

Chapter 3:
Doubts



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“I wasn’t the only person the Zats experimented on,” Rat said. “There were others, some volunteers, others forced to it.”

The *Exile* had finished its first burn, and half the crew had gone off shift. Juanita had taken over scan from Neva, and Jason was minding their course. Normally Fiona would have remained on the bridge while Rat was off, but in this case that wasn’t an option. The new first mate wanted explanations, and he couldn’t exactly blame her.

So here they were, sitting around the galley, with currents of distrust and pain thick in the air. Marcus was feeling defensive, which wasn’t exactly helping the situation, because Fiona had picked up on it and was wondering why.

Fiona took a sip of her coffee, watching Rat closely over the rim of her cup. “Go on.”

“Have you ever heard of Furies?”

Fiona shivered, but Alouette only looked baffled. Seeing the look, Fiona said, “They’re some kind of Zat special ops soldiers. Scary as hell. It took ten of us to kill one of them in the last battle, and that was after she was wiping out a good portion of the squad all by herself.”

“She wasn’t by herself, not really,” Neva said. Although her voice was firm, her eyes were sad, and she kept glancing worriedly at Marcus. “They’re *never* alone.”

Fiona frowned slightly. “Explain.”

“From what we’ve been able to piece together, the Furies were taken from their homeworlds as part of something called the Youth Advantage Program. They were all girls between the ages of ten and twelve at the time. Zatvian doctors then proceeded to implant them with specialized systems. Heat sensors so they can ‘see’ in the dark. Electroplaques, so they can deliver an electrical shock to an opponent. Other things. They were fitted out with permanent ports into the spine and jugulars, which were hooked to a drip that could provide any number of hormones or drugs.”

“So they’re hopped up on drugs? That’s why they weren’t reacting to any pain when we’d hit them?” Fiona asked uncertainly.

Neva’s mouth thinned. “Yes. Adrenaline, pain killers...all the things to make the perfect controlled soldiers. Along with one last abomination. The Zats grew a symbiote inside of them, an entire secondary nervous system, which would handle the extra sensory capabilities, monitor the blood, and control the drip.”

Marcus stared down at his hands. **God no, my little girl, tortured, just want to get her back/kill the bastards who did this (pain/grief/guilt/hate)**

“Make no mistake,” Rat said quietly, making certain he caught Fiona and Alouette’s eyes. “The symbiote is alive and conscious. It talks to them, controls them. The Furies are girls, young women now, with a *thing* inside of them that they can’t escape. The drugs suppress emotion as well as pain, and I think they have to. Otherwise...the Furies would be screaming, tearing at themselves in an attempt to get rid of the monster inside.”

Alouette closed her eyes. **(horror)** filled the air, along with **(pity)**.

“So we’re looking for Furies,” Fiona said. “And what’s to keep them from killing us when we’re finding them?”

“We’re working on that,” he said wryly.

Fiona shook her head. “Well, your heart’s being in the right place. It’s your head I’m not so sure of. Send me whatever files you’ve got, and I’ll put my mind to it, see what I can come up with.”

“We don’t know how current the information is,” Rat cautioned. Information could only travel as fast as a courier ship, after all. And things happened to ships out in the void; there was never any knowing for sure how much a given situation might have changed until you dropped out of jump right into it.

Fiona shrugged. “Who does?”

An alarm tone suddenly sounded over com, making everyone jump. “Alert, alert, alert,” called Juanita. “We’ve got ships coming into the system. No transponders—the *Hailstorm* picked them up on scan. They’re heading right at us.”

Marcus swore and surged to his feet, sending his chair flying back on its track. There was a wild scramble, everyone making for the lift, and Rat was glad he hadn’t yet allowed Jasmine out of her carrier after the last burn.

“What have we got?” he asked as soon as he hit the bridge. Juanita surrendered her place at scan to Neva and took one of the observer seats, while the rest made for their boards.

“*Hailstorm* is relaying their scan to us, captain,” Neva called even as she webbed herself in. “Three ships, their transponders off. One is showing a Zat configuration; the other two I don’t recognize. They’ve adjusted course—they’re in our lane, now.”

“Speed?”

“Fast. They haven’t done much braking.”

“Transmission from the captain of the *Hailstorm*,” Fiona interrupted.

Rat had been expecting that. “Put it on speakers.”

“Captain Bill Sees in the Dark of the warship *Hailstorm*, to Captain Rat of the *Exile*.”

“I copy, Sees in the Dark. What have we got?”

“At a guess, they’re raiders. We’re moving to support you, but they’re coming in fast.”

“Thank you. We’ll hold them off until you get here. Rat out.”

“Why are they making for us?” Neva asked into the silence that followed the end of the transmission.

“Because they have the choice of two warships, or what shows up on their scan as a freighter,” Jason replied reasonably. “They are raiders, after all.”

The whispers grew louder, a thread of pain and fear woven into them that hadn’t been there before. **capture or kill, just blow us open, not looking for slaves, it’s all right they’ll just kill us, don’t lose it**

“They don’t know we’ve got teeth,” Rat said, hoping that he sounded calm despite the whispers moaning in his head. “They think we’re just a freighter, and that they’ll be able to do a quick snatch-and-run before the warships get here. They’re going to find out differently.” He snapped loose the safety web. “Fiona, you have the bridge. As soon as the fighter is loose, go full burn.”

Fiona cast him an appraising glance as he passed by on his way to the lift. “Right into their faces?”

“That would be the plan.”

He caught a glimpse of her grin as the lift doors closed. “I like the way you think, captain.”

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Long practice meant that it took less than a minute for Rat to ‘suit up. The lift let him out

into the spine; away from a station and outside of the habitation cylinder, there was no rotation to simulate gravity, and he was able to kick off and shoot down the spine to the hatch like an arrow.

The *Cuchulainn* was berthed inside a false hold, which would hide it from anything short of military-grade sensors that would fry everything in sight anyway. The moment he was in the cockpit with the canopy down, he hit the com. "I'm in. *Cuchulainn* ready to launch."

The hold opened like a flower; the moment he got the all-clear, Rat cut the umbilicals, fired the fighter's thrusters, and surged into space.

Silence descended, so complete that it stole his breath. Distance made a difference to the whispers; only here, far enough away from any human mind, could he find peace.

Unfortunately, I have to spend that time trying to blow up other people trying to kill me. Goddess, he wished he could just take a little time every day in the cockpit, putting the fighter through its paces and using the silence to think his own thoughts, without everyone else's hammering at his brain. But that would only use up fuel to no good purpose, and without knowing where they might find more on their travels, it was insane even to contemplate.

The three raiders came up at the reaches of his active scan. They had done some braking, but not much, and were still bearing down on the system at a rate of speed that would have resulted in their ships being confiscated had they been legitimate travelers. All were small vessels with a large engine-to-mass ratio; given that they were a motley of types, including what had once been a Zat transport, he suspected that they might have some non-standard augmentation in the weapons department.

A quick check of the scan showed that the *Exile* had gone to full burn as ordered, and he guessed that there were some interesting conversations occurring on the bridges of the raiders.

The fighter beeped a warning; one of the ships was targeting him with their scan, even though he was probably too far away for a good shot. He grinned, flipped the cap off the firing controls, and activated his own targeting systems. "Right back at you," he murmured. "Come on, now, this is a lot more trouble that you expected, isn't it? What you thought was an innocent little freighter has just launched a fighter and is heading straight for you instead of retreating. A warship is on the way, and if you can't blow us and grab the goods before they get here, you'll be in a world of hurt. Just turn around and leave."

An alarm sounded; he adjusted course, easily avoiding the missile they'd fired in his direction. "All right, then. Let's do this," he said, and punched the acceleration.

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Neva stared at the three red dots on scan and reflected that she had stopped seeing that all-green view a lot sooner than she'd thought. The raiders were passing into range for the *Exile's* active scan, now. With the lack of transponders, scan simply labeled them object 1, object 2, and object 3.

The green specter of the *Cuchulainn* raced ahead; a moment later, object 2 began to flash. "Fighter has engaged raider ships," she reported, hoping her voice stayed level. "They're firing."

"Well, now, we can't be letting the captain have all the fun," Fiona said. "Marcus, commence targeting."

"Aye."

The three raiders suddenly broke formation, fanning out from one another. "They're trying to flank us," Neva guessed.

"They know that we're slower and less maneuverable than them, especially with the cargo holds," Jason said grimly.

"Hold course," Fiona ordered. "Marcus?"

“Still not in range, damn it.”

“Don’t you be cursing at me, sir. How long until we’re in range?”

“At the rate they’re traveling, just a few minutes.”

Neva watched anxiously as the *Cuchulainn* went through a sudden series of course changes. The nearest of the three ships fired again, but as far as she could tell didn’t make contact. A few moments later, the solid red icon began to disintegrate into a host of smaller ones.

“Alert, alert, alert. One of the raiders is coming apart. We’ve got debris in the lane.”

Marcus swore. A moment later, they passed into targeting range, and he swore again.

“Steady,” Fiona said, the voice of calm itself. “We’re still too far away to likely be hitting anything. Wait until you’ve got a good shot.”

“Alert, alert, alert!” Neva called. “Enemy ships are firing!”

“Evasive maneuvers,” Jason said, sounding as though they were discussing nothing more urgent than a potential new course heading.

The ship moved suddenly, the heavy hand of acceleration that had been pressing Neva back into her chair shoving her sideways as well. Over time, she’d learned to ignore the planet-born instincts that screamed the world had gone out-of-balance, but the abrupt change in what her inner ear insisted was *down* still bothered her. “Clean miss,” she reported.

“Returning fire.” Marcus let out a nasty laugh. “Hah! Grazed ‘em.”

They were entering the debris field from the remains of the first ship now. The ship jinked again, this time from the autos, moving to save itself from the larger of the fragments. Impact rang through the ship, and something screamed down the side. Scan fuzzed out for a moment, then righted itself.

Fiona cursed. “One of the holds is breached. Not a hot hold, thank God, but we’re likely to lose whatever was in C-6.”

On scan, the *Cuchulainn* was dogging the ship they’d grazed. Marcus muttered something uncomplimentary and turned his attention to the third ship. But even as Neva tracked it on scan, its vector changed. “Priority! Third ship is breaking off from the fight.”

“Come back here, you bastards!” Marcus snarled.

Neva glanced over, saw Marcus’ scowl and the small smile on Jason’s mouth. “Shall we pursue?” he asked laconically.

“Negative,” said Fiona. “We’ll leave it to the warships to clean up. Jason, let’s see if we can flank that bastard before he gives the captain too hard a time.”

Fiona switched over to the com frequency for the fighter. Neva listened to her half of the conversation as they coordinated the *Exile’s* approach. The final raider must have realized what they were trying to do, because it suddenly went through a hard vector change.

“Priority! Remaining raider is breaking off.”

“Hard, too—going to have some bloody noses on board, if the g’s don’t do worse,” Marcus observed. He sounded rather pleased about it.

“Keep an eye on them, in case they’re changing their minds later on, but don’t alter course,” Fiona ordered. She thumbed the bud tucked into her ear. “Captain? Will you be rejoining us?”

On scan, the *Cuchulainn* trailed after the raider, hanging back out of weapons range, although just barely. Other fighters from the warships had launched and were on their way, but physics was against them and she doubted they would make it before the raider reached jump speed.

Fiona was silent for what seemed like a long time, even given the lag, as if Rat hesitated in answering. Then finally, she said: “Very good, captain. Be seeing you soon.”

The green speck of the fighter turned and slowly began to make its way back.

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Rat sat at com as the ship coasted along in the shift before the final burn that would take them out of the Waga Chun system. The ship was silent, with most everyone else asleep. The occasional soft whisper of a dream brushed against his consciousness and was gone.

He ought to be sleeping as well, he knew, but instead he'd gone up to the bridge so that he could put in a call to the *Red Cloud*. The warship was still patrolling the outer reaches of the system, and the lag time was even worse than it had been at dock.

"Good luck to you." Joshua's warm voice came through the bud at his ear.

"Thanks. And to you." Rat hesitated, wondering how much he could afford to say. He knew what he *wanted* to say: that he wasn't sure he could do this, that he was terrified he'd lead his crew to their deaths.

I'm not a captain, not really. I'm just pretending. He remembered their former captain, how confident she had been. When she made a decision, she hadn't agonized over it, hadn't spent days second-guessing herself.

Of course, if she had, maybe she'd still be in charge instead of Rat.

"Bill Sees in the Dark tells me you handled the raiders well," Joshua said, out of the gulf of lag time and space. Rat wished they could have met face-to-face one more time before setting out, instead of picking and choosing what words went out over open com. "You'll do fine."

Rat winced, wondering if he was that transparent, or if Joshua was just that perceptive. "Goddess, I hope you're right."

A part of him wanted to confess the thoughts that had chased themselves through his head when he had been tailing the fleeing raider. He'd wanted to just keep going, heading away from the whispers and the responsibilities and the fear of failure.

Of course, there had been nowhere to go. The fighter could only stay away from a ship for so long before the air and the fuel ran out. And he didn't *really* want to abandon his friends.

But still.

"When you've found what you seek, you're welcome to return here," Joshua told him.

"Thank you. We might do that." Rat glanced at the countdown clock and sighed. "I'd better get some sleep before jump. Thanks for everything, Joshua. I mean it."

"You're welcome. Ten Bears out."

Rat clicked off the com, set it to alert him automatically if there were any incoming messages or emergencies, and headed for the lift. Jasmine was roaming free on crew level, and he caught a glimpse of her bounding down the hall, joyful only to move. He envied her.

Neva was asleep in their bed, her pale hair fanned out against the pillow. Moving quietly so as not to wake her, he sat down on the edge of the bed and took his boots off, stowing them so that they wouldn't become projectiles should the ship suddenly have to move. The only light came from the amber safety in the bathroom—a private head and shower was pretty much the only perk to being captain on the *Exile*. He studied her face silently in the soft glow, aching suddenly to touch her, to stroke the scarred skin of her cheek and taste her lips.

If I screw up, everyone might die. That was the real reason he'd wanted to stay in the *Cuchulainn* until the air ran out, like a child refusing to come in when called for dinner. *I'm responsible now. My decisions are going to get us through this...or wind up with people dead.*

If something happens to Neva because I mess up...

He didn't know what he'd do. She'd been his anchor from the first shift he'd come on board the *Exile*, the one who'd helped him go from a gibbering madman to...whatever the hell he was

now.

Running on too little sleep is going to make mistakes more likely. Lie down and stop being so morose.

With a sigh, he stripped off the rest of his clothing and slipped beneath the safety web and the blankets. Neva mumbled something incoherent and turned into him, curving against his side. He pressed his lips to her hair and closed his eyes, but it was a long time before sleep finally claimed him.