted in, forgetting his own harness as he looked around, "You see 'em? Anybody see 'em?"

"Behind the church," River pointed as Mal untethered the mule and flung himself on while Zoe powered it up and moved slowly away from the Trading Station. The young man who'd tried to shoot Zoe burst out of the station as they pulled away.

"Take me with you!"

Mal bellowed at him as they began to pick up speed, "Get in the vault with the others—"

"I can't stay here! Please!"

River felt Riddick's irritation and sudden unease as he and Kaylee tightened up the makeshift entry couplings, his voice telling his little sister to get inside, helping her down while he grabbed the tools and half carried her into Serenity. Mal's voice was implacable, "It's too many. Drive, Zoe."

River looked up as a Reaver craft roared over their heads. It was ugly, torn apart, belching smoke, a welded conglomeration of ruined ships, painted with blood like paint for war. It disappeared over the rooftops towards the church. The mule began to speed up more, and she could feel Zoe's unhappiness as the young man begged.

The Reader looked at Jayne and he nodded his understanding, the boy couldn't be saved now, "Have to do it." She sighed and pointed her gun at the boy, one pull of the trigger later and Reavers would have to make do with a corpse, rather than torture the young idiot to death.

Mal stared at her in shock, "What—"

"Couldn't take him aboard." River explained as she began to scan behind them for pursuers. "Like a panicked horse, would have pushed half of us off, even if we could carry him and the payload. Bad idea. He should have stayed in the vault. Would have been safe."
Even as she explained what seemed completely obvious another two Reaver ships headed towards the church. A skiff shot out from behind the buildings of an adjacent street, four times the mule's size and gaining on their position. The noise was overwhelming, the screams of the townsfolk, gun fire, and worse the mental shrieking of the Reavers. Mal's thoughts were the only thing louder, his pity tinged with horror, 'Poor bastards don't stand a lick of a chance.'

She tried to close her mind to all of it, everything but her bàng jiār, Riddick's elegant labyrinth like mind the steadiest anchor even at this distance. Jayne fired a mess of shots at the skiff even as it pursued them into Lilac's rocky prairie. "How come they ain't blowing us out of the air?" He asked as he slammed another cartridge of bullets into his gun.

Mal didn't sound happy as he answered, "They wanna run us down." He was busy firing while Jayne loaded his weapon. "The up-close kill."

River took a deep breath and poked her head over the seats, "They want us alive when they eat us." She took aim and fired, shooting one Reaver in the head and watched it fall.

Jayne fired another barrage of bullets while Mal reloaded, "Boy, sure would be nice if we had some grenades, don'tcha think?"

She smiled grimly as Mal refused to dignify that with a response. "Jayne, my belt pouch," She fired while he ducked down and reloaded and sighed in frustration that he hadn't heard her over the noise.

Zoe had gotten on the radio, her ability to multi-task was very impressive, even more so when she sounded so calm, "Wash, baby can you hear me?"

Wash's voice came over the radio, Riddick talking to Simon and Ciara in the background, "We're moments from air. You got somebody behind you?" River concentrated on Riddick's voice, "Get down to the bay and be ready to receive casualties."

Zoe managed to pack a lot of meaning into a two-syllable word, "Reavers."

Wash's response was mostly nearly unintelligible but the gist was impolite. "Ai-yah. tyen-ah...
Riddick's reaction was worse, his growl of a voice cursing clearly and furiously, "Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ."

The First Mate risked a glance back at the skiff, at which her three passengers were still firing. It was easy to see the skiff was gaining on them. "We're not gonna reach you in time."

"Just keep moving, honey." Wash's voice wasn't quite as calm as his wife's, "We're coming to you." Riddick's voice was bellowing to Ciara, "Get down to the bay and be ready to open the doors on command! Simon, get prepped!"

She was glad that Kaylee had played with the mule's engine. If she hadn't they'd have become Reaver lunch twenty miles past. An arrow pinned the ammo container shut just as Jayne fired his last shot and he instinctively stood to get some leverage to pry it open. "Jayne no!"

Her warning came a split second too late, a harpoon arrow shot through the air and straight through Jayne's leg, a brace locking onto him from the arrow head and yanking him backwards straight off the mule and towards the skiff.

River had cause to be grateful for Mal's reflexes because he leapt for Jayne, "Grab on!"

Jayne grabbed onto the Mule's tow bar, which was a steadier anchor than Mal's unsecured body, and still had the presence of mind to shout at the Captain, "I won't get et! You shoot me if they take me!"
Mal had slotted a new ammo cartridge into his pistol, thankfully he carried them on his belt and not in the now bolted shut ammo container of the mule. River shook her head as he took aim and Jayne misunderstood, "Well don't shoot me first!"

River shook her head and pulled Mal down before another arrow could go through his shoulder, "Stay down," She admonished and shot the harpoon line, which made Jayne's legs fall from their up towards the skiff position and drag on the ground. "Grab him, I'll cover you!" Any drag was bad when they needed all the speed they could get.

She picked up Jayne's gun Sarah and began to lay covering fire the way she'd seen in the memories of the four soldiers of the crew. Mal hauled the biggest member of said crew up as Jayne cursed, "Rutting pigs! Where's—"

River held his gun as they rushed across the prairie, aware of Wash's voice in the background, talking to his wife calmly, "Get some distance on 'em. You come to the flats, I want you to swing round. Gonna try a Barn Swallow. Ciara! Open her up!"

The Reader held herself steady as they veered at some rocks, buzzing them closely enough to loosen them and send them flying into the Reavers. The skiff was forced to veer behind the rise, which would give them a lot of extra room to make the U-turn they'd need in order to make Wash's trick work.

Unfortunately, while the mule had been going at top speed, the skiff had apparently been toying with them. She watched as it began gaining on them, their space to turn slowly lost, "Won't work." She commented to Mal, "Too close. Chance of collision ninety-eight-point two percent."

"Got no choice," Mal shook his head.


"Little late to be tellin' me that," The Captain grumbled at her. "Hindsight bein' twenty-twenty an' all."

River nodded absently and stood on the back of the mule, steady on the cargo containers and ignoring Mal's shouts and Jayne's exhortations to be careful. "Then he will not be angry."

"Get down from there!" Mal clearly didn't see where she was going with this.

She reached into the belt pouch and did a tally, confirming her numbers and eyeing the skiff for weaknesses. Air intake for the jets, port holes for shooting and a topside cap torn open for faster boarding. "In a moment."

Wash's voice was on the radio, "Okay, baby, we've talked this through."

"Talkin' ain't doin'," Zoe retorted, ever the pragmatist.

River felt Jayne's thick hand wrap around her ankle, not pulling, just adding his weight to hers as he realized what she was doing. A brief calculation for air velocity and wind direction and she was ready.

One at a time the grenades came out of her pouch, pins pulled, and were thrown into the weaknesses she'd identified. She was grateful for Jayne's grip as the explosion made the mule's passage a bit rougher than she'd anticipated. Reavers were blown from the skiff, towards the mule and in the opposite direction, and River allowed Jayne to pull her back down to the seats.
"Will have to inspect the mule for damages," She told Mal as she closed the flap on her pouch. "Couldn't account for all shrapnel."

"Yeah..." He was staring at her in shock as Zoe made the U-turn they'd been needing to meet up with Serenity.

Zoe had heard the explosions and as they drove over the wreckage of the skiff radioed into her husband, "Uh, you know that rescue?"

"Yeah?" Wash sounded puzzled.

"Won't be needin' it after all," Zoe told him sending River a quizzical glance. "Just set her down and we'll drive in."

Serenity dropped out of the sky and settled to the prairie in front of them, rocks crunching under her feet and Zoe drove the mule right inside, past Ciara and a slightly confused looking Simon, to park somewhat abruptly just short of the back staircase.

River began to climb out of the mule, shaking her head and trying to clear it of Reaver thought, while Jayne eased himself into a position from which he could exit the vehicle with a modicum of grace and dignity. Mal wasn't bothering with any such thing as Kaylee ran into the bay, "Are you all right?" Her big brown eyes took in Jayne's state, Mal's frazzled expression, Zoe's near painful stoicness and Simon's confused look before settling on Simon as priority. "Better shut the bay doors."

He nodded and hit the button to do so just as a Reaver popped out from under the mule. Kaylee shrieked as it lunged towards them and for a moment the bay was filled with deafening echoes as all four of the mule's riders emptied their weapons into the not quite a man anymore thing.

Riddick growled as he heard the shots, taking the hall at a run and the stairs in several jumps, making it down to the cargo bay. Wash's voice was echoing up to him from the coms in the bay, "We all here? What's going on? Hello?"

Zoe's voice didn't echo so much as he'd nearly reached the bay when she replied, "No casualties. Anybody following?"

The pilot sounded considerably calmer, "Nice flying, baby, and that's a negative. Clean getaway—Out of atmo in six minutes."

Mal looked up from the mess of blood, guts and piercings on the bay deck to nod at Riddick as he approached them, "Set course for Beaumonde," He looked at the rest of the crew, "First thing, I want this bod—"

The Captain's orders were cut off as Riddick's fist met his jaw, throwing Mal to the deck where he grabbed his gun threateningly. "Nee tzao ss-ma? Nee-yow wuh-kai chang?"

"You stupid, selfish, son of a whore—" Riddick growled down at him.

"I'm a hair's breadth from riddling you with holes Riddick—" Mal interrupted.

Riddick was vividly conscious of Zoe at his back, her hand on her mare's leg, Jayne wounded on the mule's back and River shuddering beside the vehicle, her scent a morass of pain, fear and relief. The
steel blood of her scent was faded with rust and burnt cinnamon was nearly overwhelming everything. "One simple job. She'll be fine," He snarled, throwing Mal's earlier words back at him.

Mal had managed to push himself to his feet without recoiling unduly from the Reaver corpse he'd nearly landed on and got right back in Riddick's face like the damn fool he was. "She is fine! Except for bein' a little wobbly, she's the picture of health!"

Zoe, to give her credit, was trying to add some calm to the situation, "Wasn't for River, we'd probably be left there. She felt 'em coming."

"She's ready to keel over, ill and exhausted," Riddick couldn't seem to get his hands to relax from the fists they'd formed. He wanted to beat Mal into the deck until the man saw sense.

"But she'll be fine," The Captain was determined to push.

"And what if one day she isn't?" He snarled back at him, "Every time you push her like this you do more damage. It takes longer to come back from it. This isn't her body, this is her brain, that brain and ability you find so tā mā de useful." The animal was rising, ready to kill this idiot who threatened his wife, his mate, he could feel it, his eyes hot and angry. "What happens when you push too far? When she tries too hard to do what's useful to you. You want to push her right into a psychotic break?"

Mal looked nonplussed for a moment, looking from Riddick to Simon, "What?"

"A psychotic break," Simon explained in as dispassionate a voice as he could manage considering the subject matter at hand was his sister. "Such as being unable to break out of a panic attack or a flashback because she doesn't have the mental reserves to do so. She could get lost in her mind."

River spoke absently, "Great wits are sure to madness near allied, And thin partitions do their bounds divide."

The Captain's expression was stunned and Riddick couldn't help the growl rising in his chest, "You think we were just exaggerating? Yú chūn zǐ jiǎo de dà zì ròu. Never again. You understand me?"

Unfortunately, that just put Mal's back up all over again, "Seems I remember a talk about you giving orders on my boat."

"Well sleep easy 'cause we're off your boat. Soon's we get our share of the job." He could barely hold the animal back. Only River's hand covering his knuckles kept him from going for a shiv and opening the Browncoat up neck to nethers.

Kaylee's breath caught, "Well let's not do anything hasty..."

Mal seized on that and ran with it, "No, shiny! I'm sick a' carrying tourists anyhow. We'll be on Beaumonde in ten hours' time, you can pick up your earnings and be on your merry. Meantime you do your job. Get rid of this body. Help Wash keep us in the air." He pointed at Simon, "And you, patch up my crew."

Simon began to move towards Jayne and River stared at the Reaver, "Yesterday, upon the stair I met a man who wasn't there." She looked up at Simon, "He didn't lie down. They never lie down."

He was fairly certain that Mal never had figured out just how good his hearing was. Zoe might have
an inkling but she'd have to know he was there to be concerned about such things and unless he was a threat to her or the Captain, which at the moment he wasn't, she'd never realize he was there. She was attuned to danger, not presence. It was a fine distinction and one he'd never chosen to make. If someone was nearby, best to know it. Anyone could be a threat. "You think I did wrong?" Mal was asking Zoe, one old friend to another.

Zoe didn't seem fazed by the question or the concern, "No, I think things'll glide a deal smoother for us without River, Rick and Simon on board... at least in some ways. But how long do you think they'll last?"

If Riddick wasn't with them, the answer would have been five seconds or less, but he was, and Mal knew it, "Rick made his call. She an' the doc, they's as babes in a basket when we took 'em in; we sheltered 'em plenty. Man has to cut loose, learn to stand on his own."

Riddick shook his head wondering how in the wild worlds Mal could be so blinded by his own beliefs that he couldn't see just how far from sheltered Simon and River were. The man had a gift for out of the box thinking and confounding the law men but he got something in his head it took the devil himself to shift it. He had flashes of comprehension and then he slid right back into his old ways.

"Like that man back in town?" Zoe asked and caught the Furyan's attention again.

There was a pause and he guessed from the sound of their voices that they'd stopped at Mal's bunk, "She had to shoot him. What the Reavers woulda done to him before they killed him…"

"I know," The First Mate's voice was understanding, to a point, "That was a piece a mercy. But before that, him begging us to bring him along."

Mal's voice was testy and Riddick guessed that whatever had happened Mal hadn't liked it but he'd agreed with it. "We couldn't take the weight. Woulda slowed us down."

"You know that for certain—" Zoe sounded like she was frowning.

"Mule won't run with five. I shoulda dumped the girl? Or you? or Jayne?" He paused and his voice held a dark grin, "Well, Jayne..." His voice hardened, "It had to be done. She was right. The man was like a panicked horse, would have pushed and shoved and maybe we'd have lost someone. She knew what needed to be done and she did it. Before the Reavers could get a hold of him. Why do you think I wanted to bring her? You, Jayne, you two might hesitate, hell, I didn't even have my gun out yet for all that I agree with what she did. But she and I, in that sorta situation, our thoughts are for our crew, not some damn fool who should have stayed in the vault like he was told."

That was a tidbit of information that was new. If Mal thought that he and River were usually on the same wavelength why would he be throwing them off? Then Zoe threw out something Riddick could only consider a true piece of idiocy and a lapse in judgement on her part and distracted him from that line of thought for a moment or two. "Coulda tossed the payload."

The Captain's voice was incredulous, "And go to Fanty and Mingo with air in our mitts, tell 'em 'here's your share'? They'd set the dogs on us in the space of a twitch, and there we are back in mortal peril. We get a job, we gotta make good."

He was plainly losing patience with the conversation and implied criticism, and Zoe's placating tone reflected her understanding of that even as Wash's steps sounded from the stairs to the bridge, "Sir, I don't disagree on any particular point, it's just... in the time of war, we woulda never left a man
stranded."

"Maybe that's why we lost," Mal pushed the door to his bunk open and the conversation ended. Riddick continued on his way up to the bridge.

By the time he got there Wash and Zoe were cuddling in the pilot's chair and he sat down and double checked the course Wash had set. "Looks good. How long you figure?"

"Well not wanting to attract attention I'd say about ten hours of so. Maybe a bit more," Wash looked more sober than Riddick had ever seen him outside of Zoe being hurt. "Rick you three really leaving?"

"River and I are," He didn't bother to keep up the accent he usually used around the crew and Mal especially. "Simon's safer with all of you."

"Mal didn't throw him off?" Wash looked surprised.

"Didn't say he was," Zoe answered him. "Though he seems to be assumin' Simon'll leave."

"Though he was nonspecific as to who he considered 'tourists'." The Furyan sneered, "As if we haven't earned our way from the second day on Serenity."

"He don't take to bein' given orders on his own boat," The First Mate's dark eyes were mild as they studied him.

"And I don't take to him dragging River out when she clearly wasn't having a good day." Riddick snarled.

"I can see both sides," Zoe held up her hands in surrender. "Ain't sayin' you don't have a point. But she did save our lives."

"And she could have done that from Serenity, with a gorram radio," He argued back. "She didn't have to be right there."

"You know how Mal gets," Wash reminded him quietly.

"Yeah I know. That's why we're leaving," Riddick stood. "Which is why I'd better get packing."

River sat on the mule. The mindless task of going through the ammo storage and pulling out the shell casings was soothingly repetitive and she could listen to Kaylee and Jayne while they talked. Simon was cleaning the infirmary now that he'd gotten Jayne all bandaged up. He wasn't happy that Jayne was walking on his wounded leg but admitted he couldn't exactly do anything to stop him. He'd wrapped a pressure cast around Jayne's calf though to keep the wound from being moved too much when Jayne walked and it was serving its purpose well enough.

Kaylee was busy opening the trapdoors in the floor with a keypad attached to a cable while Jayne dragged the Reaver corpse closer to the doors.

"I do not get it." Jayne commented. "How's a guy get so wrong?" Kaylee looked at him in question and Jayne elaborated, "Ain't logical. Cuttin' on his own face, rapin' and murdering—" He rolled his eyes, "I mean, I'll kill a man in a fair fight...or if I think he's gonna start a fair fight, or if he bothers me, or if there's a woman, or I'm gettin' paid— mostly only when I'm gettin' paid." He sent them both
a grin as he deliberately assumed the coarse, disgusting mask of the mercenary he'd played for years and the two of them made faces at him in amused reaction.

His blue eyes were sober as he dumped the body in the lower airlock, "But these Reavers... last ten years they just show up like the bogeyman from stories. Eating people alive? Where does that get fun?" He shook his head. "What's the point of it?"

Kaylee started the doors closing, "Shepherd Book said they was men that reached the edge of space, saw a vasty nothingness and just went bibbledy over it." River frowned, Kaylee was upset, more so than she normally would be over a fight.

"Hell, I been to the edge. Just looked like more space." He shook his head.

"I don't know. People get awful lonely in the black. Like to get addlepated ourselves, we stay on this boat much longer. Captain'll drive us all off, one by one." She sat next to River on the mule and began to help sort.

"Aw, it ain't like they're never gonna see us again," Jayne dropped his 'I'm a nasty greedy evil merc' act like an old sack. "Rick calls you his sister, that means he'll wave and send post."

"I can't get to sexin' Simon through the post," Kaylee retorted glumly. "I ain't even got him to my bunk yet."

"A gentleman does not press a lady into acts for which she is not ready," River remarked quietly. "And Simon is not leaving. Won't let him."

"What?" Jayne and Kaylee spoke in unison.

River nodded looking over her shoulder at Simon in the infirmary, "Not safe for him with us. Not safe for any of you anymore. Better that we're gone. Serenity sails on, we begin to lay more false trails, hints of where we are, and Serenity is left alone."

"Well, there is that," To his credit Jayne didn't sound thrilled about she and Rick leaving. But she could hear in his thoughts that he understood. The idea of leading harm away from people he cared for was one he'd embraced ever since he became a merc.

"I thought you an' Rick had a place here. Now you're leaving us. Just like Shepherd Book." Kaylee's pretty face was sad. "Just like Inara..."

River hugged her sister, "You must take care of him for me. Please."

She looked over her shoulder at her brother as he exited the infirmary and joined them in the bay, smiling at Kaylee and kissing her cheek. "You all right bǎo bèi?"

Kaylee smiled at him tremulously, "I thought you was goin' along with River an' Rick."

He looked shocked at the thought, and sad at the same time, "No. No I... I'll admit that was my first thought. But then I remembered how fast the two of them can move. They're partners. And we're family but I'd be in the way. They're more likely to be identified if I'm with them. And... I really didn't want to leave you."

Kaylee's smile was pleased but worried as well, "But you two, you been together so long."

River watched with a half-smile as Simon nodded, "We have. But abandoning someone I love to stay with my sister out of a misguided sense of guilt or over protectiveness would be... unhealthy."
He kissed Kaylee's temple, "She'll always be my sister. But she doesn't need me to protect her. Or to take care of her. She has a husband for that."

The Reader smiled slowly, "And we will never be truly parted. I carry you with me wherever I go gē ge."

Simon nodded and hugged her tightly. "You'd better go and start packing. We'll be on Beaumonde in less than a day."

She nodded, "Things to be done before we depart."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So what do we think? I'm trying to make it clear that healthy as River seems she still has troubles. And for all that Mal says he gets it, he's not going to put the health of one person over the wellbeing of his entire crew. Sooner or later he and Riddick were going to truly clash over that. So a parting of ways was inevitable. But we are now officially in the BDM and progressing right along. I think I've got it about half written and then there's editing to do but my goal for finishing this story before the end of the year seems realistic. Maybe even before then.

Chinese Translations:

gē ge (big brother)

Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ. (Fuck everyone in the universe to death.)

bàng jiār (lover / partner)

Xiā zi mō xiàng (blind people touch an elephant (idiom, from Nirvana sutra); fig. unable to see the big picture / to mistake the part for the whole / unable to see the wood for the trees)

tā mā de (fucking)

Yú chūn zì jiāo de dà zi ròu (stupid inbred sack of meat)

bǎo bèi (treasured object used for "darling," "honey,"

Chinese Script Translations:

Bee-tzway. Wrong wuomun fah-tsai. (Shut up and make us wealthy)

Liu kou shui de biao zi he hou zi de ben er zi (Stupid son of a drooling whore and monkey)

Ai-yah. tyen-ah... (merciless hell)

Nee tzao ss-ma? Nee-yow wuh-kai chang? (You wanna bullet? You wanna bullet right in your throat?)
Quote Sources:

My poor body…requires it: I am driven on by the flesh; and he must needs go that the devil drives – All's Well That Ends Well – William Shakespeare

The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed. - Verses upon his Divine Poesy – Edmund Waller

Yet I argue not against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer right onward - Second Sonnet to Cyriac Skinner – Milton

For those that fly may fight again, Which he can never do that's slain. - Hudibras - Samuel Butler

Yesterday, upon the stair, I met a man who wasn't there he wasn't there again today I wish, I wish he'd go away... When I came home last night at three the man was waiting there for me but when I looked around the hall I couldn't see him there at all… Antigonish - Hughes Mearns

Great wits are sure to madness near allied, And thin partitions do their bounds divide - Absalom and Achitophet - Dryden

Yesterday, upon the stair I met a man who wasn't there - Antigonish - Hughes Mearns
He'd known from the start that their time on Serenity would be limited. Mal was too mule stubborn and got his back up too quick for Riddick and River to stay on permanent. Sooner or later Cap'n was bound to do something stupid and Riddick would take exception. Considering Mal and Riddick had both been sergeants in the war it was a miracle they hadn't killed each other. Both of them were used to being in command of their own crew and neither particularly enjoying being told no.

After River had pulled a knife on Mal up on the bridge he'd been surprised they'd stayed on. He'd have thought for certain Mal would throw them off on the nearest rock. He guessed having Zoe and Wash speak for them had helped keep Mal from going bughouse crazy.

He'd thought things had been better, at least for a while. Mal had seemed to come to an understanding. River had proved herself beyond talented at keeping Serenity under the radar and no one could touch Riddick for intimidation and violence, not to mention his own near genius brain.

Ciara moved towards him in her graceful way and stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek, "I'll be stayin' aboard whilst all o' you do business. I'm not wantin' to breathe Beaumonde's less than clean air overlong."

"Cain't say I blame ya," Jayne nodded leaning down for her caress and leaving one of his own on her lips. The doors to the bay were opening and the ramp folding down, letting the aforementioned polluted air into Serenity's atmosphere. River and Riddick were standing by, each with their weapons in place, wheeled cases near the doors. Ciara patted his arm sympathetically and headed towards the upper decks, most likely to the galley.

"Shea," River smiled up at him. She was trying he could tell, but there were lines of strain around her eyes. "Shouldn't be on that leg overmuch."

"Figure you two get paid an' ya'll be back here for your things an' gone. Mal's gonna need some sorta backup 'sides Zoe to come out of a meetin' with the twins in one piece." Jayne shrugged off the necessity. With Simon cleaning out the wound and working his top-ten-percent magic his leg felt better now than it would a weeks healing without the Doc around.

"You're not wrong," Riddick nodded. "Gonna need to find passage to see Universe. Pick up our boat."

"Head back to Herschel after that?" Wash asked as he came down the stairs with Zoe.

"Might," Riddick shrugged. "Few things to decide first."

He watched as Wash gave River a gentle hug and a kiss on the top of her head, "We're going to miss you two." He said quietly, his usual cheer dampened.

"Doc, you got your things all packed," Mal called in a 'I'm-in-such-a-good-mood-because-I've-been-paid-and-the-thorns-in-my-side-are-leaving' voice.

"And why would I do that?" Simon was the epitome of unpacked, with his shirt collar open, his gunbelt around his waist and cuffs rolled up. His hair was smoothed out and he wore his blue specs but that might have been because Kaylee was on his arm.
"Because you're leavin'?" Now Mal's voice was all 'why-am-I-havin'-this-conversation'.

"I hate to disappoint you Captain," Simon paused and the corner of his mouth jerked up in a half grin. "That's not true, disappointing you can be fairly enjoyable, especially in this case. But I'm not leaving. Riddick and River are leaving but it's not necessary that I go with them."

"Thought I said I was done carrying tourists about," Mal wasn't quite irked and Jayne guessed that he didn't hate the idea of still having a doctor on board but he didn't want to back down from his stance. Mal was awfully stupid that way sometimes.

"I believe, considering I've yet to take in any sights without violence, kidnapping or gunplay taking place amongst various medical dramas, that I cannot be considered a tourist." Simon retorted dryly, "Unless you and I have a significant difference in definition. I'm not paying you to cart me around Mal. You pay me to be the ship's doctor. And quite frankly, you need me."

"Sir, having Simon here would be considerable helpful in the next months." Zoe commented, a wealth of meaning in her words that Jayne wasn't quite getting.

River and Riddick though, her eyes darted towards Zoe and her eyes widened and he inhaled deeply and smirked at Wash as if he knew exactly what Zoe meant. Simon apparently took her meaning as well because he nodded, "I'll be studying the relevant texts, both Ciara and I, just in case."

"That's appreciated Doc," Wash nodded his gratitude.

"Am I or am I not the Captain of this gorrarn boat," Mal snapped in annoyance. He had that look on his face that never boded well. It was his 'I'm-the-captain-and-I-deserve-my-captainy-respect-an'-nothin'-goes-on-on-my-boat-that-I-don't-know-about-and-approve' expression. Jayne stifled a groan as Mal continued, "It ain't your decision to make."

Mal was leaning into Simon and getting in his face but the Doc didn't back down, "Captain, you have need of a doctor. You have one readily available and willing to sail on a ship that is, while homey, not of the caliber to which I'm accustomed." He patted Kaylee's hand with a side glance of apology for the truthful but not exactly complimentary words about Serenity. The mechanic nodded her understanding and Simon continued. "Serenity has other enticements though, Kaylee being chief among them. Quite simply Captain, I'm unwilling to leave her. I don't think you want me to try and follow you around the 'verse. I should think it would cause more trouble and bring more attention than you'd like. I'm many things but subtle is not among them."

"Tài kōng suǒ yǒu de xīng qì săi jǐn wǒ de pì gu," Mal cursed in annoyance as Zoe folded her arms and regarded him meaningfully. "Fine. Stay. But no more whining on about the food or the workin' conditions or what have you."

With that somewhat anticlimactic declaration he turned and glared at River and Riddick, "You two got your cut. Why're you still around?"

Riddick growled and Jayne wondered just how much more stupid Mal could get in one day. "Because we haven't got our cut. The transaction still shows 'pending'. Which means it's dependent on Fanty and Mingo and their cut. So, we're with you."
"Fine," Mal scowled and glared at Jayne, "No grenades."

"Since I ain't figured you was gonna rob the twins I didn't think to bring 'em." Jayne rolled his eyes. "Course, now you've said it, I'm sure we'll find a use for 'em an' we won't have 'em."

"Every-gorram-body's got somethin' to say today," Mal muttered in irritation. "Fine. Fine. Let's all have a parade."

Jayne nearly laughed at that, it was a bit like a parade. Everybody but Ciara was coming off the boat. Kaylee wanted to enjoy being on Simon's arm, Simon wanted to say farewell to his sister and Rick before they left obviously. Wash wanted to keep company with his wife. Jayne gave the bay an uneasy look, "Mal, maybe we oughta… put the ship on lockdown?"

Mal looked startled as he walked down the ramp but turned and regarded Jayne and the boat consideringly. "Not a bad thought," He conceded, which was more than Jayne thought he'd get, and set the ramp to close behind them, one of River's little toys in his palm to set the ship to fortress mode until they came back in range with the right codes. Every member of the crew had their own so if they split up no one was locked out, but at least the ship wasn't wide open for anyone to wander in with a push of the button.

"Ciara's the only one aboard right now," Jayne explained to Simon and Kaylee, though Wash was trying his darnedest to look like he understood already. "Don' set right with me, leavin' the door unlocked, so ta speak, an' her all alone."

"Well let's get this over with," Mal muttered.

Jayne rolled his eyes as a slovenly gigolo called out to an elegant lady, "Peow-liang de shaojie, nee goo wuo huhnee shang-hao. Wuh hway wrongnee shungkai roo hua."

The woman, sensibly, was having none of him, "Wuo dway-nee boo-woon, boo-jen."

Kaylee was talking earnestly to Riddick, as if the man needed advice, "Don't talk to the barkers, only the captains. You look the captain in the eye, know who you're dealing with."

Rick nodded and kissed Kaylee's head affectionately, "Didn't we deal with you when we came aboard Serenity mèi mei?"

"An' lookit what happened," Kaylee retorted with a half grin.

As they passed the gigolo he called out to Zoe, "Peow-liang de shaojie, booleetah, goowo. Zoe gave him one of her death glares that if looks could kill, should have decapitated the unwashed man but sadly did not.

Wash's response was less impressive, "Wo tai-tai boo peow-liang!" Jayne smothered a grin as Zoe's death glare transferred to her husband and Wash shrugged sheepishly.

Kaylee was still giving advice that neither River or Riddick needed, "Don't pay anybody in advance. And don't ride in anything with a Capissen Thirty-Eight engine, they fall right out of the sky."

Jayne shook his head as they arrived at the Maidenhead. The bar had a 'no guns' policy that made for the slow and vexing process of the gun check, during which they each put their guns in a drawer and were given a claim key in return. Jayne shook his head and handed his gun to Kaylee. "Go on back ta the ship would ya? Put this in the galley? I weren't thinkin' a the gun check or I'd've just left it." He had enough knives that he felt semi comfortable. River and Riddick hadn't bothered with their side arms. River had probably Read the meetin' place outa Mal's fuzzy brain and informed her husband.
"Sorry, forgot to tell Shea," River's quiet voice apologized from his elbow where she'd appeared in a blink. Kaylee didn't look thrilled at the idea of slinging a gun across her chest but at least the sight of it would get her back to Serenity safely if she walked at a fast clip.

"Ain't a problem. Kaylee really oughtn't be offa the boat anyway." Jayne shrugged. "Figure she wanted ta keep the Doc company and he just wants to be around you two as long as he can. So, I don't blame 'im, but he looks a mite more intimidatin' than Kaylee."

Simon slanted him an amused look, no doubt tickled over the 'mite more' part of the sentence. Doc sure had lightened up since he an' Kaylee started courtin' behavior. He guessed not worrying constantly about his sister helped with that too.

Finally, they made it through the gun check, the bouncer wasn't terribly watchful and didn't even seem to care about how many of them there were, handing out the claim keys without interest. The CorVue was buzzing on the wall, talkin' about Lilac and he looked up to hear the newsperson saying "... that it was a band of Reavers remains unconfirmed. The only survivors of the massacre apparently locked themselves in the Trade Station vault until—"

Jayne stopped paying attention except to scope out the rest of the screens. He trusted River and Universe's work to mess with the cortex but it was best to know where the gorram things were just in case. Just like hunting, better to not leave a trail if you could help it. Just behind him he caught a glimpse of Riddick adjusting his specs and knit cap while River played with the hat she wore as if she were fussing with the set of like a frilly sort of girl. Her hands and the brim blocked her eyes and half her face pretty well as they descended the stairs.

"I don't much like this Mal," Jayne remembered how much he hated the sunken bar, every exit a floor up, making a quick escape wishful thinking.

"Well this's the spot and we're stuck with it so quit gripin'," Mal retorted.

Jayne rolled his eyes and would have snarled back but Mingo and Fanty practically popped up in front of Mal. "Domestic troubles?" Mal's irked sigh would have been funny under other circumstances as the twins continued, '"Cause we don't wanna interrupt." The first twin nodded, "A man should keep his house in order."

Now Jayne did grin because the twins loved to confound people but Mal could always tell 'em apart, greeting them properly by name with a nod to each in turn, "Mingo. Fanty."

Mingo pointed at his brother, "He's Mingo."

Mal shook his head, "He's Fanty. You're Mingo."

Mingo looked irritated while River and Riddick looked amused. They could tell as easy as pie and they'd told Jayne the trick of it. Now that he'd been exposed to the twins he could hear the difference too, "Ghahh! How is it you always know?"

"Fanty's prettier," Mal bullshitted as he pulled out a chair. Jayne leaned against the wall of the booth and watched. Mingo's voice was a touch higher than Fanty's. Apparently Mal could tell the difference even over a bad wave. "Feel to do some business?"

Mingo was surveying their group, i.e. most of the crew, "Bit crowded, isn't it? As you see, we come unencumbered by thugs."

"Which means at least four of the guys already in here are yours." Mal wasn't a complete idiot after all. "All's one. I'll just keep Jayne with me."
Jayne slanted a glance at River and Riddick who nodded, "Be at the bar." Riddick said shortly. When the twins looked as if they were about to object Riddick gave them a look that ought to have sliced their gizzards, "We ain't got our cut yet an' damned if we're leavin' without it."

Whether it was Rick's tone or his stare, the twins subsided, while Zoe was quietly attempting to reason with Mal. Jayne could have told her that wouldn't take. "Sir, are you sure you don't—"

Mal shook his head, "Go. Go get yourselves a nice romantic meal."

Wash grinned happily, "Those are my two favorite words!" Zoe was giving him her 'why-did-I-marry-you-again? look' to which Wash replied, "Honey? 'Meal'?"

Mal nodded at Zoe and Jayne rubbed his forehead as Mal used his 'I'm-so-relaxed-and-calm-reassuring' voice, "It's business. We're fine."

Jayne watched as they left, and saw Zoe give Rick a little nod before meeting Jayne's eyes meaningfully. They wouldn't be much past the entrance to the bar then. That was good. If they had to make a run for it, trying to find half the crew scattered across the docks would surely be the worst waste of time.

He turned back to the twins just in time to see Fanty slip a few coins to one of the saloon girls who started doing a fan dance that was more about wiggling and blocking the cameras than grace. He shook his head, River could have done the same thing and made it actually look like dancing.

"Quite a crew you've got," Mingo was in the mood to make conversation for some reason even as Mal nonchalantly shoved the bag of cash towards their feet.

"Yeah, they're a fine bunch of ruebens," Mal nodded.

"How you keep them on that crap boat is the subject of much musing tween me and Fanty." Mingo sent his twin an indecipherable look.

Fanty added, "Our end is forty, precious."

"My muscular buttocks it's forty—" Jayne felt his hands twitching of their own accord to his empty gun belt. Beside him Mal made a slight pained noise as if Jayne's words had injured him.

"It is as of now. Find anyone around going cheaper." Mingo told them flatly.

Fanty concurred, "Find anyone around going near a sorry lot like you in the first instance."

Jayne caught a glimpse of River moving around the bar while Riddick lounged near the base of the stairs, the two of them looking like a pair of mountain lions, just waiting to pounce. For all they called each other wolves there was something very feline about his brother and sister. It were a pure pleasure to watch them move around, ready for a fight, or a dance, dependin' on the music. Mal saw where he was looking and gave an irked jerk of his mouth towards the twins. Apparently Cap'n needed all of his brain to deal with the cheatin' pricks.

Fanty was practically waxin' philosophic, going on and on, "You're unpredictable, Mal. Which is the
single worst thing to be in this business. Mingo and me, we's greedy. Could set your watch by our greed; it wavers never. But you... you run when you oughta fight, fight when you oughta deal. Makes a business person twitchy."

Mingo picked up the thread, "Adding in the fact that your ship's older than the starting point of time and you can see you's charity cases to the likes of us."

Jayne snorted, "Serenity's more sound than yer boots or yer brains. Ain't ever let us down. Unlike you."

Mal actually gave him an approving look, which Jayne thought was a bit ill timed considering the shock of it near gave him a gorrarn heart spasm, before the Cap'n glared at the twins. "Well here's a foul thought. I conjured you two were incompetent; sent us out not knowing there were Reavers about. Now I'm thinking you picked us out because you did."

Mingo shrugged, "That were a sign of faith, boy. And it doesn't affect our forty per. Danger is, after all, your business."

"Reavers ain't business, double dickless." Jayne nearly snarled the words. "Maybe I oughta fetch that arrow harpoon thing pierced through my leg and shove it up yer ass. See how you like dealin' with it." He was dimly aware of the stupid CV screen increasing its sound as a commercial for Fruity Oaty Bars came on. The gorrarn ad would have had to work its way up to mindless and the cartoon characters were bizarre animals. Weirdest thing was, River was staring up at the blasted thing as if she was bewitched.

He couldn't say why he heard her voice. He just knew he did. And Rick heard it too, straightening up from his pronounced slouch as if coming to attention. River's elegant core tones whispering, "Miranda."

Jayne had seen River fight; she and Rick went at it all the time, sparring or just working off excess energy when they couldn't retreat to their bunk. But this was something different. He'd only seen this once or twice, in the middle of the night while Simon watched safely from the catwalks above the cargo bay.

Moving a damn sight faster than any eighteen-year-old girl had any business moving, she strode over to the nearest table, where two men were sharing a drink. Then they both shared being on the receiving end of two well placed kicks from a girl that just took them both out.

They weren't just any kicks. Them was kicks by folks trained to it. Jayne had seen her kick like that before but never with that look in her eyes, as if she weren't even seein' folks as people, just obstacles. From the look on Mal's face he'd seen kicks like that too, but it hadn't been from anywheres good.

River wasn't even close to done. She kicked the two men's table into a card player at the next table even as she swept a bottle off it behind her. That bottle hit a fella square on the nose, which was quite a feat, seeing as how the man was behind River. Jayne guessed being a Reader came in handy like that.

Riddick had closed in on his wife and taken the place of the four bar patrons who were trying to gang up on her, dispatching them in a slightly less lethal manner than River and began to block her movements, fighting back in a way that Jayne knew Mal hadn't ever seen before. This was in earnest fighting, the kind that the two of them had been careful to keep hidden from the Captain. Mal was nervous enough about them, knowing they could fight like this, that little River had that in her, Captain'd throw them off the boat faster'n he could spit.
Two men came at them from either side, one brandishing a knife, doubtless secure in the notion that she couldn't take 'em both while Rick was distracting her. River relieved them of that notion by doing a perfect split, thus ducking both attacks, then reached over her head and grabbed the wrist of the knife guy and used his momentum to stab the other one while Rick grabbed another would be combatant and threw him over the bar like something outa a cortex movie, complete with breaking mirrors and shattering bottles.

Jayne became aware of a possible complication at the same time as Mal. When River had begun her little spree of violence two things had happened. The first was the bouncer had come a-runnin' with his shockrod, looking a damn sight less bored. It hadn't taken him long to get to her but River had made impressive use of the time. The second was that three men of considerable body weight moved to stand between River and the twins.

While they were distracted Jayne reached under the table and grabbed the bag of money. Since Fanty and Mingo hadn't picked it up he figured it had momentarily slipped their minds. And after this little episode it was doubtful the twins would do business with them again so he'd rather they keep as much of the take as possible. Especially since the twins had been planning to screw Serenity out of an extra fifteen percent.

Without even a little effort, River relieved the bouncer of his shockrod and used it on him. Jayne had been on the receiving end of a shockrod once, as had Mal, at a tavern on Boros where someone took umbrage to either Mal's brown coat or maybe Jayne's blue eyes, or either one of their attitudes, he couldn't be sure which, and he wasn't keen to relive the experience. He'd lain twitching on the floor next to Mal for the better part of an hour and couldn't walk straight for two days. It had taken Mal the better part of a week to regain his equilibrium.

After finishing with the bouncer, who fell to the floor to commence his own hour of twitchiness, River then used the shockrod on Fanty and Mingo's three bodyguards.

Thankfully Riddick tapped her on the shoulder to get her attention and she spun, kicking her husband in the solar plexis as if he were just another fella in the bar and discarded the now recharging shockrod. Jayne shook his head, Mal's jaw had dropped open, "River?"

Jayne wasn't sure why Mal felt the need to ask, it wasn't like she was a different person, but Fanty and Mingo looked a lot like Mal, "You...know that girl? That's your crew?"

Jayne smirked at them, "Lookin' a lot less like we're the raggedy edge now don't we?"

Mal shook his head, still dumfounded, "I really don't." He turned and looked at them, "You two had better get while you still can."

"Don't tell us what to do," Mingo retorted angrily even as he and Fanty made a run for it.

Some had managed to get out of the Maiden head. Others weren't so lucky. River was simply everywhere, and if she wasn't, Rick was. She kicked around a corner to kick a man she couldn't see right in the face. Rick was throwing people away from her towards the stairs right and left but for all his strength and speed River was gorram near manic and faster than he was.

Mal made a beeline for the gun holder and Jayne darted past him to the entrance, bellowing for Simon as River and Rick fought and Mal scrambled to get his gun out of lockbox.

When he turned back to see how Rick was doing subduing his wife some idiot who'd managed to sneak a gun past the bouncer, or was on Fanty and Mingo's payroll, pulled out his weapon even as Mal finally got the drawer open to get his.
River grabbed the man's arm and snapped his elbow with a sickening crunch. The man screamed in pain and shot himself in the gut, no small feat. Then she kicked the man's gun in the air, kicked someone else who hadn't learned the futility of a frontal assault, and caught the gun just as Mal got his out of the drawer.

Four things happened simultaneously. Riddick reached his wife and wrapped her up in his arms, setting his teeth on her neck with a growl that echoed through the bar. Mal's gun pointed at River. River's gun pointed at Mal. And Simon pushed into the Maidenhead and shouted, "Eta kooram nah smech!"

River slumped in Riddick's arms, immediately asleep. Mal was staring from them to Jayne and Simon and said the first sensible thing Jayne had heard him utter in two days, "I think maybe we ought to leave."

She couldn't wake up. And she couldn't stop the dreams that weren't dreams. Thoughts flowed like water, but without a beginning, and no end in sight. The Operative could not remember the time before he became an Operative of parliament. This was not due to any flaw, but rather to training: Those memories had been removed, deemed both irrelevant and detrimental to his ability to perform his function. He was as the limbs to the parliament's brain, carrying out their instructions. To build better worlds, for all the citizens of the Alliance.

To carry the analogy further, the information he had obtained from Dr. Mathias served as the central nervous system, directing the limbs' actions.

To locate River Tam, he needed to get a message to her, and he needed a delivery system that would have at least a chance of working. His solution, so brilliant because it was so mundane, was to use the one thing seen by more people than anyone else: advertisements. Ads were quite literally everywhere and no matter where Simon may have taken River, it was unlikely she would be able to escape the inundation of advertising.

Sooner or later, she would come across an ad for Fruity Oaty Bars. And then the first phase would be complete.

Sure enough, she did—on Beaumonde in a disreputable establishment of the type that invariably came into being regardless of how hard the Alliance tried to stamp them out. Human nature was never easy to change.

He stood on the bridge of his ship and watched the feed from the Maidenhead. His eyes, cold as the Black, met hers through the CorVue camera and he smiled, pleased, almost warm, "Hello again. Yes, it's me. I'm glad you've finally asked for me."

'I didn't! I didn't!' She tried to argue, tried to fight it, the conditioning, the programming, and couldn't. No more than he could. But he didn't know she was there. Didn't hear her, didn't realize he'd brought her right to his side. Right into his mind where she could see everything that had been done to him, how he'd been deliberately maimed, crippled in his reasoning, remade into the parliament's tool. And hidden, deep in his mind, where he could never find it, the secret to undoing what had been done. To him, and to her. All programming could be rendered inert to triggers. With the right sequence of codes.

Ensign Carmelito said, "Nothing on the fellow who carried her out, though we can posit a guess it's Riddick. The others… one could be her brother. The last one standing in the bar besides those two…"
We got a partial pos on a retinal—man who had the gun on her is Malcolm Reynolds. Captains a Firefly-class transport ship, Serenity. Bound by law five times, smuggling, tariff dodge—not convicted.” Carmelito shrugged, "Nothing here that would—"

"The ship. The name of the ship." The Operative already knew of the connection between the Tams and Reynolds. A fed named Dobson had boarded Reynold's ship and then both Dobson and the ship disappeared after Dobson called in. The fed had taken a second shot at the crew several months back and, again, failed. A bounty hunter named Jubal Early was last reported to be chasing down the Tams, partnered up with Dobson, and then he too, disappeared without a trace. A simple salvage vessel shouldn't have been so safe a haven. But if Riddick had been with the Tams all along… And something about the name Serenity…”

Softly to the computer in his spectacles, the Operative said, "Crossref: Malcolm Reynolds, Serenity."

Text started to scroll on his lens and River read it as he did. It wasn't hard to deduce what conclusion he would come to. The Operative was brilliant but he wasn't a genius. Or a Reader. Not like her. But he smiled.

"Sir?" Carmelito asked, sounding confused.

"Serenity Valley. Bloodiest battle of the entire war." Some of the information came from the scrolling text but he, and she, actually knew most of it already. He had only needed the prompt. "The Independents held the valley for seven weeks, two of them after their high command had surrendered. Sixty-eight percent casualty rate."

"Of course, sir," Carmelito said. "I just didn't—"

The text hit Reynold's service record, and the Operative said, "There." The scrolling stopped. She didn't need to read but the Operative studied the text in front of his eyes and shook his head. "If the feds ever bothered to crossref justice files with war records... Yes, our Mr. Reynolds was a sergeant, Fifty-seventh Overlanders. Volunteer. Fought at Serenity till the very last. By the time the war ended he was in command of the entire valley of Browncoats by sheer virtue of rank." Now it made sense—Dobson, Early, how the Tams had remained safe. Given Riddick's war record he and the captain might have come to an accord, "This man is an issue. This man hates us."

Carmelito had called up the rest of the records of the unit and crossreffed. "First mate Zoe Washburne, formerly Corporal Zoe Alleyne, also in the Fifty-Seventh. Career army, looks like."

"She's followed him far." That kind of loyalty could only be inspired by the best leaders. The Operative was starting to think Tam had chosen his refuge quite well indeed. To his spectacles, he said, "Give me the crew, registered passengers." He sighed, "Our captain is a passionate man, no room for subtlety. He's bound to have some very obvious—"

Then he saw it. A licensed Companion named Inara Serra who had rented one of Serenity's shuttles for a year, and who had recently ended that arrangement to teach at the new Companion Training House on Persephone. "—weakness." He finished with a smile.

She could only watch while he scanned the rest of the crew, noting Shea's military record in common with Riddick's and Wash's stint in a POW camp. Kaylee was glossed over and Ciara wasn't even listed as crew. It was a thorough investigation and analysis and the pleasing news was that the work she and Mr. Universe had done held up to the deepest scrutiny. The fake ship ids had held true and there was no record of Serenity past the first comm buoy out of Beaumonde. For all intents and purposes the ship had disappeared.
Mal was looking at River cradled against his chest as if she were a monster who'd spring to life and begin cutting down he and the crew. "Think we'd be better off with her locked up." The Captain commented in a tone that made it clear his comment was more of a command.

The cuffs and length of chain Mal produced from a storage locker received the type of reaction anyone who wasn't Mal could predicted. Riddick's growl reverberated through the room, "And what in the tā mā de dì yù do you think you're gonna do with them?"

"Fixin' to lock her up where she can't take a fit and kill us all in our sleep," Mal retorted and got a growl of fury in return.

"You try to put chains on her and it won't be my wife you have to worry about killing you," Riddick snarled as River whimpered in her sleep.

"Like she don't know how ta get outa cuffs anyway," Shea commented offhandedly as he made sure the cargo bay doors were locked and encrypted for good measure, with Zoe adding her own codes in addition to his. Shea had dropped the bag of cash near the door when they'd rushed in, now he picked it up and threw it to Mal. "Figured we weren't gonna be doin' business with the twins again. An' they took off without their share a the take. Likely think someone snatched it up after they ran."

Mal nodded and jerked his head at Riddick. "She stays locked up or the two of you can get off right now. Don't rightly care if its safe or not. I won't risk my crew or my ship."

Riddick growled and carried his wife up to their bunk, gently settling her on the bed and covering her with the blanket that had come with the bunk before heading up to the galley where he'd heard Mal asking everyone else to gather.

"May I see her?" Simon was asking when Riddick entered the galley and stood against the wall nearest the door.

He wasn't given a chance to answer as Mal replied, "She's still napping just now. And I believe you've got some storytelling to do."

Before the story could commence Wash entered the room, "We're out of atmo, plotted for Haven. No one following as of yet. Got the cover ident we used to drop him off back on as of the last comm buoy."

Kaylee perked up, "Haven? We're gonna see Shepherd Book?"

Mal nodded, "We got to lay low. And I could fair use some spiritual guidance right about now." He glowered at Simon and Riddick impartially. "I am a lost lamb; what in hell happened back there?"

Wash wasn't quite grinning but he was obviously amused, "Start with River beating up three bodyguards and the bouncer. 'Cause I don't think that's ever getting old."

Zoe was thinking more long term, "Do we know if anyone was killed?"

Riddick nodded, "At least two will bleed out."

"It's likely more," Mal answered. "I know she meant to kill me 'fore the Doc put her to sleep," He looked at Simon quizzically, "Which how exactly does that work anyhow?"

"Safeword." Simon took a breath. "The people who helped me break River and Rick out, they had
intel that River, and the other subjects, were being embedded with behavioral conditioning. They taught me a safeword, in case... something happened."

"Not sure I get it," Kaylee was frowning.

"It's a way to control her," Riddick growled. For all the work they'd done on the other triggers, subliminals weren't something they'd had the ability to simulate. Though now that the Fruity Oaty Bar ad was out there, Universe should be able to dig it out so he and River could recreate the conditions and start to break that trigger down as well.

Simon nodded, seemingly grateful to speak with Kaylee rather than Mal, "A phrase that's encoded in her brain, that makes her fall asleep. If I speak the words, she falls into sleep. Abruptly."

Riddick moved away from the wall as Mal's expression suggested an ugly conclusion, "'In case something happened.' The Captain repeated Simon's early words.

"What?" Simon blinked at him.

"You feel to elaborate on what that something might be?" Mal spat the words out, "I mean they taught you that fancy safeword, they must've figured she was gonna, what—start uncontrollably crocheting?"

"They never said what—" Simon shook his head.

"And you never did ask," Mal grabbed Simon and threw him against the bulkhead. "Eight months. Eight months you had her on my boat knowing full well she might go monkeyshit at the wrong word and you never said a thing—"

Simon was remarkably composed for someone Mal was ready to throttle to death and it wasn't because Riddick was looming behind the Captain. Simon hadn't even seemed to notice Riddick, nor had Mal, which might have been a little insulting if the situation was less fraught, "I brought her out here so they couldn't get to her, I don't even know how they—"

"My ship. My crew! You had a gorramn timebomb living with us!" Mal didn't want to hear any of Simon's concerns. Riddick tilted his head as he heard River's heart speed up, she was awake, listening, hearing everything that came spewing out of Mal's mouth. "What if she went off in the middle of dinner, or in bunk with Kaylee, did that give you a moment's pause?"

Simon looked from Mal to Kaylee, his eyes concerned but resolute, "I thought she was getting better. I would never endanger Kaylee or the crew."

Riddick had enough of Mal nearly strangling his little brother and grabbed the Captain by the collar of his long brown coat that the man would sooner die than live without. "And he had me. Ain't like I'm tā mā de. River's had triggers embedded in her since day one and we've broken most of 'em down. Subliminals are the only ones left."

"Triggers," Shea was rubbing a hand up and down Ciara's back, reassuring his sweetheart. "Triggers to fight?"

"Fight, infiltrate, Read..." Riddick shrugged. "They tried it with me. But I'm older. Didn't take. But River an' me, we got a system, figured it out while we're still in the Academy. She gets triggered and I engage her, keep her busy, and put my teeth on her neck. The animal in her, knows I'm alpha...she submits. That breaks the trigger. Brings her out of it without putting her to sleep."

Mal's open, sputtering, mouth at that news was not a particularly attractive sight. "All...all along.
You've had a gorram assassin on my boat all this time and you never said nothin'."

Riddick growled down at him furiously. "We told you there were things we couldn't say yet. But you, you just can't tā mā de listen to reason. There are only a few things that set her off. It ain't easy to do or the programmin' d be pointless. Subliminals, I figured they were there, but we hadn't run across 'em yet. Universe has been working on digging out what they are so we could break them down too." He dropped Mal to his feet, "And if you have a problem with assassins then you should have paid more attention to me an' Shea. Independent's weren't lily white."

"She goes woolly again, and Riddick ain't around, we'd have to put a bullet in her," Zoe commented softly, worry in her voice for both River and the crew.

"It's crossed my mind." Mal agreed in a quiet voice.

Riddick and Simon both stiffened in outrage, Zoe's idea was a bullet to stop River or hold her off until Riddick or Simon could get to her, a shot to the leg or middle to impede movement. It had been River's own suggestion, knowing Zoe would have the stomach to do it if it needed to be done. Mal's agreement did not have the same tenor to it as the First Mate's suggestion.

"May I see her?" Simon asked stiffly. Mal nodded and Riddick tossed him the keycode to the bunk.

"Her hands'll be bruised up, but she should be fine," He told his little brother. "Wasn't much worse'n when we spar." Simon moved down the hallway and disappeared into the bunk.

"Can I make a suggestion that doesn't involve violence, or is this the wrong crowd?" Wash asked in his best sardonic tones.

"Honey..." Zoe looked at him worriedly and her shoulders relaxed as she saw her husband hadn't taken her comment the wrong way.

"Fanty and Mingo might be coming down hard on us, or the laws—" Wash began reasonably. "Or maybe nobody could be bunged about our little social brawl. We need to get our bearings. I think we need to talk to Mr. Universe."

Riddick nodded his agreement with Wash, at least someone had some tiān shā de sense.

Mal actually acted like he had half a brain for once and nodded, "That may be the best idea I've heard all day." He chuckled without mirth, "Which is a sad commentary on my day. Make it happen Wash. Let's see Mr. Universe."

Riddick had known Mr. Universe back when he was simply Jacob Ulysses. For all he knew that wasn't his real name either. It didn't matter much, Universe only responded to one name, no matter what it said on whatever ident he was carrying.

After they'd dropped the Walden off on U's moon River had gotten the whole story of flight school out of Wash. Apparently 'Manfred Asbach' was a prodigy of a pilot, at least on paper. Every time he entered the simulator it flew perfectly, because he'd told it to days earlier. Every time he got onto an actual ship, he had preprogrammed the auto pilot to do precisely what the lesson called for. Even when he did poorly, since some exercises could not be programmed, he hacked into the cortex that held the grades and changed them to perfection after the fact.

According to what River could find on the cortex, Mr. Universe was a certified pilot. Even though
he couldn't actually fly a ship. He was also an ordained shepherd, a professional planet diver and a licensed prospector. Riddick was willing to bet he couldn't actually perform the tasks related to those professions either.

Mr. Universe had 'acquired' the moon he lived on the same way he'd achieved all his certifications. He'd husked the computers of a communications complex and had them inform the owner of the complex that the terraforming on the moon they were using was becoming undone and that the atmo would be unbreathable inside a month. They pulled out quickly and Mr. Universe pulled in, setting himself up with dozens of cortexes and the ability to penetrate almost any electronic device in the 'verse. The only company he cared to have was his Love-bot Lenore.

Mr. Universe had remained off the Alliance's radar simply by never letting them know he existed. He had such a tremendous facility with the cortex that it was impossible for there to be any trace of him. Wash only knew who he was because he'd confronted Universe at graduation, refusing to believe that someone so inept could beat him out. For some reason Universe had told Wash the truth, and in exchange for Wash not bruising his knuckles on Universe's face, offered to occasionally help Wash out with cortex work or information.

Wash had confided that tidbit to Riddick and River after they'd dropped off the Walden on Universe's moon. He'd had a bit of a surprise back then when he learned Riddick and Universe already knew each other.

Now Universe was practically giggling as he muttered over the data feeds he'd found of River beating up most of a bar full of men. "Oh, this is good. This is—" He giggled again, "She's beating up all the burly men and I'm having a catharsis, it's happening right now."

Riddick winced, echoing Wash's expression. Universe's catharses weren't something you really wanted to see firsthand. He usually wanted a brainwipe afterwards.

"Richard… you guys always bring me the very best violence." Universe sighed happily, "You think you're in a hot place?"

"That's what we're looking to learn," Wash confirmed. "Is there any follow up? A newswave?"

Universe giggled again, "There's is no 'news', there's the truth of the signal, what I see, and there's the puppet theatre the somnambulant public. Monkey taught to say the word 'monkey', lead story on thirty-two planets. But the slum riots on Hera, not a—"

Mal interrupted which made Wash wince and Riddick sigh in irritation. Mal knew better than to interrupt Universe mid rant. The man didn't like to be interrupted and it made further interactions with him touchy as he became tetchy and cantankerous. "What about this? Did this make the... puppet theatre?"

A glance at Riddick's forbidding expression and Universe forwent his tetchy reaction for a moment, "No sir. And no lawforce flags, either. I hadda go into the security feed direct."

"You can do that?" Mal's question was calculated to flatter in its subtle amazement and made up for his earlier faux pas of interrupting.

"Can't stop the signal, Mal. Everything goes somewhere and I go everywhere. Security feeds are a traipe to access. And I wasn't the first one in, this has prints on it." Universe was successfully distracted from that disturbing news as he watched River take out four people in succession with the shockrod. "Oh! Look at her go! Everyone is getting bruises and contusions. Contoooonsions."
Zoe had caught the bad news even if Mal was still reeling from Universe's excitement, "So somebody else has been fed this. That doesn't like me too well."

Riddick shook his head with a frown as Mal mulled over that news. Universe, oblivious to anything but his own self as always, looked up at Zoe with pity, "Zoe, you sultry minx, stop falling in love with me. You're just gonna embarrass yourself." He keyed up a capture of himself in a tuxedo and Lenore in the same seat and position but wearing a wedding dress. "I have a commitment to my Lovebot. It was a very beautiful ceremony, Lenore wrote her own vows, I cried like a baby, a hungry, angry baby." His attention was taken up by the feed from the Maidenhead as Simon spoke the magic words, "And she falls asleep. Which, she would be sleepy."

Mal was done mulling, "Can you go back? See if anybody spoke with her 'fore she acted up, made any kind of contact with her?"

Universe rewound the feed to just before River, literally, kicked off the melee. Her dark eyes were staring right up at the screen as she whispered, 'Miranda' and began to move away.

The Captain was frowning, "Miranda? Go back further."

"No," Universe pulled another screen closer and the rat-a-tat-tat of keyboard typing began to transmit over the wave.

"Um... please?" Mal was using his most sincerest fake voice as Universe worked.

The cortex genius's hands moved rapidly, he'd evidently found something and there was no need to go back. The Fruity Oaty Bar commercial came up. Riddick exchanged a look with Wash as the pilot groaned. Being on the bridge most of the time they had occasion to see many the Fruity Oaty Bar ads and their primary accomplishment was to convince the pilot and co-pilot to sample the products of Fruity Oaty Bar's biggest competitor. Based on the text on the bottom of the screen Universe was showing them, the ad had been what River was looking at right before she whispered 'Miranda' and commenced to kicking all sorts of ass.

"Friends and potential lovers," Riddick found himself hoping fervently that Universe was referring to Zoe with that second designation. "I have good news and I have the other kind. Good is you're very smart. Someone is talking to her."

Riddick growled, "The subliminal commands are in the Oaty Bar commercials."

"Broadwaved across the gorram 'verse to trigger her," Mal realized.

"Now taking a moment to be grateful River's never been on the bridge when the stupid thing came blaring across the cortex," Wash commented.

Mr. Universe nodded, his expression sober, "I been seeing this code pop up all over, last few weeks. And I cannot crack it."

That little tidbit dropped midstream got everyone's attention though Universe continued speaking, "It's Alliance and its high military, so here then is the bad. Someone has gone to enormous trouble to find your little friend. And found her they have."

Riddick folded his arms and regarded the other three members of the crew wondering if River could crack that code given time and opportunity. "Send that code to River's cortex U. See if between the two of you maybe it can be cracked."

Mr. Universe nodded and looked at him, "Rick... Do you all know what it is you're carrying?"
Mal gave him a short nod and Universe cut the wave, "I believe we'd best be on our way, quick like." He stood and left the bridge.

Riddick frowned and scrubbed a hand over his face, "I'll be down with River."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Questions, comments, great thoughts? I've made a few changes but not many. I'm hoping just enough to keep things interesting. Love to hear what all of you think.

Chinese Translations:
Tai kong suo you de xing qiu sai jin wo de pi gu (Shove All the Planets in the universe up my ass)
mei mei (little sister)
ta ma de di yu (fucking hell)
ta ma (fucking)
tian sha de (goddamn)

Script Chinese Translations:
Peow-liang de shaojie, nee goo wuo huhnee shang-hao. Wuh hway wrongnee shungkai roo hua... (Pretty lady, hire me for the night and I'll open you like a flower...)
Wuo dway-nee boo-woon, boo-jen... (I neither see nor hear you...)
Peow-liang de shaojie, booleetah, goowo... (Pretty lady, forget him and hire me...)
Wo tai-tai boo peow-liang! (My wife is not pretty!)

Russian Translation (Which I'm told is Russian but I have no way of being certain):
Eta kooram nah smech! (This is very ridiculous! Literally - This is for hens to laugh)

Quote Sources:
OMG I had no quotes here… maybe because Riddick and River didn't do as much talking. Maybe next time.
Waking up after Simon had to make her sleep was never easy. Her defenses down, she became entangled in a thousand minds, sleeping and awake, screaming in rage and, just as terrible, shouting with apathetic silence. Withdrawing from the Operative's mind and rebuilding the barriers between her own thoughts and those of the rest of the 'verse, the crew, Simon, Riddick…

"From childhood's hour I have not been as others were—I have not seen as others saw—I could not bring my passions from a common spring— From the same source I have not taken my sorrow—I could not awaken my heart to joy at the same tone— And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—" The words were ancient, from a time long before Earth That Was had died but they perfectly expressed her feelings.

"Then—in my childhood—in the dawn of a most stormy life—was drawn from ev'ry depth of good and ill the mystery which binds me still— From the torrent, or the fountain— from the red cliff of the mountain— from the sun that 'round me roll'd in its autumn tint of gold— From the lightning in the sky as it pass'd me flying by— From the thunder, and the storm— and the cloud that took the form (when the rest of Heaven was blue) of a demon in my view—" She looked at Simon and saw his understanding, the storm that was coming for them. They'd tried so hard to put it off, to hide from it, keep it from endangering innocents around them. But it was here now. "Hell is empty and all the devils are here."

Simon's hands were gentle as they helped her sit up and began to clean the blood off her knuckles and face. "He's afraid of me," She whispered. It was because of that Mal wanted her confined. In the back of his mind he knew she could break out. Knew locks and steel weren't proof against her any more than they were proof against a typhoon. But it made him feel better. He was choosing to disregard her skill with knives and firearms and the fact that she and Riddick had a bunk full of them. The Captain was very skilled at denial.

Her brother's face was heartbroken and she could see that he didn't believe it was true. "I'm sorry..." He hesitated and shook his head, "Jayne isn't, Wash and Zoe are worried, but I don't think they're afraid. It's the same with Kaylee and Ciara."

"They should be. What I'll show them... Oh God... Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng." River shook her head, panic at the thought quickening her heart and breath.

"It's okay, it's okay." Her brother's hands ran through her loose hair, petting her, trying to comfort her even as Riddick dropped into the bunk and gathered her into his arms.

He was grounding her in his scent and presence but the words still came tumbling out, "Show me off like a dog, old men covered in blood, it never touched them but they're drowning in it... so much loss..." She looked up at him and then at Simon, "I don't know what I'm saying. I never know what I'm saying..."

Riddick's hand rubbed her neck, and handed her one of his shivs, "Blood, remember Qīng Xiāng. Blood binds us." He cut his thumb on the edge of it and pressed it to her lower lip, "Blood to blood."

She couldn't stop her trembling but managed to nick her thumb with the tip of his shiv, "Blood to blood." River wiped a smear of her blood to his lower lip.
"Your blood on my lips," He murmured the words of the rite gently. "Your life within me."

Her breathing was evening out, "Your blood on my lips. Your life within me." She exhaled slowly and relaxed against him. A couple of sticky bandages later and the shiv was back in his belt.

"Better?" Simon hadn't even blinked when they'd begun the ritual, having seen it more than once since he'd broken them out of the Academy. When she nodded be breathed a sigh of relief. His question, when it came, was gentle, "In the Maidenhead, you said something. When you were triggered, do you remember?" He looked at Riddick and then back to her face, "The Captain saw you say something on the feed."

River nodded slowly, "Miranda."

Simon repeated the word thoughtfully, "Miranda."

She couldn't stop the bitter laugh, or the words that came tumbling out, "Ask her. She'll show you all."

"Show us what? Who is Miranda?" He'd had a horrible thought and she could only blame his panic over her regression for his lack of logic. "Am I... talking to Miranda now?"

River rolled her eyes and gave him her best 'you're-such-a-boob' look. "I'm not a multiple, dumbo."

Her expression and bratty 'I'm-your-little-sister-and-I'm-nutso-but-still-brainer-than-you-are' tone and phrasing reassured him as to her relative sanity more than anything else could. "No. Right." He half smiled, "But I think somehow when they triggered you it brought this up, this memory."

"It isn't mine. The memory." She shook her head, "I didn't bring it and I shouldn't have to carry it, it isn't mine." She took his hand, "Don't make me sleep again. I can't keep anything out when you have to make me sleep. He's looking so hard for us, it dragged me right into his mind."

"I won't," Simon promised quietly. "Not unless I have absolutely no other choice. I promise you." He regarded her steadily, "I think you'd rather I make you sleep than have you be triggered and harm Wash or Ciara or Kaylee. Even Jayne and the Captain."

"You're right," River nodded.

Riddick frowned down at her, "Right into whose mind? Mal's?"

She shook her head, "The Operative's." She wrapped her hand around Riddick's fingers, feeling the warmth and strength in his hands while she told them what he'd learned. His fingers rubbed over her wrists and forearms, his warmth soothing her in what was pure instinctive caring. "He's gone to set a trap. He'll look for Inara and find Shazza. We need to warn Inara to go to the doctor, quickly, before he gets to Persephone. Hell is empty and all the devils are here."

Riddick brought up her cortex and handed it to her, waving Inara. When Inara's face filled the screen, the Companion smiled to see them before it faded at their worried expressions. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"The storm is coming," River whispered. "It will come for you. You won't survive it, not whole. Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thon shalt not escape calumny."

"There's an Operative of Parliament after us," Riddick explained from over her shoulder. "He means to set a trap for Mal. You're the bait."
"Need you to not be at the training house," River told her. "Go to the doctor."

"River, bǎo bǎo, anywhere I go, he'll find me," Inara reasoned. "Isn't it better that I stay here, hidden? I can tell Sheydra I'm going to the doctor, that I'll be back soon. And then I can hide under the temple. There are plenty of places. Persephone had its share of Independent sympathizers in the war. If I hadn't spent so much time on Serenity I might not have noticed but some of the walls inside don't match the outside. There are passages that lead to hidden rooms in the cellars. I could take a cab away and walk back, slip in the back gardens and hide."

"Could work better than you being somewhere's else," Riddick nodded. "And if he catches you, might be you could still get away into the passages."

"And I'm hardly defenseless," She reminded them. With a smile and a thanks for the warning, she ended the wave and River sighed.

"Put a bullet to me. Bullet in the brain pan, squish." River looked up at the sound of Mal's footsteps in the hall above them.

"Don't say that. Not ever. We'll get through this." Simon said fiercely and Riddick's hand tightened around hers.

"I'm with the Doc, no one's putting a bullet to you unless I'm dead and gone." He promised.

River sighed, "Things are going to get much much worse." She touched Simon's face affectionately.

"Well, the Captain hasn't tossed us in the airlock, so I'd say we're—"

Simon didn't get to say how well they were doing as River shook her head, interrupting him, "He has to see. More than anyone... he has to see what he doesn't want to."

Her brother was worried, more worried than she'd ever seen him since they'd crash landed on a desert planet filled with monsters, "River. What will Miranda show us?"

"Death," She whispered mournfully.

"Whose death?" Simon's eyes flicked from her face to Riddick's behind her and back again.

Her laughter was painful and uncontrolled and she couldn't quiet it once it began. Between her giggles she very nearly screamed, "Everybody's!"

Riddick had heard of Haven long before he'd ever seen it. It was something of an Eldorado among criminals of his type. A place where people could go and be sheltered from their pasts. That turned out to be both true and untrue. The mining community on Haven was willing to harbor the occasional fugitive… for a small price.

Mal had heard of Haven through a couple of his fellow Browncoats. Apparently, they'd disappeared and wound up on that rock. So Mal, being Mal, had followed them to find out what happened. Since he had a boat he'd offered to provide ferry service on the occasions when it was required. The requirements of such jobs being transport and closed mouths about the people being transported. Those two qualifications were harder to come by than most folks would think.

Riddick had never found himself with a big enough pile of cash or a large enough amount of
desperation that he'd trust people he had to pay for their help so he could come and settle on Haven, though he had it in the back of his mind as a possibility. Then he'd met River and she'd become more important than a place gorrarn near mythical as far as he was concerned.

He'd finally gotten to see it when Serenity had gotten a job to transport a thief who was tired of running from the Alliance and wanted to settle down to honest work. Of course, thievin' could be right honest work (according to Mal) depending on who was being thieved (again, according to Mal). Regardless of his opinion on theifey retirement, Mal had been willing to pick the young man up and bring him to Haven.

That had been the first time they'd traveled to Haven since Riddick, Book, Simon and River had come aboard Serenity. The miners at Haven had been real taken with Book. And they'd done their best to convince him to stay. He hadn't but when he couldn't take the life on Serenity anymore, feeling himself slipping back into those old ways of thinking, where thievin' could be honest work and killing could be justified, the miners at Haven had been overjoyed to get his wave and welcomed him back with open arms.

Haven was pretty much a big mine and little town, boasting a church and a vegetable garden, the latter of which was Book's tangible contribution to his flock. Everything was patched together, just like most every other frontier town he'd seen trying to scratch out a living from the dirt. The cannon was something of a standout though.

It had pretty obviously been salvaged from a warship. And it was the main thing that kept Haven living up to its name. He doubted it would do much against Reavers but it would be a good start. Shea and Ciara had given it a good going over and since River wasn't allowed out of their bunk yet she'd offered via wave to upgrade the cortex security. Both offers of help had been gratefully accepted and Simon was keeping busy with as much doctoring as he could manage, while Kaylee, Wash and Zoe were helping to repair more mundane machinery.

But whenever they came to Haven, no matter what name Serenity sported, they got a hero's welcome. The (former) thief Doane greeted them with a handshake as he hopped down from cannon duty. Little Hiroko ran for the crew at top speed yelling "Aun' Kaylee! Aun' Kaylee," at the top of his little lungs and crashed right into Kaylee's legs. Bernabe, one of the other Independents, gave Zoe a big hug that got Wash all fake jealous.

And then there was Book. He was as much of a mystery as people purported Riddick to be. A lot more than a Shepherd, he had surprising expertise with firearms and Alliance ships opened their medbay doors without any quibbling to help him and suppressed any curiosity regarding the boat that carried him to their doors. He dropped tidbits of information like breadcrumbs on a trail that led to nothing but more questions. The smell of old half-truths and outright lies followed him like smoke. Riddick hadn't been exactly heartbroken when Book had left Serenity, though he knew the crew would miss the preacher. He wouldn't miss feeling judged just for doing what was necessary to keep body and soul together.

Book had stood in the crowd of Haven's folk and greeted them with a smile.

"Preacher," Mal nodded. Book's hair was bound back in respectable cornrows, a change from the pony tail he'd worn aboard Serenity.

"Mal," Book returned the nod.

"Good to see you again. You look different."

Book's smile widened, "Really? I'd say you look a mite worse. In fact, in my professional opinion,
"you all look like hell."

"That's what we love about you, preacher, your ability to make us all feel good about ourselves." Everyone laughed at Mal's words, which defused any possible problems. The fact was, they did look like hell, which was hardly a surprise, but no one was ready to talk about it just yet.

Book understood that, as the next thing he said was, "Well, as it happens, I think I have a salve for what ails you all." He grinned, "Dinner's in half an hour."

"Music to my ears," Wash said with a laugh of his own.

Riddick had gathered a portion of the meal for he and River and explained quietly that he didn't want her to eat alone. Simon would go back in when Riddick came out to speak with Book about their situation. Mal's idiocy about River knew no bounds at the moment. The idea that keeping her in her bunk would keep everyone safe was the biggest piece of foolishness Riddick had ever heard. For one, River was the one who'd added the encryptions to the locks, and she could break through them faster than she could breathe. Two, if Mal wanted her where she couldn't harm anyone, locking her up with the arsenal she and Riddick had collected was counterproductive. All locking River up did was piss him off and upset her. He owed Mal a hard set of knuckles to the eye for that.

Riddick didn't miss Book's praying or his preaching, and though his cooking was still talked about in reverent tones he didn't miss that much either. What he did miss was the preacher man's ability to cut through bullshit to the heart of a problem. He might not always find a solution but his insight often led to one. But ever since River had filled Riddick in on Book's past, a hardened criminal turned even harder lawman, he'd been a bit less patient with the judgmental face and words. Book trying to change his ways didn't mean he should expect everyone else to change along with him. Or that he had the right to judge. One of his old comrades in arms had said there was nothing worse than someone who just became a teetotaler or had newly found religion. Apparently, there was a tendency to look down on anyone else who didn't quite have the same fervor or values. After dealing with Book for the longer part of a year Riddick had a better understanding of what his old pal had meant.

It was one of the few things he and Mal agreed on as they walked up to the Shepherd praying on a hillside. "Lord, I am walking your way. Let me in, for my feet are sore, my clothes are ragged. Look in my eyes, Lord, and my sins will play out on them as on a screen. Read them all. Forgive what you can and send me on my path. I will walk on, until you bid me rest."

Mal couldn't let anything stand for even a moment and Riddick sighed in irritation as the Captain spoke, "Hope that ain't for me, Shepherd."

"Then I really hope it ain't for me." The Captain quipped dryly.

The preacher wasn't quite as relaxed, "It's for the men River might have killed in that bar."

Riddick scowled furiously at that, since it wasn't as if River'd any choice in the matter, and Mal cast a quick glance at him before defending the girl he'd insisted stay locked up. And he couldn't help thinking again that Mal's hypocrisy really knew no bounds, "Weren't River that did it, you know that. Somebody decided her brain was just another piece of property to take, fenced it right up."

"You got a plan?" Book asked, his eyes on Mal rather than Riddick's glowing silver gaze.

Mal nearly snorted, "Hiding ain't a plan?"

Riddick could have told him it wasn't but Mal wouldn't hear him anymore than he ever did. Instead
he simply watched as Book shrugged, "It'll do you for a spell, and the folks here'll be glad of the extra coin."

"Glad Shea grabbed up that bag," Riddick muttered. That would just about cover the fee for Serenity's safe passage and concealment for a few days. They shouldn't really stay that long. The whole point of the false idents and special paint was to protect places like Haven.

Mal was coming to the same conclusion, "But the Alliance'll be coming. They're after this girl with a powerful will. I look to hear the tromp of their boots any moment."

"You won't." Book put out his cigar, saving the rest for another time, "This isn't a palms-up military run, Mal. No reports broad waved, no warrants—much as they want her, they want her hid. That means Closed File. Means an Operative, which is trouble you've not known."

"I coulda left her there," Mal looked at Riddick and shrugged. "I had an out—hell, I had every reason in the 'verse to leave her lay and haul anchor."

"Not your way, Mal." Book gave him a half smile.

Riddick could smell Mal's bitter amusement, "I have a way?" He considered, "Is that better than a plan?"

The preacher's look encompassed both Riddick and Mal, "You can play the thug all you want, but there's more to you than you're ever like to 'fess." Riddick refrained from stating the obvious. Of course there was more to him; tiān shā de right there was. River was the only one in the 'verse who knew every part of him and that's how he liked it. But saying as much wouldn't move the conversation along. And proving the preacher right wasn't something he was in the mood for either.

Predictably Mal couldn't resist a straight line and shook his head, "You just think that 'cause my eyes is all sorrowful and pretty."

Book was polite enough to smile at the joke but it faded quickly under his solemn look, "Only one thing is gonna walk you through this, Mal. Belief."

"Sermons make me sleepy, Shepherd." Mal's voice had gone tight and once again Riddick found himself in an uncomfortable accord with the Captain, "I ain't looking for help from on high. That's a long wait for a train don't come."

Riddick watched as the preacher sighed, "When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I'm talking about God?" Mal had no response and Book continued, "They'll come at you sideways."

Riddick's blood ran cold and he saw Mal's stricken expression as Book's words echoed weirdly with River's from months ago. Back when she talked about the storm coming for them. "It's how they think: sideways. It's how they move. Sidle up and smile, hit you where you're weak. Sorta man they're like to send believes hard. Kills and never asks why."

Furyan silver met Independent brown and he saw Mal take a long, slow, shaking breath before recovering, "It's of interest to me how much you seem to know about that world."

"I wasn't born a Shepherd, Mal."

"Have to tell me about that some time." Mal's tone suggested he'd figured that much out on his own.

Book looked out over the rise, his gaze on the raggedy buildings below them, "No I don't." He walked away, offering one last reminder, "Sideways."
Riddick watched him go, Mal silent beside him, the Captain's thoughts loud and worried between them.

She didn't like this dream.

Normally her dreams were chaotic and unfocused and confusing. Nonlinear and temporally vague. Things like gravity and other physical laws didn't apply. Other people's dreams were like that too, and it was comforting that her dreams were like everyone else's, making no sense. It was the one normal thing about her when everything else felt extremely abnormal. Even before the Academy had gone tinkering in her brain.

But this dream—this dream was specific.

A normal dream didn't have a tactile or olfactory component. She'd always found that odd. The mind could manufacture anything, why didn't dreams involve touch and smell and taste? Dreams always had plenty of sights and sounds but never any other senses.

This dream though, had her back in her classroom—the same one she'd dreamt about back in the Academy. Professor Rao stood at the front of the class, in front of a desktop screen that showed a single, dark planet, and all the students were sitting around her. But she couldn't just see Professor Rao, she couldn't just hear her words—she could smell the wood of the chair, the grass outside the tent where the class was held; she could feel the weight, small as it was, of the stylus in her hand, of the chair against her.

This was very very wrong.

Even more very wrong was that everything proceeded in a natural sequence. Cause and effect never mattered much in dreams, not hers, not Riddick's, not anyone's; nor did the laws of physics. Dreams were like Alice in Wonderland or Through the Looking Glass for all the sense they made. But this was just like being in the class.

That scared her just as much as anything ever did.

Rao looked at her. "River? River you look tired. I think everybody's a little tired by now. Why don't we all lie down?"

All the other children soundlessly got up from their seats and lay on the floor next to their chairs.

The impossibility of that struck River like a boot to the face. They didn't say a word. Not a single complaint or giggle, not even a smart remark or a question starting with 'I don't understand'. A room full of twelve-year-olds were constitutionally incapable of doing anything that quietly, let alone take a nap. Even their movements were noiseless.

The professor lay down as well. "A little piece and quiet will make everything better."

"No…" River forced the words through fear stiffened jaws, her lips numb with it.

"River, do as you're told. It's going to be fine." Professor Rao admonished her. But even her correction was strangely…diminished. Apathetic really. Professor Rao loved an orderly, elegant and intellectual classroom. She was passionate about everyone following the rules, taking turns and politely indulging in their curiosity. Discourtesy was anathema to her and disobedience a close second. For her to not care that River was disobeying was just as terrifying as a class full of near
adolescents doing anything in complete silence.

All she could see was the planet on Rao’s screen. She didn’t recognize it. And that was completely wrong because she’d memorized the orbital visual image of every single known planet when she was seven. She could tell Ariel from Persephone from Jiangyin from Bellerophon. She knew every moon, star and proto star, even the gas giants and their planetary bodies in orbit around them. Not only that but she’d memorized the nine planets that orbited the star in the sky of Earth-That-Was along with all of their satellites.

The world on Rao’s screen didn’t look like any of the many dozens of livable worlds she knew about.

"Lie down," Rao said again.

"No!"

River started awake grateful for Riddick’s step on the ladder to their bunk and cuddled into his embrace. His thoughts were full of his conversation with the shepherd but she didn’t address them, her mind full of the dream.

She wondered what the dream meant. It had to mean something. Dreams didn't just happen like that and dreams that vivid certainly didn't happen unless there was a very good reason. She had to figure out why that planet—

With a shocked start she realized that they were running out of time. The Operative had made his move. But in the back of her mind, that planet haunted her. Where was it?

Richard had scooped her up to cuddle against his chest, his voice warm and tender in her ears as he let her immerse herself in him.

"Inara waves Mal," She murmured and reached for her cortex. "The Operative made all speed, and now she and Shazza are caught. Trapped in an elegant box with only a few tricks to protect them. He has…made clear what he will do to them both if they do not cooperate with him." She breathed in his scent and set aside the dream as much as she could, letting it gel in her mind while she considered other things.

"If she's wavin' Mal she'll try to warn him," Her Furryan nodded and helped her balance the cortex on her lap. Unnecessary but a kindness that was instinctive for him when it concerned her.

"Wash wakes Mal up," River couldn't conceal her amusement. "Entertainment for all." She smirked at the cortex screen, split between Mal's screen and Inara’s. The contrast between the two of them was comical, Inara radiating elegance and beauty, Mal, shirtless, hair standing up and in general looking disheveled. Pretty much as if he'd just gotten out of bed, which he had.

Mal's face was distinctly blurry eyed as he'd clearly just been woken from a sound sleep, but he managed to sound as polite as possible for someone who’d been dreaming not five minutes earlier. "Inara."

River giggled softly, despite her situation this was truly amusing. Even more so when she considered how Inara was duping the Operative. "Mal. I, uh, is this a bad time?" The Companion was framed in the cortex screen from the waist up, and her view of the Captain covered the same territory.
"Good as any," The Captain shrugged his unconcern.

Inara's face was a study in empathetic chagrin, though polite as ever. "Please tell me you're wearing pants."

River knew for a fact that Mal was wearing pants. Zoe had commented on Riddick climbing out of their bunk in only shorts one day and asked if the habit of sleeping in trousers hadn't held over from the war. Apparently Mal had developed the habit because during the war you never knew when you needed to be up and ready to fight. Struggling to hop into pants while taking fire was not an ideal state of readiness for combat. Riddick had shrugged and pointed out that he doubted she and Wash slept in their work clothes. Zoe had paused, obviously rethinking her question in light of Riddick living with, and married to, River and conceded the point.

Mal, of course, couldn't set Inara's mind at ease, though his eyes flickered thoughtfully at her cool expression. A slight grin tugged at his lips, "Naked as the day I come cryin'. How's your world?"

"Chilly," Inara replied. "It's autumn on Persephone."

"Still at the Training House?" Mal's gaze was wandering over her face, trying to suss out what was wrong. It was subtle but there for anyone who knew Inara well.

"Right where you left me." She nodded, her expression still cool and set.

"I remember the temple/training house as nice enough. Picturesque," The Captain commented thoughtfully. "Though bein' surrounded by gigglin' girls ain't my idea of grand employment."

Inara's eyes flicked off to the side of the screen and Mal's gaze sharpened at her reply, "It is that. And a training house isn't for everyone. What about you?"

"Still flying. So what occasions the wave? Not that to see you ain't..." Mal stumbled convincingly over his words as if seeing a sweetheart who'd married another. "Well you look very fine."

River grinned at her husband, "Crew wanders in to enjoy the theatre."

"Oh. Thank You." Seemingly taken aback by Mal's compliment, and not surprisingly, as such things were rare from the mouth of Malcolm Reynolds, Inara did some stumbling of her own. "I... I guess we have something of a problem here. With the locals, I thought maybe—"

"You could use a gun hand?" Mal was asking thoughtfully.

"I'm hoping not. But if you were close at all, you—the crew—could take your ease here a while." Inara explained in her dignified way. "And there'd be payment."

"Payment is never not a factor." The Captain's words were practical and to anyone watching, he'd seem to be all business now. "I could sound out the crew. This pot like to boil over soon?"

Inara considered, her eyes moving down for a moment and then back up to his, "Soon. Not right away."

"Well, it would be, I mean I would like to..." Mal's all businesslike expression took a not so professional tilt, "Kaylee's been missing you something fierce—"

Inara smiled, one of her true smiles the first she'd offered the entire wave, "I miss her too. I even miss my shuttle, occasionally."
"Yeah, you left a... got some of your stuff in a trunk, never did get a chance to drop it off." Mal offered some false information of his own in a fit of genius unlikely to be soon repeated.

Inara blinked as if surprised, "I didn't mean to leave stuff—"

"I didn't look through the stuff." Mal sounded a bit defensive, "Just sundries I expect." She nodded, clearly having taken his words as a confirmation of her true message in waving him. The Captain continued a bit uncomfortably, "Well, it's kind of late where I'm at. I'll send a wave as soon as I can."

"Thank you." Inara nodded and cut the wave.

River looked up at Riddick, "We must have a plan within Mal's plan. Our chance to counteract the programming. The play's the thing. Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

"I'll head on up and see what's what." He dropped a kiss on her lips as she closed up the cortex. "Try to get a bit of rest. We're a few hours out from Persephone. Meditate if you can't sleep at least."

"She will," The Reader nodded.

He made it to the bridge a few minutes ahead of Mal and turned to look at the Captain when he entered, buttoning up his shirt as he walked. Wash commented jovially, "Inara. Nice to see her again."

Riddick rolled his eyes as Zoe got right to the point, "So, trap?"

Mal nodded, "Trap."

"We goin' in?" Zoe folded her arms thoughtfully.

"It ain't but a few hours out." The Captain agreed.

"Yeah, but, remember the part where it's a trap?" Riddick always liked how reasonable and to the point Wash could be. Zoe could be blunt but Wash was very good at pointing out those obvious problems that Mal never seemed to see. It kept Riddick from having to talk all the gorram time.

"For every inch, that is not fool, is rogue," He quipped, rolling his eyes at Wash's slight smirk.

The Captain valiantly ignored Riddick's comment, addressing Wash. "If that's the case, then Inara's already caught in it. She wouldn't set us up willing. Might be we got a shot at seeing who's turning these wheels. We go in." And there went Mal, making a decent point of his own.

Kaylee, being sweet and optimistic, had never really lost hope that Mal and Inara would make a go of being romantically involved. "How can you be sure Inara don't just wanna see you? Sometimes people have feelings." She offered a wicked little smirk. "I'm referring here to people."

"Y'all were watching, I take it." Mal asked evenly as he buttoned his cuffs.

There were a few slightly guilty glances exchanged before Kaylee answered, "Yes."

"You see us fight?" The Captain inquired.

"No." Kaylee shook her head.
"And did Inara once mention her fancy tea set, or dishes, or them pretty pillows and sheets?" Mal pointed out. "Which she always does since we ain't exactly without enemies and it's a nice safe way to let us know she's all right."

"She didn't," Kaylee considered.

"Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd." Riddick murmured and Mal nodded his agreement.

"Trap." Mal shrugged.

"Well should we go for hard burn?" Kaylee wondered.

"No, let's conserve fuel," Mal shook his head. "We really can't spare it, and there's a few things I'd like us to do before we get there."

Riddick turned and looked at the course Wash had set, keyed in a suggestion and then sent it back to the pilot's screen before looking over at Mal, "A few crybabies? Or just four or five clones of Serenity's ident sent off in different directions?"

"Wash, find us a spot to set down that ain't the docks," Mal instructed. "We can use the shuttle to get to the training house but I don't want the port authority locking us down when we need to leave sudden like."

"Try this," Riddick sent a set of coordinates to Wash's screen and had the satisfaction of seeing both Zoe and Wash's eyes go wide.

"Wǒ cáo," Wash swore as he read over the information.

"How did you manage that?" Zoe stared at him.

He shrugged as he worked, "Big estate, goin' cheap. River scooped it up at auction. Apparently, Wing was dead broke and livin' on credit."

"It's got a private landing site for a boat even bigger than Serenity," Wash was still awed.

"Yeah, River looked into it but the way he had that big yacht all decked out it just looked yú bèn de. She decided it wasn't worth buying. But the land, yeah, nobody wanted the stigma of buying up the estate cheap. Rich folk, they buy something cheap all the other folk think they're hard up for coin."

Riddick confirmed the course set on his cortex. "Most everyone in the neighborhood thinks some xīn gui rim fella bought the place. Which one kinda did."

"Well it'll certainly get the job done," Zoe nodded. "It ain't but seventy miles from the training house."

"Take the shuttle in and no one's the wiser we're there." Riddick nodded. "I'm gonna help Kaylee with the gadgets."

Wash turned when Zoe and Mal joined him on the bridge as they got close to Persephone, the ship landing light as a downy feather on the pad outside Atherton Wing's former home. "Well we're here. And nobody on radar beyond the regular Persephone traffic... if the Alliance is about, they're laying low."

Riddick was scanning the various channels the Feds used and shook his head, "If we heard 'em it
wouldn't be an Operative. And we're pretty damn sure it is."

Mal nodded and Riddick considered that it was a little eerie how much he and Mal were agreeing about certain things these past few days, considering the depth of the conflict between them, "They're about. I'll take the shuttle in closer. Figure to use one of the public pads nearer to the house, sneak in along with the trainees. Inara made mention of their excursions to market. Zoe, ship is yours." He started out and turned back to Zoe, "Remember: if anything happens to me, or you don't hear from me within the hour... you take this ship and you come and rescue me."

Zoe's grin was full of humor as she turned the words Mal said so often back on him, "What? And risk my ship?"

Mal walked off the bridge calling back at her, "I mean it. It's cold out there. I don't wanna get left."

Wash looked at Riddick and Zoe and asked a bit whimsically, "So, Mal's got a plan right? A brilliant strategy guaranteed to get Inara off safely with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of efficiency?"

"'Fraid it's one of the Captain's usual plans," Zoe shook her head.

"That's what I was afraid of," Wash sighed as he began to prep Serenity for the fast exit.

Riddick shook his head and smiled as River entered the bridge a few minutes after Mal had left. Zoe didn't seem surprised to see the Reader. Resigned as she regarded the diminutive Core native but not surprised. "Guess while the cat's away the mice'll play?" She remarked sardonically.

"The girl has a plan within Mal's plan. To be certain of success," River nodded, addressing Wash's last remark and Zoe's simultaneously. "She and Riddick will take the other shuttle. Go in through the garden and leave the shuttle in the alley behind the training house, masked to appear it belongs to someone else. Captain's shuttle is already wears a false ident. We must take the Operative by surprise."

"You mean to capture him?" Zoe looked shocked that they'd make the attempt.

River shook her head, "No. We must pull his teeth."

"Sounds painful," Wash joked.

Dark eyes regarded him thoughtfully, "When we begin to fly again, you must switch chairs with Richard please." She looked at Zoe, "You must make him. It's important."

Riddick nodded slowly, her scent was blazing with blood and steel, she was Seeing or Reading something that made Wash's chair dangerous to the pilot but not to Riddick. "Let's get going then. We've given Mal enough of a head start."

River nodded, "We will be back soon."

It was hard seeing through the Operative's eyes and her own simultaneously. River frowned and took a breath, devoting a considerable portion of her genius to keeping her thoughts separate from his.

The Operative was watching Inara. She was kneeling in front of a large Buddha statue that was the room's centerpiece. River recognized the sitting room as one of the rooms they'd helped Inara furnish. Spare and tasteful, relaxing and welcoming, it was very like Inara. On the couch behind her,
Shazza was sitting. The Operative was watching her but he wasn't as concerned with Shazza as he
was Inara. He hadn't let Inara out of his sight since he'd arrived at the training house. He'd left
everyone else alone, he had no interest in the Companions-in-training or the other instructors. The
only resident who concerned him was Inara Serra because she was the only connected to his mission.

Shazza was of interest, but only peripherally, her connection to Serenity more tenuous since she'd
only traveled with them once. Strangely enough, the Operative had no knowledge of their time on
Hades, their entire journey between the Academy and Serenity was a mystery to him. That could
work in their favor.

She watched through his eyes as he saw a line of trainees filing by in robes, red shawls pulled over
their heads. Most of them were small, though the one in the back was a bit larger. He didn't pay them
much mind as he'd seen several such processions in the day since he'd arrived.

Then the large one broke off the back and entered Inara's chambers, kneeling beside her in front of
the Buddha, "Dear Buddha, please send me a pony, and a plastic rocket, and—"

River nearly giggled as Mal's actions tickled her, along with the echo of the Operative's surprise and
amusement. Such things were so rare that they were almost unrecognizable to the Operative, for
Reynolds to disguise himself so ludicrously and actually get this far... "Mal is in," She murmured to
Riddick as they landed behind the Training House.

If she wasn't splitting her attention between her own surroundings and the Operative's she would
have missed Inara's words, "Mal! What are you doing here?"

"You invited me," Mal replied in a somewhat petulant tone.

Inara's exasperation was evident, and River frowned, she was in pain or she wouldn't be so upset, "I
never thought for a second you'd be stupid enough to come!"

The Operative smiled, he hadn't expected it either, and believed that he had a further measure of
Mal's supposed psychosis. Mal was still behaving like a child, "Well that makes you kind of a tease,
doesn't it?"

Shazza's little snort of amusement had the Operative glancing towards her sharply but she was
watching Inara and Mal's little play just as he was, "You knew my invitation wasn't on the level—"

"Which led me to the conclusion that you must be in some trouble." Mal replied in what was for him
a reasonable tone. He hadn't been wrong, the Operative, being aware of Inara's medical condition,
had made quite clear what he would do to her. She'd be lucky to be sane let alone practice as any sort
of Companion.

"I'm fine! I'm... giddy." Inara wasn't trying very hard to be convincing. River half smiled as she and
Riddick left the shuttle and began to ease their way through the hidden door of the garden wall.
Inara's quarters had several rooms, and two entrances to the exterior of the house along with one
entrance from the interior. Riddick and River had made a point of learning the layout of the House
and Inara's quarters just in case. As Simon had once remarked, past paranoia prevented today's
trouble.

She listened and knew Riddick could hear what she was, both of them crouched and waiting for the
Operative to speak so they would know his location comparative to theirs and Inara's. "For a woman
schooled in telling men what they wanna hear, you ain't much of a liar." Mal commented.

Inara was trying to make the Captain understand, "Mal, you cannot handle this man."
The Operative felt this was as good a cue as any, entering the room from the vestibule where he'd been watching Inara, Shazza and Mal. River nodded to Riddick and he half smiled his agreement as they began to slip around to the second exterior door. It led to Inara's bedroom and bath, and thanks to their contributions to décor, an elegant screen shielded those rooms from the view of the sitting room. They would be able to watch without the Operative seeing them. The elegant man she'd only seen in dreams until now was addressing the Captain. "I have to say, I'm impressed that you would come for her yourself. And that you would make it this far…in that outfit."

Mal stood shrugging off the red tasseled shawl, "I can be very graceful when I need to."

The Operative was actually smiling, "I've no doubt."

Shazza rose and crossed the room to Inara, taking Mal's former place before the Buddha as she knelt and Inara picked up another stick of incense. "What are you doing?"

"I'm praying for you, Mal." Inara remarked.

Shazza seconded the notion, "We're praying for you."

"That's very thoughtful." The Operative was almost condescending as he chuckled. "But I mean it when I say you're not in any danger."

Mal couldn't give up the notion of being in charge, no matter how much he was warned about the dangers of an Operative, "Speak your piece."

Dark eyes shone with sincerity, "I think you're beginning to understand how dangerous River Tam is."

Mal shrugged in unconcern, "She is a mite unpredictable. Mood swings, of a sort."

"And her companion, the escaped convict and murderer? Richard B. Riddick? Do you understand how much danger you and your entire crew is in with him aboard your ship?" River was vividly aware said murderous convict's amusement beside her at being so described.

"He's got his own ups and downs," Mal spread his hands, "Takes a little getting used to."

"It's worse than you know."

"It usually is." The Captain nearly sighed his acceptance of that sad fact.

"That girl will rain destruction down on you and your ship." The Operative explained, "She's an albatross, Captain."

The Browncoat shook his head, "Way I remember it, albatross was a ship's good luck—'til some idiot killed it." He slanted an amused look at Inara and Shazza both of whom had looked up in shock, "Yes, I've read a poem. Try not to faint."

River half smiled as the Operative moved further into the room, Mal countering his moves to keep distance between the two of them, "I've seen your war record. I know how you must feel about the Alliance."

Riddick shook his head and she could hear his thought that the Operative had made a mistake with that tactic. Mal's grim tone would have hit anyone else's ears as dangerous, "You really don't."

Almost kindly the dark man conceded a second point, "Fair to say. But I have to hope you
understand you can't beat us."

"I got no need to beat you. I just wanna go my way." River nearly sighed at the rallying cry of the Independents.

"And you can do that, once you let me take River Tam back home." The Operative moved about the room, his back to the bedroom now and Mal kept countering him.

"No, no, you're working this deal all crabbed." Mal shook his head. "You got to open with payment. Make a flush offer and then we'll see where this conversation goes."

She could hear Mal's brain, twisting and turning, coming up with new ideas and discarding old ones, unaware that he'd been anticipated by a master at chess. The Operative was shaking his head now, "That's a trap. I offer money, you'll play the man of honor and take umbrage. I ask you to do what's right, you'll play the brigand. I've no stomach for games; I already know you'll not see reason."

Mal's voice was cold and almost dangerous again, "Alliance wanted to show me reason, they shouldn't have sent an assassin."

River tilted her head as the Operative paused at that, disliking such an appellation, "I have a warship in deep orbit, Captain. We locked on to Serenity's pulse beacon the moment you hit atmo. I can speak a word and send a missile to that exact location inside of three minutes."

Riddick's lips twisted in a silent grin as Mal pulled a small device out of his coat, clipped wires all over it and tossed it to the Operative, "You do that, best make peace with your dear and fluffy lord."

"Pulse beacon," The Operative actually sighed that Mal was trying to make this difficult.

"Advice from an old tracker: you wanna find someone, use your eyes," Mal snarked. "That convicted murderer you were goin' on about? He could teach you a thing or five."

"I have no doubt," Dark eyes held a disturbing amount of patience, "How long do you think you can really run from us?"

The Captain answered almost blithely, "Oh, a jack-rabbit, me. 'Sides, I never credited the Alliance with an over-abundance of brains. And if you're the best they got—"

He was interrupted, which, despite the words, indicated Mal actually was getting under the Operative's skin, "Captain Reynolds, I should tell you so you don't waste your time: You can't make me angry."

"Oh please. Spend an hour with him." Inara rolled her eyes. Shazza smirked beside her and Mal smiled and then glared at Inara when he realized what she'd said.

"I need her, Captain." The Operative spoke almost passionately, "River is my purpose and I will gather her to me. Richard B. Riddick and the brother as well. Whatever else happens is incidental. In the greater scheme."

Mal shook his head asking rhetorically, "Why is it that the greater scheme always makes everything not that great?"

"I want to resolve this like civilized men." The Operative was the epitome of civilization, which was not all to the good, "I'm not threatening you. I'm unarmed."

In a move that surprised absolutely no one Mal pulled out his gun and shot the Operative dead in the
chest, "Good!"

Also, in a way that surprised no one he grabbed for Shazza and Inara and made for the door while the Operative got to his feet. "I am of course wearing full body armor. I'm not a moron." He grabbed Mal in a chokehold and threw him against the wall, blocking a blow from Inara and one from Shazza and in return incapacitating them for a time.

Mal went for his gun again and got kicked in the face for his trouble. When he got to his feet his nose was dripping blood and the Operative was perfectly poised, waiting for him. "No back up?" Mal wondered, "We're making an awful ruckus."

"They'll come when they're needed," The Operative was unconcerned.

"I'd start whistling." Mal was breathing hard.

"Captain, what do you think is going to happen here?" The Operative countered a very sloppy attack that even Simon would have seen coming three seconds before it happened. Mal was punching wildly, all bluster and pluck, and the Operative's counter sent the Captain to the ground near Inara who'd managed to sit up with Shazza's help. Inara put a hand on Mal's arm to keep him from getting up right away, "Nothing here is what it seems." He addressed Inara and Shazza.

"I know," Inara nodded.

"He's not the plucky hero. The Alliance isn't some evil empire. This isn't the grand arena." The Operative had gone to his briefcase and pulled out his sword. River frowned, he was reluctant, didn't believe Mal worthy of the blade but he was losing patience.

"And that's not incense." Inara said softly.

"Such an act that blurs the grace and blush of modesty, calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose from the fair forehead of an innocent love and sets a blister there, makes marriage-vows as false as dicer's oaths: o, such a deed as from the body of contraction plucks the very soul, and sweet religion makes a rhapsody of words. Heaven's face doth glow o'er this solidity and compound mass with tristful visage, as against the doom is thought sick at the act." River slipped into the room as she spoke and lifted the incense stick, breaking off the fuse of the flash bomb while Riddick came up behind the Operative soft as a panther down a tree. A hard jab to the lower spine and the Operative was immobilized just as he'd paralyzed Dr. Mathias. He was gasping in shock at the sight of River, right before him and yet so far out of his reach.

"What in the—" Mal was just as surprised.

"This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man. Plans within plans," River told him as succinctly as she could. "Hold his eyes open," She instructed Riddick and her bàng jiār nodded, lowering the Operative to the ground and pushing his eyelids back so he couldn't close his eyes if he wanted to. She couldn't help but feel Mal's shock as she pulled out a slender penlight and began to flash it into the Operative's eyes in a pattern only she could have memorized and implemented properly. "And I had done an hellish thing, and it would work 'em woe: for all averred, I had killed the bird that made the breeze to blow. Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay, that made the breeze to blow!"

"What're you—" Mal couldn't stop himself from asking the question.

"Not now Mal," Riddick cut him off and addressed Inara, "'Nara, think it's about time for that disappearing act. Shazza, you best go with Mal. River an' me, we'll be right along."
River was peripherally aware of Inara doing as they suggested, disappearing into the depths of the Training House and Shazza and Mal leaving by another direction, as she finalized the code to decrypt and unravel the programming the Operative had undergone. Triggers upon triggers and only an Operative could unmake another Operative. Like dominos, if one fell, another would fall after them. So the secrets were buried deep in their minds, locked safe behind encryption keys and memory wipes. The Operatives were a step below her, in the hierarchy of such things. They weren't geniuses, weren't Readers. They were flesh made machine, men turned into cortices in how they processed and assimilated information.

Remove emotion from the equation and the intuitive leap that lead to deductive reasoning was debilitated. But the Operative was only to be a limb of the Parliament. Limbs could be cut off, regrown, burned away.

No one had ever thought to guard the minds of the Operatives from a Reader. No one had wondered about the ramifications of a Reader coming into contact with an Operative. They'd only been concerned with what they could do, hadn't ever stopped to wonder if they should. Hadn't even considered the possibility of what could happen if they turned an intuitive genius into a Reader and failed to control her completely.

Now they would learn.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So here we are… I know there are stories where they capture the Operative, or kill him, but I didn't want that. After all River knows this one, she's been in his mind and can find it again. There's no guarantee of that with a different Operative. I hope you all like how I'm playing with Serenity. I always wondered what it would be like if there was a bit more paranoia and preparation on the crew's part and less stumbling along. And let's face it, Riddick can take paranoia to an amazing degree.

Lot of stuff from Hamlet in this one, maybe because this could all turn into a tragedy very quickly if they're not careful.

Chinese Translations:

Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng (Fire and water have no mercy (idiom). forces of nature beyond human control / implacable fate)
Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)
bǎo bǎo (darling)
tiān shā de (goddamn)
Wǒ cáo (holy fuck)
yú bèn de (stupid)
xīn guì (nouveau riche / upstart / new appointee)
bàng jiār (lover / partner)
Quote Sources:

From childhood's hour I have not been as others were—I have not seen as others saw—
I could not bring my passions from a common spring— From the same source I have
not taken my sorrow—I could not awaken my heart to joy at the same tone— And all I
lov'd—I lov'd alone— - Alone – Edgar Allan Poe

Then—in my childhood—in the dawn of a most stormy life—was drawn from ev'ry
depth of good and ill the mystery which binds me still— From the torrent, or the
fountain— from the red cliff of the mountain— from the sun that 'round me roll'd in its
autumn tint of gold— From the lightning in the sky as it pass'd me flying by— From the
thunder, and the storm— and the cloud that took the form (when the rest of Heaven was
blue) of a demon in my view — - Alone – Edgar Allan Poe

Hell is empty and all the devils are here – The Tempest – William Shakespeare

Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thon shalt not escape calumny – Hamlet –
William Shakespeare

The play's the thing. Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king – Hamlet – William
Shakespeare

For every inch, that is not fool, is rogue - Absalom and Achitophet – Dryden

Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

Such an act that blurs the grace and blush of modesty, calls virtue hypocrite, takes off
the rose from the fair forehead of an innocent love and sets a blister there, makes
marriage-vows as false as dicer's oaths: o, such a deed as from the body of contraction
plucks the very soul, and sweet religion makes a rhapsody of words. Heaven's face doth
glow o'er this solidity and compound mass with tristful visage, as against the doom is
thought sick at the act – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou
canst not then be false to any man. – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

And I had done an hellish thing, and it would work 'em woe: for all averred, I had killed
the bird that made the breeze to blow. Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay, that made
the breeze to blow! – The Rime of the Ancient Mariner – Samuel Tayler Coleridge
Riddick glanced at River as she half smiled in the co-pilot's seat, "He wakin' up?"

"Flash bomb went off as planned, he sends men after all of us. Doesn't yet realize we came in two shuttles, or that we aren't at the Eavesdown docks. Irritated the Captain was not surprised by Shazza's presence, didn't catch Inara's hand signals to Mal during the wave." River smiled wider as the shuttle docked with Serenity and the ship rose immediately in the air.

He snugged an arm around her waist as they left the shuttle and walked down to the passenger lounge where everyone had gathered in semi-comfort. River giggled in delight as they entered the room, drawing the gaze of everyone in the room. "He assumes the registered transport will give him a read of the navsat trajectory." She smirked at Kaylee and Wash who, along with Riddick and Simon, had built the misleading little engines that were at this moment zipping along various routes. "Irritated to find seven. All registered to Serenity. None of them leading to where we go."

She tilts her head, "He goes to another room. Where he keeps the twins." Riddick watched as she slanted a glance at Mal, her voice changing its cadence to that of the Operative's. "Mr. Mingojerry Rample. Mr. Fantastic Rample. Twins, born to Alanna Rample and an unknown father. One boy derives his name from a misremembered T.S. Eliot poem, the other from Alanna Rample's expression upon realizing she had a second bun in the oven. A thoroughly unimaginative woman, who passed that trait onto her sons." River frowned at Mal and her voice was her own again, "He demands information of them. If they wish to continue living to violate the eight warrants upon them, they will answer every single question he has regarding Captain Malcolm Reynolds and the crew of Serenity. And this, the most unkindest cut of all."

"Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pìgu yǎn." Riddick cursed, "We're headed to Haven right?"

"Yeah, that's the plan," Wash nodded, plainly not seeing an issue.

"Fanty and Mingo know about Haven," Riddick reminded him. "They don't know much beyond the false trails we've been laying for the past six months but they know Haven. Knew them before we started doin' business with them. And they know that we've traveled there in the past. Should your enemy go to ground, leave him no ground to go to. Remember? The reason we've been doin' all this?"

River's hands pulled out her portable cortex and her hands flew over the keys, "Waving Haven on the fastest band."

Book's face came up as it was his wave address she'd input, "Shepherd must listen closely." She didn't give him a chance to greet her. "Awake, arise, or be forever fallen. Remember the contingency plans. Look to hear the tromp of their boots at any moment; they hasten towards Haven."

Book's dark face grew alarmed and he reached out and hit something that sent a klaxon blaring in the background. "How long?"

Riddick looked down at the cortex from over River's shoulder, "As long as it takes the nearest Alliance cruiser to reach you. Could be minutes, could be hours. Take what you can, get everyone into hiding. Cruiser could raze the buildings but long as ya'll are alive we can help you rebuild. And
they can't exactly kill a mine. Bomb it maybe, but you said the shelter was deep enough in they'd be safe if that happened."

"The alarm's gone off and that'll set everyone to running," Book nodded.

"We're headed your way Shepherd," Mal spoke from his seat across from them. "We'd rather find you all alive when we get there."

"That's my profound hope as well." Book's voice was dry with tension.

"Deliver me from the workers of iniquity and save me from bloody men." River murmured and cut the wave.

"You think they'll make it?" Shea was looking worried, Ciara in his arms and pressing her lips to his neck in comfort.

"We told 'em months ago that this day could come." Riddick reminded him. "Hell, they make a gorram habit of shelterin' folks from the law. Should have had something like this in place all along. They knew this was a possibility from day one."

"And I haven't met a Browncoat yet who didn't have an escape route or hidey hole worked out," Simon commented with a half-smile, worried though he was.

Shazza sounded anxious, "We have every reason to be afraid." Riddick frowned, her worry was of the 'stuck-in-a-lifeboat-in-Reaver-territory' tenor rather than, 'the-law-is-after-us-and-we've-been-naughty' type of concern.

River smiled as Shea asked, "Why, 'cause this guy beat up Mal? That ain't so hard—"

"He didn't beat me up—" Mal objected.

"Bruises on ya say elsewise Mal," Shea smirked at him.

Shazza shook her head, "Because he's a believer." She looked at all of them with dark apprehensive eyes, "You didn't meet him. He's...he's everything River says he is and more. He's intelligent, methodical and devout in his belief that killing River is the right thing to do." She paused, considering her words, "I honestly think the only reason we haven't been blown out of the air is that he needs to see her."

"Needs to see her why?" Simon was troubled and it was obvious why. None of this was good news, though at least it wasn't completely unanticipated. No one was expected to like an Operative of Parliament's fixation on River.

The Dyton native gave a single shake of her head, "I can't know for certain. I would say to be sure of the kill... I just know he'll kill us all to get to her."

Shea gave a dark chuckle, "There's some wonderful news." For a moment he put on the mask of the merc and gave Riddick a grim look, "So no hope of a reward, huh?"

Riddick gave a short laugh at his brother's gallows humor and even Simon's unhappy expression tilted humorously for a moment. Zoe was barely paying attention to them, "Did he mention a deal of any kind?"

Shazza sighed and Mal's hand rubbed her shoulder in silent comfort as he answered, "Give the three of them up. Go my way."
"You were all ready to cut us loose not a day ago," Riddick commented with a growl.

"Cutting you loose ain't the same as handing you over," Mal maintained. "But I'd appreciate if River'd go back to your quarters now. Until we're sure there ain't any more triggers gonna set her off."

River nodded and took her bag as she left the room, kissing Riddick's cheek silently. Her scent was rife with blood and steel and cinnamon, worry about what she was Reading filling her. "I'll be up in a bit Qing Xiang." Her smile was strained but it was still a smile and he watched her mount the stairs.

Simon didn't bother to wait until she might be out of hearing range, knowing her mental abilities made her physical hearing redundant. He looked at Shazza, "Did he say anything about a 'Miranda'?

Shazza frowned thoughtfully, "What is that?"

"Don't know who or what, but it's on River's mind." Zoe explained quietly.

"Conjure it might be the reason he's after her." Mal offered the theory they'd been working on since first watching the feed from Mr. Universe.

"You think maybe it poses some kind of threat to the Alliance?" Dark eyes looked from Mal to Riddick, flicking over to Simon and back again as Shazza tried to determine how important it was in the grand scheme.

Wash seemed to be wondering the same thing, and didn't mind saying so, bluntly, "Do we care? Are we caring about that?" He and Shazza came at it from different directions but the point was the same. Did it really matter why the Alliance was after her so long as they were? Unless knowing why was of some use to them, the energy used wondering about it could be better utilized elsewhere. Wash and Shazza were both fairly practical but they weren't really tactical thinkers.

Zoe and Simon though, they were strategic thinkers, while Shea and Ciara were a mix of pragmatism and premeditation, and the matter at hand had the makings of a fine debate. If time wasn't of the essence Riddick might have enjoyed watching them all verbally spar with each other.

The Furyan watched as the crew began to argue quietly about the importance of Miranda, the likelihood of the Alliance always coming after them, and then Mal began arguing about River getting triggered and killing them all in their sleep. That point wasn't really being given credence by anyone but Mal but that didn't mean Riddick liked hearing it. The argument went on for another minute before he decided they'd wasted enough time.

"Enough," He growled finally. "Right now, River's staying in our bunk because she knows you're scared of her. All of you are, to one extent or another, and that ain't unreasonable now that you've seen what she can do plain as day. You can't keep it a secret, not from her, and she doesn't hold it against you, since for most of you it's a peripheral concern and you pretty much trust her and me with her in case there is a problem. But at some point, you're gonna have to decide," He stared at Mal. "Are you going to trust that she's my wife? My bàng jiār. Your crew? Because if you can't bring yourself to trust her there's no point to this argument."

Shazza was on his side, he could smell it, regardless of the attraction she and Mal had and the tentative courting they'd begun months back. "You can't keep her locked in her bunk forever, Mal. What are you gonna do when—"

"I don't know." Mal's reply was blunt as an anvil.
"'I don't know' is not a good answer." Shazza remarked crisply. Her scent wasn't unsympathetic but she clearly thought Mal wasn't being completely reasonable either.

"Look, we get back to Haven in a few hours' time..." Mal started to cross the room towards the door.

"This ain't the war, Mal." Shea said quietly.

Mal turned, eying him, "Are you telling me that because you think I don't know—"

"Ya been spoilin' for a fracas for goin' on six months," The senior gunhand pointed out. "Now ya got one an' it's a right brouhaha. Not sayin' yer wrong, but I ain't exactly sure it's one we can win."

Shazza offered him a half smile, "You did come to the training house looking for a fight. Which I'd say you got." She stretched a hand towards his still bloody nose as if to try and heal him.

"I came looking for you an' Inara," Mal shook his head, "I'd been given the idea ya'll were in harm's way."

Shazza touched his upper arm, "And we were. The...Operative...he was very clear about what he'd do to the both of us if we didn't cooperate with his trap."

Riddick looked at the Captain and smiled as Mal flinched slightly at the sight of silver eyes gazing out of the shadows at him, "Let's just say that Fanty and Mingo weren't exactly wrong about the way you react to things Mal. You ain't ever been what could rightly be called predictable."

"Seen a lotta sides to you Mal," Shea nodded, his voice quiet. "Just wanna be sure we know which way you're gonna jump."

Mal's voice was grim, "I start fighting a war I guarantee you'll see something new." He stalked out of the passenger lounge and Shazza followed him, her scent full of worry and intent to comfort.

Simon looked at Zoe and Wash, "If River, Riddick and I got off at Haven and Serenity left us there, how likely is it that the Operative would destroy the settlement and still continue on after Serenity?"

Zoe frowned, "On Ariel, you said those Blue Hands were killing anyone who'd even talked to you and River."

"Yeah," Shea nodded. "Weren't like they'd gotten anything useful out of us. River tryin' ta be as creepifyin' as she could ta throw 'em off. Just processin' their 'prisoners'." He barely kept himself from spitting on the deck in irritation at the word.

"Then I'd say it's highly likely the Operative would follow the same modus operandi," Ciara offered. "If what's in River's mind, this 'Miranda', is a secret of the parliament. They'll want to eliminate any possibility of it getting out. No matter how improbable."

"If there's a chance she could have told someone, that person is dead." Simon came to the painfully correct conclusion.

"Unless we stop him." Wash offered that possibility without much hope his normally sunny expression dampened.

Riddick smiled, "What? You think River an' me snuck down to the Training house just to keep Mal from gettin' killed? 'Tween Shazza and Inarra he'd've been fine. Beat up, but alive. Nope. Had another reason altogether."
She'd had to lie down, her body crying out for rest, her mind aching with the stress of Reading the Operative. His was not the easiest mind in the world to look into, emotions stunted and memories cut and scarred, newly bleeding and open with the codes she'd flashed into his mind. He wasn't even aware but already his programming was beginning to degrade.

Perhaps it hadn't been the best idea to sleep without meditating and attempting to clear her mind beforehand. But she'd been so tired that her first hours of sleep were dreamless. She should have known it wouldn't last.

The classroom hadn't changed since her last dream. Almost as if they were part of a sequence. The smell of the grass was the same, the feel of the stylus in her fingers, and all the bodies on the ground, still in sleep. Or worse. She couldn't tell. Wasn't sure she truly wanted to know.

Something dripped down her forehead and she realized she was bleeding, holes from needles in her head. A mix of temporal realities was at least somewhat reassuringly dreamlike, as opposed to the disturbing reality of her surroundings.

She set the stylus on her desk, her gaze drawn to the screen. The solar system was a glowing network of connected stars and planets. She knew them all. Naming them was as easy as breathing. Breathing faster and faster as the screen moved, pressing past all the other known planets until it's pushed into one system, one planet…

One of the walls of the classroom tent didn't lead to the gardens anymore. It opened to the Academy, the sterile white lab, gleaming tiles and blue lettering. Dr. Mathias was standing to one side, watching in his crisp white coat, pompous and proud as a rooster in the hen house. Puffed up with his own importance and unaware he would be hoist on his own petard. The formal dress of the five men standing there was a painful contrast to the room where she sat at a table, cards in front of her.

Their stares were cool and unconcerned, completely impassive, even as their ornate clothing became soaked with blood, dripping from their hands, their faces didn't change. She could see into their eyes, corpses, lying in houses, in offices and schools like her own, in city streets, city after city, a planet full of people…

Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of so much death, meaningless, apathetic, their silence screaming in her ears… Until something else was screaming. Flashing into her sight, the Reaver they'd killed getting off Lilac, rushing at her, grabbing her throat, sharpened teeth leaning in to bite off her face—

"Miranda!" River gasped as she woke and realized exactly where the planet was. And how she could show the crew. They needed to see. Especially Mal. He needed to see. He had to see.

Getting out of the bunk wasn't exactly rocket science. She and Riddick had long ago devised a way out that had nothing to do with the door to the lower hall or the ladder to the upper deck. A panel next to the bed was easily moved, and she was between Serenity's walls. A quick climb upward on the slender rungs of a maintenance ladder and she was between the crew quarters and the upper deck. Another panel unscrewed and she was in the hall and running down to the bridge.

Simon sounded the alarm out of sheer surprise at her not being in the bunk, calling her name as if she was playing hide and seek. Which she was, in a way, she supposed. But that alerted Mal whose
thoughts immediately leapt to the dangers of her being loose.

"Find her and do not engage!"

It was probably the wisest thing he could have said. She'd taken the precaution of locking several doors between the crew and the bridge. The doors being locked against him would deter him for a while, but Mal knew Serenity as well as she did, possibly more so, since he'd practically rebuilt the ship when he'd found her. And she hadn't gotten to Read every single memory he had of doing so.

At the moment the Captain was throwing his shoulder against the other door she'd bolted. She could feel Riddick's amusement as he watched, clearly without the intent to help in anyway. Zoe was frowning, not as worried as Mal but still concerned, "She's sealed off the bridge. I do not like her alone there. If the ad filters aren't on and she uses the cortex…"

Good reminder, she turned on the filter and kept searching. She didn't have long now, Kaylee, trying to be helpful, had thrown Mal a bolt remover. "Cap'n!"

Mal was removing a panel from the wall, talking to Zoe as he worked, "Check the shuttles. She coulda snuck in." He popped the panel off the wall and started to wiggle his way in. She had at least ten minutes before he reached her. Crawling through walls wasn't as easy for him as it was for her.

River nearly smiled as a floor panel hinged open and Mal pulled himself up. He was moving as quietly as he could, gun drawn, coming up behind her as if it was possible to sneak up on a Reader. She took a moment to unlock the doors and felt Riddick approaching behind Mal. To stall the Captain long enough for her bàng jiār to arrive she pulled one of her guns and aimed it at Mal without looking. That gave him some pause, he hadn't ever seen her miss even when she wasn't looking at who she was aiming at.

"To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?"

She murmured as she searched, her mind only half on trying to explain what she was doing. "Mò zhe shí tou guò hé."

After a moment Mal lowered his gun, "The government's man, he says you're a danger to us." For once Mal was speaking plain and clear. That was something of a kindness considering what was in the forefront of her brain. "Not worth helping. Is he right? Are you anything but a weapon? I've staked my crew's life on the theory that you're a person, actual and whole, and if I'm wrong you'd best shoot me now." River smirked down at her screen and, just to mess with him, cocked the gun. Mal added hastily, "Or we could talk some more."

Riddick's deep voice sounded from behind him as he stepped onto the bridge, "I'd go with talkin', just as a suggestion." He came up next to River and his big hand squeezed the back of her neck gently. "Figure it out liàn rén?"

River nodded, pointing at the screen. "Miranda." She'd found the planet that haunted her nightmares. The secret of it that had splintered her mind until she could only bury the memory or go completely insane. The planet nobody was supposed to know about.

River frowned as she stared at the cortex screen. Riddick had helpfully reached over and engaged the secondary ad filter that would keep the advertisements from running. It was something that cost coin so Mal never used it, but now it was handy. Something teasing… the edge of her brain… like a half-
"Miranda," She pointed at the black planet. "This is what has been hidden."

Kaylee was shaking her head, Simon's arm around her waist comfortingly, "How can it be that there's a whole planet called Miranda and none of us knowed that?"

"Because there isn't one." Mal was staring at the screen. She could hear in his thoughts the echo of tales from years back. "It's a blackrock. Uninhabitable. Terraforming didn't hold, or some such. Few settlers died."

Kaylee nodded, brightening as her memory came back, "Wait a tick, yeah! Some years back, before the war. There was call for workers to settle on Miranda, my daddy talked about going. I should've recalled..."

"Mèi mei, how in the wide worlds spinning were you supposed to recall something that happened when you were 'round seven years old?" Riddick grinned at her and Kaylee shrugged whimsically.

Wash was searching the cortex, "But there's nothing about it on the Cortex. History, Astronomy, it's not in there." He sounded baffled, "River where did you even find it?"

River shrugged, "Public archives. Everything is recorded, even if events and facts fade from memory. Easy to find if you know it's there. Impossible if you don't know what you're looking for. Most searches default to 'all habitable planets' and no one thinks about a blackrock."

"Half of writing history is hiding the truth." Mal's voice was bitter, "There's something on this rock the Alliance doesn't want known."

Shazza was leaning towards the screen, using one hand on Mal's forearm to balance, "That's right at the edge of the Burnham Quadrant, right? Furthest planet out." Mal nodded and she continued, "It's not that far from here." She shook her head, "Seems familiar somehow..."

"Whoa, no, no—" Wash was shaking his head with what River felt was an appropriate amount of trepidation.

"That's a bad notion—" Zoe continued her husband's thought.

River exchanged a glance with Riddick and then looked at Shazza and Simon. Simon nodded his understanding and Shazza gave a little smile of agreement. This news would be best coming from longstanding and trusted members of the crew, rather than the resident crazy genius, greenhorn doctor, rescued guest and escaped convict/murderer. It was past the Burnham Quadrant that they'd been stranded on planet. Only their roundabout course and the Rascal Puff's presence had kept them from a worse fate than death from starvation and exposure and in her case, infection.

Wash was continuing, "Honey..."

Zoe nodded punching up the commands to pull the screen back from Miranda, showing the surrounding planets and solar system. "I got it, baby."

"Show them the bad." Wash seemed to be of a similar mind to the four of them. Mal would take this better from Zoe than anyone else.

Zoe began to explain for the rest of the crew since Mal's face showed that once he saw the charts he understood exactly why going to Miranda was a very bad notion. "This is us, see?" She pointed at a dot that showed them a bit away from Haven. She pointed to another dot further out. "And here's..."
Miranda." Her fingers indicated the empty sky between the two planets. "All along here, this dead space in between, that's Reaver territory."

Wash added, "They just float out there, sending out raiding parties."

"Maybe a hundred ships. And more every year. You go through that you're signing up to be a banquet." Zoe gave them the bad news as frankly and simply as possible.

River frowned again, that thought still teasing her brain, rubbing at her forehead in irritation. "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart?" She hated it when her thoughts twisted and wound like this, past and present and future colliding. "Sideways..." She murmured and drew Mal's sharp look.

"What's that?" The Captain's gaze was concerned, for her and his crew and ship. "River, you Hearing something xiǎo lǎo?"

"They'll come at you sideways, it's how they think, how they move, sidle up...hit you where you're weak." She looked at him and his eyes widened.

"Ô, zhè zhēn shì ge kuàilè de jīnzhǎn," Mal groaned.

Riddick stiffened and pushed Wash to the co-pilot's seat. "She said when we're flyin' again you gotta sit here." He began to cue up their course, "Without goin' for hard burn and attractin' attention, shave off as much of our time as you can." He ordered the pilot, not stopping, "Mal, you and Simon, you'd best get the infirmary ready for casualties. "Last time we heard those words we're talkin' with Book."

River looked up at Zoe, "It reminds him of the Striker-class ships. He runs, one of the last... shouting... Takes a bullet to the shoulder. Doane has been struck where he stands at the cannon... Book is there."

"Did they get into the mine?" Shea was worried, remembering how spread out Haven was, how far there would be to run.

She nodded, staring into nothing as she saw the bullets plowing the dirt, destroying homes and near razing Book's church. "Book...he took Doane's place at the cannon. Familiar with the ship, souped up beyond all good sense, but the engine core remains in the same place. He is taking fire... but he has killed the ship."

Mal and Simon had long since left to prep the infirmary and Kaylee had raced off to the engine room the minute she had heard Riddick's tone of voice. Shea, Ciara, Zoe and Shazza remained on the bridge, listening.

"How many dead?" Zoe asked softly as if dreading the answer.

"Huò bù dān xíng. Ship has crashed... into the mine... no danger of collapse, but no method of egress either." River frowned, "When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions. Alliance crew is hurt and most will die of their wounds before we arrive. Stumbling from the wreckage, shooting at Book, blaming him." Riddick growled furiously and Wash began to punch out speed corrections on the controls.

"But Haven?" Ciara asked softly, "Will the people be all right?"

River snapped her gaze from the empty space to the cortex screen at the navigator's station and began to work frantically, her fingers making staccato sounds on the keys as they clattered. "Qīng Xiāng,"
Riddick asked quietly. "Somethin' we should know?"

"Haven will starve in the mine, ship blocks the way out. Can't be moved without help. Serenity can't
do the job, needs a cargo lifter or a salvage vessel, like the Walden," River didn't look up from her
work. "No time to go get it. Haven's mine began as a cave system."

"Cave systems usually have multiple access points," Zoe realized. "Can you find it?"

"Searching the archives for maps of Haven when it was first settled after terraforming," River
answered absently. "Residents don't even know how far the mines go underground, across their
world."

"We're almost there," Wash called back. "Be nice if we could be helpful when we arrive."

"Patience is a virtue pilot man," River retorted as she worked. "Can't exactly Read a planet."

"Just sayin'," Wash shrugged.

"Shea, maybe you an' Ciara oughta get a few more guns. Just in case that Alliance crew decides to
be bit more lively than we're expecting." Riddick suggested.

"Good notion," Zoe sounded approving and taking that as an order Shea and Ciara headed down to
the armory.

"Success!" River cried triumphantly. "The game is afoot: Follow your spirit and upon this charge cry
'God for Harry, England and Saint George'!"

"How far from where they're at?" Riddick asked.

"At least a mile as the crow flies. Three through the winding paths of the caves." River replied.

"Well we'll deal with that when we get there."

He'd known that Haven would be changed, had enough experience to understand the effects of
bullets and grenades on houses and bodies alike. But they flew into a world of fire. Every building
was burning, and those that weren't, there wasn't enough left of the structure to even say with any
certainty that they'd been homes. The church was burning and several bodies littered the ground, not
all of them in Alliance uniforms. He could pick out Doane, the retired thief among them.

The grounded Alliance cruiser had crashed head on into the entrance of the mine, bringing down a
good portion of the mountain on top of it. They could only hope the fleeing residents of the
destroyed settlement had been far enough in that they weren't caught in the collapse. The engine core
was a pile of slag next to it and the cannon that had brought it down wasn't far away from the ship.

Wash, from his unfamiliar position in the co-pilot's chair, had brought them in and set Serenity down
in the closest open space that would fit the boat. Riddick turned and looked at River and nodded as
he saw her decked out in her working gear, his jacket and hers over her arms. Mal had come back up
to the bridge and cursed as he looked out over the wreck that had been a sleepy little mining camp.

"Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ." Mal looked at River. "Where're you goin'?"

Riddick rose from his seat and took his jacket, "Got the shuttle set up?"
River nodded, "Both of them."

"Right. You fly one, I'll fly the other. Should be able to fit most everyone inside." Riddick nodded, "If not, we'll make more than one trip."

"Nǐzài jiǎng shén me pì huà?" Mal demanded, "Where'd you think you're taking my shuttles?"

Riddick took a deep breath and forced himself to not get pissed at Mal. They didn't have the time to waste at the moment. Beating Mal up wouldn't take long but then they'd have to patch him up and Simon was likely needed elsewhere. "Most of Haven took refuge in the mine, they got their hideaway set up in there. But they're blocked in by the cruiser and there's no way to budge the gorram thing without a tank mover or salvage vessel."

"Multiple points of ingress and egress," River nodded. "But they will become lost in the mines. Don't know where they are."

"Me an' River, we see in the dark, know where the closest exit is, so we're takin' the shuttles there. Then we'll go in, fast as we can, and guide the folks out." Riddick explained as he pulled on his jacket. "Wash, we good to go?"

"Yeah you're all set," Wash checked the couplings and nodded. "Good hunting."

"Thanks," Riddick grinned.

"She, you, but—" Mal stuttered, "She ain't gonna fly my shuttle."

"She's just as good a pilot as me," Riddick shrugged. "You need Wash here with the boat."

"Mal, we're on the ground," Wash offered mildly. "You wanna see about those burning buildings, before they get too close to us?"

Mal stomped off muttering about respect and how he didn't get none while Riddick checked his knives and took the bag River was holding.

"Luminous ink to mark our way." She explained.

"Well let's get this show on the road." The Furyan nodded.

"Yes," River looked towards the cannon. "Book is badly hurt. Simon…might be able to help him. Might not."

"Nothin' we can do about that right now," Riddick guided her towards the shuttles. "Let's focus on what we can do." He watched her run through the preflight check and nodded his satisfaction. "I'll be right behind you Qīng Xiāng."

It was a very short flight by shuttle to the entrance River had found and programmed into the cortex. By the time they landed River was murmuring about Book. "They have found him. He is very badly wounded. Lost a great deal of blood."

"He's lost blood before," Riddick was following his wife primarily because it was her ability to Read where the trapped folk were that would lead them through the twisting tunnels of the caves turned mine. "And we didn't have Simon with us then. You two getting yourselves kidnapped and all."
"Followed Simon," River retorted primly. "He works on Book now. Tries to stabilize him before he can be moved." Her scent was blazing with blood and steel as she Read the criminal turned lawman turned Shepherd. "I shot him down—" She paused, "I killed the ship... that killed us. Not... very Christian of me."

Riddick smirked, "Well sometimes what's right ain't very Christian is it?"

River chuckled low in the dark, her agreement plain. "Mal agrees. Book… Book thinks coming from Mal that doesn't mean much."

It was his turn to chuckle, following her through the black of the mines, painting the walls with bioluminescent paint for them to find their way back. "Yeah, I'd say that's about right."

River was frowning, "He begins to lose consciousness, but there will be less strain on his heart. Simon has packed him with bandages, they are able to move him." She sighed as she caught an errant though of her brother's. "Simon thinks his spine is severed. No movement below the hips."

Riddick shrugged slightly, "If anyone can deal with that gracefully it'll be Book."

"Has overcome many obstacles," River agreed. They walked in silence for a while, the darkness no more an obstacle than a soft breeze, Furyan eyes glowing in the black of their surroundings. Her scent changed again as she considered their direction and chose the right hand of a divided path. "Haven's folk are afraid. Cortex won't work, no way to reach the outside."

"Yeah, that cruiser tore up pretty much every communication array they had," Riddick recalled the sight of the ruined camp. "Town wasn't much but it's a lot less than it was."

"Kaylee, Wash, Shazza and Ciara have been putting out the fire on the church roof," She commented absently. "Adobe can be rebuilt. It can be a town again."

"Makes me glad we sent to folks to make hidey holes," He nodded as they took another turn, their pace steadier, quickening as they neared the folk of Haven and their direction became sure.

"Gladder still we could begin to unravel the programming," River told him. "He is the type to be thorough beyond surety. Would have razed to the ground every contact we had, but for part of him fighting himself. Argues against a waste of resources chasing down folk we haven't done business with or spoken to in more than a year or two. Extracted as much information as he could from the Rample twins, but all their intelligence points to the trails we have deliberately laid."

"So he didn't find the ranch on Herschel, or the Sanchez brothers?" Riddick half smiled, "Or Li Shen?"

"Nope," River sounded smug. "Finds slavers, treacherous middle men and all manner of despicable folk. Laid waste to the lot of them."

"So Haven's the only place got hit that we didn't want to get hit," Riddick was feeling some smug himself about that. "What about Badger?"

"Enough contacts on Persephone to paint himself as law-abiding. Old business with Serenity of the legitimate sort, no one who the Operative would consider the type to shelter thieves and killers after a heist." River smiled as the rounded a corner. "We are very close to Haven's folk."

"All right, let's hope they aren't planning on shooting us," Riddick really didn't want to deal with a bullet wound on top of guiding folks out of the darkness. Zhēn tā mā yào mìng. Zhù yì."
"Some weapons, but if we speak they will hear our voices. Lanterns of soft yellow light, blood, and many bruises," River explained as she walked forward and sure enough, in the distance he could see a yellow glow, perhaps forty meters ahead of them.

"Thought about how we're going to explain how we found 'em?" Riddick asked with a grin.

"Wasn't planning on it," River shrugged as they moved forward. "They know I'm good with the cortex. There are always maps to dig up."

"That's true. Might be somethin' we could do for them, we get through the storm, get the other exits mapped out and some battery lights stuck on the walls," Riddick considered that as the drew closer to the folk hiding in the mine. "For sure it's something they won't have a lot of time for, not in the next few months at least."

"True," River agreed. She gave him a little grin, "Browncoats are resourceful though." She waved at the tall figure who stepped into the mouth of light. "We have come to rescue you." She called to Bernabe. "Is anyone hurt?"

The relief in the Browncoat's voice was unmistakable, "River! Rick! Gorram but it's good to see you, well sorta see you." He called over his shoulder, "It's just Rick an' River. They're findin' a back-way in."

"Yeah, caves usually have a few exits, River dug one up on the cortex, figured with the cruiser blocking the entrance ya'll would need another way out." Riddick nodded as they reached the miners and their families. "An' since the dark don't bother us none, we elected ourselves as rescue crew. Mal an' the others are tryin' to put out some fires." He watched as his wife moved forward and checked Bernabe's shoulder. The bullet wound had been bandaged and he still had movement in his arm so he'd probably be all right.

"Shepherd Book?" Bernabe's wife Mildred was holding their daughter and clutching their son's hand. "Is he all right? He didn't make it into the mine. Neither did Doane."

"Doane was shot by the cruiser, they were firin' straight at the cannon. He didn't make it." Riddick couldn't see anyway to soften the blow. "Book's been shot, and he's hurt pretty bad, but Simon an' Jayne are workin' on him. Don't know what his chances are just yet. But Simon's a damn good doctor."

There were murmurings of worry and but most of the faces were resolved to make the best of their situation. They had their lives and that was more than the Alliance would have left them with. He waited a minute for that to sink in and continued, "River an' me, we got Serenity's shuttles parked by the back door of the mine. Don't know how many we can hold at a time but we'll try to make as few trips as possible. It ain't safe to go running around yet, we don't know how much of the Alliance crew survived the crash. So we ain't gonna split up families even if it means more trips. Ya'll need to watch out for each other."

River murmured softly, "The fire on the church is out. They can shelter there. Roof has holes but it is better than no roof or walls."

Riddick nodded, "They got the fire out that was burning the church and it's still pretty much standing so when we get back to Haven, ya'll head straight there. Don't look around, don't try to salvage anything yet. Just hunker down in the church like you were set to hide here in the mines."

River gave them a half smile, "Probably safer here but we couldn't know when we'd be back and we didn't want you to starve in here. We've marked the path pretty clearly you can find your way back if
you need to."

Bernabe nodded and began to issue instructions, telling parents to walk one ahead and one behind the children and make sure no one strayed. Riddick ran his eyes over Haven's people and saw at least one broken arm, a concussioon and multiple bruises and scrapes besides Bernabe's bullet wound. It hadn't been an easy run for the mine for some folks.

River exchanged a glance with him and nodded. She'd keep an eye on the injured then and bring up the rear of their little parade.

"Let's get goin' then. We don't wanna waste daylight." Riddick ordered. "You can bring your lanterns, just don't shine 'em in my eyes. I'll guide us out, use the lights to see where you're stepping, not where I'm going."

"I want light at my back, not in my eyes," River murmured and set him a grin remembering how he'd guided another set of folks, many of them less deserving than Haven's, through a different darkness.

"Like the caves better than that gorram planet," Riddick agreed with a grin.

It took them four trips, but they got everyone back to Haven and into the church. While Simon, Zoe, Jayne and Mal had worked on Book, Wash, Zoe and Ciara had been putting out as many fires as they could and salvaging foodstuffs, bedding and clothing from the ruined houses. Kaylee and Shazza were trying to repair some of the broken heating units before nightfall when the temperatures tended to drop. They'd also moved Doane's body to one of the empty half broken buildings to rest until burial.

After a bit of discussion, River and Riddick had decided it was easier to land the shuttles close to the church than dock with Serenity and lead the folks down through the bay and past the infirmary. Less distraction for the folks pulling medical duty, but the downside was no one had seen or heard how Book was doing.

Simon was heading down Serenity's ramp when Riddick and River finally docked the shuttles on Serenity. He waited for them in the bay as they came down the stairs on either side of it, offering an exhausted smile, "He's alive. I was just about to go tell his flock how he was doing." Simon still had a streak of blood on one cheek and his clothing was as rumpled as Riddick had ever seen.

"River said he might not walk," Riddick asked quietly as he and River joined Simon.

Simon nodded soberly, "He might not. His spinal cord was badly damaged. There hasn't been any movement in his legs. And that's if he lives. He's not a young man."

"Yeah and losing that much blood…" Riddick shook his head.

"Oh, Jayne sat down and donated a pint or so, handing me instruments as I needed them all the while in order to keep from looking at the needle in his arm," Simon nearly smiled. "So that did help quite a bit. But it's still touch and go and he shouldn't be moved for as long as we can manage."

"Well we brought you a bunch more possible donors, in case you need 'em," Riddick nodded towards the church.

Simon nodded towards the bridge. "Mal's gone up to check on the rest of our contacts." The doctor rolled up his sleeves. "I imagine there are some injured among Haven's folk as well."
Mal's irritation saturated the air when they got to the bridge. He was a hairsbreadth away from simply hitting the cortex screens in his frustration. River had gently nudged Mal away from the cortex, quickly typing in the addresses they needed and the encryption keys protecting them. Silent pings were sent to the locales they cared about, their contacts and allies still safe, with their waves in working order. When she nodded Mal let out a sigh of relief and slumped into his chair. Then she began to bring up the screens of the contacts they hadn't warned, the disreputable, double dealing or plain old evil, and the screens showed a different story. Every screen glowed with unholy fire, destruction, bullet ridden bodies or the snow of an interrupted signal.

Mal stared in shock at the screens as they came to life, and she could hear in his thoughts that this would have happened to all their friends had he not taken River seriously when she'd first begun to speak of the trouble that was hunting them. He was still numb with shock at the thought when River moved out of sight of the screens, leaving him sitting in the co-pilot's seat, Riddick behind him.

Seconds after she moved out of view the Operative flickered into sight on the viewscreens. "I'm sorry."

River stifled a grin at Mal's thoughts, that of all the unmitigated gall this was the unmitigatedest. Not just to call but to apologize? "You—not what?"

She felt more than saw the shudder that went through Mal as the Operative spoke the words she'd echoed months before, "If your quarry goes to ground, leave no ground to go to. You should have taken my offer — or did you think none of this was your fault?" His gaze flicked from Mal to Riddick's dark silent figure behind him.

The growl that burst from Riddick's throat was impressive enough to get a slight blink of surprise from the Operative, "I don't murder children, you sorry guó niàng yǎng de."

The Operative was calm, if regretful of the necessity, "As you can see, I do. If I have to."

"Weren't no 'have to' about this," Riddick snarled and River felt a surge of pride in his acting skills, summoning all of the fury such a situation would have roused in him and channeling it towards the Operative. "Weren't like you couldn't have dropped Purple Bellies in, made some arrests, done a sweep. You had a dozen other options, Operative like you, you chose this chose to be è guàn mān yíng."

Mal wasn't quite as good an actor but he was still shocked at the Operative's chutzpah and that deceived the dark man well enough, "Why? Do you even know why they sent you?"

"It's not my place to ask. I believe in something that is greater than myself. A better world. A world without sin." River was amazed, not at the man's belief, but the hubris of parliament, to think that such a thing was even possible.

Mal was outraged for an entirely different reason, "So me and mine got to lie down and die so you can live in your better world?"

Now the Operative actually had an expression on his face, as if Mal had lost his mind, "I'm not going to live there. How could you think—?" He cut himself short, "There's no place for me there, any more than there is for you. Malcolm, I'm a monster. What I do is evil, I've no illusions about that. But it must be done."
She could Read that Mal had heard the first words out of the man's mouth that he could agree with. Riddick shook his head, "Anger begets more anger." He folded his arms, "And evil only begets more evil. You don't build a better world by killing what came before, try to erase the truth of folks. Nobody can change what they are, they can only make choices as if they were better. Your better world will never exist. Turning the original materials to the best account; pruning and training nature. But she could not eradicate nature: nor will it be eradicated 'till this mortal shall put on immortality."

The Operative actually looked like he was going to argue through his shock of a murderer quoting the classics at him when Mal interrupted, "Keep on talking. You're not getting a location trace off this wave."

"And every minute you keep River Tam from me more people will die." The Operative looked resolved to that fact.

"You think I care?" Mal snapped out while Riddick growled again.

"Of course you do. You're not a Reaver, Mal. You're a human man and you will never—"

Mal flicked the switch to cut off all the screens, watching as they went dark. River came out from the shadows with a smile and Riddick pulled her close, his nose in her hair. "Interesting, how he referred to Reavers, as if he believes they are real," Riddick commented. "Not what's usual for Core folk."

River nodded thoughtfully, studying the Captain.

Mal had switched the screens to the image of Miranda she had found. She looked at the Captain, Reading the thoughts so loud they may as well be shouting to her, "Time to do a little sideways moving of our own." She spoke his thoughts aloud and he looked up at her.

"You two gonna back me on this?" He frowned, "Gonna get all sortsa folk upset at me."

Riddick looked at him and then the screen and back to the Captain, "You're gonna make a run at Miranda, see if we can use that secret as leverage?"

"More… aimin' to shout it to the skies so River ain't the only one knows it," Mal nodded. "If it's out, fact that she knows it ain't so important. Everybody else'll know it too. But if they're gonna kill us, I'd rather die trying to get at the truth."

Riddick nodded and kissed River's head, "Yet I argue not against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer right onward." He looked at Mal, "I'll back you. But you are gonna catch a lot of flak for this. Only one way through Reaver space."

River and Riddick followed Mal out as he strode down the ramp to where the crew had been gathering the bodies of the Alliance soldiers that had made it off the ship to die rather than die inside it. "Get these bodies together."

Zoe looked at him in surprise, "We got time for gravedigging? For them?"

River looked up at her husband, "Perhaps best to speak with the folk of Haven, let them know what we mean to do. He wishes to borrow their cannon. Broken, only one or two good shots left in it."

Riddick nodded and headed for the church as Mal kept on issuing instructions, "Zoe, you and Simon are gonna rope 'em together. Five or six of 'em. I want them laid out on the nose of our ship."
Simon gaped at him, "Are you insane?"

"What do you mean, the bodies?" Kaylee was completely bewildered even as Mal kept right on speaking.

"Kaylee, I need you to muck the reactor core, just enough to leave a trail and make it read like we're flying without containment, not enough to fry us."

The pretty mechanic was still stumbling over what he'd said to do with the dead, "But… Cap'n…"

"Kaylee, you got a day's work to do and two hours to do it." He turned to Jayne, "Jayne, you and Wash hoist up that cannon mount. Goes right on top. Piece or two of the other ship, stick it on. Any place you can tear hull without inner breach, do that too." He looked around thoughtfully, "And we're gonna need paint. We're gonna need red paint."

Shazza was staring at him in shock, "Mal what are you saying?" River slipped an arm around her waist comfortingy and Shazza looked down at her and then back at Mal in sudden understanding, falling silent for a moment before asking River, "We got another valley full of monsters to get through?"

River nodded, "Half a league, half a league, half a league onward, all in the valley of Death rode the six hundred."

Shazza nodded and gave her a squeeze before moving towards the cannon, her mechanical talents best suited for the job given to Wash and Jayne. River looked at Zoe who was arguing with Mal.

"Sir. Do you really mean to turn our home into an abomination so we can make a suicidal attempt at passing through Reaver space?" Zoe had her 'sir-you've-lost-your-ruttin'-mind' look on.

River nearly smiled as Mal's thought flew out of his head, That's our Zoe, never beatin' 'round no bushes. "I mean to live. I mean for us to live. The Alliance won't have that, so we go where they won't follow."

Jayne was finding the entire plan highly disturbing, "God's balls, there's no way we're going out there!" His arm was around Ciara protectively.

It seemed like that was the cue for everyone to start talking at once, "What's the point of living if you sink to the level of a savage-. Juhguh jee hua jun kuhpah-! Please, we should talk this over-. I ain't takin' orders from a man has lost his brainstem-."

When Mal pulled his gun everyone shut up, "This is how it works. Anybody doesn't wanna fly with me anymore, this is your port of harbor. There's a lot of fine ways to die. I'm not waiting for the Alliance to choose mine." He walked past his crew towards the Alliance ship, an officer of some type was struggling to climb out of the wreck when he saw Mal he raised his hands in surrender.

Mal's reaction was to shoot him in the head, "I mean to confound those bungers, and take my shot at getting to Miranda, maybe finding out what all I'm dying for. That's the only path I see left and I got to walk it. So I hear a word out of any of you that ain't helpin' me out or takin' your leave I will tā mā de shoot you."

He grabbed a body and dropped it at Zoe's feet as he headed back towards Serenity. Before anyone could say anything further another shot rang out. River smiled at Riddick as he emerged from the church, gun in hand, another body falling from the Alliance ship. It didn't even slow Mal down, "Get to work."
Author's Note: So what do you think? I always figured a sane River (or at least a mostly
sane and stable River) would be able to predict the Operative's movements somewhat.
And paranoia and precaution should be Riddick's middle names. So it didn't seem
unreasonable to me that they'd outmaneuver the Operative in some respects.

Chinese Translations:

Jiào nǐ shēng háizì méi pìgu yǎn (May your child be born with an imperforate anus)
Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)

bàng jiār (lover / partner)

Mō zhe shí tou guò hé. (to wade the river by groping for stones (idiom) / to advance step
by step / to feel one's way around)

liàn rén (lover / sweetheart)

Mèi mei (little sister)

xiǎo láng (little wolf)

Ö, zhè zhēn shì kuài le de jìnzhǎn (Oh, this is a happy development)

Huò bù dān xíng (misfortune does not come singly (idiom) / it never rains but it pours)

Nǐ tā mā de tiān xià suǒ yǒu de rén dōu gāi sǐ. (Fuck everyone in the universe to death.)

Nǐ zài jiǎng shén me pì huà (What shit/the fuck are you saying)

Zhēn tā mā yào mìng. Zhù yì. (The situation's really fucked up. Be careful.)

gǒu niáng yǎng de (son of a bitch)

è guàn mǎn yǐng . (lit. strung through and filled with evil (idiom); filled with extreme
evil / replete with vice / guilty of monstrous crimes)

tā mā de (fucking)

Script Chinese Translations:

Juugu jee hua jun kuhpah! (There's nothing about this plan that isn't horrific!)

Quote Sources:

the most unkindest cut of all – Julius Caesar – William Shakespeare

Awake, arise, or be forever fallen – Paradise Lost - John Milton
Deliver me from the workers of iniquity and save me from bloody men – Psalm 59:2

To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them? – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart? – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions – Hamlet – William Shakespeare

The game is afoot: Follow your spirit and upon this charge cry 'God for Harry, England and Saint George'! – Henry V – William Shakespeare

Anger begets more anger - Mahavira

Turning the original materials to the best account; pruning and training nature. But she could not eradicate nature: nor will it be eradicated 'till this mortal shall put on immortality. – Jane Eyre – Charlotte Brontë

Yet I argue not against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer right onward – Sonnet: To Cyriack Skinner – John Milton

Half a league, half a league, half a league onward, all in the valley of Death rode the six hundred. – The Charge of the Light Brigade – Alfred, Lord Tennyson
It's Something I Have To Do

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Riddick had explained to the folks in the church what they were planning on so no one would pitch an unholy fit about Serenity being decked out like an abomination. But no one was thrilled about it. When the Captain had seen Serenity it had been love at first sight and that had never waned, no matter the hard times they'd fallen on. River sighed as Mal's heart twinged painfully at the sight of his ship looking so torn up and evil. Serenity deserved better but it couldn't be helped. Kaylee had done as Mal ordered and messed with the engine, cursing and near crying the entire time. The bodies of the Alliance crew had been strapped to the front of her and one put in a space suit and lashed to the cannon set on the hull near the upper airlock. No self-respecting (if they had any self-respect as such) Reaver ship would take to the Black unarmed. Mal and River had done the painting, what Mal didn't quite remember River could. Riddick and Shazza had ended up helping to mount the cannon on Serenity so it wouldn't fall off when they broke atmo.

And Book had to be moved from the infirmary to the church since no one was willing to take a wounded man into Reaver territory. Mal had been set to leave Shazza and Ciara since no one really knew they were even affiliated with Serenity but they'd both pitched a fit at the thought. Humor bubbled up through her as she recalled that Shea had tried to take Mal's side on that one until the look Ciara had given him had just about blistered his chin and he'd subsided quickly.

Book began to wake up as Jayne and Riddick moved him, carrying the litter to the church where Simon was trying to get things set up so Book would recover. Mal was fortunate, or unfortunate enough to be walking alongside Book when the man woke and grabbed for Mal's forearm, rasping, "You—it's all on you now—all this death, this shit—you have to find a course. This can't mean nothing. River—you have to—" He took a breath, visibly gathering his strength.

Mal wrapped his hand around Book's wrist, holding him steady, "I know. We'll find a way through. Find a way to make this right." River reflected that whatever else he might be, Mal did have a knack for knowing what to say, sometimes anyway.

"I don't care what you believe! Just..." Book was almost glaring, fierce as a man could be with his lower half shot up. "—believe it. Whatever you have to—" His strength failed him mid-sentence and he lapsed into unconsciousness again. Thankfully he had not caught a glimpse of the horrific sight Serenity had been made into. That would have stopped his heart faster than the bullets.

Mal looked alarmed and ready to shout for Simon but River shook her head from the other side of the litter. "He woke, which is good. He was lucid, which is encouraging. It is up to him whether or not he heals. Simon instructs Bernabe and Mildred about the medicines and how to care for Book."

"I 'spect that's good," Mal nodded and held the church door, half off its hinges, open for them to walk through with the Shepherd.

Simon was adamant, "I cannot stress enough the importance of letting Shepherd Book rest. Keep him warm and dry, give him the medicines at the proper times and do not give him solid foods yet. Broths and juice or water only." Bernabe, Mildred and several others nodded.

"An' if he takes a turn for the worst?" Mildred asked quietly.

"Kaylee and Wash are getting a cortex working for you and a way to get the signal off world,"
Simon told them. "You wave me and if I can't get here I'll talk you through what to do."

"Why're you leavin'," One of the others asked. "Shepherd needs you Doc."

"Dangrous to stay," Mal told them flatly. "Can't know if the Alliance will come back. They're huntin' folk with a powerful will. We've got to do something to stymie them and we're hoping this is it."

Bernabe, his arm in a sling, nodded grimly and put his free arm around his wife comfortingly. "We'll do our best for him."

"Book takes a turn for the worse," Riddick's voice was calm and measured. "We'll do our best to find a way to get a doctor to you. Send us waves to the cortex address Simon gave you. It's safe. Let us know how he's doing day to day. If we can, we'll come back when it's safe for you. But if we can't we'll send you help."

"This day is called the feast of Crispian: he that outlives this day, and comes safe home, will stand a tip-toe when this day is named, and rouse him at the name of Crispian." River spoke softly and Riddick nodded.

"He that shall live this day, and see old age, will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours, and say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian:'", Riddick continued with a half-smile.

Simon smiled and she could hear his thoughts that it was a fitting speech considering the dangers they were about to face but that it was lost on the folks clustered around Book. River nodded her agreement and began to walk back to Serenity. Simon doublechecked the bundle of medicinal supplies one last time and Mal began to herd everyone back to the ship. It was time for her to finally face the nightmare.

Mal looked at her as they stepped onto Serenity, in her awful Reaver guise, "Any last insights?"

River shrugged, "There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail: there gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners, souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me— That ever with a frolic welcome took the thunder and the sunshine, and opposed free hearts, free foreheads— you and I are old; old age hath yet his honour and his toil; death closes all: but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods."

Mal sighed, "That ain't the heartening words I was hopin' for little genius girl.

She smiled, "Maybe he will like this better."

She took Riddick's hand and let him guide her up the ramp as she spoke, "Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The Captain's mouth firmed and he nodded, "Not to yield... yeah. That I's a notion I can get behind."

Riddick was trying to not inhale too deeply. The combined scents of everyone's nerves and fear would drive him crazy if he got too much in his nose. Kaylee was back keeping an eye on the engine so the radiation readings would remain non-fatal but Reaver-like and Wash was doing the same from the co-pilot's seat.
There'd been a slight scrum with both he and Wash trying to take the same seat and he'd finally pointed at the co-pilot's chair and ordered Wash into it with a growl. He didn't know why River was so insistent that Wash not sit in his customary chair. It was possible that she didn't know entirely why herself. But when River got that scent to her it was a good idea to just go with what she was saying and figure out the whys later.

She'd gone back to the galley and was helping Shea, Ciara and Zoe with the weapons, going over all of them and making sure each was in working order. Shazza was with Mal someplace, most likely the two of them were doing more of that half flirting half teasing they did with each other. Simon had gone down to the infirmary with the intention of mixing up some overdoses of opiates.

Mal, before he'd disappeared with Shazza, had commented on the cheerfulness (or not) of that action and Simon had grimly pointed out the possibility of Reavers taking the ship and wouldn't it be better to have the option of a painless sleepy death than one of being skinned alive? Mal had shut up at that point.

River had looked at Simon a bit reproachfully but he'd remained firm. Riddick and River might have fought Reavers before, but none of the rest of them had, and there was no guarantee that they wouldn't be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. It was better to have the option and not need it, than need it and not have it.

Riddick had nodded his understanding and River had sighed her agreement but they knew neither of them would be able to take the drugs. They'd go down fighting.

Riddick felt more than saw or heard River's presence on the bridge, her white hand on his shoulder a comfort he hadn't realized he wanted until she was there. Zoe had done the same with Wash, a solid presence at his back and he knew it chafed at her to stand and wait, to be able to do nothing but watch while Wash did his job. River had more patience for that than Zoe did, she'd learned from the best after all, the value of conserving her energy.

As they approached Reaver space everyone had gathered on the bridge, watching the other ships warily. He frowned and Wash's grip tightened as they began the slow journey through the ships that looked as torn and bloody as the Reavers than inhabited them. It was a trick, looking aimless, and still sliding between and around the Reaver boats. They didn't seem to care if they bumped into each other, not even if it meant a hull breach. There were near to a hundred ships, each ripped and savage in its own particular way. One turned as they passed, as if watching them, but made no move to follow, seemingly indifferent to their passage. Some of the ships were huge, he could have sworn he saw a cruise liner along with myriad others. All of them bedecked in red, screaming fury through the Black, without reason or sense.

It didn't take but ten minutes but it seemed like hours before they were past the nightmarish armada and arrived at Miranda.

River tensed behind him and spoke in the round measured tones they'd all come to associate with the Operative, "Define 'disappeared'." Riddick saw her look over at Mal out of the corner of his eye as she continued, "Serenity cannot be found and he finds this unexpected. Does not deal well with the unexpected. Serenity is fast becoming an irritant."

"Well ain't that sweet to hear," Mal had a smirk on his face to judge by his tone.

"Not funny," River told him in her own voice. "I envy not the beast that takes his license in the field of time, unfetter'd by the sense of crime to whom a conscience never wakes. He is not without resources. Will find a way."
"Let's just hope we'll have some leverage by the time he does show up," Mal remarked as they looked over the clouds of Miranda's atmosphere.

Zoe had taken the navigator's station and was doing scans, mostly to keep herself busy, but finding some surprising information given what they'd learned of Miranda's history, "Every reading I'm getting says normal. Oceans, land masses... no tectonic instability or radiation."

Wash was frowning, "Yeah, but no power, either."

Mal was frowning right back, "Nothing at all?"

Riddick flipped a few switches to widen their scan, glad River had done her best to upgrade Serenity's systems. "Wait. Something. Might be a beacon."

He looked over at Wash who nodded his agreement, "But it's awful weak."

"Find it." Mal commanded.

River leaned over and did something to the cortex that most likely none of them could follow even if she explained it and Wash nodded, able to home in on the signal finally. "I got it. Changing course... we should be able to land about three klicks from it."

"Let's suit up," The Captain left the bridge, Zoe and Jayne following him.

Riddick frowned and opened the coms to the suits. "Gimme a test of your coms Mal," He spoke after a few minutes and got Mal's voice in response.

"Whatever River did to the coms worked a treat, you're comin' through good and loud."

"Cleaned up the signal," River shrugged as she looked over the information on the navigator's screens.

They listened quietly to the running checks of the suits as the three of them got into the gear. Better to be safe than sorry, just because Zoe hadn't found anything to indicate the terraforming hadn't taken didn't mean it wasn't so. It was better to assume the air wasn't breathable than go out and watch your eyes start bugging from your skull for lack of oxygen whilst you turned an unattractive shade of puce.

"Opening inner doors," Kaylee's worried voice came over the speaker. After a moment she spoke again, presumably after closing the inner doors, "Opening outer doors."

There was another brief pause and Mal commented, "Gravity's Earthnorm."

Zoe was sending them the scans she was taking as they came across her screen, "O2 levels check, pressure... if there's anything wrong the scanner isn't reading it."

There was a click as Mal pulled off his helmet and when he spoke again his voice didn't have the echoing sound that came along with speaking inside a bubble, "Well something sure as hell ain't right. And those buildings are... just a mite taller than advertised. Kaylee let us back in."

Whatever else he might have expected of Miranda, it hadn't been a city that wouldn't have looked out of place on Osiris or Londinium. Tall buildings spiraled into the sky and sprawled out over miles. Everything was elegant and modern, nothing like a planet on the Border or Rim. The contrast
between Miranda and Haven was painfully stark.

But there was another difference besides the architecture. Silence. No animals, no movement but the wind blowing through the weeds that had grown up through cracks in the pavement. Buildings were decimated by long extinguished blazes but not so much as a bug was moving around them. It was eerie and more than a little disturbing. No matter what planet you were on, something made noise. On Miranda, even the breeze seemed oddly muted.

Shea was looking around, "This ain't no little settlement."

Zoe was in agreement, obvious though the statement was, "We flew over at least a dozen cities just as big. Why didn't we hear about this?"

"An' why have a Core type planet this far out?" Shea was frowning as he gazed at the buildings of steel, ceramic and glass.

River's voice was absent, as if she had other things she was thinking on, "An attempt by parliament to bring civilization to the Rim. The benefits of Unification. Seed the Border and Rim with…" She paused as if puzzled, "—with controllable planets." Shea gave her a puzzled look and she shrugged as if she wasn't sure what it meant either.

"Not controlled," Riddick clarified and she shook her head. He was getting a nasty feeling in his gut and River shuddered slightly, feeling the same as he.

Riddick watched as Mal pointed, the Captain either didn't have answers or wanted to keep his theories to himself for a while. "Beacon's up ahead." Mal and Zoe took point with Jayne while Shazza, Simon and Kaylee kept to the middle of the group, Riddick, River and Ciara bringing up the rear.

As they walked through a tunnel the motion detector flicked the fluorescent lights on automatically, which meant the machinery wasn't affected for the most part. He exchanged a look with River and she bit her lip, her scent filled with burnt cinnamon. This place scared her half to death and if it wasn't so important he'd haul them all back to Serenity and leave this insane world behind.

Zoe called from up ahead and he saw that she'd found the first body, a skeleton, face down on the ground, clothes tattered. "No entry wound, no fractures..."

Riddick looked at River again as Mal asked, "Poison?"

"No," She whispered the word, her voice a shiver of sound.

Their path to the beacon led them to stairs off the road to a walkway that looked over the dead city. It was beautiful and terrifying both, like a calm sea with some leviathan lurking below the surface. He inhaled and frowned, shaking his head, it was as if the entire world was dead, there was so little scent.

He drew River closer as Mal stepped under a banner and it lit up, another motion detector triggering it, an advertisement beginning and sputtering out. So the machinery hadn't been maintained in anyway. Everything here would begin to crumble away out of sheer neglect.

Shea was visibly steeling himself as he approached a downed hovercraft. It hadn't crashed, at least Riddick couldn't see any damage to it. "Got another one," Shea called grimly. Inside the hovercraft were two skeletons, an adult and a small child. Both strapped into their seats as if they'd just landed and expired right there. Sealed inside the vehicle the clothing they wore hadn't deteriorated like the first skeleton but death left inevitable signs as the bodies decomposed. Shea was starting to sound
irked he was so unnerved, "They's just sittin' here. Didn't crash." He got up, looking in another direction, "Couple more here."

River's scent was blazing with burnt cinnamon and citrus and Riddick wrapped an arm around her waist, tugging her close. Her slender body trembled against his and he pulled her closer, pressing her to his side.

Simon was looking around in dismayed horror, the sight of so much needless death was appalling to him. Riddick could tell the minute he realized where Kaylee was, leaning against a glass wall with a dead man pressed up against it right behind her. "Kaylee... Come this way." Simon called coaxingly, obviously hoping his sweetheart wouldn't notice. "Come here to me. Don't—"

His efforts were in vain as Kaylee turned slightly and screeched blue murder at the sight of the purply faced corpse behind her, "Gaaaa—oh God!" She stepped back, horrified as everyone else approached the glass to look into the building.

He could see plain as day from where he and River stood that it was an office of some type. Simon peered inside, part of him would always try to determine cause of death. Ciara had pressed herself to Shea's side as the big man asked, "How come they're preserved?"

"There's no discoloration, nobody's doubled over or showing signs of pain." He was studying the bodies as clinically as he could, considering one hand was rubbing Kaylee's back in soothing circles.

"More than anything, it looks like starvation," Simon was frowning, his top three percent brain hard at work.

Mal's snort was derisive and disturbed both, "Anybody want to bet there's plenty of food around?"

Ciara repeated Shazza's words, "They just lay down..."

"Runzi de Shang Di, qing dai wa zhou. Make them stop, they're everywhere, every city, every house, every room, they're all inside me, I can hear them all and they're saying nothing!" She was nearly screaming in her panic and pain, "Get up! Please, get them up! Wo shang mei er, mei zin, bian shi tou, please God make me a stone. The captive void of noble rage, the linnet born within a cage, that never knew the summer woods."

"There's gasses that kill painless, right?" Mal asked thoughtfully.

"More than anything, it looks like starvation," Simon was frowning, his top three percent brain hard at work.

Mal's snort was derisive and disturbed both, "Anybody want to bet there's plenty of food around?"

Ciara repeated Shazza's words, "They just lay down..."

Riddick inhaled, and River moaned clutching her head, "Wo shang mei er, mei zin, bian shi tou, please God make me a stone. The captive void of noble rage, the linnet born within a cage, that never knew the summer woods."

Riddick picked her up and cradled her in his arms, doing his best to surround her with his scent and strength. Shea was upset and channeling Jayne in his attempt to remain collected. "She's starting to damage my calm."

Zoe made the attempt to soothe him in her own stoic manner but she was as badly rattled by River's scream as he was. "Jayne—"
She got as far as his name before Shea interrupted, furious and afraid, "She's right! Everybody's dead! This whole world is dead for no gorram reason!"

River was weeping silently in his arms and Riddick found himself grateful for Wash's remarkably, and refreshingly, undamaged calm. "Let's go to the beacon."

The pace quickened after that. No one was interested in dwelling amongst the dead any longer than was necessary. River was shivering in his arms, murmuring in Chinese, Latin and English along with a language she'd made up in her head when she was around nine. Apparently, it had been a language without the word 'be' in it. She'd said once it had worked fine until she'd tried to translate Hamlet.

The landing strip was pretty small. He guessed most folks used hover craft and didn't need a whole lot of space. At the end of the short runway, torn and beat all to hell, was an Alliance Research Vessel. It was a model still in use but at least ten years old, given the design. They hadn't put fins on them in about that long.

The doors had been pried open and the inside wasn't much better than the outside. Clothes and possessions were strewn about the floor and the bulkheads looked as if someone had taken an axe and hammer to them, but there weren't any bodies. He hadn't seen a mess like this since they were on planet.

River patted his shoulder and he obligingly put her down. She'd stopped muttering as they came inside, her eyes wide. Now she moved towards a console and turned a control on it.

A hologram sprung to life in the middle of the room. It was a woman in an Alliance uniform. She looked utterly terrified as she spoke, images of the dead played from the world over, "—just a few of the images we've recorded, and you can see it isn't—it isn't what we thought. There's been no war here, and no terraforming event. The environment is stable."

Riddick guessed that would be a surprise to some folks, since they'd most certainly been shocked to find it so. He watched River rather than the hologram and saw his wife mouthing the words of the recording along with the Alliance scientist. "It's the Pax, the G-32 Paxilon Hydrochlorate that we added to the air processors. It's—" Her breath caught as she began to cry, "—well it works. It was supposed to calm the population, weed out aggression. Make a peaceful— It worked. The people here stopped fighting."

Riddick got a disturbingly sick feeling in his stomach again, twisting in dread as he realized what they'd done. He had a brief hope he was wrong before the recording kept on, implacable in its communication. "And then they stopped everything else. They stopped going to work, stopped breeding...talking... eating..."

The recording took a deep breath, obviously trying for some control over her emotions. Judging from the tears streaking her face she was having about as much luck as the rest of them. "There's thirty million people here and they all just let themselves die. They didn't even kill themselves. They just—most starved. When they stopped working the power grids, there were overloads, fires—people burned to death sitting in their chairs. Just sitting."

Everyone but he and River jumped as a loud banging sound came from behind the woman and she started. Everyone else relaxed as they realized it came from the recording, but the woman seemed even more tense if that was possible. She gathered herself with a visible effort, "I have to be quick. There was no one working the receptors when we landed, so we hit pretty hard. We can't leave. We
can't take any of the local transports because—"

The bang came again and she flinched, "There are people— they're not people. About a tenth of a percent of the population had the opposite reaction to the Pax. Their aggressor response increased beyond madness. They've become- they've killed most of us—not just killed, they've done—things."

He wasn't sure who'd realized it first, River had always known, obviously, buried deep in her brain she'd known. Simon caught on a half second after he did, judging by the sharp indrawn breath from his little brother. Wash vocalized what the rest of them figured out, "Reavers..." His voice was shocked and quiet. "They made them."

The recording continued, "I won't live to report this, and we haven't got power to— people have to know." She broke down in tears again, "We meant it for the best—to make people safer—to—God!" As she spoke the door behind her broke down. She whipped out a gun and fired at the direction of the noise. Then she put the gun to her own head.

She didn't make it.

Before she could pull the trigger, a creature everyone watching instantly recognized as a Reaver jumped her, biting at her and tearing at her clothes and flesh. She screamed continuously until Shea's disgusted voice sounded, "Turn it off."

Wash moved forward and shut the recording off. No one spoke. Everyone was deathly pale and shocked by what they'd seen.

None of them were any stranger to death. Death was an unwelcome guest on every world where he'd ever lived. He'd killed himself, at war, to escape, for vengeance. He'd grown inured to it. It was something you got used to when you grew up on the streets or became a soldier. And then an escaped murderer. But what he'd seen on Miranda was the coldest kind of death ever dealt. People dying and not even knowing that they're dying. Their will taken away so they just laid down and let it happen. Unknowing and uncaring.

The silence was broking by the sound of River turning and vomiting on the floor. He put a hand on her back, letting her ride it out, after she'd emptied her stomach Riddick asked gently, "River?"

"I'm all right." She looked up at him and her scent was soft and sweet with a note he'd never smelt on her before, cool clear water along with the caramel scent of her joy. Her eyes were bright and clear, like he hadn't ever seen. From the look on Simon's face he had, "I'm all right." She repeated softly.

Simon moved towards her and hugged her tightly, overcome as he finally got his little sister back. Changed yes, but unmistakably sane.

Wash pulled the recording cylinder out of the console as Riddick nodded, "Let's go."

Simon nodded, "I'm sure the supply of Pax they put in the air processors is long since used up, but let's...breathe as little of it as we can."

"Anyone gets the urge to lie down and do nothin', we'll haul you along with us," Shea agreed, his arm tight around Ciara.

Their exit was brought up short by the sight of Mal holding Shazza close, his expression tender as they tried to comfort each other in the face of what they'd learned. Riddick guessed neither of them had ever seen death on this scale, not death where no one even tried to fight back. Shazza wasn't a Browncoat but she'd never thought the Alliance was entirely evil, even though she hadn't much use
for the government. Neither one of them had any illusions left now.

River sat with the rest of the crew around the table in the galley. Riddick had taken a seat and pulled her into his lap, inhaling her scent as if starved for it, learning her again as sanity gave everything a new tint to his nose. Mal was broken anew, he and Shazza both. Mal hadn't believed he had any faith left; he'd thought it lost eight years ago in the Valley part of him had never left.

But the pain that rose inside him like blood gushing from a wound told a different tale. The Captain had just enough faith to lose. The belief that the universe might spit in your soup but at least it gave you soup. He'd been certain of that, until today, until Miranda.

Shazza hadn't ever been as fervent in her belief as Mal, but what had been left to her after Zeke had been killed was burnt out of her at the sight of Miranda. She and Badger might skirt the law and outright break it, but they'd both believed that a government was to protect the people, misguided and idiotic as it might be. She hadn't supported Unification nor had she been a Browncoat, and she knew the Alliance wasn't perfect, but this was as far short of perfection as a governing body could get.

Shea and Ciara were looking spooked, neither of them had any trouble believing the Parliament could do this, not after what they'd lived through. But believing the government was capable of atrocities and seeing evidence first hand were two different things.

Wash's eyes were wild, like a horse startling at a sudden noise, and he was gripping Zoe's hand as tight as Mal had held Shazza on Miranda. Zoe's cold fury reminded River of why Zoe was one of the most dangerous people on the boat and River pitied anyone foolish enough to get in the way of the First Mate when she began to take action.

Kaylee was clinging to Simon, her heart breaking for every one of the dead, on Miranda and the Reavers who couldn't help what they'd become any more than the dead could help lying down and dying when their wills were taken away by drugs in the air.

Simon's face was just as cold and set with fury as Zoe's, and if the crew ever doubted her ge ge could be dangerous those doubts were long gone. Simon was a healer, first and foremost and what the Alliance had done to her and on Miranda inspired a sort of nasty anger as dangerous as Zoe's. Healers were the most treacherous when they became warriors because the ones who put you back together knew all too well just how to take you apart.

Riddick hadn't had any faith to lose, not in the Alliance or God or even the universe. His faith was in her, and hers in him. But that didn't mean that he wasn't eager to mete out punishment to the folks in Parliament who'd hurt them both. His entire mind was shrouded in wrath. It pulsed through him like blood and sizzled in the air around them.

River couldn't help but recall one of the old quotes from Shakespeare and murmured it softly, "Ay, but to die, and go we know not where; to lie in cold obstruction, and to rot; this sensible warm motion to become a kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit to bathe in fiery floods or to reside in thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice; to be imprison'd in the viewless winds, and blown with restless violence round about the pendent world; or to be worse than worst of those that lawless and incertain thought imagine howling! — 'tis too horrible! The weariest and most loathed worldly life that age, ache, penury, and imprisonment can lay on nature is a paradise to what we fear of death."

Mal looked down at the recording crystal and then at his crew, "This report is maybe twelve years old. Parliament buried it, and it stayed buried 'til River dug it up. This is what they feared she knew.
And they were right to fear, 'cause there's a universe of folk that are gonna know it too." He touched the crystal gently, as if in respect for the dead it had recorded, "They're gonna see it. Somebody has to speak for these people."

He paused and River knew he was thinking of Book, near killed and possibly crippled on Haven, the scores of dead left behind by the Operative and those that would have been killed had they not been warned to run, along with all the folks of Miranda. "You all got on this boat for different reasons, but you all come to the same place. So now I'm asking more of you than I have before. Maybe all. 'Cause as sure as I know anything I know this: They will try again. Maybe on another world, maybe on this very ground, swept clean. A year from now, ten, they'll swing back to the belief that they can make people—better. And I do not hold to that. So no more running. I aim to misbehave."

His eyes met hers and River knew he found her the most frightening thing of all. He'd never seen her entirely sane. The periods of lucidity when she had a good day and Riddick was in her company couldn't compare to having her entire mind back and under her control. She was scarier than Shea, Simon and Zoe put together, more frightening to him than Riddick even, because Riddick was a known quality and she was not.

Shea half smiled as he picked up the clay bottle of engine brew, "Shepherd Book used to tell me: if you can't do something smart, do something right." He took a swig of the whiskey and slid it over to Simon who caught it easily.

"Do we have a plan?" Simon's voice was a bit hoarse as he drank. He still wasn't quite used to Kaylee's engine brew. It was something of an acquired taste.

Mal nodded, "Mr Universe. We haven't the equipment to broadwave this code, but he can put it on every screen for thirty worlds. He's pretty damn close, too."

River nodded, "Based on our orbital trajectories, he reached optimum proximity just before our sunset. If we make a direct run within the hour we're only three hundred sixty-seven thousand four hundred forty-two miles out. At full burn we'd reach him inside of four hours."

Mal was staring at her, still unaccustomed to her speaking lucidly without quotes and allegory thrown in. Everyone else gave her some sideways looks but thankfully they weren't quite as shocked as he was. That was nice. They all were glad she was okay but they weren't expecting her to be too different. She was sane but she was still a genius and a bit eccentric.

"Still got the Reavers, and probably the Alliance between us and him." Wash reminded them all of that slight problem.

Zoe added, "It's a fair bet the Alliance knows about Mr Universe."

River nodded, "He knows." She clarified for the rest of them. "The Operative. He knows about Mr. Universe. He waits for us there. Plans to kill him, once the trap is set. Mr. Universe will try to warn us."

"They're gonna see this coming." Zoe concluded.

"No." The Captain's jaw tightened, "They're not gonna see this coming." And River smirked at the thought she saw going through his mind.

Riddick watched from the side of the bridge as Mal and Wash spoke with Mr. Universe. U was
This part of the plan was unnerving, even to him. They'd fixed the cannon from Haven to Serenity and between he and Shea gotten it repaired well enough that it would safely fire at least three shots. Four would be pushing it and five would probably blow it right off the ship and the gunner with it.

They were making their way through the Reaver fleet again, but this time, they'd already attracted some notice, and that was before the 'corpse' that slumped over the cannon straightened up and began to fire on the fleet surrounding Serenity.
Mal, since it was his plan, had suited up and gone topside to fire the cannon. Shea was reporting back from the galley's observation windows, "He's got one, it crashed into another. Fired at a third, opposite side, it's gone an' smashed into another couple. Last shot… Gorram! He hit that huge big liner lookin' boat. Dunno if they're hurt bad or not but…oh yeah." Shea's voice was slightly higher pitched with fear, "They're followin' us all right. Wǒ cáo! Wash, you better get us movin' but good."

Riddick growled as Wash made to settle in his usual seat, "Don't." He practically picked the pilot up and put him in the co-pilot's seat. "You don't sit here 'til River says you can."

"Can't yet," River was half strapped into the navigator's seat while Zoe stood behind her husband. She checked something on her screen, "Near an hour has passed since our wave to Universe. At least seventy Alliance ships await. Not including the Operative's vessel. Should be more than enough."

Riddick nodded at Wash and the two of them set about going for hard burn. In the armory below them he could hear Jayne and Ciara. No one wanted a pitched battle but River had argued that it was better to be prepared for a siege. Everyone had at least two weapons on them, and one reserve, just in case the Reavers broke through. What would happen if they spent that last bullet on anyone but themselves had been made painfully clear by the data on the recording crystal.

Mal came onto the bridge as they, and the fleet of Reavers following, came upon the ion cloud. River murmured, "We are seen, activity in the cloud. Ready, at his command, lock and fire." She sounded amused, "He admires what the Captain has done. Taking away all of our alternatives, Captain still found a way to hide. Vessel in range, lock on… Bastard's not even changing course." Her voice shifted back and forth between her own cadence and accent and the Operatives.

Mal chuckled grimly, "I think he's about to get a lot less admirin' once't he sees the company we brought."

River checked her screens, "Clear of the cloud… Reavers are not yet clear of the cloud. Clearing now… Fifty ships, all on our tail." Her voice took on the tones of the Operative, "That's not good." She sounded a bit smug, "He commands for his ships to fire. Target the Reavers, everyone. Somebody fire."

She broke off and Riddick didn't dare take his gaze off his work to check on her expression. Her hands began to clatter on the old keyboard of the cortex as she worked. Riddick knew the plan had worked when they were clear of the ion cloud a full ten seconds before any Alliance ship began to fire. He and Wash pulled and listed hard to port with a vertical three sixty until they were nearly upside down, and the Alliance ships fire missed Serenity, tagging a few Reaver ships but not slowing any of them down.

"We're too close for them to arm—" Mal was almost, not quite, but almost, smiling.

Zoe's voice suggested she was wearing her 'I-have-a-bad-feeling-about-this' look, "This is gonna be very tight—"

Shea and Ciara came up to the bridge and Shea grinned, amused despite the situation, "Hey, look, we're upside down."

Riddick would have chuckled if he had the time, though he could practically feel Mal rolling his eyes. Wash was muttering to himself. He'd gone into one of his zen type trances that he tended towards whenever they had a difficult bit of flying to do. "I am a leaf on the wind, watch how I soar."
Zoe's observation wasn't wrong as Serenity commenced to weaving and dipping, avoiding Alliance and Reaver ships alike in an effort to reach dirt. The Reaver force had hit the Alliance head on, several of them smashing into the bigger ships kamikaze style, everything exploding. The Alliance ships were responding with the timely reaction of trained military. But good as the Alliance was at violence they were babes in the woods compared to Reavers. The fleet had mobilized, commencing the frenetic dance of battle, circling and firing upon the Reavers.

Mal was watching the battle, the worst sort of dogfight, ships burning out their atmosphere as the Reavers crashed into them and flooded the boats with raiding parties. Reaver ships exploding as their engine cores were fired upon and the spit and bailing wire holding them together gave way. "Chickens come home to roost," Mal murmured as he watched from behind them.

They'd nearly made it all the way through the Alliance fleet before the ship jolted.

"The hell—" Mal's question was nearly drowned out by Riddick's cursing as they were forced to duck a very large barreling chunk of debris, a piece of an Alliance ship twice their size, and as a result, flew right into a smaller one. Now they were right back in the fray.

Wash had lost his calm and was sounding more panicked than zen, "It's okay! I am a leaf on the wind!"

"What does that mean?" Mal was sounding a bit panicky himself. Serenity was bucking and weaving without any input from her pilot or co-pilot.

Riddick growled and between he and Wash both they still couldn't control Serenity. "We're fried," He ground the words out from between clenched teeth. "We got no control."

"Attempting to bypass," River's fingers were clattering. "Accessing life support, rerouting…” She called to them, "The engine isn't responding, life support energy sources rerouted… You've got some power but I can't get you anymore. Trying for backups."

"Take anything we can get," Wash called back.

Mal had run to the console as she worked, making his own attempt to get power back to the helm and giving up to grab the intercom, "Kaylee, what the hell's goin' on down there? Wash an' Rick can't fly, they ain't got controls!" There was no response, "Kaylee!"

Simon's calm voice came over the line, "This is Simon. Kaylee's been electrocuted—she'll be fine, it was just a minor shock, but the engine room is on fire. I had to seal it off."

Mal was working frantically at the auxiliary console as if he'd forgotten the cortex genius beside him, "Where's the back up? Where's the back up?"

River reached across him and flipped a few more switches and the console, and ship around them, whirred into some semblance of life, "Back up reads at twenty percent. With life support rerouted, we are at forty percent."

Zoe was bracing herself against the back of Wash's chair, the one he was in, not the one he normally considered his, "Can you get us down?"

"We're gonna have to glide her in," Wash admitted and Riddick cursed.

"Will that work?" Zoe always had to ask the tough questions. Riddick admired that about her but he really didn't want to answer that at the moment.
Wash let out a long breath, "Long as that landing strip is made of fluffy pillows."

Riddick nodded, twenty percent would get them aimed at the moon, which was definitely to be desired since without that they'd shoot right on past Universe's moon and keep going until they ran out of power, and still keep going through sheer inertia until they hit something or died. And the latter of the two was far more likely than the former. "Forty percent... that gets us at least a bit of thrust for landing, but it ain't much."

"Trying for every bit of power," River reported, "Can't get you anymore." She looked at Mal, "This will not be a pretty landing. Serenity is not aerodynamic."

Mal seemed to be realizing the same thing, because he grabbed the com again, "Everybody to the upper decks! Strap yourselves to something! Jayne, get people strapped into the galley."

Riddick didn't have the energy to spare for a look around, but he could hear Mal and Zoe pull out a set of jump seats from the wall behind the navigator's station where River had strapped herself in. He could also hear Mal muttering to himself, or to Book's God, Inara's Buddha, Zeus, Loki and any other deity that cared to stick their nose in and intervene for the better so they'd all survive this gorrarn landing.

He could see the airstrip, coming up uncomfortably fast, "Wash," He spoke the pilot's name through clenched teeth. "Say when."

"Gotta wait 'til just before gravity takes us," Wash muttered in return. "Wait...wait... wait..." They were a hairs breadth from the ground when he shouted, "Now!"

Simultaneously they hauled on the wheel and hit the switch for the thrusters to break their landing as much as possible. He could hear the screeching and tearing sound that ended abruptly and figured the noise for the landing gear being worn away by the ground. The restraints bit into his ribcage even as he and Wash used the dregs of power to turn the ship, fishtailing her on the strip and doing a near one eighty, causing Serenity's back end to slide into the hanger first.

A beam sheared off the port thruster which would make taking off again interesting in an 'oh-god-oh-god-we're-all-gonna-die' kind of way. When the ship finally shuddered to a halt the rear of Serenity had crashed into the back wall of the hanger. That was the last of the crashes, Serenity having apparently collided with enough things to promote deceleration.

Mal was unbuckling his harness and trying to stand while Riddick unhooked his own. Mal was muttering about landings and good ones and walking away and Riddick took that to mean any landing you could walk away from was a good one, if you took into account Mal's brain being a bit rattled by said landing.

Wash turned with a grin to look at Zoe and Mal, "I am a leaf on the wind. Watch—"

He didn't get to finish.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Hee hee... I know, evil cliffhanger. I couldn't resist. But so far how do you like it?
Chinese Translations:

gē ge (big brother)

Wǒ cáo! (holy fuck)

Script Chinese Translations:

Runzi de Shang Di, qing dai wa zhou, (Merciful God please take me away)

Wo shang mei er, mei zin, bian shi tou, (I will close my ears and my heart and I will be a stone)

Quote Sources:

This day is called the feast of Crispian: he that outlives this day, and comes safe home, will stand a tip-toe when this day is named, and rouse him at the name of Crispian – Henry V – William Shakespeare

He that shall live this day, and see old age, will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours, and say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian: - Henry V – William Shakespeare

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail: there gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners, souls that have toil’d, and wrought, and thought with me— That ever with a frolic welcome took the thunder and the sunshine, and opposed free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old; old age hath yet his honour and his toil; death closes all: but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. – Ulysses – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. – Ulysses – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

I envy not the beast that takes his license in the field of time, unfetter’d by the sense of crime to whom a conscience never wakes. – I Envy Not In Any Moods – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The captive void of noble rage, the linnet born within a cage, that never knew the summer woods. – I Envy Not In Any Moods – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where; to lie in cold obstruction, and to rot; this sensible warm motion to become a kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit to bathe in fiery floods or to reside in thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice; to be imprison’d in the viewless winds, and blown with restless violence round about the pendent world; or to be worse than worst of those that lawless and incertain thought imagine howling! — ’tis too horrible! The weariest and most loathed worldly life that age, ache, penury, and imprisonment can lay on nature is a paradise to what we fear of death. – Measure For Measure – William Shakespeare
The massive harpoon that crashed through the bridge windows followed immediately upon River's shriek, "Duck!"

Instinctively Riddick grabbed Wash's shoulder and dragged him off his chair, cutting off the pilot's happy speech just as the harpoon speared into the console. It ended in Riddick's chair, followed by another hitting the co-pilot's seat and forcing River to climb over it to get out of the navigator's station.

"Wash!" Zoe's cry of her husband's name was filled with a shock of fear for his fate even as Wash a bit groggily smiled up at her from under Riddick's larger frame.

"M'okay…" He was unceremoniously hauled upwards by Mal and Riddick as River scrambled out of the way. A Reaver ship had entered the hanger from a very recent opening in the roof and was preparing to fire yet another set of harpoons.

"River get—" Riddick was speaking to the air behind her as River took the stairs to the armory at a jump and pulled out several bags.

"Mal, grab some of those bags, Zoe you too," Riddick commanded, ignoring that he was ordering superior officers around as if they were his men. "Shea!"

Mal and Zoe grabbed two of the bags and even Mal grunted under the weight while River hauled one up to Riddick. The rest of her gear was in a pack just outside their bunk hatch along with most of Riddick's spare weapons. Riddick never was easy with being unarmed anywhere but their bunk, where weapons were within easy reach and it was a habit she'd picked up early in their relationship.

Shea came running up, his own bag over his shoulder, "Had ta get ev'ryone unstrapped." He explained. Of everyone behind him, Kaylee was the only one who looked uncomfortable with her gun, though Simon had his medical bag along with a bag of spare cartridges for his side arm. River nearly smiled to see Shazza with one of Jayne's repeaters slung over her shoulder and another mare's leg in her arms.

Mal tried to take the lead and got a snarl from Riddick who handed Wash a gun and slung his arm over Mal's shoulder, "You take him, I've got point." He pushed the single door in Serenity's airlock open and took a cautious look out before nodding. "Go!"

They were as prepared as they could be, but that still didn't make their trip down the landing strip to Mr. Universe's quarters any less nerve-wracking. The Reavers and their screaming were getting closer and closer as Riddick led them toward the double-sized doorway that led to Mr. Universe's 'black room', the entrance to his facility.

When they got to the doorway Mal hit a button and blast doors opened from the sides, top and bottom, widening the space. "Come on, Jayne—rear guard," Mal ordered as he headed towards the elevator.

Zoe slowed, looking around, "Sir—this is a good hold point."

Shaking his head, Mal began to argue. River tried to concentrate on what they were saying but the
Reavers were getting really loud. What had been awful while she was crazy seemed even worse now that she'd regained her sanity. "We all stay together."

"No," Zoe didn't question orders without good reason though with Wash hurt, River wasn't sure how well she was reasoning at the moment. "They have to come through here. They'll bottleneck and we can thin 'em out. We get pushed back, there's the blast doors."

Kaylee offered, "I can rig 'em so they won't reopen once they close."

Mal nodded, "Then shut 'em and hide 'til—"

Zoe shook her head again, "We need to draw them 'til it's done. This is the place. We'll buy you the time."

Riddick and Shea were already moving crates and Shea nodded towards Shazza and Ciara, "Move those crates back there for cover—and make sure they ain't filled with anything goes boom."

Riddick looked at Kaylee, "Kaylee, start rigging these doors now. Let's not wait until they're on us. Best to have a clear path to retreat." The mechanic gladly handed her gun over to Ciara and began to work on the doors.

River looked at Wash, whom Simon was looking over now that they'd stopped moving, and knew he was concussed. He shouldn't have been moved but they hadn't had a choice. His chances were good, but he wouldn't be of much use in the coming fight. "He comes," She whispered and felt more than saw Riddick's sharp gaze snap to her.

"Who? The Operative?" Her husband moved towards her, hands on her hair, smoothing her braid and soothing her ruffled nerves.

"He is angry. Mal has made him angry finally. Took longer than an hour," River focused on the dark mind and its unraveling programming. "He takes an escape pod. Helped his man into one, saw it destroyed. Furious. He will come and try to stop Mal from sending the wave."

"Can Mal beat him alone?" Riddick asked the most pertinent question.

"Possible. But the odds are not good," River grimaced as the Reavers' screams grew closer. "You will have to go with him or he might not succeed."

"And leave you to fight alone?" Riddick's growl of denial was louder than the Reaver's screaming.

"Not alone," River touched her heart and pressed her palm to his chest. "Not so long as I can feel your mind. Just…don't kill him…"

"All right," It went against everything in him to leave her, but all of this would be for nothing if the Operative stopped Mal from sending the truth of Miranda out into the 'Verse. Not killing the fèi wù gòu niáng yǎng de would be the hard part. "Mal, I'm with you."

The screaming grew louder and Shea hollered, "Move the gorram crates! Come on!"

River hadn't ever heard such savagery with her ears, only in her mind. Now she heard it in stereo and quickly retreated behind the crates, helping Shea and Shazza to arrange them in a crenellation pattern so they could shoot from behind cover as much as possible. It took every ounce of will to keep moving, to not whimper in pain at the onslaught upon her mind and sensitive ears.

Mal was standing at the door while Riddick was helping Zoe get Wash into the hallway. She heard
his intent that since Wash wouldn't be able to shoot straight it would be his job to reload weapons, Kaylee would be their runner, grabbing the empties and bringing them to him.

Mal turned and looked at Shea, "Jayne, tell me you brought 'em this time."

Shea had a grim smile on his face as he pulls a couple of grenades from his pockets, tossing one to Mal as he popped two of his own and threw them into the oncoming Reaver rush. Mal rolled his out a bit and slammed the door shut.

River winced on Riddick's behalf as the explosions echoed through the hanger, the door nearly buckling from the explosion. She took her place near Simon and Ciara, and looked at Riddick, standing grimly in the doorway, Kaylee finishing her wiring while he guarded her back.

Mal looked at Zoe, calmly loading her weapon, "You hold." He looked at the rest of them, "Hold till I'm back."

He began to walk towards the door, pausing at Shazza's side and pressing a fast kiss to her lips. "Just in case, I don't want to have never done that." He explained as he stepped away. "Rick, if you're with me, we're goin' now. Kiss your wife and let's get on with it."

River smiled up at her husband and was given a hot hard kiss full of promise. "Later we're holing up for a week." He gave her a wicked grin before pushing away as if it pained him to leave her.

He hadn't ever cared for elevators and this one opening onto the remnants of Universe's destroyed sanctum hadn't improved his opinion of them. Universe was nowhere to be found, most likely locked up somewhere, and he'd just as soon leave him there, safely quiet, at least until the Reavers were taken care of.

Lenore was sitting quietly on the couch, powered down apparently, until Mal approached her. Then she opened her eyes, whirring to life, and spoke.

He'd never heard her speak, as far as he knew she couldn't, and since it was Universe's voice coming out of her mouth he figured he was right. "Mal."

Mal stopped his retreat from the creepy sex robot and stared at it as it spoke, "This guy's gonna kill me. Later...he says...with a sword. How weird is that? I got... a short span here... They hit me with...some...something... they don't know about Lenore... They destroyed my equipment but I have a back-up unit... bottom of the complex, right over the generator. Hard to get to. I know they missed it. They can't stop the signal, Mal. They can never stop the signal." He paused in his recording and said as if for someone else's benefit, "Okay this is painful. On many levels. I'm not—"

Lenore powered down again and Riddick exchanged a glance with Mal, "Hard to get to." Riddick mused, "Knowing U that could mean damn near anything."

"Well let's not dawdle on the way to our funeral." Mal quipped and Riddick nearly grinned as he began to lead the Captain down to Universe's backup systems.

River groaned as the Reavers closed in on them, their rage pounding against her skull, "I can't shut them up."
Simon put a hand between her shoulder blades and rubbed her spine, "It's okay. Breathe méi méi."

She pressed the heels of her hands to her temples, nearly bowing in half with the effort of shutting them out, "They're all made up of rage. I can't…" There was a loud bang as a body slammed against the door and she flinched.

Her brother was cautioning her, "Just stay low. I'm right here." He had one hand on her spine, the other aiming his pistol towards the door.

Shea moved past Zoe to her other side, "River, you gotta focus." He gave her shoulder a little shake. "C'mon now."

Simon nodded, his voice firming as he realized his sympathy was getting her nowhere. "Breathe River. Grab on to Rick's mind and breathe. Blood to blood, remember?"

River took a breath and then another, no time for the ritual now, but the memory of Riddick's blood on her lips, the salt copper taste of his vow to her, the feel of his mind, was enough to steady her. She was dimly aware of Zoe calling out, "Jayne and I take the first wave. Nobody shoots less they get past our fire, or you're damn sure you've got a headshot."

The banging on the door continued, Simon was speaking with Kaylee, murmuring reassurances to his sweetheart and promises of a nice picnic somewhere pretty once this was all over.

Kaylee was scared, her terror overwhelming as she loaded weapons and flinched each time the door banged, "Oh, I didn't plan on going out like this. I think we did right, but…"

Simon's sigh was heartfelt as he pressed his forehead to hers, "I tried to plan everything, how to court you, what to say. But whenever I tried to put my plans into action I'd screw it all up. I just wanted to keep you and River safe. To have a home with you."

She could feel Kaylee's astonishment at Simon's declaration and half smiled at the warmth between the two of them. Simon continued to aim his gun even as he kissed Kaylee, "My one true regret in all this is never being with you. Never getting past the kissing stage of our courtship."

Kaylee's astonishment had actually stopped her trembling, "With me? You mean to say, as, sex?"

Simon's smile was evident in his voice, "I mean to say."

Kaylee's surprise translated into resolve and she slammed the cartridge in her hands home, sticking a gun on her belt, "Hell with this. I'm gonna live."

Shea gave a low chuckle, "Doc, you got a career as a motivational speaker after this."

"I think I'll be busy enough with the doctorin'," Simon called back wryly and kept his gun on the door. "River? How're you doing?"

She froze for a moment as she felt the presence of the Operative, above them in Universe's room, his movements triggering Lenore's programming. He would go after Riddick and Mal. It was a certainty now. "Be not afraid; the isle is full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not. Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices…" She fought to focus again as the enemy came closer.

Simon's voice was more insistent, "River!"

He was right to be concerned as the door began to come off its hinges, the steel finally failing under
the onslaught of Reaver bodies being thrown at it.

They'd reached the basement via a long staircase down to a catwalk and Riddick sighed, Universe was just a bit paranoid and it showed in the set-up of his generator and backup system. Mal shook his head, "Hard to get to. That's a fact."

The railing of the catwalk wasn't much of a barrier between them and the generator shaft. Miles deep, machines rotated and ground the shaft, arcs of electricity ricocheting around it. On the other side was the platform with the broadwave console, sitting behind a clear partition. Riddick looked up while Mal was looking down the shaft a bit dizzily and absently grabbed the back of Mal's shirt to keep him steady.

The ceiling was a mess of cables and chains, around a series of ladder rungs. "We want to get to the console we'll have to climb across," Riddick motioned upwards when he was sure Mal was steady on his feet again.

"When Universe sets out to make something complicated he gives your wife a run for her gorram money," Mal climbed up on the railing and reached for the ladder rung on the ceiling, very carefully. Not the Riddick could really blame him, Cap'n didn't exactly have Furyan reflexes. A flash of light, so quick Riddick nearly missed it, and Mal gave a shout of pain, nearly toppling over the rail.

The door was pried partially open, enough for one Reaver to squeeze through and charge. Jayne shot it in the face with a curse of revulsion. Zoe stood and began to fire methodically as another two burst through the door. River shivered, Zoe's mind was ice cold, all her being concentrated on the job to be done. To hold this ground until the Captain returned.

The door burst open and the Reavers began to come through at something more than a trickle of one at a time, Zoe still calmly shooting, ducking down to reload while Jayne sprayed them with bullets. But for every one shot down it seemed like two more took their place.

"I'm out!" Shea was Jayne now, his merc mask coming down over his face, trying to not think about his sweetheart behind him, firing through the crenellations of the crates, her rifle barking a sharp deadly rhythm.

"Here," Kaylee threw him a loaded gun and he tossed the empty back to her while Zoe began firing again.

"They cannot scare me with their empty spaces between stars - on stars where no human race is. I have it in me so much nearer home to scare myself with my own desert places." She recited the words grimly as the Reavers pushed forward. River pulled the trigger of her Ladysmith instinctively sighting between the eyes, dimly aware of Shazza beside her and Simon near Zoe, both of them shooting to give the others cover to switch out weapons again.

Then it happened, a sudden eruption of Reavers through the door, like a flood, a volcano of blood and rage, and Zoe ran out of ammo.
Riddick grabbed the back of Mal's shirt again and hauled him backwards to land on the catwalk rather than tumble into the generator shaft. Mal landed on his face but he at least he'd only fallen a few feet instead of a couple of miles and going splat at the bottom.

Mal got up a bit painfully as Riddick turned to see the Operative coming around some equipment, his laser in his hand, obviously trying to get a closer shot. Mal was wincing slightly, "Shot me in the back." He smiled, almost charmingly sweet, "I haven't...made you angry, have I?"

The Operative's voice was dark with what in anyone else might have been grief, staring at them through those damn spectacles, "There's a lot of innocent people in the air being killed right now."

Riddick flexed his hands in silent threat, "Now you decide to get righteous? You have no idea how true that is."

Mal was glaring at the Operative, no wise ass attitude or charm anymore, he'd dropped them like an old coat, "I know the secret. The truth that burned up River Tam's brain and set you after her. And the rest of the 'verse is gonna know it too. 'Cause they need to."

The Operative sounded pitying, "You really believe that?"

"I do."

Riddick looked the Operative over as Mal spoke. His face was more strained than serene, lines around his eyes and mouth and furrows in his brow. River's work on his programming seemed to be paying off.

"You willing to die for that belief?" The dark man asked.

"I am."

Seemingly satisfied with that answer the Operative raised his gun, but Mal was quick to shoot it out of his hand. Another two shots and Mal's gun was empty but even with the body armor the Operative was forced back a couple of paces.

Mal dropped his cartridge and slammed in another, "Of course, that ain't exactly plan A..."

Riddick grabbed him and took cover at the same time as the Operative, "Mal, I'll cover you. Go for the console."

The Captain looked at him for a moment as if evaluating his chances of getting shot in the back by his own man before giving a whimsical smile and darting for the railing while Riddick began to fire his side arm at the crates where the enemy had taken cover.

Unfortunately, even his gun ran out of bullets at the usual rate and when he had to reload Mal hadn't made it very far across the chasm. The Operative dove for his gun, but Mal's bullet had put paid to any idea of a laser slicing through the two Browncoats.

Riddick slammed another cartridge in just in time to see the Operative launch himself off the railing and grab one of the chains dangling from the ceiling. It snapped but he swung and grabbed another, kicking Mal with both feet from behind.

Riddick cursed as Mal flew off the rung but managed to grab a chain and made a manful attempt to kick back at the Operative. "Tiān shā de!" There was nothing for it but to join them swinging around like idiot apes. He got a running start and launched himself off the railing to grab a good stout length of chain, colliding with the Operative.
The *gǒu niáng yǎng de* was like that crazy ape man who yelled as he swung from vine to vine. As Riddick swung around for another shot, his chain dropped a few feet and the Operative managed to climb up and reach a lever, releasing one end of Mal's chain. Mal went swinging and smacked into the platform with his middle, winding him enough so that he was barely able to grab on.

That same gorram lever released Riddick's chain too, dropping him a full two stories below the platform and probably further if he hadn't let go of the steel links and reached for the machinery of the generator. Besides the irritating noise the jolt nearly smacked his goggles off his face when he collided with the side of the equipment. Half blinded and nearly deaf he grabbed on with both hands.

It felt like a full five minutes later, but was probably only thirty seconds or so, when he was able to look up, just in time to see Mal pulling himself onto the platform, in time for the Operative to swing down to it from above.

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The Reavers flooded into the room and only bullets kept them back, but Zoe hadn't gotten her hands on a loaded weapon and the lack of gunfire from her side of the room spurred the Reavers on. Zoe stood to fend them off, using her mares leg as a bludgeoning weapon and shouted in fear as they grabbed onto her and biting and pulling.

"Zoe!" Wash was hazy in the head but River could feel that he always knew where his lamby toes was and she wasn't in front of him anymore.

Jayne bellowed, "River, you cover me!" And she couldn't do anything else but pick up one of the repeaters, the one Jayne called Daisy, and fired on anything with a piercing in its face. Jayne was beating the Reavers off of Zoe while everyone else fired to keep the others back and managed to pull her back towards the hall doors.

She barely knew what she was saying as she fired, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he to-day that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile, this day shall gentle his condition."

"'S like fightin' 'longside Rick all over agin," Shea commented as he passed her with Zoe and she gave him a lopsided quirk of her lips as she continued to fire Daisy.

River tried not to wince at the sight of the First Mate, the Reavers had sliced her down the back, cut at her hips and bitten through her shirt on her shoulders and arms, she even sported a bitemark on her cheek and one of her ears had a round tooth marked notch in it that hadn't been there before.

Shazza took another of Jayne's guns and positioned herself in front of Simon, covering him while he checked on Zoe, "Spine's intact—"

"Just give me a bandage." Zoe ground the words out.

"More than a few bandages," Simon agreed handing her a loaded gun while he sprayed her wounds with his bandaging foam. It was first aid worth its weight in platinum, instantly hardening into an elastic covering and he used it liberally on her back, ear and cheek.

Jayne was growing irritated as now the Reavers were shooting back, with guns as well as nail balls and blades. "Oh, now you're likin' guns, huh? Cheaters!" A bullet hit his shoulder and he grimaced but kept up his covering fire. Ciara was beside him, firing her rifle and leaning back to reload when another couple of bullets got her in the leg and hip as they ricocheted around the room. She went down with an elegant curse and leaned around the crates to keep firing as much as she could.
River grabbed for another weapon and realized the guns near her were empty. Kaylee was firing to help cover Simon and inadvertently exposed herself to the enemy. Several darts hit her shoulder and neck and she screamed, dropping the gun she was holding to pull the darts out. Shazza glanced back to see if they needed help and took a knife to her forearm forcing her gun down.

Zoe thankfully was just as good a shot when she was on the floor and began firing as Shazza stepped back and one handed helped Simon drag Kaylee into the hall next to Wash. Jayne ran out of bullets and cursed reaching for his pistol. "Everybody fall back!" Zoe bellowed seeing their numbers being whittled down by injury, "Fall Back!"

Jayne hauled Zoe up and River kept shooting, using her heel to kick the empty guns back into the hallway as she retreated. Shazza hit the door controls with her good hand and River watched as they began to close from each side, above and below, continuing inward until they stopped.

Four feet before they should have.

Zoe ordered calmly, "Jayne, River. Grenades."

River threw hers out hard and waited for the explosion, estimating casualties and taking another, throwing it in a different spot and waiting again. Jayne handed her another, warning her, "Very last one."

River could envy Zoe her stoic calm, though damaged by pain and worry for her husband, as the First Mate and former Corporal evaluated their situation. "They're gonna get in—"

Kaylee's voice was not entirely steady, and River really couldn't blame her, "Can close it—from—outside."

Zoe tried to stand up and couldn't, "No one's coming back from that..." She looked at Jayne and River, "How much ammo do we have?"

Jayne joked grimly, "I got three full cartridges and my swingin' cod. That's all."

River evaluated her supplies, "I have four cartridges, my knives, and sword." She shrugged, "Doubtful shuāng rǔ and táo huā yuan will be of any use in battle. Reavers are not swayed by sexual attraction." Jayne gave her an appreciative grin while Wash actually chuckled, although Wash wasn't entirely in his right mind at the moment.

Shazza had gone back to the elevator in a vain effort to call the lift, "Lift isn't moving."

Zoe looked at them, "I've got about four rounds left. When they come, try to plug the hole with 'em."

Kaylee moaned pitifully and Simon moved toward her, "I'm starting to lose some feeling—here- I think there's something in them darts they threwed at me."

Simon petted her hair, "Lie still. I'm gonna give you something to counteract the—" He stood looking around, his bag was still outside the doors, "My bag."

River heard the gunfire, and so did Jayne, both of them flattening themselves to the wall. Simon wasn't quite as quick, the bullet tearing through his belly. The scream in her throat died as it reached her lips and Simon fell. Shazza grabbed him and a cloth, putting pressure on the wound, pressing hard even though it would hurt, "Keep pressure here..."

Simon was gasping as blood soaked his shirt, "My bag. Need... adrenaline... and a shot of calaphar for Kaylee... I can't... River...?"
Jayne began firing into the hole in the doors as River knelt by her brother, her mind clear, her grip on Riddick's thoughts firm as she took Simon's hand.

Simon was murmuring, "River... I'm sorry..."

She shook her head and kissed his forehead as if he were her dì di, "You won't leave Simon. You've always taken care of me." She looked up as the lights went out and the emergency lights glowed red after a moment. Jayne was still firing, trying to pick off the Reavers, "Now it's my turn."

She stood and turned, discarding her guns and dove through the hole in the doors. Simon's cry of her name echoed behind her as she rolled and landed in the midst of the Reavers. Through their rage it was hard to tell if they were surprised or not, but she was still faster than they were. The door panel was damaged by a Reaver blade, a moment to reroute and the doors began to close again. They wouldn't stop this time. Simon's bag was at her feet.

She threw it into the hall as the doors closed.

This was not, Riddick decided, his very best day ever. He was beginning a very cautious climb upwards to the platform. Cautious because he was climbing up an active generator and one wrong move could have him grabbing onto something that would either give way or fry him to a crispy critter like one of those bug zapper things.

As he climbed he saw Mal's gun go skittering over the side of the platform, and it was a good thing there was a railing because from the sound of things if there wasn't, Mal might have gone over too. But apparently, he was hanging on and giving the Operative a fight. That alone told him the Operative was feeling off.

Whether it was the Operative's programming coming undone, the fifty Reaver ships flying through his armada of order and peace or Mal's irritating habit of doing precisely the wrong thing at the right time, Riddick didn't really care. Mal just had to hold on until he could get up there and give him a hand.

A few feet above him someone, probably Mal, knocked over a tool chest. Tools and assorted computer parts scattered over the platform. Riddick ground his teeth against a presence revealing curse as he heard the tell-tale ring of a sword being pulled from its scabbard. Mal was in deep kimchee or his name wasn't Richard B. Riddick. Climbing became somewhat quicker as someone, again likely Mal, hurled a toolbox.

Then he smelt the blood. Deep rich blood, the likes of which came from the center of the body. And for the first time since Mal had commenced shooting at the Operative, the man spoke. "You know what your sin is, Malcolm?"

"Ah hell, I'm a fan of all seven," Mal quipped. Riddick angled his gaze to peer through the space between the generator and the platform edge just in time to see Mal headbutt the Operative and punch him so hard that the man staggered back. Definitely off his game. But he'd lost his grip on the sword, which was still, sadly, sticking out of Mal.

But he responded with a spinning kick, getting his leg impaled by Mal's screwdriver. The Operative gasped as Mal pulled him in with the screwdriver and rocketed his fist into the Operative's chin.

The Operative went down hard and from the looks of things, was actually a bit dazed, as Mal began to slowly pull the sword from his body.
Mal began to move towards the Operative as Riddick began the slow and careful process of getting from the generator to the platform. He couldn't exactly climb up between the two, that would result in the crispy critter-ness for certain.

The Captain was holding the sword over his head as if to swing down at the Operative, leaving himself wide open. "But right now..." He took a deep breath, "I'm gonna have to go with Wrath."

Riddick winced as the Operative rolled out of the way of Mal's swing, kicked the Captain from his position on the ground and was up in a second to grab Mal's sword hand. Mal dropped the sword, which figured as he wasn't used to holding onto them really, and the Operative responded by punching him repeatedly in his stomach wound. Mal was having a worse day than he was. And that was saying something.

The Captain went down hard, spitting up blood and tried to grab for the sword only to get kicked in the face. The Operative picked him up and Mal was too tired to even throw a decent punch. "I'm sorry." The Operative spun Mal and dug his fingers into a nerve cluster at the base of Mal's spine. One that Riddick knew he no longer had there as it had gotten torn up by shrapnel in the war. It was still damn painful though and Mal went rigid.

The Operative retrieved his sword, still speaking in that elegant condescending voice, "You should know there's no shame in this. You've done remarkable things. But you're fighting a war you've already lost."

Riddick was pleased to see that Mal's shock had gone away and managed to pull himself onto the platform as the Captain twisted almost gracefully out of the way of the Operative's sword, grabbing his hand and pulling him forward to punch him in the jaw again. "Well, I'm known for that."

Before the Operative could recover Riddick came up behind Mal and tapped him on the shoulder, "You mind Mal? I've got an itch needs scratching."

Mal rather tiredly stepped back, leaning against the console. "Not at all. Just...try not to make a mess."

Riddick stared at the Operative, "Know who I am?"

The dark man nodded coolly, "Richard B. Riddick. Escaped convict, murderer, former Browncoat."

Riddick smirked, he couldn't help it, "No such thing as a former Browncoat. You either are or you aren't." He couldn't stop himself from moving forward and striking at the man in front of him either and truthfully, didn't even try. A hard kick to the man's solar plexus, a right to his jaw and a chop of his fist and the Operative lost his sword. It slid to a halt in front of Mal's boots and he saw the Captain pick it up out of the corner of his eye.

The flurry of blows the two of them exchanged didn't feel half as satisfying as they should until he snapped the Operative's nose and was rewarded with a spray of blood. "You might be wondering why Mal could move? You know, after you hit him in the back?" He smirked, "Got torn up by shrapnel during the war, he had to have it moved."

The Operative looked bewildered for a moment and Riddick could understand why. According to River, the Operative had known Mal's medical history, he'd seen the wound and the moved nerve cluster. But he hadn't altered his reactions to suit the circumstances.

"Yeah that's what happens when they take away your memories and turn men into tools. You lose the ability to make intuitive leaps. You don't make the connections that could save your life. Or take
someone else's. Xiā zi mō xiàng," Riddick blocked a rather nice uppercut and brought his fist down on the Operative's face. Something cracked and he thought it might be the man's ocular bone.

The Operative reeled for a moment, the force of the blow a shock to him and he stared at Riddick as if seeing him for the first time. His scent was charged with surprise and pain, and Riddick got the impression that nothing had actually caused him pain in a long time. Pain was the 'Verse's great equalizer. Right along with death and taxes.

Riddick growled, baring his teeth abandoning his Rim accent as he channeled Wrath. Someone was going to understand just what those hún dàn had done to his wife, "Nothing man made can stand up to the 'Verse's most perfect predator. Parliament could try, but they couldn't create a Furyan. They wouldn't even know where to begin. Change an innocent girl into something close, and then rip and tear at her mind until she's forced to become my equal in order to survive. Only way she could was become something like me. When she made the choice to embrace what she was and bound herself in blood. The Academy could create an assassin, but an assassin ain't the 'Verse's most perfect predator."

"I am." He grabbed the man by the throat as he stared and squeezed, compressing his vocal cords and windpipe until the man couldn't speak, slamming him down on the platform before kicking the man in the spine hard. That would hold him paralyzed for a few minutes at least. Same nerve cluster he would have used on Mal.

He looked around and noted the position of the screens, dragging the Operative up to the railing and taking the sword from Mal and using it and the man's body armor to hold him in place against the post.

Riddick crouched down to look at the man, half broken already and remembered what River had told him. One final phrase, to be sure everything decrypted remained so. "I guess you got no clue what River an' me did to you back on Persephone. But she started the process of degrading the programming in your brain. Your memories'll come back, you'll remember who you are. Livin' with what you've done, guess you'll have to learn, or not, as you choose. Might be that you could erase everything again, reset yourself back to what they made you. But I ain't gonna make it that easy for you." He smiled coldly, "And the night shall be filled with music, and the cares that infest the day, shall fold their tens like Arabs, and silently steal away."

The Operative's gaze went fuzzy for a moment before it sharpened again and Riddick nodded, "Now that's in your brain, be a helluva lot harder to reprogram you." He looked over at Mal knowing that the Captain was itching to say something.

"Sorry 'bout the throat." Mal slanted a glance at Riddick, "Well, not really. Expect you'd wanna say your famous last words now. Just one trouble."

He walked over to the console and began prepping it while Riddick checked the connections. Thankfully they hadn't damaged anything. Riddick glanced over at the Operative, "We ain't gonna kill you."

Mal inserted the disc, "Hell, I'm gonna grant your greatest wish." He turned the disc slightly and it hummed to life. "I'm gonna show you a world without sin."

Riddick watched as he hit 'send all'. The crystal lit up and the broadcast began on all the screens. Every screen in the entire 'Verse was filled with the images on Miranda. The scientists voice began to speak as he found the controls for the ramp and hit them, "These are some of the first sites we scouted on Miranda. There is no one living on this planet. There is no one—except for a small few..."
Riddick inhaled and smelt the Operative's growing horror and despair as he slung Mal's arm over his shoulder and began to half carry him across the walkway to the other side. "C'mon Mal, lotta stairs."

When the terrible, terrifying, mind scarring truth of Miranda had embedded itself like a splinter in her brain, she'd broken. What multiple surgeries, fighting and torture had been unable to achieve had been accomplished in the few seconds it had taken to Read the minds of men drowning in blood that never touched them.

It had only been Riddick that had kept her from true madness. He had known the terrible truth of mankind long before she had. That the legacy of Cain and Abel was unending. Mankind would always have the seeds of evil inside them. The only things that mattered in the 'Verse were choices. It was she that made him understand that in the 'Verse that gave him nothing but pain and horror there was also hope and love. Finding her in that hell had given him hope and a faith that would not die. Just as finding him had done the same for her.

Men can't live without hope. And what were Reavers but anger and pain and no hope to sustain them?

In the Maidenhead she'd been triggered by the subliminal messages, every bit of thought or control over her actions gone. In an instant. Just like her sanity had fled from Miranda.

But now, with that splinter of truth gone from her mind, eradicated by seeing the reality of what Miranda was, she could find the tendrils of programming that remained in her mind.

And use them for her own purposes, towards her own ends.

To protect her crew.

She'd found a home on Serenity, a flawed, dangerous and occasionally crazy home, but a home all the same. Because she and Serenity were so very alike. Few in all the 'Verse to see the truth of her and love her all the same. Beaten and scarred but not quite broken, not anymore. Because someone had cared enough to try and fix her, to love her as she was, even beaten and bent.

Serenity was broken now, hurt and lying in the hanger, but she'd fly true again. Love would keep her in the air, slip the surly bonds of earth, dance the skies on laughter-silvered wings, engines humming, bright and joyful.

River slammed the heel of her hand against a Reaver's nose, shoving fragments of the broken skull into its brain and killing it. Her sword was covered in black blood, the axe she'd taken from one of the Reavers was dripping with it even as she whirled and sliced through another set of limbs.

It was actually getting a little hard to move with all the bodies piling up around her.

But the rage was slowly fading, dying with each Reaver around her, with each ship the Alliance fleet was destroying in the Black above Universe's moon.

Part of her could mourn the lives of the innocent who had become ravening monsters through no fault or choice of their own. But just like an animal with rabies they had to be put down. Bullet in the brain pan. Squish.

She took out another three with whirling blows of her weapons and a hard kick to the back of a neck, breaking it instantly. This time, when they went down, they would stay.
She could sympathize with them somewhat. She'd never chose to become an assassin, unless choosing to survive was making that choice. And perhaps it was. She chose to live, to survive and that meant enduring and eventually embracing the training she'd been put through.

But she had a light at the end of the tunnel. She had Riddick. His mind was clear and crisp and echoed with Wrath as he fought his own battle, but part of it was always with her.

The Reavers had no such comfort.

Finally, the last fell. And she stood in the center of the dead, blood nearly covering her, dripping from her skin and clothing.

Riddick nearly dropped Mal when the elevator doors opened and he didn't see River. He saw Shazza holding a pressure bandage to Simon's belly. Blood was streaking one arm and she was pale as a ghost, the hasty bandage soaked. Kaylee unconscious, Wash nearly out, and Zoe not much better. Ciara was braced in a sitting position against the wall, bullet wounds on her leg and hip while Shea was bleeding from his shoulder and calf. The doors to the black room were shut and there was only one place his wife could be.

Zoe looked up, bleary eyed, "Sir?"

Mal bit out the words, "It's done. Report?"

"Fuck that, where's my wife," Riddick growled and barely kept himself from throwing Mal at the First Mate. "Where's River!"

Zoe opened her mouth and seemed about to decide which of them to answer first when the doors behind her began to open.

Everyone conscious turned to look, those who were able, feebly raising their nearly empty weapons as the small square iris of the door slowly opened to reveal River, standing alone in the middle of a room full of bodies. She was dripping with blood, some of it hers, but she was gloriously alive.

He knew he'd dropped Mal's arm and didn't even care that the man had nearly fallen without his support as he took five long strides towards his wife.

He was within arm's reach of her when the blood-spattered walls behind her were ripped away. Smoke and dust flooded the space and light pierced through it, making him tiān shā de grateful he'd kept his goggles on. Some fifteen or more Alliance soldiers stood in the opening, every weapon trained upon he, River and the crew behind him.

One of them was shouting commands, "Drop your weapons! Drop 'em now!" While another was asking over his shouts, "Do we engage? Do we engage?" Shea and Zoe were reluctantly laying down arms while everyone else appeared to have forgotten they possessed them.

He could feel everyone behind him tense, River's hands were tightening on her weapons, ready to turn, even as a soldier leveled his gun upon her, his face sweaty and frantic while still another soldier shouted, "Targets are acquired! Do we have a kill order? Do we have an order?"

He could hear every pulse, all of them pounding like drums, but for his and Rivers, Furyans, defiant until the end. And this could only end badly.
River looked up at him, her lips parting in a bloody smile and he knew she wasn't hardly hurt at all, no more than he was. The soldiers were shouting, no one in the crew dared to move, and neither would he while River was between him and guns.

The impasse might have been broken by a twitchy trigger finger, on which side it would hardly have mattered, but for the Operative's voice, harsh with the ache of a mightily abused throat, "Stand down. Stand down. We're finished."

The gravestone was round, more like a bell than a headstone and topped by a capture behind glass. From behind it a wise-looking man with a silver goatee and wild hair tied into neat cornrows smiled. His expression suggested he knew the punchline to a joke that the 'Verse wasn't quite ready to share with everyone else yet.

River sighed as she fixed her message to the rocket and retreated back to Riddick's side. They'd tried to save as many as they could. Tried to prepare their friends. But infection, strain and an old heart were too much for Shepherd Book. The name on his stone was the one he'd taken from another man but he'd used it for so long she'd decided he could keep using it. He didn't think of himself by his birthname anymore.

Were it not for Simon and Riddick there might have been two more graves. Mr. Universe had been nearly forgotten, locked up in his closet and slowly bleeding to death from the belly wound he'd been given in retaliation for whatever the Alliance soldiers had thought he'd been doing with Lenore. Riddick had gone looking for his old friend once the Operative had confirmed he'd been left alive and where he'd been locked up.

Alive had almost been a lie.

Wash was still recovering from his concussion, and the bleed in his brain that had been the result of their flight from death after he'd received it. There was a reason you weren't supposed to move concussion victims around less than carefully, not that they'd had much of a choice in the matter. Simon had insisted upon seeing him once his belly wound was stitched up and upon viewing Wash's very uneven pupil dilation had proceeded to read the Alliance doctor the riot act.

The emergency surgery to alleviate the pressure of the brain bleed might have done more damage if Simon hadn't insisted upon doing it himself. He'd shot himself up with adrenaline and painkillers and fixed Wash and then looked at Zoe's back again, making sure she wasn't going to have any nasty limps as a result of her wounds.

He'd lost consciousness after that and Riddick had taken over basic care of the crew until Simon was awake again, augmenting that of the Alliance doctors. It helped that everyone else had pretty basic wounds, barring Mal's sword to the belly. Beyond that he was mostly just beat up, same as the rest of them. Zoe had nearly ended up with a nasty infection, trying to hold off the Alliance doctors at gunpoint before Riddick had pushed his way into the room and taken over cleaning out her wounds. River had been going over their charts and encyclopedias of medical texts and between she and Riddick they combined to make a pretty good basic doctor. Kaylee's reaction to the stuff the Reavers had put on the darts was shaken off after a day of rest and fluids to flush the garbage out of her system and Shea had been up and limping around once the bullets were removed and he'd gotten a few bandages on.

Shazza hadn't left Mal's side except to check on Simon, Riddick and River. Her own wound had been more dangerous than she'd thought, the bullet nicking an artery. Only a pressure bandage had
kept her from losing too much blood and possibly her arm. Thankfully the general surgeon was good with bullet wounds if not subdermal hematomas and he'd fixed everyone up pretty well. Shazza still flexed her hand constantly as if it tingled, a side effect of the nerves regaining circulation.

Shea wouldn't let Ciara get out of the wheelchair she'd been stuck in until she was able to walk without a limp. Unbeknownst to her sweetheart she'd practiced walking in her room under Riddick's watchful eyes until she could manage that feat. Riddick had come out of her room every day for a week shaking his head over her stubbornness. "No wonder she an' Shea are a match. Both related to mules."

The Alliance soldiers had been more frightened of Riddick than they were of the rest of the crew combined. Even with the Operative rather tiredly vouching for them with his fractured cheek and ocular bones and still bruised throat, the soldiers were wary.

The doctors had learned to do what he and River told them, especially when they wandered through the hospital ship and volunteered in various wards, cleaning wounds and stitching folk up as needed. River found she enjoyed the work when there wasn't any threat of an officer recognizing them and sending she and Riddick back to the Academy.

One of the soldiers had stared at them and gotten the gumption to ask why Riddick of all people was helping them.

"Was on Verbena when that gow niang yăng de bombed the factory, killed all those folks and hurt a bunch more," Riddick answered as he calmly continued working on the boy's leg. "Helped anyone who was wounded. Didn't care what colors they were. Everyone bleeds red." He gave the boy a stern look, "Man who killed those folks fought for the Independents. Don't mean all Browncoats are murderers. No more than all Purplebellies are. Lieutenant who commandeered our ship was a good officer, made sure a lynch mob didn't kill the wrong man, brought the right one back for trial."

River half smiled, "Husband was Đàn Chồng in the war." Her smile turned to a smirk as the boy went more pale. "Learned to put people together after he learned to take them apart. Both come in handy."

"My wife calls me Lù duân," Riddick smoothed a bandage over the wound. "Also comes in handy. Happy the man, and happy he alone, He, who can call today his own: He who, secure within, can say, To-morrow do thy worst, for I have lived today."

After that Riddick's reputation had spread all over the ship, and then the remains of the fleet. It hadn't made anyone less afraid but it did give them something to think about. Since she and Riddick were the only two of the crew who'd come through the mess relatively unscathed they were the ones making arrangements with the Operative for Serenity to be transported to Eavesdown. The Walden would be a bit cramped but once the crew was recovered enough they could ride in it back to Persephone.

But before they left the system they'd stopped at Haven. Even if she hadn't much liked Book all the time, he deserved the respect of her attendance at his funeral. And more than that, the people of Haven deserved her respect.

Shea limped forward with a lit taper in his hand and lit the rocket, carrying their wishes and prayers into the upper atmosphere. Once the rocket hit its apogee it exploded into a spectacular display of fireworks.

River watched with Serenity's crew and her husband, among the survivors of Haven, and took a deep breath. They all mourned the lost. Those lost to the Pax and to the Alliance, sacrificed to save the Parliament embarrassment.
She turned when the fireworks faded, Haven in her view, and half smiled. Slowly it was being rebuilt. The church first, its roof nearly repaired, and the rest of the buildings after it. The Walden, being a Hanover Class Brigantine had been able to slowly move the Alliance cruiser, with some effort. It was better in space than in atmo but it had gotten the job done and Haven could resume its mining operations. The people here were good folk and she hoped she would see them again.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Well Ladies and Gents, we're closing in on the end here. I hope you will all forgive me the cliffhanger we left chapter 78 on since I didn't kill Wash. We've got one more chapter to go and then we'll be at the end. I hope you're all still enjoying this and stick with it. And by all means tell me what you think. I love to hear your reactions.

Chinese Translations:

fèi wù (good for nothing)
gǒu niáng yǎng de (son of a bitch)
mèi mei (little sister)
Tiān shā de (Goddam!)
shuāng rǔ (breasts)
táo huā yuán (vagina (lit. "garden of peach blossoms"))
dì di (younger brother)

Xiā zī mō xiàng. (blind people touch an elephant (idiom, from Nirvana sutra 大般涅槃經 | 大般涅盘经); fig. unable to see the big picture / to mistake the part for the whole / unable to see the wood for the trees)

hún dàns (bastards)

Lù duān (Luduan, mythical Chinese beast able to detect the truth)

Quote Sources:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not. Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices… - The Tempest – William Shakespeare

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces between stars - on stars where no human race is. I have it in me so much nearer home to scare myself with my own desert places. – Desert Places – Robert Frost

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he to-day that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile, this day shall gentle his condition. – Henry V – William Shakespeare
And the night shall be filled with music, and the cares that infest the day, shall fold their tend to like Arabs, and silently steal away. – The Day Is Done – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

slip the surly bonds of earth, dance the skies on laughter-silvered wings, - High Flight – John Gillespie Magee Jr.

Happy the man, and happy he alone, He, who can call today his own: He who, secure within, can say, To-morrow do thy worst, for I have lived today. - Imitation of the 29th of Horace - Dryden
Riddick’s first order of business after making sure Universe lived was to get him away from the Alliance. To that end he had been smuggled, without Lenore, aboard the Walden and hidden in one of the rooms on the upper decks.

To say Mal had been surprised to find him there had been an understatement. But he couldn’t say much about it, the Walden not being his ship. Most of the crew had done their best to avoid Mr. Universe. His treatment at the hands of the Alliance hadn’t changed him one bit. And his manners were as eccentric as ever.

Universe had managed, in the short amount of time he’d been alone on the boat, to augment and otherwise improve the cortex systems from the basic version to something approximating reliable, as far as it could be done with only programming. And he’d tuned into the news that they’d all missed. The results of the Miranda wave as the ‘puppet theatre’ was calling it.

It looked as if there could be another war.

Riddick wasn’t as concerned with that as Mal thought he should be. If there was a war it wouldn’t be because no one was trying to make peace. Both sides would need to compromise and, in his experience, neither was eager to do so. Ever. So something would need to be done to keep things from exploding and then avalanching into outright hostility. Setting course for Persephone and Eavesdown’s repair docks gave him time to think of what he and River had planned.

“Second thoughts?” River asked softly from behind him, her soft lips kissing his temple as she stole around his chair and settled in his lap.

“Nah,” He shook his head. “Gotta be done. The whole mess’ll just start all over again if we don’t do something.”

“Don’t want that. Not another war.” River shook her head. “Laws in place now practically guarantee there will be though. Must be changed.”

Riddick growled, sane or not, River was still a Reader and the amount of pain that Mal broadcast every time he thought of there being another war, of potentially losing another war, was a near agony to River. “You know he won’t leave the ship, even if we get the rest of them all settled at Wing’s old estate or the house we got offa Burgess while repairs are made, he won’t go.”

“And I’ll have some respite from his…emotions.” River nodded. “Dart Courier waiting for us at the estate. Delivered two days ago.”

“Good shape?” He knew he should have known better than to ask when she rolled her eyes at him.

“Would I buy you junk to fly?” She remonstrated and he grinned.

“Only as a disguise.”
It took everyone to fix Serenity. Everyone and then some. The Operative had authorized the repairs to be made on his account, the Parliaments account Riddick guessed, and that had gone a long way towards keeping Serenity’s books in the black. Zoe had replaced the shattered bridge window herself, exorcising the ghost of fear that wouldn’t die every time she remembered that harpoon impaling her husband’s chair. They’d left the cannon at Haven, and it was already back in its place of protection, repaired almost as good as new.

River had been responsible for most of the rewiring, she and Ciara were slender enough to slip into Serenity’s crawlspace to replace what had been burned out or simply torn loose during the crash. He and Shea had done a lot of the welding and heavy lifting, Shazza, Simon and Kaylee had worked on Serenity’s engines and Mal had done a lot of everything else. He’d worked hard to scrub off the Reaver-like red paint that had been scrawled all over his ship’s hull, what was left of it after the crash and sandpaper effect of the ground scraping along the metal. But he had been responsible for giving Serenity new life once, and there was no one, not even Kaylee or River, who knew the ship better. Any change or upgrade had gone through him.

Serenity had needed a new thruster and new landing gear, plus assorted other parts which had burnt out when the engine room caught on fire. Everyone’s bunks, the infirmary, the lounge and the galley had been tossed higgledy piggledy when they’d sort of crash landed on Universe’s moon. It was actually easier to list what hadn’t been damaged that what had. The entire ship looked like a giant toddler had picked it up, pulled parts off of it and shaken it like a rattle before slamming it back down.

Universe, for all that his expertise would be welcomed, was admonished to stay hidden on the estate. The Walden was docked at Eavesdown, undergoing her own retrofit for purposes of their own and Universe would only get in the way there. Riddick was pretty sure his old friend would end up stealing another moon or probably a space station knowing him.

It had been Wash who’d reminded them, somewhat blurrily as this was before his surgery, to go get Lenore before Universe got himself caught trying to retrieve her. Bundling the Lovebot into a sack with some of Universe’s belongings hadn’t been hard. It had just been a matter of making a quick trip from the hanger up to Universe’s quarters and back down to Serenity to stash Lenore in one of the smuggling compartments.

Inara had come to visit them and as a favor to Mal, gone up with some of the programable paint and patched up the badly damaged sign for the ships name. She had the neatest touch of all of them besides River and it was something she could do to feel helpful without straining herself.

The Miranda wave had hit Badger hard. His younger sister, her husband and children had gone to Miranda to settle, drawn by the promise of a new life and a planet with clean air and plenty of jobs. To hear that the terraforming disaster that had killed her and his nephews and niece was a lie to cover the most despicable type of act had infuriated the normally calm crime boss. His reaction was to contact Riddick and River and ask them exactly what it would take to make sure the men responsible were punished. Needless to say, they had not informed Mal of that communique. Or their response to it.

Shazza was splitting her time between helping with Serenity and working with Badger. She was the reason the repairs on the engine kept clicking along in spite of Kaylee and Simon’s ‘smooch breaks’ as Kaylee called them. Badger had come by with Ruby and hugged his cousin tightly for a long while before managing to get Mal’s back up. But he’d also offered work when they were back on their feet. Moving sheep this time apparently.

Riddick smirked as he fixed another panel in place and began to weld the joins. He and River would
not be aboard for the sheep smuggling adventure. Smaller than cows they might be but sheep were just as dumb. And smelly. Not something either of them were interested in experiencing.

He grinned as he caught sight of Simon cuddled with Kaylee on the observation area couch, smooching, as Kaylee called it. Simon was as good as his word. Once he and Kaylee were both recovered he’d happily succumbed to her seduction attempts. He’d also snuck out and bought a ring to give her when he felt she’d accept a proposal. Simon’s bright red face as River teased him that Kaylee was making sure he could fulfill his husbandly duties before even thinking of marriage was something Riddick recalled with much fond amusement.

Shea had already proposed to Ciara and let slip that one of Book’s last acts as a Shepherd had been to marry them on Haven before they’d gone off to rescue Inara. The two Kerry natives had been wiser than they’d let on, knowing River being triggered in the Maidenhead was the beginning of the storm. As Shea put it, “Even if we weren’t married long ‘fore we got kilt, ‘leastways we’s married in God’s eyes.”

Kaylee had gotten a little, okay more than a little, weepy eyed at that and hugged them both tightly. Mal had stood there looking uncomfortable while Wash welcomed Shea belatedly to the club of married men aboard Serenity. “We’ve got you, me and Rick now. We outnumber the unmarried men.” That had tickled Shea quite a bit.

Riddick watched as Mal hauled in the last of the repair equipment. Mal knew he was there but it was interesting to note just when the Captain’s instincts kicked on and clued him into the figure who’d been watching Serenity as he stepped closer to the ramp.

Mal didn’t turn, though he did stop, his hand near his gun. Riddick had to give him credit, he knew exactly who it was watching them. Though he supposed after taking a sword to the middle the Operative’s aura, so to speak, would be pretty unforgettable. Finally, Mal spoke when it became clear the Operative wouldn’t, “If you're here to tell me we ain't finished—then we will be, real quick.”

The Operative moved to stand just under the canopy created by the nose of the ship, rain falling behind him. Riddick moved from his spot in the shadows and smirked as the Operative’s eyes went to him quickly, startled at the sight of him, and then went back to Mal. “Do you know what an uproar you've caused? Protests, riots—cries for a recall of the entire Parliament.”

Riddick shrugged as Mal turned around, “We've seen the broad waves.”

“You must be pleased,” The Operative looked anything but.

Mal was wincing. Riddick bet his wound was troubling him some, no matter how many painkillers Simon gave him, nothing but time and rest would heal all the aches and pains. And the repairs they’d been doing hadn’t helped matters. Rest had been in short supply as Mal tried to do the work of two men repairing Serenity. The signs of discomfort faded as the Captain spoke, a faint bitterness in his voice. Reality wasn’t always sweet, and the ‘Verse didn’t give happy endings for more than a sunset, “‘Verse wakes up a spell. Won't be long ’fore she rolls right over and falls back asleep. ‘Tain’t my worry.”

Riddick regarded the Operative as the man spoke, weighing the truth of his words, “I can’t guarantee they won't come after you. The Parliament. They have a hundred men like me and they are not forgiving.”

He gave a quick nod to Mal, who simply smirked at the man, “That don't bode especially well for you—giving the order to let us go, patching up our hurt...”
The Operative shrugged, a casual movement that contrasted oddly with his elegant manner of speech and dress, “I told them the Tams were no longer a threat — damage done.” He glanced at Riddick, “Your…exploits, Mr. Riddick, I’m afraid are too much a matter of public record to simply expunge. But Simon and River Tam—they’re from a good family and such an aberration from routine can be easily swept up as youthful exuberance. Strangely enough there was very little to clean up. The Parliament might listen, but—I think they know I'm no longer their man.”

Mal didn’t react to that overmuch. It was plain he didn’t have any sympathy for the Operative, “They take you down, I don't expect to grieve overmuch. Like to kill you myself, I see you again.”

“You won't. There is—” His small was grim, “—nothing left to see.”

Mal began his ascent into the ship as the Operative looked up at Serenity’s name, for once she was wearing her own sigil rather than an alias. The question, when it came, was clearly not the one Mal expected, “‘Serenity’. You lost everything in that battle. Everything you had, everything you were... how did you go on?”

Riddick stepped away from the ramp as Mal hit the button to close the inner doors, giving the Operative an unimpressed glance, “You still standing there when the engine starts, you never will figure it out.”

Riddick shook his head as the ramp went up and moved away from the ship, speaking over his shoulder, “You find something else to believe in.” He informed the dark man quietly. “For Mal that’s his crew. River an’ me, it’s each other. Don’t know what it’ll be for you.”

The Operative had moved away when he did, “You won’t be going with them?”

“With a target on my back?” Riddick glanced back at him, “And a hundred other Operatives all looking? Don’t seem like the brightest idea. Me an’ River, we’re smarter than that.” He smirked slightly, “Though from what River said, Parliament won’t have their Operatives much longer. Spoken to any of them recently?”

The man looked faintly shocked and then resigned, “I have… after such events—one of my counterparts came to speak with me and he will speak with the others. Certain… adjustments must be made, considering one of us was defeated in combat, even if it was two against one. Will you try to kill all of us?”

“Got no need to,” Riddick shrugged as he headed towards the seamier side of town. “We just want to go our way. River said your programming would unravel. And she was right. But she also said the Operatives were like dominos. If one falls, they all fall.”

“And she is the finger tipping the first,” The Operative realized with a shock.

“You might could say,” The Furyan chuckled. “Parliament didn’t think far ‘nough ahead. Nobody ever figured on what’d happen if a Reader met up with an Operative. A Reader that weren’t controlled by the Parliament. Kinda dumb really. With all the programming in your brain for any Reader to see, including how it can all be undone.”

The Operative was still standing still with shock when Riddick drifted away in the crowds and by the time he was jostled and alerted, Riddick was long gone.

River was giggling when he finally got to the estate where they’d holed up for a spell. “Confounded
“Seemed like the thing to do,” Riddick chuckled and scooped her up to kiss simply because he could. “Things clickin’ along here zhì àì?”

“Hmm…” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Universe says the Walden is almost done being retrofitted.”

“Then we can get to work pretty soon.” He smiled at the thought. Mal and the crew were well out of it, but he and River still had plenty to do. Between she and Universe they’d dug out a library’s worth of dirty secrets on the Parliament. And with the Operatives no longer reliable tools it would be much easier for them to do some judicious pruning of the governments far reaching branches. Not to mention there were plenty of Browncoats out there who wouldn’t mind stirring up trouble even if it did mean another war. He wasn’t interested in a war but a few folks causing diversions would be helpful. And they didn’t need to know that’s all they were. With the Parliament’s eyes on them, they wouldn’t be paying as much attention to what was happening under their noses. “The closer you think you are, the less you’ll actually see.”

“Been working on the Dart, Kaylee gave advice,” River rubbed her lips over his jaw as he carried her into the kitchen. “New paint and she’ll be easily disguised just like the Walden.”

“And she’ll fit in the lower cargo bay easy enough?” Riddick hadn’t been certain that part of the plan would work until River had gotten hold of a turntable.

“Now that we’ve adjusted the shaft for the Bombay doors. Sail her in, land on the turntable, turn it on and she is spun around to fly out again,” River nodded pulling up her cortex and showing him the plans. “Reinforce the deck plating and the back of the bay. Hydraulic lifts to raise and lower cargo to the upper bay. Changed the layout of the lower deck to accommodate the Dart.”

Riddick nodded and tapped the area of the Bombay doors. Originally there’d been a shaft from the lower deck doors to the lower mid deck in order to lift and lower cargo. It was still there but now it telescoped up and down and they could seal it off or open it as they pleased in order to deal with cargo or create an airlock out of the lower deck to garage the courier ship. It lowered the height of the ceiling by about a foot but with its considerable height to begin with it wasn’t that much of an issue. It had cost a pretty penny but between River husking and the income from Niska’s appropriated holdings they weren’t suffering for it. “Any trouble?”

“None that platinum could not fix,” River shrugged, her words echoing his thoughts. “And we have plenty of that. Between Niska’s money, Burgess’s and my investments... won’t have to worry for a while.”

“Good. Like to get started as soon as we can. Get Universe set up on Herschel and go hunting.” Riddick kissed his wife again simply because he could.

“We will shake the ‘Verse to the its foundations when we are done,” River grinned at him.

“Damn right we will.” Riddick grinned back.

River smiled as she keyed in the last of the information and looked over her shoulder. Riddick might not care for the way the Walden moved, like a whale in a puddle, but he did love the amenities and tech they’d put on the boat. On the upper decks at least. The lower decks were all function. Anyone boarding them would find themselves on a working salvage boat, utilitarian and spartan. The upper
decks were private, locked down and inaccessible without hours’ worth of husking or the passkeys and codes.

“Just about done here my láng,” She began to run her program. “Last of the information has been entered. The program should root out all the connections to Blue Sun.”

“Key members of Parliament?” Riddick repeated the conversation she’d Read and repeated to him what seemed like forever ago. It hadn’t been that long. Only three and a half months.

In that time, she’d closely monitored the Operative’s movements. From Persephone it was an easy hop into the Core’s cortex systems and between she and Universe, no secret was safe. Certainly not the images from the cameras so abundantly seeded through Core Worlds. He hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d told Mal the Parliament had a hundred men like him. They had more truly. And once the Operative had spoken to the others, the weave began to come unraveled and they were all their own men once again. More subliminals sent through the cortex feeds had hastened the deterioration of the behavior modification. It had been a sight to see all the rigidly controlled Operatives act like normal folks.

There had been some panic, flurries of waves between agents, confirmation of what was happening to them and with it, a growing resolve. No one who had seen the Miranda wave could ignore it. Following that, no one could ignore the Parliament’s part in it. Not even Operatives with newly recovered memories.

The unrest in the general populace hadn’t abated much and though the government was making noises about reform, nothing was really being done. Granted months were like minutes in government processes and unwinding red tape could take years, but after seeing for certain that Reavers were real and just how they’d come to be, no one was feeling patient.

“One is already dead. Terrible accident,” River murmured. “Another has…retired, abruptly. Four left for us to deal with if someone else doesn’t get to them first.” She brought up faces and names on the screens, dossiers flowing in green letters.

“We’d better get to it then, really don’t want another war on our hands,” Riddick suggested.

River nodded her agreement. “The Walden is set on a course to Ita moon, slow and ponderous.”

“Then let’s get in the courier and make some speed.” Her mate ran a fingertip over her jaw and she grinned at him.

“Got a name for her too,” She slide the portable cortex into her satchel.

“Yeah?” He picked up the bags he’d dropped inside the doorway. “A real one?”

“Not an alias to be donned and removed upon a whim,” River agreed as they walked down to the lower deck. “Call her Dagger’s Point. Because they won’t see us until we draw blood.”

Riddick’s chuckle was low and evil and sent lovely shivers down her spine. “Now that I like.” He flipped switches as they walked, setting security systems for each deck as they traveled through the ship. “Had a thought about the Walden, renaming it if we wanted.”

“Cannot call the boat Miranda’s Wail. Dead giveaway.” River smirked at him over her shoulder and was given a shrug in return.

“Still a good name,” He smirked back at her. “I was thinking, Prospero’s Daughter.”
“Still obvious to anyone with an education,” She debated. “But since we’ll be going under false
names more often than not…”

“Why the hell not.” Riddick nodded. “Something to see to after we get underway.”

The lower deck was almost cavernous since they’d taken down the walls dividing it into different
cargo holds. Maybe they’d put a few up again, but they had plenty of room for containers and the
Arrowhead Courier was more important than legitimate cargo. She keyed in the codes and locked the
doors behind them and gave her husband a grin. “The game’s afoot. Follow your spirit, and upon this
charge. Cry ‘God for Harry, England, and Saint George!’”

Riddick dropped their bags in the tiny cabin and headed for the bridge. “He which hath no stomach
to this fight, let him depart; his passport shall be made. And crowns for convoy put into his purse:
We would not die in that man’s company. That fears his fellowship to die with us.”

“Which is why we did not bring Mal in on this,” River commented as she followed him. She took a
moment to send Universe a message and received a text in return, “Universe wishes us luck and says
he’ll keep watch here. Will wave if there are any issues.”

“Then let’s get underway,” Riddick was already starting the ships launch sequence while River set
the controls, turning the hold into an airlock. “I’m itching for a fight.”

“For blood he means,” River grinned as she finished her half of the work. “Time to go a hunting.”

“And I’m gonna be a big bad wolf,” Riddick shot her a grin as he hit the button for the airlock doors
and guided their newly christened ship out of the hold.

They picked up the tail coming off of Osiris, and Riddick made a noise of irritation in his throat and
moved to lose it only to be stilled by River’s hand on his shoulder. “Set a course for Bellerophon…
we can land in the dessert. Haymer sent a wave, he has news for us. We can meet with him after.”

Riddick nodded and keyed the course in, setting the engines to hard burn and grinning as their
tagalong had to act fast in order to keep up. “So, who’s following us Qīng Xiāng?”

“Operative,” She grinned at him as she took a seat. “Surprised a Dart can move so quickly.”

“So those upgrades we made to the engines definitely worth it,” He chuckled as he piloted the ship.
“We’ll need to hit a fuel station after we meet up with Haymer.”

River nodded and made a note of it in the cortex. Not that she really needed to with her memory but
it was a habit they’d picked up from Wash. “Hmm… Foreman on Herschel wants to know if he has
the go-ahead to start up that horse breeding program.”

That was one of the things the two of them had been talking over and he nodded, “Unless you can
see a reason not to. If it doesn’t do well it won’t cost much in the long run.”

“Good tax write-off, start up a business,” River was keying in the text wave as she spoke. “Will tell
him to scout out good stock, start small and expand slowly. And try to hire locally if possible.”

He nodded, “How’s Badger holding up?” He’d heard the little man’s voice over River’s cortex as
she took a wave.
“Angry still. Ready to so something…unwise. Told him we are working on the problem, several of 
the men responsible eliminated already. Gave him the names.” River still spoke in shorthand now
and then when she was thinking hard on something else or Reading someone. Truthfully, he found it
a bit comforting, that she didn’t try to be perfect all the time when he was around.

“That settle him some?” He punched in the co-ordinates for their little landing zone on Bellerophon,
the spot Serenity had waited while they’d pulled the job on Yo-Saff-Bridge.

“Somewhat,” River nodded. “He wishes change and is impatient as he sees nothing being done in
Parliament.” It was a sentiment they were both sympathetic to. And one of the reasons they’d let
Badger know parts of their plans for change.

“Well maybe our tagalong can do something about that,” Riddick suggested as they came in for a
landing. A quirk of the planetary orbits had put Bellerophon much closer to Osiris than usual, barely
an hour’s hard burn. That would only last a month or so and then the distance would increase again.
The stop at the fuel station was more so they could reach Ariel which was spinning in a far orbit due
to the same quirk.

“It is possible.” River smiled as the ship settled onto the ground with nary a shudder. “Smooth as
silk. No one flies like my Mister.”

“Well I ain’t no Hoban Washburne but I do all right,” Riddick chuckled. He looked out onto the
dessert, “Here comes our tail. Nice little boat.”

“Alliance Aerospace Fighter,” River commented. “Used exclusively by Operatives these days.”
Riddick whistled under his breath as he headed for the air lock. “They’d have to be, gorram things
are so expensive.”

“We can still go faster,” His wife shrugged, her voice more than a little smug, and rightfully so.
She’d worked out how to improve their engines beyond what anyone would expect of their little
Dart Courier.

“Well let’s go see what he wants,” Riddick checked his weapons reflexively and watched as River
keyed in the unlocking sequence, adding several codes as precautionary measures. No one would be
able to get onto the Dagger’s Point but them. Anyone who tried was in for a painful shock. Literally.

When they exited their ship, the Operative was waiting for them, his familiar face more worn and
tired than they’d ever seen, even immediately after the Miranda wave. “Wū’an,” She greeted the
Operative politely. Riddick didn’t bother with such niceties, simply glaring at the man from behind
his goggles.

“Miss Tam, Mr. Riddick,” The Operative gave them a slight though respectful bow. “I…I wished to
say that I have noted your…activities of late.”

“Long way to come to say that,” Riddick commented. “And its Missus,” He nodded at River. “My
wife.”

“Ah, my apologies, there was no record…” He stopped as logic prevented him from continuing,
“But of course, there wouldn’t be.” His head shook, “I’m still growing accustomed to…”

“Having more than half a brain?” River suggested. “Intuition and emotions?”

“I would say yes to all of the above,” A dry smile tilted his lips. “I surmise that you are aware, you’re
not the only one…to engage in such work?”
Riddick chuckled outright, “Yeah, saw a few of the fellas we’d a mind to deal with had already been prey to a couple accidents.”

“My fellows are…not forgiving of such…deceptions.” The Operative shrugged. “And while they are still reeling from the home truths we were made to see; some form of action is required.”

“Try getting the law about only ‘full citizens’ of the Alliance being able to vote repealed.” Riddick suggested, “If the Alliance is determined to govern everyone, then everyone ought to have a say in the government.” He folded his arms, shivs within easy reach, “For if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them.”

“Thomas Moore’s Utopia,” The Operative murmured. “Yes, I can see that would be a start.”

“I would also suggest you and your…fellows, study the governments of Earth That Was. Particularly that of the United States. One of the only governments that was still working in the manner it was intended from its conception.” River’s cool voice was like water, soothing and gentle and he felt some of his frustration ease. It would do no good to take his irritation with the entire government out on one man. Not when that man could actually effect change.

“How do you mean?” The Operative seemed open to suggestion, but a bit unsure of what her suggestion meant.

“The Alliance began as the Angelo-Sino Alliance. For China and America.” River seemed in the mood to give a history lesson. “Two of the mightiest nations from Earth-That-Was. Assimilated other countries under their banner. Joined forces to build the Ark ships.” She eyed his spectacles and keyed something into her cortex, her fingers making a little ‘shooing’ motion towards the Operative and text began to flow across his spectacles. “Read the Constitution of the United States of America. The founding of their government. They had their elected Parliament and Prime Minister. But they were separate bodies, one for making laws, the other for carrying them out. And a third, for the interpretation of law. Legislative, Executive and Judicial.”

“Interesting…” The Operative’s voice was preoccupied as he read the text. “What is described here…”

“Hasn’t been done in centuries,” River said flatly. “But Parliament needs to change. The government of America became corrupt in some instances, but it could not be corrupted entirely, due to the way the system was established. Everything in balance. And while corruption might have existed, it could also be cleansed.”

“To survive as a nation…for so long…with such a precarious method of determining leadership,” The Operative sounded awed and Riddick grinned.

“Read about them, old histories. Nation was founded by people looking for a better life. Rebelled against the country they came from, fought their own Independent War and they won. Created that nation and it lasted until Earth-That-Was failed. Longer even.” He told the dark man. “Seems like that’s the sorta thing you and your fellows could learn from.”

“It…should my counterparts agree, it seems a worthy goal,” Dark eyes studied them. “And the two of you?” Unspoken was his question as to what they would be doing.

“We’ll be around.” Riddick shrugged, “Got things to do, places to be, and people to put in place.”
“People like Duran Haymer?” The Operative asked with what might have been a half smile. Riddick stiffened at the implied threat and the Operative held up his hands even as River’s expression hardened and her scent blazed with fury. “We have no intent to harm Mr. Haymer. He’s a loyal, intelligent, thoughtful citizen of the Alliance. Our government needs people like him.”

“Simon Tam was a loyal, thoughtful, intelligent citizen too,” Riddick reminded him. “Didn’t stop the Parliament from sending assassins.”

“As I once told you, I am no longer their man,” The Operative shook his head, “A fact they seem to not have entirely understood.”

“That’s all to the good,” Riddick warned him. “I don’t doubt they’ve got other nasty secrets hidden away.”

River regarded the Operative thoughtfully but nodded her agreement. “Time for all Operatives to pool their knowledge. Intelligence unshared is intelligence lost.”

He looked startled, as if it hadn’t occurred to him that he might be in possession of knowledge his fellows didn’t, and vice versa. “I believe you may be correct.” He bowed again, “Thank you for your time and…your help.”

As if knowing, and perhaps he did, that they wouldn’t turn their backs to him, and he shouldn’t turn his to them and present too tempting a target, he backed onto his ship. Only when it lifted off did they return to theirs.

“That was…interesting,” Riddick commented as he took his seat in the pilot’s chair again.

“Hmm… in a way slightly different than an ‘oh-god-oh-god-we’re-all-gonna-die’ type of way.” River agreed. “Shall we set it aside and go see Haymer? We must persuade him to take a greater interest in politics.”

When they landed on Herschel in the empty field designated for that purpose River was exhausted. What had started out as a series of surgical blows struck to the heart of corruption in the Alliance had turned into a widespread operation to overhaul the entire government. They’d been on the move for more than six months.

The work they’d put in to alter the Walden had been worth its weight in platinum more than once. When the Walden swallowed up the Dagger’s Point they effectively disappeared, especially since the Alliance depended on com buoys in order to reference nav sat trajectories. The Courier’s pulse beacon had been removed before they’d ever begun to fly her and the Walden looked so old and decrepit a malfunctioning pulse beacon wasn’t a surprise at all.

More than once their disappearing act had been the only thing that kept them safe. Riddick had been a good pilot before. Now there was nothing he couldn’t make the little ship do. Disengaging the engines to float into the Walden’s mid deck had become child’s play. With his ability as a pilot and her talents at husking the cortex they were as ghosts in the machine. Universe had taken his leave from the ranch almost three months ago, having found another hidey hole to take over. This one was in the Kalidasa system, a privately-owned moon that had been strip-mined after terraforming and then mostly abandoned, it had another ion cloud around it and thus made the perfect place for a husker like Universe to put down roots. There were some folk who eked out a living panning for gold as it were but for the most part Universe was alone on the rock.
River rubbed her forehead and sent a wave off to the man, reminding him to make a list of needed supplies. Universe would happily live on protein bars as long as he had his cortex arrays and Lenore but he still needed more than that if he wanted to keep from being found.

“Remindin’ Universe about his grocery list?” Riddick came up behind her and began to rub her shoulders and neck, his big hands pushing and rubbing at the knots in her spine.

“Hmm… he’s forgetting he needs blankets, soap, and other necessities.” River sighed in relief as her muscles began to relax.

“We’ll take a week here at least, then run the stuff out to him,” Riddick scooped her up. “But right now, time for my jùn jié wife to get some rest.”

“As if you aren’t brilliant in your own right,” River smiled and rested her head on his shoulder.

He chuckled as he carried her down through the Walden and out towards the house. “Got a wave from Badger and Shazza. They want us to come visit.”

That was some welcome news. They’d had to make do with waves rather than see their friends and being able to talk in person and without layers of encryption slowing the process would be a relief.

“Hmm… take the week and then go to Persephone?”

“That’s what I figured,” Riddick agreed and nodded at the housekeeper who’d opened the door for them.

River gave the woman a tired smile, “We haven’t eaten, but anything is fine, sandwiches or something. We’ll be retiring directly after.”

“Yes ma’am,” The older woman nodded and shut the door behind them, walking briskly off to the kitchen.

Riddick took the stairs with his effortless stride and pushed open the door the master’s suite, settling her gently in one of the soft chairs. “I figure we pick up the supplies on Persephone, and take them out to Universe, see what we feel like doing after.”

River nodded and nearly moaned in relief as he began to take her hair out of its chignon, standing behind her and pulling a brush through the waist length locks until she felt boneless. “You’re going to make my brain melt,” She mumbled and was rewarded with a warm wicked laugh.

“Good. You need some food and rest.” He began to unlace her boots. “I’d put you in the bath but I think you might fall asleep in there.”

“Wouldn’t be wrong,” River was falling asleep where she sat.

When she woke up she was being aggressively cuddled by her husband, both of them wrapped in quilts in comfort on the wide bed. Riddick’s soft chuckle sent heat to her cheeks as he nuzzled her. “Fell asleep before Mrs. Higgs could even bring us the sandwiches. Made me promise I’d bring you down for breakfast.”

“Lots of work these past months,” River sighed and kissed the pulse beating in his neck. “But we’re nearly finished.”
“Gotta admit, once you got them going in the right direction, those Operatives really know how to get things done.” Riddick was grinning, she could feel it in his voice and thoughts. “Parliament still doesn’t know what hit them.”

“Dangerous to give so many men such intimate knowledge and leave them unrestrained by anything but their own minds,” River knew she sounded smug but she didn’t care. “Everything they were programmed to use upon the Parliament’s behalf they are now using against them and Parliament still doesn’t realize the half of it.”

“I was wondering, none of them have tipped to the fact that their Operatives aren’t theirs anymore?” Riddick sounded bemused, as if he couldn’t conceive of people being so blind. Perhaps he couldn’t, it went against his nature to practice such self-deception.

“So far only a few, but they were quickly misled, or in one case, eliminated when she proved so corrupt that she could not be swayed towards the Parliament’s true purpose.” River shrugged. “Politicians, very self-involved and uncaring about others until election day.”

“Still, didn’t think they’d get quite so far as they have,” Riddick remarked thoughtfully, his hands petting her hair and skin.

“Many hands make light work,” She smiled. “And once they pooled their information, and decided upon a course of action, they are very hard to stop.” She looked up at him, “Funny, all they are doing is enforcing the law.”

“And getting rid of a few laws that don’t seem to serve any but a few wealthy pricks.” Her husband seemed fairly satisfied by that.

“Implementing widespread change could take longer,” River sighed. “We could be working on this for years.”

His lips pressed to her forehead and she could feel the love he had for her, “Well, what else have we got to do? May as well do something useful.”

She laughed softly, “True enough. Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus, and we petty men walk under his huge legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves. Men at some time are masters of their fates. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves, that we are underlings.”

Riddick chuckled and kissed her, “Well, let’s have a rest and then we’ll get back to work.”

River pressed up to him and smiled wickedly, “Don’t feel like resting right now my zhàng fū.”

“Well let me see what I can do about that,” He grinned and tumbled her onto her back.

Riddick looked around the field where the boats were parked, it was filled with people celebrating, half of them folks he didn’t know all that well.

Shazza had thrown herself into his arms and hugged him tightly when they’d walked off the Walden. The joy on her face was almost eclipsed by the unfamiliar look of hope on the face of the man beside her. Malcolm Reynolds hadn’t had anything to hope for in a long time, and less call to believe anything good would come of that last escapee of Pandora’s box.
The ranch at Herschel had become something of a meeting place for Serenity and Walden. Now and then Monty and his crew would come by and everyone would camp out and have a big old party. Today they’d brought another ship along with them, piloted by a set of Browncoats who’d been blockade runners during the war. The little Knorr they flew looked like a puppy next to the Walden. But today was something special.

Shazza let go of him and wrapped River up in another hug before letting her go to beam at the two of them. “I don’t know how you did it, but you did.” She nudged Mal. “He’s so stunned he’s speechless.”

No one had thought it could be done, Riddick glanced over at his wife, except for her. Even he’d had his doubts. It had taken years. But it was done.

The broadwave had gone out over every cortex screen, the ‘puppet theatre’ was slightly improved, with some actual investigative reporting as the concept of a free press gained momentum. Adopting the idea of free speech as a law and not just a vague concept had been a huge step in the right direction. And when the law outlawing speech criticizing the Alliance as sedition had been repealed it had taken another couple of giant strides.

Then the Operatives, aided by River’s genius with a cortex and Riddick’s ability to sniff out trouble, had begun to move the Parliament in a direction approaching democracy for all Alliance citizens, not just the ones who agreed with them.

Sometimes it was hard to believe it had really been six years since he and River had been busted out of the Academy. More than five years since the Miranda Wave.

But the Operative, their Operative as River and he had come to think of him, had been adamant. The day of their escape had been the day the government began to fall. No one was calling it a revolution. Or a rebellion. It wasn’t even a war. Not unless a war was fought in boardrooms and statesmen’s halls.

Funnily enough, it had been the wives of the Parliament who’d been their most valuable allies. River had searched the archives and found ample comparisons between Victorian Earth and Core Civilization. The women back on Earth-That-Was hadn’t had much of a voice in their futures, considered property, stupid as cows. The women married to the members of Parliament hadn’t had any trouble drawing correlations between those ancient women and how they themselves were treated. Hostesses, wives, mothers and never allowed to offer their opinion. Pretty bits of fluff unsuited for ‘men’s work’.

Life at home became much more uncomfortable as the women made their opinions known. Being shown that a woman in high society of White Sun enjoyed less freedom and autonomy than a woman of means on the Border or Rim had outraged them. Professional women had a voice but it was through their guilds, and often those were led by men, or women who had no reason to care about anyone or anything but themselves and their guild. Being protected by someone else’s self-interest didn’t set well with any of them.

The Operative had chuckled when River had sent him word of what she’d done, starting with her own mother, and commented that the minute men forgot that the female of the species was more deadly than the male, the men were doomed to failure.

Simon and Kaylee and their youngest were chattering happily with Ciara and Shea. Ciara was noticeably pregnant and glowing. All of them were more relaxed and happy than Riddick had ever seen them. There’d been hard times after Miranda, restless murmurings of another war, Browncoats infuriated with the Alliance all over again. Serenity would have been on the drift but for the income
from the ranch to keep her going between jobs. Having more mouths to feed hadn’t made it any easier, but that hadn’t stopped Zoe and Wash. Zoe hadn’t told Mal, but she’d been pregnant before Miranda. And afterwards Simon had threatened to put her on bedrest if she didn’t take it easy. But she’d made it through and their daughter was one of the prettiest children on Serenity.

River smiled at him, “Our revels now are ended. These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air: and, like the baseless fabric of this vision, the cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind.” She took his hand, “The Alliance is dead. Long live the Alliance.”

Riddick took her hand and kissed her knuckles, “Old age hath yet his honour and his toil; Death closes all: but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.” She smiled up at him and he grinned. “We did it Qīng Xiāng.”

“The Alliance is finally a democracy,” River kissed him. “We have done the best we can. Wàng zǐ chéng lóng.”

“Well, if they get off course, some of those educational reforms ought to put them right again,” Riddick grinned and she nodded.

“History is no longer programed by the victors,” She agreed. “And now zhàng fu has a new job to learn.”

“What’s that?” He grinned down at her and wrapped an arm around her waist, moving towards Shea, Simon, Kaylee and Ciara.

“Zhàng fu must learn to become Bà ba,” She told him blithely, her scent full of mischief and joy.

When he came to, Shea was roaring with laughter, Simon was smiling and Wash was shaking his head in commiseration. River smirked down at him and he couldn’t help laughing where he lay. They had plenty of work to do yet, and there’d always be trouble somewhere, but he had River. His brothers were laughing at him, his sisters were giggling, his wife was pregnant and Mal was looking confused. There might still be work to be done but he wouldn’t be doing it alone. He had family. He and River could stop running. They were home.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: So we’ve come to the end. I doubt I’ll end up writing another big long story in this ’verse. Maybe a one shot or two but I’ve got so many other ideas percolating I want to keep going with them and not force anything with this one. I hope you enjoyed it and you’ll check out some of my other stories if you still want River and Riddick.

Chinese Translations:

zhī ’ài (most beloved)
láng (wolf)
Qīng Xiāng (Sweet Scent)

Wǔ’ ān (Good afternoon)

jūn jié (elite/outstanding talent/ genius)

zhàng fu (husband)

Wàng zǐ chéng lóng (lit. to hope one's son becomes a dragon (idiom); fig. to long for one's child to succeed in life / to have great hopes for one's offspring)

Bà ba (Dad, pops, daddy)

Quote Sources:

The closer you think you are, the less you'll actually see – Now You See Me

The game's afoot. Follow your spirit, and upon this charge. Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!' – Henry V – William Shakespeare

He which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart; his passport shall be made. And crowns for convoy put into his purse: We would not die in that man's company. That fears his fellowship to die with us. – Henry V – William Shakespeare

For if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them. – Utopia – Thomas Moore

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus, and we petty men walk under his huge legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves. Men at some time are masters of their fates. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves, that we are underlings. – Julius Caesar – William Shakespeare

The female of the species was more deadly than the male – Rudyard Kipling

Our revels now are ended. These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air; and, like the baseless fabric of this vision, the cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, yea, all which it inherit,shall dissolve and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind. – The Tempest – William Shakespeare

Old age hath yet his honour and his toil; Death closes all: but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. – Ulysses – Alfred Lord Tennyson

End Notes

Translations:
wǒ kào - crap
hún dàn - bastard
Qīng Xiāng - Sweet Scent
nǐ zi - little girl

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