

***MY OWN KIND OF
FREEDOM***

A FIREFLY NOVEL

**BY
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My Own Kind of Freedom
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**TO CALIANN
FOR MANY REASONS**

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In this, my first effort at a media tie-in novel (yes, my soul is lost), it seems tacky to thank the creator, cast, and crew of Firefly; but it feels wrong not to, so call this a half-assed nod in that direction.

For people who care about such things, the book was written in emacs on a box running Mandrake Linux, then I used OpenOffice to format it for printing. The final layout for online publication was created with Microsoft Word and Adobe Acrobat. People who care about such things need to get a life.

PROLOGUE

Those who appreciate ginseng — either for its supposed medicinal qualities, or for its distinctive flavor — are willing to pay inordinately high prices for it.

In the Southern Hemisphere of Paquin, about eighty kilometers east of the

Scar (in the high foothills of the Napala chain) is a long, meandering forest called Runaround, full of oaks and sugar maples. It is the best place in the 'verse to find – or grow – the herb called panax, red berry, tartar root, and ginseng. It's a plant that is absurdly easy to grow, given the right climate and soil: you cut a furrow in the autumn, drop in the seeds, pack them down, and spend the next five years tapping maple trees and shooting at poachers.

In addition to being the economic base of the region, Ginseng is the name of the biggest town, with a population of almost nine thousand, if you include the nearby rooters. The town has an effective sewage system, clean water, several paved roads, dozens of permanent buildings, and, temporarily, just past the smokehouse, it had a Firefly-class transport, hunkered down in a clear field like something that pounces waiting to pounce.

Inside the vessel, even as her landing gear settled onto the rich dirt and plumes of smoke were blown away from the side-thrusters on the outside, a voice came over the intercom: "We're down. We have landed safely. Yes, through a hailstorm of fire, once more, we have achieved landfall in spite of all the obstacles of the heavens. We are delivered. We must kiss the ground. Yes, I say, the ground, the holy ground we must, uh, kiss."

On the outside, the cargo door swung down. On the inside, a large, square-jawed man wearing loose pants and a green tee-shirt said, "Need to break that intercom." He put a finger into his ear and shook it as the pressure finished equalizing.

Near him, also looking out on Paquin, was a brown-haired woman wearing greasy gray cover-alls. "This world smells like candy," she said.

"Smells like money to me," said the

man.

Two others walked up next to them. Like the large man, they both wore sidearms: his was standard military-issue Shacorp IX semi-auto, hers was a lever-action sawed-off carbine. He was clean-cut, and of average build; she was dark and athletic-looking.

She said, "All right, let's make this quick and clean. We make the exchange, and then we're out."

The man glanced at her. She glanced back at him. "Just trying to save you the trouble, sir. You must be tired of giving that speech."

"I'm appreciative, Zoë. Most like it'll do as much good as when I say it."

The big man snickered, but didn't say anything.

"Jayne, stay here and see to the loading. Zoë and I will go see about payment."

"I thought we were being paid on the other side."

The one who'd been addressed as sir (a title he accepted as if used to it) tilted his head and peered up at the larger man. "Yes, Jayne. We are. And they are being paid at this end. I think they call that commerce."

"Wait, Mal. We're paying them? I'm not real keen on giving money to a bunch of-"

"Is it all right with you if we pay them with the money Sakarya gave us for that purpose?"

"Uh . . . yeah."

"Glad to hear it. Then you don't mind if we go ahead and do this deal? I mean, I wouldn't want to take a step without your *ta ma de yunxu*."

"*Suibian ni*," said Jayne as Mal and Zoë set foot onto Paquin.

"I still don't get it," he continued after they were gone.

The woman in cover-alls said, "Cap'n and Zoë going to drop the money off, then they load the cargo, then we drop off the cargo on Hera, then we get paid, then we buy Serenity a new induction—."

"What I don't see is why we ain't just keeping the money and saving ourselves a lot of flying around."

She sighed. "Oh, Jayne," she said, and wandered back into the ship. She climbed the metal stairway up from the massive cargo hold that was the reason for the ship's existence and followed a long corridor back to the med bay. A young man—he looked like he barely needed to shave—stood looking down at the occupied exam table. He glanced up as the woman approached and said, "Hello Kaylee."

"Hey, Simon. How's River?"

"Sleeping," he said, glancing once more at the small figure on the table. "I'm trying a new treatment. She'll be out for an

hour or two."

"Was she having more dreams?"

He looked at Kaylee and nodded, and there was a certain communication that passed between them, as if a conversation many times repeated didn't need yet another iteration. Instead, Kaylee said, "Checkers?"

"Why not?"

Five and a half hours later, the hold was loaded with four tons of pre-cut maple.

Mal punched the door closed and said, "Wash, take us out of the world."

"That part went pretty smooth, sir," said Zoë.

"Yep. From now on, you're giving the speech."

Outside, the sound muffled by the boat's skin, the side-thrusters fired, and the ship lifted.

CHAPTER 1

MY OWN KIND OF LIE

Serenity: Bridge

He always smiled when Serenity first kissed atmo.

That was the moment that separated pilots; a sloppy entry cost fuel, a perfect entry saved fuel, and the difference could be the difference between a healthy profit and a disastrous loss. When you kissed atmo, it was all touch; suddenly the number of

variables increased by an order of magnitude: the shape of the ship, the tilt of her nose, the attitude adjusters, speed, direction, the density and exact composition of the upper atmosphere – all of it.

Mal never noticed, of course; none of them noticed. They'd only notice if he did it badly; then he would, no doubt, get all sorts of looks and remarks. And it would cut into his profits as it would the rest of the crew's.

But none of that was why he made his entries as close to perfect as humanly possible: he did it because it was what he loved doing. The challenges to a pilot in the black were rare, and usually involved some form of terror. But the first touch of atmo on a new planet, setting up the slide, the deceleration, balancing skin heat with fuel cost, inert-damp with gravity – feeling part of the boat in a way even Kaylee, bless her heart, could never know – those were the moments of living. That was the best.

He was aware of the first hint of rudder to port, and nose up, and then the thrust control was under his right hand; and after that for a while he could no longer follow the details, because he was no longer using controls—it wasn't cause and effect, it was just one long effect as distinctions blurred. Pilot to control, control to boat, boat to atmo, atmo to gravity, gravity to pilot: they were all the same thing as Serenity sang the song only Wash could hear. After an interminable twenty seconds that was over so quickly it may never have existed, the decisions were made, the hard part past, and everything was, alas, easy again. It was morning on this part of Hera.

From the co-pilot's chair, Mal said, "How's the entry?"

"It's an entry. They're all the same."

"How long are we looking at?"

"Twenty minutes, give or take. Unless I accidentally flip us over and lose control

and send us smashing into the ground to a fiery demise. That would be quicker."

"Okay. Well, don't do that."

"All right."

Wash smiled as Serenity slid fully into atmo.

Serenity: Bridge

He saw his pilot smiling at his own joke, was tempted to make a remark, but just looked away instead. *What's wrong with me?*

In his mind, he played back the last several days of the trip. He'd been short with Kaylee, patient with Jayne, all but ignored Zoë, and, just now, he had asked his pilot a meaningless question, just to break the silence—a silence that he normally didn't mind; a silence he normally liked.

It had to be the job. That was the only explanation. There had to be something

about the job that was bothering him.

He reviewed all the pieces, starting with the initial contact with the client (seemed all right; a public posting, nothing to make it appear aimed at his crew), the contact with the client's rep (over a vid; should he have insisted on meeting in person?), the plan for the dropoff (good flat area; easy to spot a potential ambush), and the guarantee for the payment (Flush said he'd known the client, Sakarya, for years; he'd never heard of him twisting on a deal).

So, what was his gorram problem?

If he was getting to the point where he was smelling trouble just because everything was going right, he'd have to give it up and *hao xianshi de gongzuo ba*.

When he felt the slight, brief weight fluctuation and heard the de-press cycle kick in, he got up, left the bridge, and made his way to the cargo bay. He threaded his way past the stacks of lumber.

Predictably, Jayne was there ahead of him. "Are they going to have people to do the unloading? I'm not that keen on carrying — "

"They'll have people," he said.

The big man glanced him. "You all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You been acting funny."

Mal shrugged. "Nope. Everything's shiny," he said. "Not a care in the world."

His weight increased a little as Serenity made her way toward the ground.

Serenity: Engine room

She pouted and loosened the starboard eq valve half a degree. She swapped the wrench for the I-tester, applied

it, and looked. Then she turned to Zoë, who was leaning against a bulkhead next to the hammock.

"That might do it."

"Do what?"

"You didn't feel that lurch when the a-grav cycled?"

"I didn't notice."

Kaylee frowned. "Well, okay. Hey, Zoë?"

"Mmmm?"

"Has the Cap'n been acting funny?"

"You mean, more than he has since Inara left?"

"Oh."

"Hmmm?"

"That's what it is. Inara left."

"Honey," said Zoë, "I love you, but sometimes you're a bit slow."

"Well why didn't he" her voice trailed off.

"You know the Captain." said Zoë.

"No, I don't."

"Well, neither do I, for that matter."

Kaylee put the I-tester back in its case and the case into the cabinet. "We're almost down. Should we go explore?"

"I've been here before," said Zoë.

Zoë got up and made her way toward the cargo bay. Kaylee followed, just for the company. "I love new worlds," she said.

"They're so full of possib —"

"So you've said."

Kaylee looked at her sharply.

"I'm sorry," said Zoë.

"Is this the first time you've been back to Hera, since then?"

"The second."

They didn't talk any more as they made their way down the passageway, until they reached the stair to the cargo bay, when Zoë said, "It must be hard on you, staying cheerful all the time in a boat full of us morose types."

"Not a bit," said Kaylee. "It just comes natural. Ain't nothing ever gets me down."

Mal and Jayne were already there, and the cargo door was just opening.

Serenity: Med bay

He had learned that there were times not to argue with his sister, so when she said, "There are ghosts here, Simon," he just said, "We'll be staying on Serenity."

"They're already here."

"Ghosts can't hurt us, River."

"They're hurting Zoë."

"Zoë can take care of herself."

"Sometimes they ask questions I can't answer. Sometimes they ask questions I

don't want to answer. They want to know if they were right, Simon. How can I know if they were right?"

Simon wrapped his arms around his sister.

"They're going out now," she said.

"And they're going to leave footprints where they walk. Tell them he isn't who they think he used to be."

"Who isn't, River?"

"The ghost. The one who's still alive."

Simon, from long experience, didn't try to work out how a ghost could be alive; there were too many things his sister said that didn't make sense. The trouble was, there were far, far too many things that did.

"You know what I think?" said River.

"What do you think?"

"I think you should kiss Kaylee."

He stared at her. "Why should . . . why . . . what are you talking about?"

"Well? Haven't you thought about it?"

"Of course not."

River frowned, thinking deeply for a moment. "Well," she said, "I'm not going to do it for you."

Hera: Yuva Road

Hera crunched beneath his boots.

Jayne's boots were much like what the mudders of Canton wore: coming to mid-calf, held on by three buckled straps; but they also had steel toes for protection from anything dropped on them and for additional emphasis in any argument that involved kicking.

"Mal, we going to have any time here?"

"

"Time for what, Jayne?"

"For getting a drink, and maybe getting sexed. It's been so long--"

"Depends how smooth things go. If

everything is right, we can take a day or so."

Zoë said, "And things always go smooth for us, don't they, sir?"

Jayne patted his sidearm, a Greer Model B with extended magazine, and said, "I got a smoother with me."

"Oh, good," said Mal. "That makes me feel all kinds of reassured."

"Well, let's just reassure this ruttin' job and —"

"Jayne, that's enough."

"Jayne," said Zoë, "What's with the sudden urgency for a bar, anyway?"

"It's nothing. Just the same faces every day for months gets sorta old."

"Mmmm," said Zoë.

Hera: Yuva Road

Zoë glanced at the Captain, but he appeared to be lost in thought. Still, the

operative word there was "appeared;" she'd known the Captain more than once to have picked up a subtlety that she'd thought he'd missed. And certainly he picked up on things that she had missed, and then put them together correctly. Much as he prided himself on his ability to form a good plan, it was this other skill, his way of seeing an odd little thing and knowing what it meant and reacting to it correctly, that had gotten them out of so many situations that they ought never to have escaped.

It was on this *yongyuan bei ding wei laipigou de wanju* world called Hera that he had noticed an overturned supply truck on a deserted road, and moved his command half a klick to the west and so outflanked what would have been an ugly, ugly ambush. And again and again, the same thing had happened. So she ought to trust him to pick up on Jayne's oddity, and, not just pick up on it, but figure out what it meant. Which

was more than she could do.

Except that the Captain just wasn't himself these days, and that was cause for worry.

The "town" of Yuva began abruptly as the road split into two main streets, which ran parallel for about a mile before the southernmost ("South Street," said a sign) left you at the top of a hill leading down to where the miners lived in what was effectively a different, larger, and much filthier town. North Street was half a mile longer, ending in the company security office. On South Street, a bright, clean-looking store stood on the right beneath a sign saying, "Company Store," opposite a small park-like area, with a pond and a few scrubby trees.

Sakarya's mansion (white, square, and imposing) was perched on a sort of hillock (artificial, and artificially green) just south of the store.

Zoë continued chewing over the problem, though she still scanned the empty street in a habit so deeply ingrained she could never shake it. Could she talk to her Wash about what was going on with the Captain? It got into tricky areas between them.

They continued up the street, past the long, walled and gated driveway leading up the hill. The effect was more absurd than imposing — why set the mansion back from a two-street little town?

To the north was a small, square brick building, that said in Chinese characters, "office."

"I'd imagine," said the Captain, "that this is it."

"Good," said Jayne. "Let's get our ruttin' money."

"You may as well relax," said the Captain. "We're probably going to be stuck waiting for unloading instructions, and

waiting longer to get paid."

"*Wo taoyan dengyideng* . For how long?"

"A few hours, most like. Maybe a day. Rich guys take time before they're willing to part with money. You good with that, Zoë?"

"Of course, sir. Let's go in."

The Captain led the way.

Serenity: Med bay

She hated it that Kaylee was afraid of her, and so she didn't go near the engine room any more than she had to. She understood why Kaylee feared her: it was because Kaylee, as much as she knew about engines, didn't really see how anyone could be comfortable with fractal geometry. It had all been that one incident, the time months ago when Kaylee had seen her factor so

many variables at one time, in the skyplex with all the shooting going on. Too many variables, and the equation solved too quickly, and Kaylee couldn't comprehend it, and so she was afraid.

Once River had tried to explain that problems in fractal geometry were easier if you solved them from the inside, but the explanation had come out muddled.

Communication was so difficult, because you needed to access so many different parts of your brain to form a sentence and they all worked at different speeds, and the part that told the sentence to vocalize worked at yet a different speed; and then there were the ants inside your brain interfering with everything.

She had tried to explain that to Simon once, but had gotten that look that said he was being Patient and Concerned. She hated that look.

He had that look now, as he sat next

to her bed in the infirmary and studied her insides on his charts that didn't show the ants.

"I wish you could remember more," he said. "I mean, about what they did to you. Did they ever explain what they were trying to make you into?"

"Yes," she said. "They told me they weren't really ants."

"Ants?"

"Yes. In my brain. They aren't really ants, I know that. I just call them ants because that's what it feels like when they go walking around everywhere making it hard to see where everything is that I'm trying to get. I call them ants, but they aren't."

"All right."

"They're really termites."

She sneaked a peek at him. He had the Look again.

"River — "