

UNCOVERED

Date: April 11, 2514 (during transit between Persephone & Greenleaf)

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teaser: Captain Cooper delves into her crew's secrets -- and confesses one of her own.

The Adventures of the Jin Dui (Original Characters/Firefly 'Verse.Novel-Style RP Club)

(more about the Jin Du at our <http://jin-dui.swartz.com>>ship's website

Additional fanon credits: New Cardiff Bulldogs by William "Yellowjacket" Pace

Cooper limped onto the bridge, managing two full cups of tea in her right hand, her cane in the left. "Zǎo ān," the captain said to Fatima, offering her one of the cups as she reached the pilot's station.

"Xiè xiè," Fatima replied, taking the tea speedily, as though maybe she had been anticipating the captain's early morning visit. Fatima navigated her cup past the veil of her burqa and sipped gratefully as Cooper eased herself down carefully into the co-pilot's chair. Her crippled hip was throbbing pain this morning -- it had been since Persephone, truth be told, but they didn't have pain killers aboard the ship strong enough to control it, and even if they had, Cooper likely wouldn't have wasted them. She had too much work to get done today to be fuzzy-headed, and the pain was a chronic issue. It was never going to go away without Core-level treatment, so Cooper ignored it as best she could, and focused instead on the work at hand. There was plenty enough of that.

"There's an Alliance cruiser, the *Daishandao*, off of Heinlein. There's lots of chatter drifting out there from miners in the Peers. And we've received repeated hails from another merchanter, the *Merry Gull*. She's Greenleaf-bound from Kaleidoscope and cruising a parallel course about four hours behind us," Fatima reported, as Cooper keyed up the screens at the co-pilot station and had a look at the long-range scans herself. "The *Gull* hasn't deviated from that position, and we're well in range of the *Daishandao*."

In range of the Alliance ship's intervention, Fatima meant. In case the *Merry Gull* was something more than she looked. Cooper nodded and sipped her own cup of tea, not commenting on the pilot's paranoia. Every morning report Cooper obtained from Fatima followed the same script -- the shy, quiet woman was always hyper-focused on who the other travelers were out there in the big black, as though any new blip on the long-scan was likely to turn up pirate or one of those Reaver ships that were all the muttered-rumor back on Deadwood.

It made made a captain wonder, sure as hell it did. Cooper took another sip of her tea and shifted her eyes off of the trio of glowing monitors before her in order to study her alterday-shift pilot.

It had only been days ago when, in-bound to Persephone, Cooper had formally hired her crew. She was still shocked that none of them had instead chosen to collect their references and walk, given the likelihood of a berth with higher pay and a more certain, more solvent future was only a stroll away up the Eavesdown Docks. But her crew had made their choices to stay. Which meant it was time now for the captain to ask some deeper questions.

Cooper weighed her words carefully before taking that plunge. "Most of us have our secrets," she said, giving the woman a steady, no-nonsense look. "I respect that. I don't intend to pry. But as the *Jin Dui's* captain, I do need to ask: are there things you know which you need to share with me, for the welfare of this ship and crew?"

Fatima's jade green eyes were difficult to read through the concealing fabric of her burqa. But Cooper could see they had gone fully dilated with fear.

Cooper frowned to see that reaction, although she was not surprised. Normally, Cooper hated to retreat. Someone gave you an inch, you were a fool not to take it and more if you could. But she had her suspicions about what had Fatima spooked, and her intuition was not to push the other woman too far, too quickly. Instead, Cooper took a long swallow of tea, then gathered herself up out of the co-pilot's chair. "Just think on the question," she told Fatima, taking pains to sound measured and patient -- and by all that was holy, controlling the flare of rage that had erupted in her gut. "Just get back to me on it when you feel able," she said, tamping down on that anger and doing her damned-all best not to let it to leak. "I'll leave you to it," she added with a wave for the bridge, taking her leave for all the world as if she was unaware of the landmine she had just lobbed under the poor pilot's skirts.

Her rage propelled Cooper back down the corridor to the galley. It didn't take keen powers of observation to put two and two together: Fatima Nahas had survived something terrible when the last ship she had served on, the *Parysatis*, had been lost, and it sure as hell wasn't a hairy military gunship like the *Daishandao* the woman was scared of meeting out in the deep black. Cooper limped into the galley and yanked open the bin where she kept root vegetables. She snatched out some potatoes and two onions, then broke a bulb of garlic off the rope that hung from over the sink. *You can't save every life that finds its way to your table.* Every surgeon learned that lesson, and combat surgeons were pummeled by it. *But zhè gāisǐ dì dìyù, it didn't stop me from wanting to!* Cooper pulled her favorite kitchen blade off of the magnetic knife strip, then put her gut-full of rage to good use. The garlic and onion went under the knife first -- she chopped them into a fine mince, then dumped them into the skillet and turned on the heat. The potatoes came next -- she had them looking like they had come out of a shredder by the time the onion mix had gone golden in the skillet. While the breakfast hash fried up, Cooper threw ingredients into her largest mixing bowl and added a measure of sourdough starter as well, to make herself a few loaves of bread dough to knead the hell out of. Cooper wanted to do violence to something -- and since Fatima's abusers were no where within reach, the sourdough would have to do.

Despite the exercise, the rage stuck, and roasted along with breakfast on the stove. *Why in xuèxīng dì dìyù, Cooper thought bitterly, was there that miserable rutting war in the first place? Why did we waste all of those lives? Ours? Theirs? What was the point of it all, if innocent civs like that poor creature up on the bridge are still going to be preyed upon? Alliance fought us to control the Border and the Rim. Now they've got it, and they don't do squat.*

And an even bitterer a thought, on the heels of that one: *Had we won, could our side have provided any better? Or would we have even tried?*

Luckily for the crew, it was nigh impossible to over-knead bread dough by hand.

TRANSLATIONS:

Zǎo ān = good morning (literally "Early peace") (Mandarin)

Xiè xiè = thank you (Mandarin)

Zhè gāisǐ dì dìyù = damn it to hell (Mandarin)

Xuèxīng dì dìyù = bloody hell (Mandarin)

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The hash had been shifted into the warmer plate; biscuits and gravy were done, four loaves of sourdough had been set aside to rise, and a tray of garlic-ginger bao was baking in the oven. Cooper had gone to the cargo bay to care for the stock, and returned to the kitchen with a gallon of fresh milk and five fresh eggs to find the first of the crew were up and helping themselves to breakfast.

"*Ata mārie!*" Hoss said cheerfully in his native tongue. The mechanic was a morning person -- unlike others among the crew, he regularly rolled out of bed bright-eyed and bushy-tailed

"*Kia ora,*" Cooper replied automatically as she put away the raw milk and eggs. That single phrase was just about the only Maori she spoke, and she was only reasonably certain that it meant "good morning to you, too." But mangle it as she did, it never failed to put a smile on Hoss's face to hear the route response he had taught her years ago.

"We're going to tackle the number-three portside hydraulic pump today," Hoss said, buttering a second (or third) buttermilk biscuit. "We'll see if that gasket we replicated will actually fit or not."

Sully sat on the opposite side of the long dining table. Unlike Hoss, he was sagging over his breakfast plate, recklessly pouring himself a cup of tea while yawning. At least the man was trying to navigate, Cooper thought with dour amusement. Neither Chang nor Halo were likely to be seen before lunch time. She reaching over to nudge Sully's mug more squarely beneath the stream of tea. "Got a question for you," Cooper said, once disaster was no longer imminent.

Sully stopped yawning and made an effort to open his eyes wide. "Shoot," he said, then muffled another yawn.

"I'm tackling each of the crew in turn with this today," she said. "Now that you all are hired crew, I don't want to be caught by surprise at some port somewhere by someone's inconvenient secret. Nobody without something to hide is going to have been shivering in the mud back there in the outback of Deadwood, looking for work on a derelict like our ship."

"Don't be calling my darling a derelict," Hoss said around a mouthful of buttermilk biscuit.

Cooper snorted at that, and fixed Sully with a no-nonsense stare. "So. You tell me -- you got anything you need to share?"

Sully took a long swallow of tea, his expression thoughtful. "I've got business contact, numbers, and smuggling drop-site coordinates all over the Kalidasa and Red Sun clusters, plus a scattering of solid business contacts elsewhere as well. But do I have any juicy secrets?" He glanced at Hoss, a clear question of whether or not Cooper wanted to have this conversation in front of a witness. Cooper gave a twitch of her lips at that, something almost a smile. Hoss would never be 'just crew', and her first mate already damn well knew it. Sully smiled and flexed his shoulders in a shrug of submission. Just checking, she figured that gesture to mean.

"Okay, well, straight up then," Sully replied verbally. "I haven't kept any secrets from you. At least, nothing that's business-related -- I'm sure you don't want to know the name of the lovely twins I lost my virginity to when I was 15... or was I 13?"

"I don't need to know your bedroom exploits. Just anything relevant for this ship's business."

Sully nodded sagely. "Then rest assured: I'll hide nothing from my captain which my captain needs to know. Trust me in that. Because whatever profits this ship, profits me. Capisce?"

That earned a brief, but real smile from the captain. Put that way... well, it was the first thing she had ever heard the suave pilot say which Cooper found herself able to believe in absolutely.

TRANSLATIONS:

Ata mārie = Good morning (Maori)

Kia ora = Good morning to you, too (Maori)

Capisce = understand? (Italian, slang -- the real word is "capsici")

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Abby came and went for breakfast while Cooper was back on the bridge, giving Fatima a break for a meal and her first morning prayers. So it was Halo who stepped next into her targeting sights, when he shuffled in later for brunch.

Cooper had already finished cleaning up the galley after breakfast, with two plates set aside and waiting in the cold box for the ship's late risers. The glazed bao were cooling on a wire rack for lunch; the last half dozen left in a bag of onions from Deadwood were about to turn, so Cooper was slicing them up in order to make an onion soup. She kept slicing away as she watched Halo pull out one of the breakfast plates and put it in the microwave unit for a warm-up.

"Got a question for you," she said, as the microwave dinged and he pulled out his meal. "I'm asking you the same thing I'm asking everyone else: do you have any secrets you need to share with me? Anything need-to-know, that might be important for the welfare of this ship?"

Maybe it was unfair to hit a man with a hard question like that, when he was still sleepy-eyed and clearly not running with a full operating system yet. But the way the pilot flinched, then froze for a heartbeat or two before shifting a wary, suddenly much-more-alert glance back her way left Cooper feeling fully justified in the underhanded maneuver.

"Nah," Halo said, sounding off-hand enough as he took a seat at the galley table.

In response, Cooper fixed him with a hard look. The captain had known since his first interview that the pilot was hiding something. She simply gave him the stinkeye, and let the knowing silence grow colder and more uncomfortable with each passing breath. It was a tactic officers and their mothers the 'Verse wide had learned to perfect, and although Halo tried for a time to feign immunity, he ultimately failed.

"Alright, look--" he finally said, putting down his fork in submission. "I didn't tell you the whole truth when I first came aboard. Truth is -- I'm AWOL. I skipped out on the Alliance late in the war. I was an ambulance driver, just like I said. I saw how folks got treated on both sides, and them that got stuck in the middle. It was the way the ones caught in the middle got treated that bothered me. They were just folk, just trying to make their way, minding no business but their own. I couldn't abide that. I woke up. I left. Yeah. AWOL. That carried a death sentence during the war, so there's no way I'm going to risk getting caught." Halo gave a long, heavy sigh, and picked up his fork again. "So there. Now you know. And I'm none too keen on anyone else finding out, neither."

Cooper continued to stare at him. The story was just about what she had expected to hear -- so she wasn't sure how much to trust it. The Alliance threatening an AWOL soldier with a death sentence didn't pass its smell test -- the Core worlds treasured their concept of humane punishment far too much for that. Now -- strap him down for a little bit of chemical rehabilitation in the form of psych reconstruction, maybe... that, to her thinking, would be a fate worse than a bullet.

"Uh huh," she said with a nod, still giving him a hard stare, enough to make it clear she was going to accept his story on face value, but that she wasn't entirely sold. "Any ports of call you expect might be too hot for you? Any places you know you can't show your face, which we should steer clear of?"

Halo began to pick at his food again. "No. I've been careful, and I switch up my disguises and IDs when there's any risk. So. Now you know. Happy now?"

"Satisfied," Cooper replied dryly. "Or at least I am for now." She gave her words a moment to sink in, and gave the pilot a last, direct look. Then she gathered up the onions she had sliced fine, and turned her back to the galley table. Until and unless Halo decided there was anything more to tell his captain, his captain had a pot of onion broth to get simmering.

BREAK #1

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Halo wasn't the only one the captain got the drop on before lunch.

Chang went from sleepy-eyed to baffled in a heartbeat at the question. "Secrets?" he said, blinking rapidly, looking as though his drowsy brain had just been kicked hard by a mule. "Me?"

Cooper cocked her head to one side in amusement and just stared at the man. He couldn't look more guilty in that moment than if she'd caught him with his hands in the ship's safe. "Know what?" she dead-panned. "You shouldn't ever think of playing poker without wearing eye shades. That innocent-look of yours doesn't do you any favors."

Chang swallowed visibly and groped after his mug of tea. Cooper just sat where she was, perched on her stool in the galley, arms folded across her chest. She watched her systems-man as he tried to collect his scattered cool, and wondered to herself if she were a sadist for enjoying his obvious discomfort so very much.

And in some discomfort he was. Chang's blue eyes were bulging, and he squirmed in his chair at the dining table as he obviously tried to think of what to say. Cooper almost felt a pang of pity for the man. Almost.

"C'mon," she poked at him. "It can't be that hard to tell me the truth."

Chang let go of a massive sigh. "I don't know what to say that won't get me in deeper trouble," he fessed up, then squirmed a little more. "Okay. So. Everything I said about my job experience is true-- the programming, the electronics, even the vacc-suit time. It was on a

couple ships and a skyplex, like I told you. Um, what I didn't tell you was that the skyplex was Intel HQ, over Shadow, and when I got there they added a bit more to my job description. I wasn't a spook, I swear, just an analyst." Chang's baby blues darted toward her nervously, and he gave another massive sigh, this time as though maybe relieved to share his story. "I was going to tell you, I swear I was -- but only when I had something to show you for it."

It was Cooper's turn to blink. "What does that mean?"

Chang patted the front left chest pocket of his utility vest. "I left with some data," he confessed. "A lot of it. I'm still sorting through it, trying to crack some encrypted sections. But I know there'll be details on here we'll find useful. Like where some of the Fleet battles were. Final headings of lost ships. That sort of thing."

If Cooper had been a dog, she would have had her ears pricked full mast and maybe needed a chin wipe for the instant salivation. "Possible salvage?" she couldn't help but echo back at him, and Chang's response was an eager nod and a wide grin.

"If you've got heading, speed, and mass, you can sim the course, see what grav wells it'll interact with and which way it's probably bent." He grimaced. "Problem is, most courses get complex enough to make my little handheld run crying for its mommy. Gimme some time on the ship's comp, once I've got it fully patched and running smooth, and then I can use the nav co-processor to sim the courses. Independent Command never fully disclosed ship losses because of the risk to morale, but there's still lots and lots of little engagements left floating derelict out there. "

Provided Chang weren't spinning her, that data cube he had was a hell of a treasure. There was hěn hǎo de hézuò cash to be made laying claim on drifting salvage from the war. It was a big, deep black and hard to find it cold, but anyone with coordinates in their hands were sitting on a fortune. Hell's bells -- the Jin Dui could make good money simply selling the information alone -- but much, much more could be made if they got to the salvage sites first, before anyone else stumbled across them.

"We haven't the basic supplies we need for a salvage run," Cooper said, seizing of the logistics of such an operation. "Before we can even think of it, we need an EVAC suit large enough to fit Hoss; we need to get the parts necessary patch the three defective suits we've got aboard."

"We need a couple of cutting torches, patch tape, scrapper's gel, ID transponders, and a whole slew of stuff," Chang said, eager to contribute, now that his confession was made and his secret had been embraced. "I know they say it takes money to make money, and I hate it that they're right. But maybe we could get a loan or something? Or get Van Hooven to back us?"

"We sell our cargo on Greenleaf at a 10% mark-up, and we hang on to that cash and make our way for Beylix," Cooper said, seeing the puzzle pieces of her ship's future course begin to fall

together. "We scrimp and save with Beylix in mind, and find all the gear we need for a salvage run. You think you'll have some coordinates for me by then -- say, a month and a half or so? Depending on what ports we have to string together on the way to Beylix?"

Chang thought about that, frowned, then nodded slowly. "That nav co-processor, you know it has three cores running in tandem to check each other, but I can install some custom drivers to make them work separately and give you three times the juice. It won't even disrupt normal functions as long as I..." The thoughtful look on his face vanished suddenly as his blue eyes cut past the captain, toward the aft hatch. "What the--"

Cooper turned.

Polly the goat stood in the hatchway of to the aft stairs. The white Nubian cocked her head to one side and gave a friendly blaaaat of greeting.

"*Gǒu shǐ*," Cooper muttered. It wasn't the first time the diary does had pulled a houdini, and no doubt wouldn't be the last -- they were goats, after all, and bored goats at that. "Gimme a biscuit," she told Chang, who had yet to wear out his Core-boy fretfulness around the ship's livestock.

Chang handed her the biscuit off his own plate, buttered and spread with ginger jam. She nodded an absent thanks and held the treat out to Polly before starting her careful, slow approach. The goats were gentle beasts, but they were regular quantum theorists of animal kingdom, and once they got a nibble of freedom, like hell was getting caught and penned up again part of their agenda. Try to just walk up and grab them by their leather collars and you had a chase on your hands. Bribery, however, worked nine times out of ten. Well, or maybe a solid eight.

"Cookies," Cooper sing-songed, wafting the jelly-smeared biscuit so that its perfume would reach the doe's nose well before Cooper had limped into reach. She and Hoss had been training the goats that "cookie" was any treat a goat wanted, and both Polly and Anna were quick to add the word to their vocabularies. Polly's head was up and her nose was working; if the ponderous, hanging ears could have, they'd have been vertical in anticipation.

"*Me-eh!*" It was a short, sharp blast of greed. A buttermilk biscuit alone might not have done the trick, but the glistening frosting of golden ginger jam had poor Polly enthralled. "Chang, you are a genius," Cooper murmured as she fed the goat with one hand, while slipping her other through Polly's leather milking collar. "Get me a belt or something," she added. "The general supplies locker second from left, it's got some bungees. Quick-like, please."

Chang nearly burned the deck getting to the storage lockers. He snatched out a handful of bungees, then returned at a warier pace, genius enough not to rush up into a herbivore's face. Cooper took two of the elastic cords and knotted them together quickly, then hooked one

through the goat's collar as a makeshift leash. Gentle as the does were, they massed well more than half of Cooper's own body weight, and four legs vs Cooper's one-and-a-half meant the goat would win in a wrestling match every time. "Another biscuit, please -- and don't spare the jam."

Chang went to slice and slather another bribe, while Cooper reached out to toggle the all-ship comm panel beside the hatchway. "The goats have taken themselves a walkabout," she announced. "Anyone below-decks, grab Anna and get her back in the stable-pod; she's probably worked the lid off the grain bin and is stuffing herself with a second breakfast."

"On my way," Hoss replied from somewhere. The words through comm were followed by the sound of heavy boots from engineering at the other end of the long maindeck hall.

"If the does left their door open, we've likely got hens lose too," Cooper added, on a second thought. "Do a head count. We don't want another one roosting in the mid-deck heat exchanger again." She toggled the line off and accepted the biscuit Chang gave her. "Back to your bunk," she said sternly to Polly as she led the goat back to its stable pod, holding the treat along with her cane should she need the lure. But the goat was leash-savvy -- she knew she was caught, and followed readily enough as Cooper escorted her back the way she can come. They headed down the aft hallway and toward the cargo bay gangway.

Chang's admission had been the best of bombshells, Cooper thought as she walked, unable to resist preoccupation with the promise she'd just been given. If Chang truly had a trove of High Command war records, and he really could predict those courses... *Niúbī*... Cooper wanted that to prove out so badly she could just about taste it. If the *Jin Dui* could claim salvage on a drifting military derelict, the financial reward would be substantial. But first, they had to acquire enough of the necessary gear to take a walk-about outside the *Jin-Dui's* hull, and who among them could safely take such a walk? Sully, she was pretty sure... Chang claimed experience... both she and Hoss had done a little EVA during their time aboard the *ISF Diamondback*. Who else was trainable, or who was she willing to risk on a dangerous hull-crawl?

The logistics of a possible salvage operation followed the captain down the stairs to the cargo bay. As she rounded the gangway catwalk over the wide, partially-full chamber, she spotted the second wayward goat at once. Anna, the black-and-white spotted Nubian, stood on the lower stair landing, scratching a sharp hipbone against the railing. Cooper took the last step off the catwalk and onto the top stair down, with Polly ambling at her heels as passive as a lamb. Below, she heard the sound of someone already in the stable pod. "Cookies!" Hoss sang out, accompanied by the rustle and rattle of molasses cob being poured into the milking station. Anna heard it too -- the spotted goat gave an ecstatic *meh!* and vaulted off of the landing, scrambling after the promised treat.

... *gǒu shǐ* ... Cooper had a split-second's recognition of her dubious situation -- she was taking a step down the stairs, her weight on her bad leg, with a four-stone herd animal immediately behind her. Then Polly surged after her stablemate with a resonant warbling "*Blaahweh!*"

Cooper was already dropping the makeshift lead and grabbing after the railing, but eighty pounds of lunging Nubian sideswiped her, slamming her off her feet and head-first down the remaining stairs.

Cooper shouted an obscenity -- what, exactly, she couldn't later recall. Reflex was to reach out and break her fall with her hands; instead she ducked her head and tucked a shoulder as if she could turn the fall into a roll, battling instinct in an effort to protect her hands. The metal deck of the midway landing came up hard -- she skidded on her bad side and cracked her skull hard against the landing rail, while Polly's dainty hooves clattered down like knives just in front of her nose. The rest of Cooper's body slammed into the railing, saving her from a longer fall, while Polly pivoted nimbly to avoid stepping on her and clattered away down the stairs, ignorant of any disaster except her stablemate getting to inhale all of the sweetened grain before the white goat could claim her own share.

Cooper thought she heard her name being called, but her ears weren't processing. Pain hazed everything -- but pain was something she had already learned to overcome and disassociate from. *Niúbí!* was the sole, burning thought in her head, aghast at the ignominy of having been knocked ass over teakettle by a frakking goat. Cooper lay where she was, the thin railing against her back holding another tumble at bay, and carefully flexed the fingers of both hands, unwilling to acknowledge or accept any other physical sensation until she had confirmed her hands were unharmed.

Fingers flexed and extended and shook. Her hands were all right. Anything else was survivable, so long as her hands were undamaged. Cooper sucked in a ragged breath like a prayer of thanks, and let her surgeon's microfocus go.

"Coop!" Thunder hammered the deck as Hoss came dashing up the remaining half-flight of stairs to her rescue. It was easy to forget how fast the big man could move -- that idle thought drifted through her mind, a happy distraction from the pain now demanding its share of her attention as the adrenaline from the fall itself burned away. Cooper blinked her eyes and began a surgeon's mental checklist -- vision was hazy, ears were ringing, and the back of her head hurt from where it had hit the rail. Probable concussion. Shoulder and chest hurt from where she had landed -- but breath sounds were good, she could inhale fully without any difficulty, ribs must be fine--

"Coop?!" Hoss was on his knees now in front of her on the midway landing, his hands huge and gentle against her shoulder. "Don't move, you took a tumble, we'll get a stretcher."

"Someone'll have to make one first," she grumbled at him. The thought of the rest of the crew seeing her like this, crumpled on the stairs like a weak gorram fàntǒng, gave her the burst of strength she needed to attempt to rise. Hoss checked that immediately, however, holding her down easily with one hand as he pressed something against the back of her skull.

"You clocked yourself in the head something good," he said, his voice pitched in that professional rumble she had heard for years, in triage pits and operating theaters beyond count. "The doctor's on her way, so just sit and wait for her."

"I am the doctor," Cooper growled at him.

Hoss smiled at her and patted her cheek fondly with the hand which wasn't applying pressure to the back of her skull. "No, my *whaiaipo*," he said. "No. Not right now, you're not."

TRANSLATIONS:

gǒu shǐ = dog shit (Mandarin)

me-eh! = hot damn! (goat)

hěn hǎo de hézuò = damn fine (Mandarin)

Blaaaahweh = waaait for me! (goat)

niúbī = fucking awesome (literally "cow cunt") (Mandarin)

fàntǒng = useless person, literally "rice bucket" as in only useful for storing food (Mandarin)

whaiaipo = sweetheart (Maori)

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BREAK #2

The infirmary bay was still a useless shell. The ship's previous crew had stripped it down so completely, they had even removed the cabinet doors and the exam table. So in an emergency, they made do with the battered couch from the passenger lounge, dragged into the searingly well-lit infirmary bay.

"This thing smells like piss," Cooper grumbled, picking a bit of stuffing from the sofa's arm, which had been damaged by gunfire back during the ship's departure from Deadwood. "God forbid anyone shine a blacklight on this thing. We gotta replace this before the *Jin Dui* dares pick up any passengers."

"Hold still," Abby said sternly, finishing the application of a pressure bandage across the back of Cooper's skull. Cooper was bitterly annoyed with the entire situation -- not only was she mortified at her own accident, but she had been waiting for the opportunity to assess Abby's skills as a combat medic. It was a little hard to do that when it was the back of your own head being treated. Still, what she had observed she grudgingly approved of. The medic didn't fuss about, and her small talk consisted of the risks of introduction of infection to the emissary and intracranial veins, and the likelihood of that leading to mortal osteomyelitis -- good standard scare-the-civvies stuff. With Hoss's assistance, Abby had irrigated the scalp laceration to flush out any gross contaminants. The compression bandage came next -- it needed to stay in place for 30 or so minutes, Cooper knew, so that the compression would constrict the bleeding, before they could suture the laceration closed.

"We need surgicel and gelfoam," Abby complained. "At the very least. And 5-0 absorbable sutures. I am going to have to use 3-0 on this, and that is not ideal."

"It's not," Cooper agreed. "But it's the back of my head. Unless you decide to shave the strip bald and sign your name in sutures, no one will ever notice."

Abby snorted at that, although whether that was from humor or annoyance, Cooper couldn't tell.

"You could always just braid it," Hoss suggested. "It's only an uncomplicated shearing lac, after all."

"Braid the wound?" Abby said, aghast.

"Braid the hair. During the war, when we were running low on suturing supplies and surgical staples, it's something we used to do for minor head lacerations," Hoss explained. "Once the wound is clean and irrigated, you moisten about a dozen or so hairs from either side with saline or sterilized water, then twist them into a thread. Then you tie them in a simple square knot, then tighten the knot with forceps, maybe dab it with a spot of dermabond if you've got it --" Cooper felt the deft tug of Hoss's example. "Like that, before the forceps. It works, you just gotta be sure a fox hole buddy knows to snip them out again after 10 days or so."

"Doesn't hurt as bad as a line of mattress sutures or figures eights," Cooper agreed, as Abby leaned in closer to peer at Hoss's handiwork. "And it doesn't interfere with future suturing like hemostatic agents, if you find time later to do it proper."

"That method does not allow for much wound security," Abby said. "Would not wearing a helmet rub it open again in short order?"

"Depends on where on the head it rests. And if you've got the supplies and the time, suturing is was always preferable option. But we didn't have as the same resupply of preferable options like your side did," Cooper replied. The quip came out sounding more bitter than Cooper had intended. She winced.

"Captain doesn't mean it like that," Hoss said.

"*Bī zhū*. Don't apologize for me. I'll apologize when I need too," she snapped at Hoss, before giving Abby a grudging look. "But yeah. Like he said. I didn't mean like that."

"Yes you did," Abby said crisply, her manner starchily professional. "And it was true. The Alliance was exceptional at establishing a steady supply line, and I know Alliance troops did not suffer the same sort of deprivations which the Browncoats did. I saw some of that firsthand, and it turned my stomach." She reached after her personal medkit, and pulled out a small, sleek

handheld scanner. Cooper frowned in surprise to see it. She herself hadn't handled a working scan unit since the end of the war.

"You've got your own equipment, I see."

"A few things, yes," Abby said. "Of course I'll loan what I have to the ship until the ship can afford replacements. But for the moment -- that was quite the fall you took. Let me make sure there is nothing I have missed."

"No--" Cooper began to protest, trying to rise.

"Yes," Hoss overruled her, putting a hand on her shoulder and easily holding the captain in place.

Abby chuckled with amusement, her eyes focused on the scanner's small screen while she slowly took a reading along the curves of Cooper's skull. "Your assistance is appreciated," told Hoss cheerfully.

"No it's not," Cooper complained, while Hoss shot Abby a wry look.

"I'm sure you're just as much a pain in the tush when you're a patient," he told Abby. "Nurses -- they're reasonable, generally, but doctors are always a pìgu huángjiā téngtòng."

Abby laughed again, as she ran the scanner down along the left side of Cooper's body, the side which Cooper had landed on. "I am sure you are correct," Abby agreed. "Orderlies never miss a thing, do they?" The amused smile suddenly vanished, and the medic's dark brows drew together quizzically as she looked at her screen. She ran the scanner over Cooper's hip again, then looked to Cooper in question. "I'm not sure what I'm seeing here..." Abby said

Cooper groaned and closed her eyes. "I know the hip isn't cracked again. Been there, done that, ain't going to forget the experience any time soon."

Abby gave the scanner another pass. Then she thumbed it off and slid the instrument into her pocket. "Right now, you are not my captain. You are my patient. So tell me what is going on with your injured leg."

"Better show her," Hoss said. He squeezed Cooper's shoulder, then headed for the infirmary door. "Go ahead. I'll stand guard and make sure no one comes along to peek through the window."

Cooper frowned after him, but her hands went to the buckle of her belt. "Hell no, might as well hit comm and summon everyone," she grouched as she dropped her trou. "Get a pole, I'll put on a show, maybe sell some tickets while we're at it," she complained, trying to keep her manner

unaffected. But she couldn't make herself look at Abby's face when the other woman made a small sound of dismay.

Cooper knew how bad her leg looked. Even now, years after, it was hideous. The irregular radius of burns were rutted and ridged, twisted and discolored -- and in the center was a long, deep valley where the meat of her leg was simply gone.

"Tell me what happened?" Abby finally asked, in a voice which had gone crisply starched and professional again.

"Alliance crowd-buster." Figuring Abby was done, Cooper pulled her trousers back on as she spoke. "My trophy from that last action on Hera. Our field hospital was set up in the abandoned Companion's Hall on Whore's Mountain at the southeast end of the valley, along the south fork of the Serenidate River. The first couple of weeks of Serenity Valley was relatively light stuff -- lots of hurry-up and wait, with companies digging trenches, battle groups getting hunkered in wherever they had good ground for it, defensive lines being set up, that sort of thing, with a few small hard scraps between our boys and the Alliance troops as one side or the other made feints to test each other's mettle. During the first two weeks of it, most of the real action was farther east along the New Sinai Front. But that changed on April 18th. The fighting got serious, and got serious fast. We had the third or fourth wave of casualties of the day when the Alliance just dropped a firestorm on our heads. One moment, I was up to my elbow's in some poor skut's bowels trying to put her back together, and the next... big bada boom. Best I could figure later, the metal operating table next to me must have flown up and shielded me from the worst of the blast that took out the rest of the surgical hall. But when I woke, I had a hell of a shrapnel wound in my leg, the once-grand Companion Hall was rubble, and there were only two other survivors left in the entire place."

Abby sank down to sit on the far arm of the couch. Her expression was sober but sympathetic. "What happened next?" she asked.

Cooper shrugged. "If your scanner was working right, you saw my hip. I couldn't stand -- my pelvis was busted and had been separated from my spine. I was lucky my femoral artery wasn't affected by the mortar wound, but the blast took a big chunk out of my upper thigh. I was shredded by blast debris, and some of it had once been my mates from the unit." Her voice and face were stoic, but Cooper avoided Abby's sympathetic eyes. "Hell, I picked out of my thigh a piece of jawbone with gold teeth still attached. I knew the man whose mouth they'd belonged in. I shouldn't have been alive, and there was an active period of time there where I began to wish I wasn't."

"When we heard about the Companion Hall hospital massacre, it was that the Browncoats were using the hospital as a human shield for an artillery unit," Abby said. "The Browncoats were warned, but after they shot down an overcrowded Nightingale ambulance and all aboard were killed, the battlefield commanders were forced to act."

"I know the official story," Cooper said bitterly. "It's bullshit. The only weapons in that place were the personal firearms assigned to staff, and whatever came in on patients. We were displaying the Gold Crescent and the Red Cross, and transmitting our noncombatant codes on all frequencies. The way I figure it, Alliance command knew that being on top of Whore Mountain as we were, the hospital was visible for miles up and down the battlefield. It had been a clear blue day -- as I recall it, it was the only day of clear weather we'd had in weeks. It was well past noon, and there was no cloud cover. Everyone saw it happen. Blasting us to bloody rubble was a helluva blow to Browncoat morale, and so what if the patient on my table at that moment was some poor gut-shot Alliance trooper? Small sacrifice, right? What happened there a war crime, no doubt it was. But if you win the fight, you get to write it down for the history books." Cooper took a deep breath, then shrugged. "So. It sucked. And I'm sure my side did bad shit, too."

"What happened after you woke up?" Abby asked. "Mortars don't generally inflict burn wounds -- at least, not like that one."

"No," Cooper said wearily. "That was me. When I woke up, it was late afternoon and a couple of scouts from the 76th Battalion were hauling me out of the wreckage of the operating theatre. They moved me and the other two survivors they'd found into the only stable part of the hall and laid us there on blankets. They cast around for whatever supplies they could hump back down the mountain, and promised they'd send back an evac team for us. The three of us waited, and did what little we could for one another. Pavel died during the night; Inga died the next morning. A two-man Alliance recon team showed up the afternoon after Inga died. Apparently, they were looking to see if the site could be bulldozed and turned into the Alliance battle command's HQ. They were surprised to find me still kicking -- okay, well, lying there -- and they gave me some water. One of them had a flask of whisky -- good stuff, too. She gave me her flask, and they both swore they'd come back with a med team for me. After the promises from the 76th, I didn't believe them any farther than I could spit. After they left, I drank some of the whisky, then poured the rest of it on my leg. It was going gangrenous, and I knew I couldn't amputate solo and survive. So I doused the wound and cauterized it."

"Oh god." Abby swallowed and made a face. "That sounds dreadful."

Cooper shrugged. "Live or die. Make a choice and stick to it." She managed a dry laugh. "I'm damn stubborn. It's a character flaw of mine, I know. It makes me hell to live with, maybe -- but I'm still alive today because I'm more stubborn than I am sensible."

"So what happened then?" Abby asked. "How did you get down off the mountain?"

"Your side came through. Those two recon skuts reported to their officers, their officers filed the paperwork, and approximately 36 hours after the bombing, an Alliance ambulance ship showed up, plucked me up out of the ruins, and transported me to their orbital mercy ship. The staff

there took quite an interest in me, since they knew I was a fellow surgeon. They reconstructed my hip, stabilized my spine, even gave me a shot of rejuv for the leg. But then I was shipped on to the medical unit of the POW processing center on Hera station. All interest ceased and desisted there, along with the rejuv injections. The newtech bios had to be saved up for their own troopers, I suppose. Still, it means there was some assisted tissue growth -- I can probably thank that single injection for being able to walk at all. Count your blessings if you got them, right?"

"Right," Abby said, without any conviction. She blew out a breath and made of show of taking out her handheld scanner again. "Well, I think that pressure bandage has been on for long enough. Shall we look and see if the wound is ready to be closed?"

"Be my guest," Cooper said.

Abby deftly removed the bandage as Hoss came back to assist. "It looks ready," Abby said as she leaned close again to study the wound. "Do you have a preference?" she asked Cooper then. "We have 3-0 nonabsorbable filament nylon in your choice of mattress line or figures-of-eight, or I can do this special and practice your braiding method for old times sake."

Cooper snorted at the medic's dry humor. "You mean miss out on a teaching opportunity? Braid away."

With Hoss hovering close by to oversee, Abby went to work. Cooper let her eyes close and went null-state, ignoring the tugs at her hair, and the various lower aches and pains which a pair of painkillers could not overwhelm. Instead of the pain, she centered her thoughts on the logistics of getting their passenger quarters up to pass. A coat of whitewash on the walls, for starters. The bed frames were still bolted in place -- they didn't need to replace those, but mattresses had to be purchased. Linens that were new (or at least looked it); a dresser for each room, fixtures over the bare lighting. Did the doors all roll closed properly in their tracks? What about the--

"Done," said Abby then, dropping her forceps on the tray and stripping off her gloves. "I'll want to take another look at that this evening before you turn in for the night, and if I don't like the look of how it is holding, then I will suture it up. And you know the drill -- you took a knock to the head and you strained that leg of yours in the fall. I would prescribe full bed rest for you if I --"

"No way," Cooper countered. "I got too much work to do--"

-- if I thought you would tolerate it," Abby overrode the interruption. "If you will compromise with me, I will allow you to recline in the galley observation lounge."

"Deal!" Cooper agreed.

"Hoss, if you will escort our captain there," Abby said.

Hoss rumbled an assent and made to pick Cooper up. She held up one hand, delaying that. "Quid pro quo," she said to Abby. "Your turn."

Abby had been beginning to clean up. She stopped and looked at Cooper in surprise. "What?"

"You heard my sordid little secret, Baldwin. Now it's your turn. What secrets are you sitting on which I should know about -- as your captain, as might affect this ship and her crew?"

The woman stood and stared at Cooper for a moment, her pale skin flushing crimson. For a moment, Cooper thought Abby might deny she had any secrets to share, but instead, the woman let out a long, long sigh. "You will not tell this to the rest of the crew?" she said to Cooper and Hoss.

Hoss made a zipping motion over his mouth and mimed throwing something away over his shoulder, while Cooper just cocked her head and gave Abby a stern look. "Of course. For as long as it remains irrelevant to the ship's welfare."

Abby sighed again, then rolled back her shoulders and stood a little straighter. "My mother is Clarissa Bow. The holovid star. And my father is Abraham Baldwin, CEO of Steadfast Pharmaceuticals and former team captain of the New Cardiff Bulldogs and Core Championship MVP."

Hoss grinned in delight -- he was a massive rugby fan, enough so to likely recognize Baldwin's father by name -- while Cooper blinked and tried to make sense of the confession. "So what the hell are you doing on my ship?"

Abby managed an edged smile. "Trying to stay as far away as I can from the both of them," she replied. "And that is all I want to say about it."

"*Shì*," Cooper replied, while Hoss nodded his understanding. "Is that all?" Cooper added, dead-pan.

"What?" Abby retorted, flushing red again.

"So you got a famous celebrity and a big-name athlete-slash-multi-gazillionaire titan of commerce for parents. That's gotta suck, but you got anything I can take advantage of for this ship?" Cooper repeated slowly, as if talking to a child.

"If it's money you're--" Abby began, clearly defensive, before she caught the teasing edge to the captain's question; the medic clearly had no access to her parents' staggering accounts. Abby's

flush remained, and she pointed at the Infirmary door. “Get her up to the main deck, and out of my infirmary!” she growled.

Hoss laughed and scooped Cooper up in his arms. “Yes ma’am!” he chuckled as he carried her from the room, and headed for the passenger lounge stairs.

TRANSLATIONS LOG:

Bī zhù = shut up (Mandarin)

Pìgu huángjiā téngtòng = royal pain in the ass (Mandarin)

shì = yes (Mandarin)

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BREAK #3

Dinner happened -- between them, Fatima and Hoss converted the onion broth to a potato-onion soup, then produced sourdough cheese toast and tempura onion rings, with Hoss’s favorite black bean brownies for dessert. Chang and Abby had cleaned up in the galley, and Cooper had simply stretched out on the low sofa in the observation lounge and watched it all happen, offering bits of unnecessary advice from the peanut gallery. She had her hand-held and a wireless stylus, and devoted her confinement to drinking in commodities data from the Red Sun and Kalidasa Clusters.

Soon, it would be alterday shift change. Hoss had already passed through to let her know he was headed down to workout on the Springflex weight equipment, one of the few truly useful bits of scavenge they’d inherited from the previous crew. Hoss had been working out twice a day on the thing, and had already lost much of the extra weight he had packed on during his time working on the cruiseliner. He would shower after his workout today, Cooper knew, and then want to carry her down to her cabin.

The commodities data was making her head swim -- she forced herself to focus on it, trying to absorb the ebb and flow of markets within clusters. Her father had loved economics, had thrived on running his business and serving his customers, always striving to have on hand for them what they needed before they knew they wanted it. He would have loved the challenge of a working cargo ship; an ‘emporium for the frontier’ he would have pronounced it, and then proceeded to make the ledgers balance. Somehow. There were moments when Cooper felt the full weight and responsibility of the position she found herself in -- but if she had learned nothing else during her years in the war, it was how to deal with those moments of despair: deny them, then outrun them. If you assumed false confidence long enough and hard enough, it became a self-fulfilling reality. And besides -- failure wasn’t an option. The lives and livelihood of her crew depended on her.

Soft footsteps in the galley caught her ear. Fighting fatigue, Cooper blinked her eyes and tore them away from the rows of data displayed on the large smart-paper wall screen, and looked over her shoulder to the galley. Fatima was there, refilling the insta-kettle after having poured a pot for tea. Cooper blinked again, almost not recognizing her alterday pilot. The woman had put aside her burqa. Her hair was worn back in a single, ebony braid, and her head was wrapped in a loose rust-red shayla scarf. She wore a green kurti tunic and dungarees with the legs rolled up to the calf: Cooper recognized both items as clothing reclaimed, patched and laundered after the firefight on the ship's deck on Deadwood. Fatima caught her look and smiled. Cooper tried to look away, knowing she was staring -- but it was the very first time she had seen the woman with the enveloping burqa off. Damn, but the pilot was even more lovely than Cooper had guessed.

Fatima stirred some cream and sugar into her cup of tea, then poured a second cup and brought it over to Cooper. The woman sat cautiously on the three-legged ottoman beneath the wall screen and sipped her tea for a moment, while Cooper tried to stop staring and tasted her own. Her cup was straight and unmuddled, just as Cooper preferred it.

"You asked me a question this morning," Fatima said. "I wish to answer it now. I do not want to hold secrets from you. I am just frightened --" She hesitated, frowning over her choice of words, then took solace in another sip of tea. "I have family alive yet. My parents and brothers, they live on Persephone. I could have reached out to them while we were onworld. But I knew they think me dead, and that they would prefer to have me so, than to take me back as I am." Fatima held up a hand, silencing Cooper when Cooper had been gathering herself for a response. "I married onto the *Parysatis*. My father arranged it, and it was a good choice for me. I was my husband's junior wife, but he was a good man, and his first wife welcomed me like a sister. My father-in-law was captain of the ship, the entire crew my husband's family by blood or by marriage. I learned to pilot the ship and they sponsored me for my license. My husband and I sought to have children of our own; I helped care for my husband's two beautiful sons, and for the other small children on the ship. I adored my new family, and felt adored in return. Even my mother-in-law... well, maybe she was not as welcoming, but she was at least mostly kind. It was a good life. I loved it as it was.'

Fatima paused for another sip. Cooper drank her own and waited in silence, giving her alterday pilot the space she needed to navigate her story. "I did lie to you, when I said it happened during the War," Fatima began again. "It was October of last year. The *Parysatis* was a Caravel class transport. We had a set loop of Londinium to Persephone to Beaumonde, with trade partners who had done business with my father-in-law for decades. We had left Beaumonde and were returning to Persephone, and were just passing out range of the Kalidasa comm relays when the attack came. The ship was a pirate corsair called the *Best Vengeance*. They overtook us, and many of the crew were killed during the boarding. They stripped the *Parysatis* of whatever they considered of value -- myself and two of my sisters-in-law included. My sister-wife and her sons, all of my nieces and and nephews... they were lined up and shot or stabbed. Even the babies --" She stopped speaking for a time, her face hidden from view as she contemplated the

tea cup she held on her lap. But then Fatima took a shaking breath and lifted her face again. "My sisters-in-law were given to the crew for their enjoyment. I know one of them was... cut to death. I do not know what happened to the other. Captain Detrick kept me for himself. Later, he grew tired of me. He contacted a broker, who made arrangements for my sale. A wealthy man of business saw my adverts and chose to purchase me for himself. So Captain Detrick entrusted me to a courier. I was in a cryogen chamber for a time, and when I woke, the courier had me in an apartment on Deadwood. He wanted to clean me up and dress me properly for handing me over to my new master, but he felt presenting me in what he had been provided -- a yellow burqa and a shift -- would mean he would risk not receiving a bonus. The courier tied me up and went to purchase me more revealing new clothing; I managed to free myself, and I ran for it. I made my way to the Yankton grav-rail and managed to sneak aboard a freight car. I was discovered and put off at the rail stop nearest Deadwood, and rather than risk going back to Yankton, I just began to walk. It was chance that brought me to the camp in time to learn about your ship, and that you were hiring. I am afraid of what would have become of me, had the *Jin Dui* not been there. Certainly the courier is still searching for me, and the new master who had purchased me. And Captain Detrick and the *Best Vengeance*. That is what I fear most -- that he is out there somewhere, looking to reclaim me. I will cut my own throat before I go back aboard that ship. Better a death by my own hands, than what Detrick and his crew would do to me."

Cooper found she was still staring. The grim story was both something like what she had guessed -- and entirely unexpected. "You know anything about your buyer on Deadwood?" she asked, scrambling for what angles demanded closest inspection.

Fatima shook her head. "A businessman," she said. "A rich man who admired my eyes. That is all the courier said."

"You got a name for this courier?"

Fatima again shook her head. "Detrick told me what my fate was, and then put me in the cryo chamber for transport. When the courier woke me, he never said his name. He was short -- my height -- and stocky. Dark hair, dark eyes. He wasn't full Chinese -- but he was Asianic of some mix. I did not see anything unusual about his clothing -- he was dressed conservatively by Persephone standards, work clothing and dark, but quality fabrics and that were well tailored. He had a tattoo on the back of one hand, I think it was of a horse's head, but the room was dark and his hands were never still enough for me to catch more than a glimpse of it."

Cooper nodded, disappointed but still filing away that data for later use. "And Detrick and his ship. Anything more you can tell me about them?"

Fatima's smoke-green eyes had gone huge, and Cooper could see the hammering of her pulse at along the curve of her throat. But the woman controlled her fear and continued to answer her captain's questions. "Captain Detrick's commerce is in secrets and information as much as it is

valuable goods. He is brilliant -- and he enjoys tormenting friends and foes alike. He bragged to me that he always has an ace up his sleeve, and that his allies fear him, while his enemies never know what has hit them. He takes delight in that -- in causing fear, and in the respect such fear wins him."

"What ports does the *Best Vengeance* favor?"

"I don't know. I was not allowed to know such things, and my movements aboard the ship were... restricted."

Cooper nodded, not wanting to press further. "If you can think of anything about the *Best Vengeance* -- like what weapons did she use against the *Parysatis*, any bits of information the captain did let slip around you, please let me know. Your family back on Persephone -- are you sure you don't want to contact them? We can find a clever way to do so on the sly, if you think Detrick or someone might be watching them as a way to find you."

Fatima shook her head sadly. "No. My family is very old-fashioned, very traditional Sunni. My father and brothers would see my living, bespoiled as I am, as bringing dishonor to our family. Even my mother would turn her face away. If they believe me dead with my husband and his family, they can grieve in peace for me; if they know I live in disgrace, they will think of me with shame. Better I remain dead to them than that."

It took Cooper a few moments to tamp down her rage at that statement. She kept her expression carefully neutral and took one, two, then three swallows of tea before trusting herself to speak again. "As you wish. If you change your mind on that, don't hesitate to tell me. Thank you for trusting in me enough to share your story. I needed to know the possible dangers. You are safe about this ship -- and if anyone aboard makes you feel in any way uncomfortable, you tell me. *Dǒng ma?*"

"*Shì*," Fatima answered. She finished her tea, and seeing that Cooper's cup was dry as well, she gracefully rose and took both cups to the galley. "I need to relieve Halo on the bridge," she said. "Do you need anything before I go?"

"*Bù, xiè xiè*," Cooper replied. She turned her eyes back to the wall screen and stared blindly at the data there, while Fatima padded off quietly for the bridge.

Cooper couldn't have said how long had passed before Hoss turned up again at her elbow. "Coop?" he asked. "You all right?"

Cooper rubbed her dry eyes. "Sure. Just fine."

Hoss snorted at that. "Yeah, sure. It's been a longer day than most, I'd say. You ready to hit the hay?"

Normally, sleep was something Cooper struggled to find. But suddenly, she felt her exhaustion as though it were a weight draped around her neck and shoulders. "I don't think I could walk," she confessed, when weakness was normally something she denied with a vengeance. "Even if Abby would let me, I don't think I could."

"Then let's get you settled in." Hoss scooped her up as though she were weightless. "Don't worry about breakfast in the morning, or about the stock," he said as he carried her for the aft stairs and the mid-deck crew quarters corridor. "Trust the rest of us to see to it. We can manage without you for a day, you know."

Cooper rested her head against her old friend's shoulder. "Trust you all, huh?" she murmured. "I asked everyone else, you know. What secrets they had I should know, for the sake of the ship. But I never asked you. You got anything I need to know about, that I don't already know?"

Hoss gave a small, guilty sound at that. "You know that little packet of candied ginger you were so excited to find in the back of the dry goods bin? I'm afraid it's gone. I was craving it the other night, and had a nibble. And then one nibble turned into another, and next thing, it was all gone. Forgive me?"

Of all of the secrets Copper had heard that day, this was the only one to make her laugh.

TRANSLATIONS:

dǒng ma = understand? (Mandarin)

shì = yes (Mandarin)

Bù, xiè xiè = No thank you (Mandarin)