

The Haunting of Yun Manor

Louise Sellers

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Chapter 1

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Part 1

The crew of Firefly class ship *Serenity* were back on *Persephone*. *Persephone* was the kind of place where trouble easily found the unwary, and the crew of this particular Firefly class ship had a peculiar talent for trouble. Today, it was just the usual trouble, namely money. That particular variety of trouble was sufficiently everyday not to raise much comment among the rag-tag bunch of petty criminals, aristocrats and retired alliance officers that somehow gathered together under the wings of Captain Malcolm Reynolds.

Zoe might have been first mate of *Serenity* on a more conventional ship, but she had started her relationship with Malcolm Reynolds as his Corporal and, excepting the requirement for a measure of conmanship, that was how she remained. Sitting beside him in a dingy bar in downtown *Persephone* she looked more like a bodyguard than a business partner. It is entirely possible that Captain Reynolds liked it that way.

Xiao Hoagg, sitting opposite them, knew none of this. He knew only that they were a crew for hire; that they were going in the right direction and that they could leave soon.

The rest of the crew were playing pool on the bar's new 'hard-light' table. "Tired of unconvincing feedback mechanisms in your pool cue?" read the standard publicity. "Want to experience the sensation of genuine physicality?" the more risqué advertising went. Mind you, the more risqué advertising generally wasn't for pool tables. The table was new and the game had attracted a big crowd, interested in the novelty of hologramatic billiard balls that you could touch. It

was leading to more than the usual amount of betting and cheating. Suddenly you could nudge one of the balls with your fingers or an accidental bump on the table, not just with the electronic pool cues. This was a circumstance that had escaped the notice of neither players nor onlookers.

Mal wasn't giving an alliance credit away, but then he rarely did during a deal. Them as knew him well would have detected a faint hesitancy in the way his eyes flicked from side to side. He smelled a rat but for the life of him, he couldn't justify the instinct and with Zoe sat by his side he couldn't walk from the deal without good reason.

"Twenty per cent in advance," he said.

"It's only a short hop, Captain. Not much of a risk and the price is handsome."

"I don't carry goods out of charity, especially not for strangers. I ain't waiting 'til I arrive for payment."

"I can easily employ someone else." The man looked bored.

"No you can't, else you wouldn't be asking me to transport fancy party-food to some luxury moon in the first place. We ain't exactly caterers to the rich and prosperous. Don't take well to bowing and scraping for a start."

"I'm not asking you to bow and scrape. Just deliver the gorram food and try not to break anything on the way."

"Not breaking stuff costs twenty percent in advance."

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen I can see my way to accommodating."

Fifteen would barely pay for fuel to the holiday moon, on top of other supplies Serenity badly needed. But Xiao Hoagg was also correct. He had other options and the final price was good.

The crowd at the pool table cheered. Jayne Cobb, Hero of Canton, only once described as Firefly's public relations officer, paraded around the table, his pool cue raised. Then his opponent threw one of the hard-light balls at him and things went downhill, or uphill, from there, depending upon your viewpoint. Jayne's particular expertise in public relations was ideally suited to the situation. If anything, it got even worse when the publican turned off the hard-light balls and the company resorted to the traditional methods involving fists and beer bottles.

The evening, having therefore ended to the satisfaction of all involved, the following morning found Serenity flying free. Its crew went about their various activities on the bridge, in the cargo bay and the engine room or simply occupying their time in their quarters. It was a peaceful trip until moonfall when a hitch arose.

The bridge of Serenity was large enough to hold the whole crew, just about. But when Jayne Cobb was angry, as he was once the details of said hitch had been communicated, he could seem to dominate the space some.

“What do you mean he’s not going to pay us?” demanded Jayne. “We delivered the gorram food!”

“*Bun tyen-shung duh ee-dway-ro*,” replied Mal, giving his opinion of their employer. “Says his party was cancelled three days past. Ain’t his fault we didn’t see the communication.” Mal thumped at the bulk-head.

“But even if we had, right? We’d still have been en route. What would we have done? Still had a ship full of luxury food items.” Hoban Washburne liked to keep out of fights, and that included fights that some of those involved preferred to class as strong disagreements. He sat in the pilot’s chair and kept his head down. But sometimes something not making no sense forced him to butt in. Their employer’s excuse didn’t appear to make no sense at all.

Jayne carried on complaining, like Wash hadn’t said nothing much at all. “Said we shouldn’t have taken the job. There was a reason the regular suppliers wouldn’t touch him.”

Mal scowled. “The docket said it was a rush job. We were in port. Looked like an easy cargo.”

Wash decided to ignore the bickering and check the local situation. The network wasn’t encouraging. “I’m not sure we can even afford to refuel,” he muttered. “Local prices are oddly high.”

“Our client controls those prices.” Zoe’s voice was calm but laced with irony. It was the sense of poise that Wash loved about her. That and the poise itself, and the fact that if it did get nasty in here any time soon, he’d be safe hiding behind her.

“Wait? Are we being stitched up?” asked Jayne.

As if in answer the communications array pinged. Wang Ruan, nobleman, businessman and, as Mal had said, *bun tyen-shung duh ee-dway-ro* appeared on screen.

“Gentlemen, it seems I may have a solution to our mutual problem.”

“Stitch-up,” muttered Jayne.

“We’re listening,” said Mal.

“My party had to be cancelled because of an unfortunate lack of staff. Now if your crew were prepared to perform a little minor waitressing, perhaps provide some minimal security, then I’m sure the party could be re-scheduled, you would be paid and everything would be tickety-boo.”

“Lack. Of. Staff.” Mal enunciated each word to make sure he’d understood.

“Lack of staff, indeed.”

At this point, it must be owned, several thoughts chased through the mind of Captain Malcolm Reynolds, one at a time. Most of these thoughts were variations on the idea there was clearly more to this situation than met the eye. These thoughts wondered variously if it were a trap, and if so whether said trap was designed specifically for the *Serenity*. They considered the possibility that the whole set up was an elaborate con or that the crew of the *Serenity* were being set up as fall guys. But the final thought in the stream pointed out they couldn't afford the fuel to get their boat off the moon. Therefore they didn't have a lot of choice.

“We get a free refuel,” Mal said.

“After the party.”

“No, we get a free refuel now. We get decent food while we stay here and we get paid after. The fuel don't cover even half of what we're owed.”

“Not at regular prices anyway,” whispered Wash.

“Very well, Captain, you have a deal.”

“Waiters!” sneered Jayne.

“You're security. Where's Inara? She's used to fancy customers.”

“You going to ask her advice?” Zoe sounded amused.

“Ain't gonna pass up an advantage. She says we're being played we take the fuel and go. Else we eat the man's food and earn us some pay.”

Less than an hour later, the crew were being shown around Yun Manor, the luxury holiday home of one Wang Ruan. The tour went surprisingly well, all things considered. All things being the understandable truculence on the part of the crew of *Serenity* coupled with their inherent individuality. Wang Ruan found them unruly and ill-disciplined. If they had been from the inner planets or, in the case of River Tam, better dressed, he'd have described them as eccentric, but in general they were not so he didn't. The Companion who travelled with them clearly was eccentric, at least in her choice of fellow traveller. She was not a part of the crew and, at any rate, it was inconceivable he could hire a Companion as waitressing staff. Unable to afford her rates as a Companion, and uncertain she would agree to be hired anyway, Ruan had compromised and invited her as a guest. Of the remaining gaggle only the Doctor, Simon Tam, and the Shepherd, Book, had even a veneer of civilisation.

The manor was timber-built but had been constructed in a style known in some circles as neo-Georgian. The combined effect was some way between a ranch house, a Spanish hacienda and a British stately home. The long wings of the house, and its large windows, enclosed a shaded, dusty courtyard with terraces and balconies floating off the main structure like flourishes on a wedding cake.

River Tam, the Doctor's sister, had begun the tour by enumerating each feature and tracing its stylistic ancestry. It was a speech Ruan had given himself many times and he was discomfited to hear words so like his own coming from the mouth of an urchin, with long straggling hair and hob-nailed boots, even if her accent, and brother, suggested good breeding somewhere.

The tour was restricted to the main areas where the crew would be working, and then took them up to the third floor and a narrow corridor next to a winding stair that lead up to the attic.

"These are the servant's quarters," said Ruan stiffly. "I'll expect you all to keep to them, except when required elsewhere."

"We'll sleep on Serenity," said Malcolm Reynolds.

"I expect my servants to be on call at all hours. Sleeping on your ship isn't an option."

"Now wait a minute..." started Mal.

"Surely you only need a few people here," interrupted Inara. "The rest can stay on Serenity."

Torn between asserting his authority and contradicting a Companion, Ruan adopted a bored expression. "As long as there are people available and my guests aren't bothered by unnecessary tramping about, Captain Reynolds' crew can sleep where they like."

Mal looked at Inara and scowled. It was clear from his expression that he was wondering if fuel was actually worth the attitude. She frowned back at him. Try not to be too uncouth, the expression said.

There was a sudden bang and the windows in the dusty corridor started to fly open, one by one, the shutters crashing back against the walls. All the crew felt the sudden rush of air. Dust from the terraformed plain danced in the breeze, making them cough and then all was still once more.

"*Ta mah duh!*" said Jayne.

"What was that?" asked Mal. His tone made his words only a fraction more polite.

Ruan shrugged. "Atmospheric effect, side-effect of the terraforming. Pay it no mind."

He moved on. Mal made another face at Inara but she ignored him.

Wang Ruan stopped abruptly at the end of the corridor. "That concludes the tour, Captain. I hope all the duties are clear."

"What's through there?" asked Mal, gesturing towards the door at the corridor's end.

“Just workshops, but there is valuable equipment in there. I don’t want it broken so your people are to keep out.”

“Right you are then.”

The look Malcolm Reynolds exchanged with Jayne Cobb behind Ruan’s back did not go unnoticed by most of Serenity’s crew. As Wash said to his wife in the privacy of their cabin later that night, “I hope Ruan realises that door’s going to be open and things broken, first sign of trouble.”

River had not walked down the corridor but she stood at the foot of the winding stair leading upwards. “What’s in the attic?” she asked suddenly.

“Nothing,” said Ruan. “It’s empty.”

River smiled a secret smile and remained silent. But her hand rested on the wooden wall by the stairway.

In these times of post-war austerity it had become fashionable for the rich to fend for themselves to a degree. Inara, for instance, had endured many a laboured boast on the correct way to make an omelette, or the construction of the perfect garnish to turn a simple sandwich into an act of perfection. The sober reality, of course, was that automation had boomed. The modern kitchen groaned under the weight of devices to automate the production of food while the aristocracy groaned in turn at the bland homogeneity of the food so produced.

These observations lead us, inevitably, to Wang Ruan’s kitchens.

“Will you look at this?” asked Kaylee wide-eyed. She stood at the heart of the kitchen, while engines hummed around her.

We have not yet introduced our humble reader to Kaywinnit Lee Frye. She needs little introduction, you can tell her essence in a glance, like looking at a ray of sunshine with a smudge of engine oil on its nose. It’s only when you get to thinking about it, you wonder at the reserves of strength that allow the sun to shine in the sorts of places Kaylee found herself.

Kaylee had kept silent when Ruan had shown them round, Mal having had some words to say on the subject of everything going smoothly and how that probably followed from letting him and Inara do all the talking. In extremis only, Simon was allowed to speak. Zoe had had words to say on the topic of Malcolm Reynolds doing the talking, aristocrats who were withholding money, and the smooth running of events, but in the end she was prepared to back him up.

“What is it?” Mal asked. Machinery clattered and whirred.

“It *was* one of them automated kitchen assistants but it’s been modified some,” said Kaylee.

“How much is some?”

“A lot, but it’s all shiny, I can tell. Look at this! I bet this can make a whole meal from fresh ingredients without any interference.”

“That’s good. I wasn’t sure who was going to do the cooking. I can’t see Mal here as the King of modern cuisine,” said Simon.

“The food has instructions,” said Mal, defensively. “With the possible exception of your sister, we’re all capable of putting food in an oven and taking it out again when done.”

“If you look, you’ll find the instructions are a bit more specialist than that.”

It wasn’t just the instructions on the food that turned out to be a bit more specialised than first anticipated. Waitressing, even to ‘basic’ standards, as defined by the aristocracy of the inner planets required a little more effort than dumping a tray on the table and saying ‘there you go then.’ None of Firefly’s crew had any experience waitressing except for Jayne who, when pressed, mumbled something indistinct about a job and wouldn’t be drawn further. Thus it fell to Inara and Simon, as persons accustomed to being waited upon, to bring them as would be serving folk, up to a modicum of respectability. Hence we find Inara, Simon, Book and Kaylee in the kitchen practicing. River observed, but by mutual unspoken agreement no one proposed to put her in a frilly apron in front of the assembled dignitaries.

“No, no, Kaylee! Hold the tray in the centre,” cried Simon.

Kaylee wobbled slightly, tray balanced on one hand. “Don’t see why I can’t hold it with both hands, that would be safer.”

Simon scratched his head. Unpacking the answer to that question would require several detours through history and a grounding in the workings of class privilege. Somehow he didn’t think Kaylee wanted that answer. “You’ll be expected to hold it with one,” he said lamely.

He looked to Inara for support. She nodded and walked up behind Kaylee. She placed her hands one on Kaylee’s hips, straightening the line of her body, and the other just under the one holding the tray.

“Stand like this. Keep your head straight. Now try again.”

Kaylee humphed. She began to walk across the room.

“Smaller steps, Kaylee,” said Inara. “Imagine you’re gliding.”

“No one will be looking anyways,” objected Kaylee. “Not in that ugly dress I have to wear.”

“You’d be surprised,” said Book, who was struggling in turn with his own tray. “I expect the dress is an attempt to stop you outshining the guests.”

“Oh Book! You do say the sweetest things.” Kaylee looked over her shoulder to beam at the shepherd and wobbled in mid-stride. The tray began to slide from

her hand.

“Watch out!” shouted Simon.

There was the briefest moment of doubt and then Kaylee regained her balance. She frowned at the tray in a confused fashion. River giggled. She was watching proceedings from one of the counter-tops, where she sat cross-legged.

“Are you all right, Kaylee?” asked Book in concern.

“I don’t rightly know. It was the darndest... I’m shiny. Let’s continue.”

“What was it?” River questioned Kaylee later that night in the small garret room that they shared at the foot of the winding stair.

“Don’t rightly know,” Kaylee repeated. “I had the strangest feeling. Like someone caught me as I fell.”

“The kitchen likes you,” said River with confidence. “It told me so.”

Above them in the attic the timbers groaned and the wind crept in through cracks in the boarding.

Part 2

The guests arrived in a cavalcade of carriages, ground cars and lightweight flyers. These parked variously in the grounds, all of them dwarfed by the vast bulk of Serenity. The crew were kept busy carrying cases up the stairs to the guest rooms and fetching and carrying for the wide range of sudden and urgent errands the guests required.

Only one box of jewellery accidentally went missing and it was found by Captain Malcolm Reynolds within a half hour. After that Jayne Cobb was excused from meeting and greeting.

By mid-afternoon, the guests were assembled in the front hallway and the courtyard beyond. Their dress was a mixture of exquisitely tailored sombre greens and browns, and they carried with them a small armoury of rifles. The afternoon was to be spent in the historic activity of shooting grouse, for which specific purpose the local woodland had been stocked with birds flown in at no small expense.

In the bustle, Captain Malcolm Reynolds chanced to brush past Zoe. “All going well so far, sir!” she murmured.

“*Tyen shio-duh!*” Mal gestured helplessly at where Jayne stood nearby rather obviously leering down a young lady’s décolletage.

“All things considered,” amended Zoe. She gazed over at Jayne and the young lady for a moment. “There haven’t been any fights,” she offered.

“If we get back from this *ai ya* grouse shoot without any killing, it will be a small miracle.”

“Lout!” The young lady with the décolletage slapped Jayne. He smirked and rubbed his cheek.

“No fights yet,” amended Zoe.

“All ready for the hunt!” asked Ruan. “Tally ho!”

The guests issued forth from the house with Zoe, Mal and Jayne at their heels. The small moon of Arden had been terraformed into a tough grassy heathland. Like all the terraformed moons, it was inclined to be dusty rather than green, and harsh winds had stunted the growth of trees, turning the estate’s woodland, such as it was, into a tangle of gnarled and twisted branches. On the heath itself though, heather bloomed, creating a springy purple quilt within which the birds nested.

The party halted at the edge of the heath while beaters from the nearby village departed to frighten out the grouse. Mal, Zoe and Jayne stood silently behind the shooters handing out guns on request. Jayne somehow managed to appear insolent, even in silence.

“Anything?” asked Mal, as he handed a new fowling piece to Inara.

“Ruan is trying to sell the house. He bought it as an investment that didn’t pay off. The guests are all potential buyers.”

“*Qiongqi*,” murmured Mal under his breath. “So we’re part of the show. That’s information it’s mighty useful to know.”

“Why no staff?” asked Zoe.

“It’s supposed to be haunted.”

“Haunted so bad he can’t get ahold of staff?” Mal sounded incredulous. Captain Malcolm Reynolds might not have had much acquaintance with the fancier side of life, but he had a good instinct for risk and reward. Nothing so strange had happened in the house to explain a lack of any staff at all.

Inara shrugged, an elegant gesture, refined over a hundred years by the Guild of Companions to convey the message ‘why are you asking me? Do you think I’m psychic’ with an added overtone of ‘I’m already doing you a favour’. Captain Malcolm Reynolds, as was his want, ignored the subtleties of the gesture.

“That why he’s selling?” he asked.

Inara shook her head. “He needs the money. His little business empire isn’t doing so well. The cost of fuel wasn’t set so high just to make your life difficult, Malcolm Reynolds.”

“Haunted eh?” mused Mal, as Inara walked back to the guests. “Now ain’t that something.”

Wang Ruan, on observing the skills of his so-called staff, had decided upon a cold supper for the first evening, which would be prepared and set out while the guests were out shooting. Insofar as the servants were required to do anything after that, it was simply to keep out of the way.

The large table in the kitchen, even though it was surrounded by the vast mechanisms of the kitchen assistant, and the prospect of real food drew his staff together none-the-less and they also sat down to a cold supper, one as well supplied as that elsewhere but among company more boisterous, if less refined.

“Ain’t no such thing as demons,” declared Mal, conversation having naturally turned to the subject of the haunting.

“I don’t know. Don’t you like to think that there might be, you know, something after death,” Kaylee smiled at him.

“Not much, no.”

“Despite thousands of years of human endeavour there are still many questions we can’t answer without recourse to some being greater than ourselves,” began Book.

“First,” said Mal. “I don’t believe in God either, and second, we ain’t talking about God anyway, we’re talking about demons, ghosts, *huli jing*.”

“Nevertheless, there may be more things in heaven and Earth...”

“I agree with Mal,” said Simon suddenly. “There is no rational basis for a belief in demons or,” and here he looked a little embarrassed, “God. Superstition is the refuge of the uneducated mind.”

“Well, that’s you told, Kaylee,” laughed Jayne.

“I didn’t mean,” began Simon and he glanced anxiously in Kaylee’s direction, the faintest blush detectable on his cheeks.

“Yes, you did,” said Jayne. “You just didn’t think through very well.”

“Do you believe in ghosts, Jayne?” asked River, suddenly.

Jayne looked down at his food suddenly. “No.”

“Not afraid of unseen hands, the light tap-tapping of something at your window? Mamma’s tales of signs and portents: Don’t forget to leave milk for the boggart; Don’t anger the forces beyond your control.”

“No.”

“Not afraid that something might lurk in the dark, cracked and broken, patient and remorseless and hungry, waiting to drag your soul down into the pit of hell?”

“I said no!” shouted Jayne. He slammed his dish on the table and stood up. “Man can’t even eat his dinner in peace around here.”

“You *are* scared aren’t you?” said Kaylee, amazed.

“Did you see a hobgoblin when you were a kid?” Wash was beginning to laugh.

“Or maybe a pixie?” said River, staring intently at Jayne.

“I didn’t seen nothing. Mal back me up here.”

Mal shrugged. “Jayne says he didn’t see nothing. Wouldn’t like to doubt his integrity.”

“Does he have any?” asked Wash, curiously, and the conversation turned away from the subject of demons.

The casual observer would be fooled, watching the crew of *Serenity* talk, into thinking they were just so much scum. The flotsam of the alliance washed up on a frontier shore with nowhere else much left to go. Men and women with neither the wit nor the resources to make much of themselves. Wang Ruan, strapped for cash as he was, was already half-disposed to make such an error and his observations of the day gave him a confidence that was misplaced.

“Ah! Captain Reynolds.” Ruan hardly looked up from the papers on his desk as Mal entered the room.

“You called?” The irritation in Mal’s tone should have been painfully apparent, even to one who did not know him, such as Ruan.

Ruan’s mind was made up, however, and he failed to notice the warning sign. “The young lady, River Tam, was impudent to Mr Chan this morning. I shall be docking your pay. Further penalties will follow any further incidents.”

“Now, wait a cotton-pickin minute.”

“I’m a busy man, Captain.” Ruan looked up, his face a picture of supercilious dismissal.

Mal slammed his hands down on the desk. “There seems to be a misunderstanding, Mr. Ruan, about the nature of our business relationship.”

Ruan rocked back slightly in his chair but said nothing.

“Now I, and my crew, are not servants. We are helping you out by acting as servants and waiting upon all your fancy friends because you represented to us that it would be impossible to pay us for the *work we have performed* without bodies to fetch and carry food and other fancy stuff for your guests. Well, my crew are fetching and carrying all dainty like. They are also chopping wood for your fires, managing and, may I add maintaining, the monstrosities of those machines you call the cook and the laundress, and generally being polite when your fancy friends treat them like so much dirt beneath their feet.

“Now if you don’t want us to walk out of here and leave you and your friends to, god forbid, pack their own bags and close up this little party smart-ish, losing

you, if I may say so, the opportunity to turn a little profit on this house, then I expect to hear no more talk about docked pay. *Dong luh ma?*”

“Impudence can not be tolerated.”

“You will tolerate a little, when the person in question is in unusual and straightened circumstances, just as I’m tolerating a little defaulting on payment on your part due to your unusual and straightened circumstances. I repeat *dong luh ma?*”

Ruan looked thoughtful. “As crystal, Captain. I hope we understand however that the house will fetch a higher price if all appears proper and correct.”

“You mean you don’t want your friends to find out about the so-called demon.”

“If you put it that way. I must say you are remarkably well informed about my activities, Captain.”

“Don’t worry Mr. Ruan. I ain’t got no problem concealing the existence of something. Least of all something I don’t believe in, in the first place. As for the second remark, I like to be well-informed about them as I choose to do business with. Not being well-informed got me and my crew here in the first place. I don’t intend to let you get away with any more *hun dun* tricks like that, *dong luh ma?*”

While Mal clarified their respective positions for the benefit of Mr. Wang Ruan, Shepherd Book and Inara stood on the terrace of Yun Manor. The evening sun was just dropping below the horizon, casting long shadows and throwing the sky into a startling shade of pink and yellow.

Ostensibly Book was serving drinks while Inara took the air. But even though the Shepherd stood rigidly to attention, all outward appearances proper, Inara reserved him a secret smile that acknowledged their friendship.

“What do you think of this place?” asked Book.

“Apart from the demon? It’s a rather dull business house party. Ruan hasn’t spent enough money on it and it shows. He’s not a good host.”

“There was some discussion of spirits at dinner.”

“While I was upstairs dining with the guests?”

“Yes, Mal doesn’t believe in ghosts.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Not really, but I’m curious to know your thoughts.”

“What would have me say Shepherd? You already know I believe there is something beyond us, something spiritual to use an old-fashioned term.”

“So you believe in demons?”

“I didn’t say that. I believe there is a spiritual dimension to life. I believe that without spirit there are no dreams and without dreams we become hollow shells. That may flow from your God, Shepherd, or it may flow from something else. I

don't believe in *Huli Jing* lurking in the garden and playing tricks, any more than our estimable Captain does."

When said estimable Captain made up his mind to something, like, for instance, not being taken in by any more *hun dun* tricks, he liked to take steps to make secure his position. Since there was at least one clear mystery in Yun Manor, one to which his attention had been drawn, he intended to do away with said mystery. So it was that, not long after his conversation with Wang Ruan, Malcolm Reynolds, Jayne Cobb and a crowbar, were positioned outside the mysterious locked door in the servants' wing.

"Why are we doing this?" asked Jayne.

"Because I want to know what Ruan has locked up in there."

"But he'll dock our pay."

"He's going to dock our pay anyway if he can, any time Kaylee drops a glass or you leer down another dress front. Don't like being kept in the dark and messed around with and all my instincts tell me I'm being kept in the dark and messed around with something special. I want to know what else Ruan isn't telling us."

"So we can blackmail him?"

"That or steal it, yes."

"Sounds good to me." Jayne grinned happily and tapped the crowbar in his hands.

"That said, he'll dock our pay for sure, if he finds out we broke in. Let's see if the keys work first." Mal started trying out a set of keys on the lock.

"Where'd you get them?"

"From the drawer in his office."

After a second the padlock clicked. Mal pushed open the door to reveal a massive workshop, bathed in a harsh light.

Jayne whistled through his teeth. "Sure would like to see Kaylee in here. She'd be happier than a pig in shit."

"Who are you?" a small man leaped out from behind a piece of machinery, goggles perched high on his head. He had dark hair and eyes. His chin receded ever so slightly giving a soft look to his visage. In short, his resemblance to Ruan was uncanny.

"I'm the butler, who are you?"

"We don't have a butler. Too scared. Too up-tight. Jumped up nouveau riche. Should show more respect to his training. Don't get to be a butler by growing up on some *shee-niou* outer planet full of *Huh choo-shung tza-jiao duh tzang-huo*. Education is specialised and expensive."

"Right," said Mal slowly. "I'm the *new* butler."

The man looked at him curiously and sniffed. “Not a usual butler. Cordite on your clothes and blood on your hands.” He moved forward and circled Mal.

“Shit!” Jayne muttered quietly.

“Lights and guns. Lead the men. Keep them going. Help will be here soon. Do what you must. Keep flying.”

“Something like that,” Mal said blandly.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d leave my brother alone,” said Ruan suddenly from the doorway.

Mal marched up to him, towering over the man. “Why’s he locked up?”

“In general, he isn’t. However, as I believe we agreed, we both make money if everything here appears normal and proper.”

“What happened to him?” asked Jayne.

“He had a breakdown while he was still at school. He’s brilliant but unpredictable. He made most of the modifications to the household appliances. However when there are strangers in the house it’s safer for everyone if he keeps out of the way.”

“Mad as a loon then,” said Jayne.

“I prefer the words sensitive and brilliant,” said Ruan blandly. “I asked you not to come in here.”

“You also kept threatening to dock our pay,” said Mal. “That makes a man like me antsy.”

“We don’t like not getting paid,” Jayne thumped the crowbar against his hands suggestively.

With the attention drawn away from him, Li Ruan, for such was his name, had seized a wrench and begun a quiet approach upon the interlopers within his domain. The new butler that wasn’t, he had deduced, was the chief threat, despite the physical dominance of the other man. A foot away from Malcolm Reynolds, Li Ruan raised the wrench to bring it down in one forceful blow. Mal turned fluidly and threw a punch directly at him. Li ducked surprisingly swiftly, but Mal swept his feet from under him, leaving him sprawled on the floor.

“That’s another reason he is kept away from guests,” remarked Ruan.

“Consider this a good reason to make sure we get paid,” said Mal. “Or your guests will know all about your mad brother.”

Darkness fell, Kaylee and River, sharing a small room by the winding stair that led to the attic, giggled and whispered until they finally fell asleep, oblivious to the faint rat-tat-tat on the ceiling and the sparks of glittering dust that fell around them and gradually melted into the floor. Jayne slept soundly. The shutters on the window banged but he ignored them. His subconscious could tell the difference

between the wind and a gun-shot, and it had no time for the former. Only when he was awake was he troubled by half-remembered tales his mother had told. Unconscious, he was calm and serene. Malcolm Reynolds lay awake and listened to the wind that blew around the house, rattling shutters and carry the faint unmistakable sounds of battle into his room.

“Serenity Valley was a long time ago,” he said and turned over pulling the blankets above his head. “Ain’t no call to go dredging up the memories now.”

Wash and Zoe were curled up in their little berth aboard the Firefly Class ship named after both the place and the battle that Malcolm Reynolds now claimed to wish to forget.

“Do you believe in demons?” Wash asked.

“No. You don’t either.” Zoe stretched and turned in their cramped bed. Space on board Serenity was scarce and precious. As a result, Wash and Zoe were always crammed together when they were alone in their quarters. Not that they minded.

“I don’t, do I? Why are we sleeping on Serenity then, and not in the creepy haunted house?” Wash was smiling but he was always genuinely fascinated by her. In some respects his wife remained a closed book to him.

“So you can mind the ship, honey, don’t you remember?” Zoe poked him under the covers.

“Oh yes, I forgot that. Still how did you know I don’t believe in ghosts?”

Zoe kissed him. “Some things I just know.”

In the depths of his workshop, Li crouched and gibbered to himself. There were voices in his mind and the machines that ought, by rights, to have been singing to his gentle tune were grinding and screeching. They whirled and turned in a fashion beyond his control and faint laughter drifted upon the air.

“No, you are mine. This can not be happening!” he shouted impotently into the darkness.

There was a harsh cry of triumph. The lights in the workshop flared brilliantly once and then all was silent.

“I created you,” Li whispered with faint defiance.

Nothing replied.

Part 3

In a large house there is always work to be done and when a party is in full swing and the intention is to make the house look as pretty and homely as possible then there is extra work to be done, especially for them as are filling in as servants.

Jayne was up early chopping logs in the yard. You'd think, he mused to himself as he sliced the wood in half, that with all the fancy labour saving equipment in the house they'd have some kind of a log-chopping machine. But no. Li wasn't allowed out and that meant the desire to build and modify which was everywhere evident inside the manor was absent from its grounds.

Outside logs had to be chopped.

Around Jayne's feet a small skirl of wind lifted the sand into tiny eddies. "Gorram atmospheric effect," he muttered to himself, keeping his eye doubtfully on the trails of dust.

He selected another log and placed it on the chopping block.

"Really?" whispered a voice.

Jayne whirled around, axe at the ready, but there was nothing to be seen.

"Atomspheric effect," Jayne repeated to himself and turned back to the chopping.

The axe was torn out of his hand. Jayne gaped as it spun through the air, flying down the yard. It paused, hovering, as if waiting for some signal. Then it spun on its axis and flew back towards him. Jayne flung himself to the ground as the axe flew over his head and embedded itself in the side of the stables.

"Right," muttered Jayne. He set off towards Serenity to fetch Vera.

"What's that for, Jayne?" asked Kaylee, encountering him leaving the ship, Vera clutched in his hands.

"Nothin'" said Jayne defensively.

"You seen a ghost?" she teased.

"I ain't saying I have, and I ain't saying I haven't. But someone is in trouble with me and that's no mistake."

Up in the house, Book was helping River to turn down the beds in the guest rooms. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say, that Book was turning down the beds and keeping an eye on River at the same time.

"Do you think the fair folk like it here?" asked River.

Book frowned momentarily at the archaic and foreign terminology. "I'm surprised you believe in the *huli jing*."

"Don't you believe in them?" she asked, looking disappointed.

"I haven't made up my mind yet," he confided.

“But you believe in lots of other things.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. What I believe isn’t in anything as tangible as a *huli jing*.”

The door to the room banged shut noisily and Book couldn’t help smiling. “Even when they’re slamming doors.”

Somewhere thunder crashed, causing Book to look out of the window.

“They didn’t like you saying that,” said River.

Through the glass of the window Book could see black clouds in the sky, rolling towards him. “There’s a storm coming,” he said.

River stared upwards, as if she could see through the ceiling of the room and into the attic reached by the winding stair and out of the attic into the sky above. “The *huli jing* are angry, and tumultuous, and afraid.”

Book forced himself to turn his back on the view out of the window where the storm clouds boiled and at River where she stood. “It’s just a storm,” he said firmly.

There was a sudden crash and the glass pane of the window shattered. A fizz of electricity darted across the room, leaving a burning smell in its wake and a stark burn in a jagged line across the clean white sheets.

Book whirled back and found himself staring through the broken glass into bright blue, untroubled skies.

Captain Reynolds heard the sound of breaking glass and instincts long honed to the detection of trouble drove him to the stairs and up them.

“Captain Reynolds, a word?” Ruan stood at the foot of said stairs, examining his fingernails in a supercilious fashion.

“*Wuh tzai chien shr ee-ding ruh dao shuh-muh run luh bah*” muttered Mal quietly under his breath. “And what may I do for you?”

“The ball tonight. It needs to go well.”

“Don’t see what you expect me to do about it. My people are solid, a little unpolished, but solid. So long as your *atmospheric effect* keeps out of the way...” Mal allowed himself an eloquent shrug.

“If it doesn’t go well, your chances of payment are low. I need to sell this house.”

Mal walked down the stairs so that he stood eye-to-eye with Ruan. He spoke low and gently. The overall effect was one of quiet menace. “We’re all well aware of that, Mr Ruan. In fact I do believe we have discussed the full complexity of the situation already. However, in case you had temporarily forgotten some of the more pertinent points, let *me* remind *you* that if it doesn’t go well, your chances

of getting out of this without having your legs broken are also low. Just so we understand each other.”

Ruan blinked once and then his face contorted into an expression of distaste. “It’s a good job you never attempted to get employment in service, Captain.”

“So I have been told.”

“I want no more of this *huli jing* nonsense, Captain!” Ruan hissed through clenched teeth. “I’ve heard your people talking.”

“It’s not our fault. You didn’t say nothing about no *huli jing* when we signed up. ”

“There are no *huli jing*. It’s an atmospheric effect. But it has clearly got worse since your arrival. I’ve had five guests complain that their rooms have been disarranged and Miss Chan thinks someone tried to push her down stairs. I hold you and your crew responsible.”

“Oh, *juh jen sh suh kwai luh duh jean jan*” complained Mal. “I have half a mind just to take my crew out of here.”

“Let us be plain with each other, Captain Reynolds. If I do not sell this house, you will not get paid. Now see to it that the sale goes through smoothly. Get rid of the demon or *huli jing* or whatever it is, if you have to. That may be a task more to your liking and talents.”

Mal’s boots stamped as he carried on up the stairs but his expression was thoughtful. He was no servant, but he remained a soldier and he understood how to fight an enemy.

“Captain, a word?” It was Inara, standing serenely in the corridor outside her guest suite.

When Mal had challenged her about the suite, Inara had claimed that she was seizing the opportunity for a holiday. Ruan had invited her to the party and there were no strings attached. If truth be told matters were a little more complicated than that and Inara was too well trained not to be aware of the fact. If we are charitable we must allow that perhaps she had chosen, in this instance, not to examine her motives too carefully and simply enjoy the change.

She gestured with one elegant hand, inviting him into her chambers. Malcolm Reynolds froze momentarily and she registered the expression of surprise that crossed his face. She turned and entered the room swiftly before he had the time to think of some comment or retort to reassert the barriers that stood between them.

The guests’ suite was lavish, if simple, and Inara had done little to it but bring across a suitcase full of clothes. That morning, however, she had returned to Serenity and collected her tea service. Kneeling on the floor and arranging the

cups, she felt her hands slipping into a routine. Already the guest suite began to feel like a place of work. But that was good. In this instance she needed to be business-like.

“You’re inviting me for tea?” Mal sounded both intrigued and suspicious.

“So I am, Captain, please sit down.”

“Why?”

“People normally drink tea while sitting down.”

Mal scowled. His face betrayed that he was vaguely aware that something was coming up. He sat cross-legged on a cushion opposite Inara.

“Right! Tea!” he frowned again. “Do you want something? Are you trying to seduce me?”

“I’d hardly need to offer you tea to seduce you,” Inara snapped.

“I thought maybe business was suffering. Ruan’s guests don’t seem like the paying customer type.”

“Tea for two!” Inara snapped and clapped her hands.

The teapot rose into the air of its own accord and poured two cups of tea.

“Well I’ll be...” Mal’s words trailed away. “How long has this been going on?”

“It started early this morning, handing me clothes.” Inara clapped her hands again and the teapot dropped down on the table slopping tea onto the cloth. “It’s a little bit directed for an atmospheric effect, I think.”

Mal glanced around the room. His face betrayed confusion and some anger. “It’s a *huli jing* that serves tea!”

“Not very well,” said Inara. “It’s broken one cup already. It has the basic form of the ceremony and appears to understand simple instructions, but within limits.”

Mal’s face went thoughtful. “Simple instructions, within definite limits.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s mighty interesting and no mistake.”

“I thought you would find it so. Now drink up your tea, Captain, and try not to spill any on the cushions.”

When Mal finally made it to the source of the sound of breaking glass there was nothing to be seen except the smashed window. It was only later in the day he learned the story when Book accosted him in the manor’s courtyard.

The house party was setting out on another grouse shoot, which served to satiate the guests’ blood lust and keep them clear of the atmospheric effect which, so far, had confined its activities to the manor’s close environs.

Book found Mal in the yard, smiling sweetly at miscellaneous guests as they loaded up into carriages and mounted horses to take them to some particularly auspicious spot.

“There’s something odd about this demon,” began Book.

“Ain’t no demon.”

“There’s certainly a something.”

“I know that but it ain’t no ghost, nor demon, nor *huli jing*.”

“Simply because you don’t believe in ghosts? That’s a little dogmatic, Captain.”

Malcolm Reynolds lifted his eyes upwards and Book saw the faces of men pressed against the windows of the Manor house. They were dressed as soldiers.

“I have plenty of ghosts, Shepherd. It’s just that this ain’t one of them.”

“Let me tell you what I saw.”

The ball was to be the centre-piece of the house party. While the assembled guests once again took themselves into the scrubland to shoot grouse, those left behind set about their preparations.

“Isn’t the room going to look pretty?” asked Kaylee as she looped more decorations on the ballroom’s walls.

“A golden cage,” whispered River. She was surrounded by origami cranes. It turned out she was deft at making them, and Ruan had decided he wanted the whole room filled with cranes in honour of Ancient China. River had started to talk about the cranes coming from somewhere else entirely but Mal had clapped a hand over her mouth and said they’d be happy to oblige with the decor.

“It’ll be lovely once we have those birds hung up,” added Kaylee. “Gonna be a lot of work to do though.”

“Flying away on the breeze,” whispered River.

At her words a faint draft wafted through the room, stirring the pile of cranes into a drift across the floor.

“What was that?” asked Kaylee. “Is a door open?”

“It wants the birds to fly free.”

River stood up, stretching out her arms and the paper cranes lifted into the air, spiralling gently round her head and up to the ceiling.

Kaylee’s mouth dropped open. “Are you doing that?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

The birds dropped gracefully to the ground, one by one, covering the dance floor and side tables with pink and green confetti.

“A friend. Don’t be scared. It’s here to help.”

Returning from the shoot, Zoe found Wash in the stables. There was a small workshop-cum-smithy attached. Li was allowed thus far, through a connecting door, but for the time being it lay idle and Wash was using it, on the side, to fabricate some spares for Serenity.

“How did it go?” he asked as she came in.

“They shot birds. We watched.”

Wash grinned. “That exciting, huh?”

“I don’t even know why he wants security. The guests were all vetted in advance.”

“We’re here to protect them from the ghost, you know. Kaylee saw something earlier. She’s buzzing.”

“There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“I don’t know, for a moment earlier, I had the strangest...” Wash’s voice tailed away, his jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide. “Zoe, you might want to take a look behind you.”

Zoe whirled round. Facing her was an alliance soldier, gun at the ready. She didn’t hesitate. Reflex responses she had thought long forgotten swung into action. She almost heard the sounds of the artillery and the flypast of the fighters. She shouldered the shotgun she was carrying, and fired. Then she dropped to the floor as a laser seared over her shoulder.

“*Tyen shiao duh*, those are real lasers!” shouted Wash.

“Said there’s no such thing as ghosts.” Zoe scrambled away, behind some hay bales to find Wash already crouched there.

“This isn’t good cover, is it?” he gabbled. “This is about as useful as cover as a chocolate fireguard.”

“Here,” she handed him her pistol. “Try not to hit me.”

“Oh, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Wash popped up over the bales and shot, an action commendable for its enthusiasm, if nothing else. There was an electrical popping sound and some fizzing.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Not sure. I think I missed.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. Then she cautiously raised her head above the bale. The alliance soldier was nowhere to be seen.

When Zoe and Wash stepped back out into the centre of the workshop they stood for some moments looking about themselves. All was apparently normal.

Wash might not have been an accomplished shot, but he understood ballistics and could trace a path. This drew his attention to a spot on the far wall.

“I hit this.” The wooden shoring had fallen away and electrical wiring sparked and fizzed behind it.

“I didn’t notice that before,” said Zoe, frowning.

Wash shrugged. “It’s a long way up. Looks like a transmitter of some kind.”

“That soldier was solid and those lasers were real.”

“Yes, I know.” Wash looked thoughtful.

River stood at the foot of the winding stair. The sounds of the party drifted up towards her from below but she’d been made to feel unwelcome. They didn’t need something twisted and strange amid the paradise of birds and pretty flowers. Something out of shape and awkward turned the atmosphere like milk turning sour. It didn’t need to be said, she knew. They’d said it anyway.

“Party needs to go smooth, Simon. Ruan needs to sell the house to get the money to pay us. Since I don’t want to be stuck on this *hun dun* moon any longer than strictly necessary that means we need to be smooth too.”

“No River?” Simon had asked.

“I like it when you understand my drift.”

Besides River had been listening to the voices, sensing the gentle pull up and away. She placed her foot at the bottom of the stair and began to climb.

Part 4

Simon, Book and Kaylee were serving champagne, while Mal and Jayne lurked at the fringes of the room, managing, if anything, to look even more menacing dressed in the stark black and white of their uniforms and bereft of all but the smallest of sidearms.

In the centre of the room a small set was being danced, weaving complex patterns in and out in a way that almost entirely lost the original purpose and meaning of the form. The rest of the party progressed at the fringes of the room. Inara moved through the guests, neither one of them nor one of the servants. The elegant fiction was everywhere maintained that she was the highest of high society. From a distance she looked like nothing so much as some exotic butterfly admired by those around her but treated with careful caution. The veneer of civilisation is often thinner than it at first appears.

There was a clatter that disturbed the delicate equilibrium, the careful facade in which nothing genuine could be said or done. Kaylee's tray dropped, spilling champagne.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Have I ruined your suit? Don't worry, it's only white wine, my mother always said vinegar would remove stains. I can get it washed for you. There's a whole laundry in the servant's quarters. Fully automated, you should see it. It's an incredible piece of engineering."

"What she lacks in refinement she makes up for in good will, don't you think?" said Inara, allowing herself the luxury of a real opinion.

The guest at the receiving end of the accident smiled. His eyes were bright and he insisted it was nothing.

"Well, she certainly seems to have charmed that young man," said Simon, pausing next to Book. A slight smile, mirroring the guest's own, lingered around Simon's mouth as he watched the scene.

"Not the only young man she's charmed, I think," murmured Book.

Far above them River hesitated. The attic was empty and dusty but at the far end light shone up through the floor boards from some room below. Cautiously she moved forward muttering to herself. "Into the light. Comes the light. Into the darkness. Comes the darkness. Oak, ash and thorn, build the house. Sour the butter, frighten the mouse. In the attic I creep, small and slight. Beware Mab's kingdom. Beware the lights."

She stepped over it and through it and above it and stretched out her arms and fell into the voices.

There was a shriek from the far end of the ball room. Book's tray of champagne fell to the floor as pale forms swept down from the ceiling. Their faces were sharp and distinct. Pieces of metal jutted out from them, pulling flesh out of shape into hideous leers, twisted and strange. The bodies were hazy shadows of smoke.

"Reavers!" someone shouted.

Book pulled out his bible and held it before him. "Begone foul spirits!" he started but his voice faltered and he didn't sound convinced.

The revellers backed away in fear and the dancers scattered as the Reavers swooped to the centre of the room. One surged outwards towards the pretty lady who only the previous day had slapped Jayne for taking liberties. She cried out and ducked behind Jayne's bulky form, pushing him forwards.

"Oi!" he shouted, indignant, backing up too as the hideous man advanced. He reached for his gun and shot, but the bullet passed through the Reaver to land, with a thud in the far wall.

Jayne snickered. "Ain't got no form. Can't do no harm."

The Reaver's scythe swept forwards. Jayne ducked instinctively and then shouted, "Ow!"

His hand came away from his face where a thin trickle of blood had formed. "That ain't fair."

The scythe swept down again, only to be blocked this time by a long thin blade. Inara moved in, like a dancer and slashed. The blade passed through the body, which dissipated into a mist which swirled above their heads and then up through the ceilings. The others followed.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Kaylee into the silence.

Suddenly everyone was talking.

"Why did that work?" complained Jayne.

"It's one of the decorative swords from the wall," said Inara, but she frowned at the blade.

"Cold iron, I don't doubt," said Book thoughtfully. "River spoke of the fair folk this morning."

"That makes less sense than none," complained Jayne. "Who are the fair folk?"

"Where *is* River?" asked Simon.

River was whispering, her hands before her face, weaving words, half-remembered, half-understood. Around her the light swirled and danced.

But the night is Halloween, Captain, The morn is Hallowday; Then win ye, win ye, an ye will, For weel I wat ye may.

Just at the mirk and midnight hour The fairy folk will ride And they that wad their money win, From manor they maun ride.

"Where's River?" Simon repeated.

"She's not here?" Jayne stared accusingly at Simon.

"Ruan wouldn't have her serving, too unreliable."

"We should check her rooms," said Book.

"I'll tell Mal. Jayne, you go with them," said Inara.

"Why should I take orders from you?" Jayne started.

Book placed a hand on his shoulder. "We need to find her, son. She may be the key to this."

Jayne scowled at him and then stared pointedly at the hand. Book removed it and rocked back on his heels giving a slight cough. Then he looked at Simon. Jayne glanced angrily between the two men, sensing the silent exchange of glances.

"Please, Jayne," said Simon stiffly after a minute.

“Well, seeing as how you’re asking nicely... Dunno what I’m supposed to do about your madwoman of a sister though.”

“Neither do I.” whispered Simon in a confused tone as Jayne started back out of the room.

“We should stay in groups,” returned Book.

All was confusion and sound. Book, Simon and Jayne pulled free of the throng and headed up the stairs to the third floor. They’d been gone less than five minutes when Zoe and Wash met Mal and Kaylee at the entrance to the ballroom. Guests pushed past in both directions amid a flurry of conversation.

“What’s going on?” Zoe asked.

“We had a small incident with a Reaver and cold iron. Some here feel it was in mighty poor taste,” said Mal. “I told Inara to keep everyone calm.”

“This is calm?” asked Zoe.

Mal shrugged.

“We were attacked!” said Wash from behind Zoe. “By a pretend phantom alliance soldier.”

“Pretend phantom?”

“Some kind of projection equipment,” Zoe dropped her voice and the four of them instinctively moved to one side.

“Nothing like anything I’ve ever seen,” reported Wash. “Kaylee might be able to make head or tail of it.”

Mal looked thoughtful. “Now isn’t that plenty coincidental? I seem to recall Ruan saying something about his brother being a mad inventor.”

“Brilliant and sensitive were the words as I heard tell,” said Zoe.

“Still I’m beginning to think as how we need a gentle talk with him and we should be taking a better look at that workshop of his while we’re about it.”

“You think he has something to do with the Reavers?” asked Kaylee.

Wash shrugged. “Fancy custom projection equipment. You can do a lot with that.”

“Only so much. ’Nara said you’d need a pretty good artist to create pictures like them Reavers we just saw,” commented Kaylee, “and they ain’t standard in any of the systems I know of.”

“This mean we won’t get paid?” asked Wash.

“Not looking good, is it, Cap’n?” Kaylee looked to Mal.

Mal scowled then pushed his way back into the ballroom.

“Everyone keep calm!” he shouted. He jumped up on a side table and towered over the crowd with a sense of authority. “Now it would seem that we have a slight hitch with the entertainment system. Would that not be right, Mr. Ruan?”

Ruan's mouth opened and shut a couple of times and then he nodded.

"So if you will all keep calm then, Kaylee, our lovely mechanic, will take a look at it." Mal gestured at this point towards Kaylee, who blushed and then bobbed an approximation to a curtsy.

"Aye, aye, Cap'n." She grinned.

Above them Simon, Book and Jayne looked around the emptiness of the room that River and Kaylee had shared.

"Well she ain't here," observed Jayne.

"The winding stair..." mused Simon.

"What?"

"The winding stair, she's been talking about the winding stair."

"Your sister talks no end of nonsense. Don't mean there's anything in it."

There was a clatter above them and all three men looked upwards to where the wooden ceiling creaked under the footsteps of someone above. Complex tapping movements as if someone danced a pattern. None of them were particularly versed in lore or legend but each instantly recognised the call of ritual and understood an urgent need to stop it.

"The attic," said Simon.

"You think she's found anything valuable up there?" asked Jayne.

Simon just looked at him.

Before long the three of them stood at the foot of the attic stair. Ahead was a wall of mist, hovering across the steps.

"Them Reavers weren't made of anything solid," said Jayne, as they hesitated.

"Still cut you," observed Book.

Jayne squared his shoulders. "Gorram ghost keeps messing with me. It's about time it got something back."

"You first then," said Simon.

Jayne scowled at him and then plunged into the mist and vanished.

Simon and Book waited.

"It seems safe enough," said Book after a moment of silence. This of course was a temptation that fate could ill ignore. There came a blood-curdling scream and Jayne tumbled backwards out of the mist into the arms of the men below.

"Jayne, you all right, son?"

"Gorram ghosts stabbed me," he shouted.

Simon pulled Jayne's hands from his chest. A long gash trailed from shoulder to hip, bleeding profusely.

"I spoke too soon," said Book and he gave the mist covered winding stair a dark look. Above them the feet continued to tap out their pattern.

“Right! That’s it!” Jayne struggled to his feet and started back down the corridor.

“What is? Let me look at that wound?” Simon pattered along behind him.

“Quit fussing, will you?” grumbled Jayne. “It’s only a flesh wound.”

“I’m going to put a dressing on it,” said Simon firmly. “I’ve got medical supplies in my room.”

“No, you’re not, we need to get up to the attic.”

“We can’t get up the stairs,” said Book. “Might as well let him bind you up.”

“We don’t need to go up the stairs,” said Jayne. He barged into his small room and fished under the bed, producing Vera.

“A gun isn’t going to be much use against ghosts,” remarked Simon.

“I ain’t going to use it against the ghost,” said Jayne and fired straight upwards. Dust and debris reigned down and then cleared to reveal a large hole in the ceiling. “River, are you up there?”

The repetitive pattern of feet suddenly stopped. River’s face appeared at the hole.

“River, are you all right?” asked Simon.

“Yes, I’m talking to the Sidhe?”

“Who are the gorram Sidhe?” asked Jayne.

“Old Earth legend, son.”

“Do you want me to come down?” asked River.

“If you could,” said Book.

Gracefully, River dropped through the hole and landed lightly on the floor. A trail of dancing lights followed her, swirling in a circle around her and making her hair dance and fly.

“*Tzuh muh luh?*” asked Jayne.

“The Sidhe,” said River. The lights formed into a wall and hissed. “Don’t anger them.”

Part 5

The sounds of gunfire had echoed through the house and Mal made sure to draw his gun as he marched along the corridor to Li’s workshop, Kaylee, Wash and Zoe just behind him. As they approached he fired at the lock and kicked the door open. “*Shensheng de gaowan,*” he cursed as they entered.

All around them cogs were turning and lights were flashing. Half-formed ghostly figures weaved in and out of the machinery and workbenches. Here there

was a glimpse of an alliance soldier, there a glimpse of a Reaver. A colonist in a wide-brimmed hat and heavy coat galloped past on a horse. Li was perched on top of a giant revolving cog in the centre of the room, hitting a lever with a wrench.

“What’s going on?” demanded Mal.

Li looked up. “I can not switch off the machine. It’s out of control.”

“What’s it supposed to do?” asked Kaylee.

“Hard-light projection.”

“We’d worked that bit out,” said Wash. “What’s with the ghosts?”

“Neural linkage.”

Mal glanced at Wash who shrugged.

“What’s neural linkage?” asked Zoe.

Li tapped his head. “Wires in head; transmitters and receivers. Since they’re there might as well make use of them.”

“Transmitters and receivers...?” Wash tailed away.

“What gorram idiot puts transmitters and receivers in his own head?” demanded Mal.

Wash was looking thoughtful, “Come to think of it...”

“No,” said Zoe. “It’s a stupid idea.”

“Hey, I didn’t say anything!” Wash sounded affronted.

“You were thinking it.”

They all looked back at the figure of Ruan perched on top of his machine and the same basic thoughts occurred to all of them. Mal remembered Li lunging at him with the wrench, and his enmity with the old butler. He understood you might go to many lengths to get some detested person from your home. Kaylee was imagining what you could do with projection equipment where you just had to think of the picture and then make it happen without needing any artistic skill. Wash was puzzling over the alliance soldier and wondering how Ruan had known. Zoe calculated risks and angles.

Two suited figures suddenly formed up, out of the crowd of ghosts. They were men, their faces expressionless. The effect on Li was dramatic. He froze for a moment on top of his machine and then jumped down off the wheel and began backing away. The figures reached out, blue gloves visible on their hands.

“Wait a minute,” said Mal. “Wait a minute. Exactly which school did you go to?”

“No! No!” shrieked Li, still backing away from the figures. Behind him was a large bank of machinery, exposed wires trailed from it to the workshop floor and sparks of electricity arced from section to section.

“Damn it!” Mal began to run across the workshop, but it was already clear he would be too late.

The ghosts with the blue hands advanced.

With a shriek, Li fell against the exposed wiring. There was a flash of light and the distinct smell of burnt meat.

“*Aiya!*” said Mal. “He might have been useful too. Kaylee, Wash, can you switch this *hun dun* machine off?”

Wash looked around the workshop doubtfully. Then he reached out cautiously and flicked a switch. Nothing happened.

“No. Kaylee?”

“I don’t know,” she looked at the vast machine. “It could take some time.”

“What could?” asked Jayne from the doorway. His dress coat had been removed and bandages were wrapped around his chest. Behind him clustered Simon, Book and River. Small dots of light swirled around them.

“Switching off the machine,” said Mal.

There was a hissing sound the lights that so clustered and danced darted at Mal, resolving into tiny figures that pinched and pricked.

“Ow!” he cried.

“Wait,” said Kaylee. “Li said it was running on a neural interface. But if he’s dead it should be shut down by now.”

“Unless someone else has interfaced to it as well,” murmured Zoe.

“Someone who went to the same gorram academy that Li did,” finished Mal.

All eyes turned to fall on River.

Mal’s eyes opened wide and then he marched forwards. “Everyone! Stables! Now!”

The reader may imagine the tumble and clatter as the crew of Firefly class ship Serenity descended the stairs of Yun Manor and exited out into the yard.

“Area of effect, right?” said Mal as he marched into the stables.

“We don’t know anything at all about how the machine works,” protested Wash.

“I can work out some,” Kaylee said.

Wash turned to stare at her.

“OK, but not much... yet,” she admitted.

“Area of effect seems plausible,” admitted Simon doubtfully.

Mal had already grabbed a saddle. “So we take your sister out of the area and wait for the machine to close down.”

“I had better go with her,” muttered Simon, also grabbing saddle and bridle.

“Maybe we all should,” said Book.

“No!” said Mal. “Don’t want to draw too much attention. No need for Ruan to know River has anything to do with this. Might cause an issue with the payment.”

“Can’t argue with that!” agreed Jayne. “Up you go!” He helped hoist River up into the saddle.

Simon rode a horse over, all aristocratic style.

“The Sidhe won’t like this,” said River.

“Well I don’t much like the Sidhe,” responded Mal. “And they ain’t got no business hereabouts, dredging up memories and fears and such like. Of that I’m certain.”

He handed River’s reins to Simon. “Just keep going a good distance.”

Simon nodded and set his horse to a trot.

As they left the stables and began to move down the driveway, the air about them twisted and swirled. A localised atmospheric effect was making its presence felt. Simon risked a look back. Horses followed them. There were knights and stags and centaurs with a wild array of swords and spears and antlers.

“It’s the wild hunt,” said River. Her eyes were wide with excitement.

“Oh good!” said Simon weakly. Then he urged his horse to a gallop. Behind them the horns sounded and the hunt began. On the whole, he thought, he’d have preferred it if River had picked the *huli jing* rather than whatever obscure mythology this was.

We return now to Li’s workshop for the solution to the problem lies there. All that’s needed is for Wash and Kaylee to figure out how to shut down the machine that turns and hums in the centre of the room.

“Shouldn’t you be doing something?” demanded Mal.

“I am doing something, Captain.” Kaylee grinned. “I’m waiting for this power coupling to free up.”

“Power coupling?”

Wash shrugged. “We can’t hope to figure out how this thing works, but we can just turn off the power.”

“Once we can get to it,” said Kaylee.

A translucent bubble of light surrounded the heavy duty cable. It sparked like electricity.

Lights swirled above the central machine.

“It ain’t gonna explode is it?” asked Jayne nervously.

“Maybe,” said Kaylee.

“But probably not,” said Wash hurriedly.

“*Chou ma niao*,” swore Jayne.

“Perhaps non-essential personnel should evacuate?” suggested Book cautiously, backing out of the workshop.

“Go!” ordered Mal. “You too, Jayne, Zoe.”

“Sir!” questioned Zoe.

“I don’t really need much help,” said Kaylee. “I’ll be fine on my own.”

“No! Wash and I will stay,” insisted Mal.

“If Wash stays, I stay,” said Zoe.

“Don’t disobey a direct order.”

“Was that a direct order?” she looked at him blankly.

Mal swore. “OK, you stay too.”

The others had already gone.

Simon had always been a good rider. While he wasn’t empathic in the bedside manner sense, he had a knack for reading the health and comfort of a body and that made him a good surgeon in a slightly detached way. That same knack meant he understood horses at some level, enough to know when they were tired or eager, or excited. A natural propensity to application and the constraints of high society had given him everything else that was necessary.

The horses were good and Simon was riding them as hard as he could, given that River only had half her attention on horsemanship and he didn’t want to yank the creature’s bridle too much.

Behind them the wild hunt roared. All he could hear was a cacophony of barks and growls, the thin sound of the hunting horns carrying above it all. Sometimes he thought they were pulling ahead, but then River would suddenly sit up straight and turn around in the saddle. Her horse would slow down, hampered by the awkward position of its rider and Simon would have to slow up too. The ghostly forms would rush towards them.

“Who are the prey?” asked River.

Simon didn’t know. He hoped it wasn’t them. It probably wasn’t them so long as River didn’t think it was them.

They rode on into the night, past the scrubby trees and over the heather laden moor. Grouse rose up at their passing, flying squawking into the night.

They had travelled a little short of five kilometres when the horns grew fainter. River turned in her saddle once more and this time Simon allowed himself the luxury of slowing up too. Behind them the faintest blue glow showed where the hunt had been and then it, too, was gone.

“We outrode the hunt,” whispered River.

The blue light hissed and swirled, projection equipment straining long past even its theoretical limits. Then the energy washed backwards, back over the heather and gorse, back through the twisted shapes of stunted woodland, over the courtyard, up the stairs, along the passage and into the workshop.

“It’s working! It’s working!” cried Kaylee, rushing around the machine.

The light whirled and swirled in a column above the turning wheels. Faces emerged, dancing and screaming in the heart of the maelstrom. Reavers and soldiers, fair folk and foul, danced together in a brilliant whirlwind. Slowly the images were sucked down, down into the depths of the machine. More light rushed in through the doorway and down between the floorboards of the attic at every moment. Gradually, the cocoon around the power coupling withdrew. Kaylee reached for it.

Mal caught her arm. “Let’s just wait a few moments longer,” he said. “Make sure it’s shiny.”

“But, Captain?”

“He may have a point,” said Zoe.

They waited. Light suddenly surged back along the cable in a flare, like electricity and then, silently vanished, plunging the room into darkness.

“Now can I unplug it?” asked Kaylee.

“If you can see it, yes.”

The beam of a torch shone out. “Always have a torch to hand, Cap’n. Never know when it’ll come in handy,” said Kaylee’s cheerful voice.

There was a muffled thump and then a whining sound as machinery slowed to a stop.

“That’s that then,” said Wash. “The party goes on and we get paid.”

“We killed the host’s brother,” observed Zoe.

“He fell into his own infernal contraption,” said Mal. “Can’t help that.”

“I doubt Ruan will see it like that, Sir.”

“Then we’ll have to make him.”

Picture the scene as Mal descends once more to the ground hall and the public areas of the house. His crew stumble along in his wake, drawn by his energy but confused as to his intentions.

“But what are we going to do?” asked Wash.

“We put on a show.”

“We don’t know how to put on a show!” wailed Kaylee.

“Don’t have to be a good show. Any show will do. New technology, up-to-the-minute, all mod cons.”

“What?” Jayne stopped at the top of the ancient wooden stairs looking baffled.

“This here!” Mal spread his arms to encompass the dusty main hall. “Is the house of the future.”

“Is this is another of your plans, sir?” asked Zoe.

“Ruan! Just the man! Let’s sell this house!” Mal clapped a surprised looking Ruan on the shoulders before powering into the ballroom.

“What’s going on?” asked Ruan.

“Captain has a plan,” said Jayne.

“You’d best just go with it,” said Book. “I doubt you can stop him now.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” Mal began. “I do apologise for the somewhat alarming nature of the previous demonstration. There was a small technical hitch which our lovely mechanic has just fixed. Kaylee? Where’s Kaylee.”

“Here, Captain!” Kaylee waved her wrench from the back of the crowd.

“Right now, controls! Where are the controls?” Mal looked over at his crew.

Wash looked around and then pointed to one corner. “They’ll be there.”

Jayne squared his shoulders, grabbed Kaylee’s wrench and marched to the indicated corner of the ballroom where he whacked at the panelling with the wrench. Finely crafted panelling splintered under the assault. Jayne pulled it away. He gestured at the exposed control panel with a flourish, the refinement of which was marred, ever so slightly, by the wrench.

“Excellent!” Mal beamed at the crowd. “The controls you see are for the house’s networked hard-light entertainment system. Ladies and gentlemen, this system is in every room of the house. Kaylee, would you do the honours.”

“Err... OK, Captain!” Kaylee, who had been peering into the exposed control unit, looked a bit doubtful and then pressed some buttons.

“Factory settings, I think,” murmured Book quietly to her.

At that moment the image of a Reaver formed at one end of the hall. The crowd gasped and shrunk back. Kaylee scowled and then took the wrench from Jayne and hit the machine with it. The Reaver shivered, vanished and was replaced by butterflies and fox spirits that danced through the air. She beamed at Book.

“Factory settings. Ain’t they pretty.”

The crowd flowed back and several people clapped.

“And later we will take you all on a tour of kitchen and laundry to demonstrate the customised highly automated systems that typify the workmanship throughout the house,” finished Mal.

Inara packed her bags and carried them across the dusty ground between Yun Manor and Serenity. The other guests were departing in their assorted carriages and cars. Inara had tired of their chatter and since the sale was accomplished and she wasn't being paid to be present she proposed to leave.

The giant form of Serenity towered above the manor house. It was gargantuan and ugly where the house was elegant. Inara smiled and her footsteps had a lightness to them as she crossed the ground. The crew scuttled in and around the loading bay, stacking boxes.

"You got paid then," observed Inara as she approached.

"Only in truck, gorram prices are ridiculous," grumbled Jayne.

"Still, we got paid," Wash grinned. "And there weren't actually any *huli jing*."

"I never said there were," muttered Jayne.

"Oh come on! Weren't you just the teensiest bit doubtful?" asked Kaylee.

"No! I like things to be what's what and where I can see them."

Inara smiled. "Some of us prefer a slightly less concrete view of the universe."

Mal walked down the ramp as she was speaking and he paused on the threshold to survey the people gathered before him.

"Just as well I'm Captain then," said Mal. "Can't live on dreams."

That night, far from the luxury moon, the elegant manor, its secrets and its ghosts, Mal sat back in the pilot's chair and gazed at the sky.

He had lost all his dreams, and he had too many ghosts, but still he kept on flying.