



Exile's Burn

Elaine Corvidae

Exile's Burn  2003-2007 Elaine Corvidae
<http://www.onecrow.net>

Cover art by Elaine Corvidae

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/1.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Permission is explicitly granted to freely distribute the ebook, to create derivative works (including fanfiction), and to adapt the book (for example, into a podcast, webcomic, or play), so long as it is not done for commercial purposes and Elaine Corvidae is attributed as the original author.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Exile's Burn was initially serialized for free on my website. I would like to offer my most profound thanks to everyone who visited my forum, sent me an email, or otherwise gave me encouragement during the almost four-year journey from beginning to end. Special thanks to Skylia Dawn Cameron, Claire R., Jeroen, Bippy, Gerard, and Ann for your endless enthusiasm and support.

This book is dedicated to the internet community, the generosity of which never fails to amaze and uplift me.

**Part I:
Shattered**

Chapter 1: A Rat in the Walls

They're all going to die. I'll kill them all.

No! No no no no no...

Shut up!

Rat clutched his head, his body bending double so that his dreads nearly brushed the filthy decking. Whispers nagged him, insidious murmurs that swelled ever louder, threatening to tip him over an edge that was always dangerously near. *Not now, not now! Focus!*

He concentrated on Jasmine's weight on his back, the clever fingers of her good paw sunk into his hair for balance. The fur on her long tail was soft where it looped around his neck. Her warm smell overwhelmed the stink of grease and oil that permeated the docks, along with the reek of his own unwashed body.

go soon? (running, hard bone jolting underneath, nails digging in)

The whispers retreated, leaving him panting, as if he had run a long way. *I have to get out of here. It's getting worse.*

"Soon," he whispered, patting Jasmine with a shaking hand.

Almost afraid to move, he risked a look out from behind the stack of barrels where he hid. He didn't know what the cylinders had once contained, but even empty they were covered with hazard warnings of every kind. The smell that came from them made him faintly queasy.

The door to the main cargo hold waited in front of him, its streaked and battered surface both an obstacle and a promise. Only a quick dash, and he could be through it. If not for the guards standing to either side, of course.

Although their gray Zatvian uniforms showed not a wrinkle or a crease, and their boots, helmets, and gear all shone like mirrors, neither guard stood quite precisely at attention. The approach of an automated loader occasioned not even a glance from either one.

In a few seconds, the loader would fire a burst of chatter—well outside the range of human hearing—at the doors, and they would slide open in welcome. It would be the perfect opportunity for Rat to get inside. But the guards, no matter how inattentive, would surely notice a crouching man burdened by a le-murr running alongside the loader. Which meant that some kind of distraction was in order.

I can't risk it. It might push me over. It might not work. I might—

Got to do it. Got to.

Rat swallowed hard, cast a last glance at the approaching loader to judge distance, and turned his focus on the nearest guard.

**can't wait to get home tonight and see Pyter (handsome man, hard muscles, sex, want, love) maybe go out for dinner (pasta, tomato sauce, salivating) this is the worst assignment*

*I've ever been on why can't they just let machines do it "We have to maintain a presence" (commanding officer, pompous ass) need a promotion**

Rat jerked at the flow of information, struggling to sort through the barrage of unfiltered impressions and feelings. It was hard to concentrate, hard to pick out anything relevant in the cacophony. *You're bored as it is. Just look away. Just look—*

The guard staggered forwards suddenly, a fountain of blood spraying from her nose. Her partner let out a startled cry and grabbed her arm. "You all right?"

She shook her head mutely, wiping frantically at her face. A moment later, her concerned partner pulled her away from their station, making a frantic call to the medics through his com even as he did so.

Rat felt as if his insides had frozen. *No. Just a nosebleed. I didn't break anything loose in her head, I didn't, I didn't...*

The doors to the cargo bay groaned open. Trying not to think, Rat sprinted from his hiding place, keeping the loader between himself and the distracted guards. A few seconds later, the doors slid closed behind him.

Made it.

If no one checks the vidlog for some reason. If no one has to come in. If...

He fell back against the wall, gasping for breath. The air in the cargo bay was cold, and it bit easily through his layers of tattered, grimy clothing. When he didn't move for a moment, Jasmine braced her bad paw against his shoulder and began to pick at his dreadlocks with the good one, looking for lice and fleas. The gesture went straight to ancient primate instincts, and Rat felt himself relax marginally.

The cavernous bay was dimly lit and packed full of cargo crates of every size and description. Some of them were new and shiny, while others bore scars and scrapes from years of abuse. All were marked with codes detailing what ship they were bound for and when they would be loaded. Some of them had special labels warning of contents either fragile, or dangerous, or both. It was one of these Rat was looking for.

Feeling as if he played some horrific game of roulette, he fished a stolen reader out of the inner pocket of his baggy jacket; the other pocket was heavy with a pilfered O₂ generator. He aimed the reader at the first container, squinting as he watched information scroll by on the tiny screen: contents, shipper, loading schedule.

Nothing I can use. Not that he'd expected the very first container to be what he needed, but even so...

He moved into the stacks, checking crates as he went. *What ship is unlucky enough to be leaving soon? Who's had the misfortune to agree to transport something that needs atmosphere? Who's going to die?*

No one. No one's going to die. NO ONE.

It won't be so bad on a ship. Fewer people. Not so much pressure. Nothing will happen.

And if it does...better a small crew than an entire station...

A memory of dead, staring eyes came to him, accompanied by the image of the guard with blood gushing out of her nose. Rat pushed them away desperately. His hands began to shake, and whispers rang in his head, getting louder.

"No," he whispered back, breath puffing into a cloud of steam in the chill air. "Please be quiet. Please."

After an hour of searching, during which loaders continued to zip in and out, taking away some crates and dropping off others, he finally found what he was looking for. KEEP

PRESSURIZED AND HEATED appeared on the reader's screen. The container itself was the right size...and even better, there was a loading time only a few hours away.

Glancing around fearfully, Rat hurriedly popped the seal. A broken seal would be a dead giveaway if anyone decided to do one final inspection, but there was nothing for it. With any luck, no one would have a reason to look until the crate was unloaded at its final destination.

And since when have I had any luck?

He wondered briefly if he had once worshipped any gods, and if so whether or not they had done anything for him. If they ever had looked out for him, then they'd seriously fallen down on the job now.

Unless it's my fault. Unless I'm being punished.

Shut up!

Rat's hands shook as he hauled out all the stuff packed inside the container. The only hiding spot for it was behind a stack of crates not due to ship out for a few days yet, and he cursed at the clues he was leaving behind. But there was nothing else he could do.

"Ready?" he whispered to Jasmine.

She hopped down off his shoulder and walked along the edge of open container, her tail high in the air and her enormous eyes surveying the interior. **hide, safe, warm, dark, good (snuggle mommy)**

Rat would have grinned if the situation hadn't been so desperate. If he hadn't been risking her life as well as his own. *Can't leave her here, though—who'd want a le-murr with a bad hand? That's why she was culled in the first place. They'd just kill her for being...what was it? "An imperfect example of the breed?" More like proof their breeders aren't 100% infallible, that there's chance involved along with genetics, luck of the draw...*

Rat imagined the Zats shooting Jasmine just for the target practice, and his stomach tightened into a ball. Whispers nagged at him, and he covered his ears reflexively, even though it would do no good.

No. Can't lose it now. Things to do.

Shaking off the whispers, he climbed into the crate. Jasmine leapt in after. The top sealed them in darkness that Jasmine found comforting and right. Rat tested the seal carefully—good enough not to pop open by accident, but he'd be able to shove it back when they needed to move.

And they'd need to move fast. There would be a damn narrow window between loading and acceleration, during which he'd need to get out and find someplace to hide. If he missed it, there would be no escape from the crate until whatever ship he was on gathered enough *v* to kick in the Savvies and start folding space. Four shifts was the typical time for a freighter, which would mean too long without food or water if they got trapped. The time would be less for passenger ships, even less for military.

A Zat Klegger could do it in two if the crew didn't care about the extra *g*'s, said a shadowy part of his brain.

Shut up! Leave me alone!

Panting, as if he wrestled with some opponent he couldn't quite throw, Rat turned on the O₂ generator and lay down. Jasmine curled against him, her thoughts of **warmth** and **mommy**. He focused on her, blotting out the whispers, until they both drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Neva walked quickly along the main commercial corridor of what had once been Moldar Station, her head down so that the shadow of her hood hid her face. The scars attracted attention; she'd learned that already on the brief transit from Dios-II. The maimed or deformed just didn't wander around in public; that was what hospitals were for. But after two years of operations, she'd had enough, and a few scars hadn't seemed like much compared to all the damage the doctors *had* taken away.

"Just one or two more sessions," Dr. Hallaway had told her. "At least wait until then."

Maybe I should have listened. After all, what was another month when she'd already spent over two years lying on her back, staring at the white ceiling tiles? She'd memorized those tiles, every discoloration, every crack, until she could still see them when she closed her eyes.

But the message said it was urgent. This was the date they gave—they didn't ask if it was convenient for me.

And what were they going to do, come all the way to Dios-II and drag me out of the hospital if I didn't show?

She'd hoped to be able to lose herself in a crowd on-station, but she was one of the only figures in sight not dressed in uniform. *Why didn't I expect this?*

Neva had never been off-planet until the war, but she'd read her aunt's letters describing Moldar Station—now Station 12B, Sector 5—the way it used to be. Then it had been prosperous from trade and tourism, only one jump away from the rich world of Harvest.

Now...now it was gateway only to a lifeless cinder.

Don't think about it. Don't.

Neva kicked savagely at the trash that littered the corridor. Maintenance, whose budget was probably dismal, was obviously having a difficult time keeping the station neat despite all of the posters on the walls reminding everyone that cleanliness was part of being a productive citizen of the Zatvian Cooperative.

Planet killers.

Most of the businesses that remained open on the entertainment strip were the kind that catered to off-duty soldiers or freighter crews just hitting dock. Bars, mostly, sprinkled with brothels and casinos. A few kiosks sold cheap trinkets to serve as mementoes. *Patil's Perfect Primates* said one sign, and her heart contracted sharply at the sight. The Zats shut down mental hospitals and soup kitchens, but left in business companies that tinkered with genes until the animals they bred had patents instead of rights.

I shouldn't have come here.

Then where? Where else do I have to go?

She almost missed her destination. The sign was small and dim, lost amidst the brighter lights of the more popular bars. *The Never-Empty Cup* it proclaimed, but the image of an overflowing mug flickered sporadically. Inside, the narrow bar smelled of spilled alcohol and burned toast. A few customers were visible in the pools of light surrounding the tables, and a tired-looking server slouched at the counter, sorting knives and forks. Neva felt eyes on her for a moment, and she bowed her head, a reflexive attempt to hide the scars.

"You must be Neva," said a deep voice almost at her elbow.

She jumped, swore silently, and forced herself to stillness. The man was tall and dressed in unremarkable tunic, pants, and boots that might have belonged to any freighter hand. His auburn hair was tied back in a ponytail, and a neatly-trimmed beard shadowed his jaw. This close, she could smell his cologne, a teasing whiff of spice and musk. His complexion was

light enough to have the pasty-white look that betrayed him as a spacer, someone who hadn't felt the touch of sunlight in a long, long time.

Merry meet, she started to say, but the words died on her tongue. Merriment had left her life for good. "You must be Drake."

"Come, sit down, have a drink," he said, and put a hand to her elbow, as if he meant to steer her to a table. It was a gesture Devin had used many times, and she jerked back, her heart stuttering suddenly in her chest. Drake gave her a look she couldn't interpret and dropped his hand back to his side.

He had a booth in the back of the tavern, and she slid across the cheap, plastic-covered seat opposite him. The lighting here was even worse than in the front of the bar, and it occurred to her that he was a stranger whose intentions she didn't really know. He could kidnap her, kill her...

But what does it matter?

"I see you got our message," Drake said after taking a swallow from the half-filled mug in front of him.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yes." His hazel eyes narrowed as he studied her face. "They did a good job on you."

Neva wouldn't let herself flinch. She wondered if he'd seen any pictures of what she'd looked like before. "Yeah. I'm guessing you paid for my new face?"

"In part."

She swallowed hard, trying to find words of gratitude. But the only thing that came to mind was that she would have been better off dead. "The message said Aunt Agnes was killed. What happened to her?"

Drake turned his gaze briefly to his drink, as if he expected to see something in its depths. "An accident. What do you know about what Agnes did after she left Harvest?"

That wasn't much of an answer. He's hiding something.

"Very little," she replied carefully. Her hands curled into fists beneath the table. Two years of tension, two years of rage, two years of uncertainty boiled under her skin, and it was everything she could do to suppress it. "Aunt Agnes left Harvest to join the war effort. She sent letters home frequently at first, but after a while they got fewer and farther between."

"You were in medical school then?"

"Until the call went out for every able-bodied person on Harvest willing to hold a gun." She stared at him, waiting for him to say how strange it was, that someone who had once wanted to preserve lives had ended up taking them. But he said nothing, only sipped his drink and watched her with inscrutable eyes. "So I quit school and went off to learn how to shoot people."

"You didn't finish your studies."

"No."

"But you remember some of it? Enough for first aid? Enough to run a plasma patch or a diagnostic bed if you had to?"

Neva hesitated before answering. *He's looking for someone to replace Agnes.* Agnes had been a doctor when she had joined up. Her early assignments had sent her to the front lines to put soldiers back together so they could go out and get blown apart again. What she'd been doing in the last two years, since the surrender... Goddess only knew.

"Yes," she said at last. "I remember. I've had plenty of time with nothing to do but stare at medical equipment."

Drake nodded, as if he'd expected her answer down to the word. "Go on with your story."

"What's left to tell? I ended up on Mabon—one of the terraformed moons—manning a gun emplacement. The Zats came in and blew us to hell. Those of us who survived were evacuated to Dios-II for treatment. End of story."

Except it wasn't the end, that was the awful part. Bad enough that Devin had died beside her. Bad enough that the same blast that had killed him had removed a good part of her face and left wounds over the rest of her body as well. At least she couldn't remember that part—she'd been knocked unconscious, and the medics had kept her under throughout her first interstellar jump.

And while she was in transit, deep in a drug-induced coma, everyone she'd ever known and loved had died. One or two asteroids, caught in the jump-field of Zat ships and boosted up to a good percentage of light speed, then dropped back into normal space on a collision course with Harvest...and that had been it. No more Mom and Dad. No more Jordan.

No more Wight's Beach, where the moons made the tides dance around the rocks. No more sunsets shining like gold over Cradle City. No more anything.

Except Agnes. Agnes had been her last tie to Harvest, her last relative, her last connection to her old life. But Agnes hadn't come to see her. Agnes hadn't even sent a letter.

And now Agnes was as dead as all the rest. Dead in an "accident" that this man didn't want to tell her about.

Drake kept watching her with eyes that said he knew everything she didn't want to say. "The strike on Harvest ended the war," he said at last. He slid his drink aside and leaned over the table, intent and edgy. "No one else wanted to risk that happening to another planet."

Neva didn't want to talk about it, didn't even want to hear about it. "Get to the point. If you have one."

"Fine. It almost killed Agnes when she heard what had happened. There were only two things that kept her going: revenge and you."

Neva shook her head. "She never wrote, not once in two years."

"One year, more or less, from her point of view. Jump does odd things to time. She talked the rest of us into paying your hospital bills while the docs put all the pieces back where they belonged."

"And now you're here to collect the debt?"

"More or less."

Despite herself, Neva felt the first stirrings of curiosity, pushing insistently against the numb shell that had enclosed her for two years. "You say my aunt lived for revenge," she said, keeping her voice low. "Who are you? Was she serving on some kind of military ship? But the war is over, so that can't be possible."

Drake smiled; the expression took years off his face. "Registration code says we're the *Cuckoo*. A small freighter out of Station 23A, Sector 5. All perfectly above board, no citations or warrants to speak of. Never even been sued over lost or damaged cargo."

There was something about the way he smiled, the way he phrased things, that made her heart beat harder. "*Registration code says,*" as if what it says and what's real aren't the same thing.

But faking the code on a transponder was a major offense even before the Zats took over. Knowing the Zats, they'd probably shoot you on sight for it.

What did Agnes get herself into?

"I see," she said finally.

"Perhaps." He went back to his drink, some of the intensity draining out of his gaze. "You've got a choice, Neva. I know you'd probably like a little more information before making that choice, but that's too bad. You can walk out of here now, go wherever you want, and forget we ever spoke. Or you can come with me and take over for Agnes as best you can. Do some of the things she did. Maybe even have the chance for a little revenge of your own."

"And if I just walk away...what happens to my debt?"

Drake smiled. A nice smile, she noted with almost clinical detachment, one that probably charmed plenty of women. But that part of her felt dead and numb as all the rest.

"It goes away," he said.

"Free and clear."

"Exactly."

Neva absently traced the pattern of scars on her face with one hand. *I don't know anything about these people, except that Aunt Agnes apparently helped them as a medic.*

No, I do know something—I know that, whatever they're up to, it probably got her killed.

If I get on that ship, they could make me disappear, and no one would ever hear from me again.

But why pay my bills if they were going to do that?

Or why let me walk away after spending so much money on me?

No matter what Drake says, I owe them. She felt the raised seam of scar tissue under her fingers, running from the corner of her lips to her cheekbone. The delicate arch of bone beneath had come at the expense of numerous grafts, all grown from her own cells so that her body wouldn't reject them. *If not for what these people did for me, I'd be...I don't even know where.*

Where will I go if I say no?

"Show me this ship of yours," she said at last.

* * *

The docking area was only slightly busier than the commercial district had been, and even then most of the activity came from the automated loaders zipping back and forth from various warehouses to the docked ships. The cavernous space was icy cold, making Neva shiver in her sleeveless shirt. Stark white lighting from the filaments high overhead flung equally-stark shadows from the tangle of gantries and umbilicals. Lines ran to every ship, bringing in power, water, and air, and taking away any waste that couldn't be recycled on board. The dry, cold atmosphere stank of lubricant and fuel.

Of the ships themselves, nothing could be seen, of course. It had disappointed her when she'd first read her aunt's letters describing the station; somehow, she'd thought that a station would waste air, space, heat, and other resources by building a structure big enough to bring ships inside. That was insane, of course—some of the commercial freighters were truly huge, and you'd need to build a station as big as a good-sized moon to fit enough of them inside to make a profit. Instead, they stayed on the other side of the walls, connected to the station by docking clamps and umbilicals. A small airlock and gantry let crew come and go; larger ones connected to any cargo holds that had to be kept heated and pressurized. Skimmers transited between station and ship for the cold holds.

Because the *Cuckoo*—or whatever its name really was—had been assigned a berth close

to one of the main elevators, Drake suggested they walk the rest of the way instead of hire a cab. Neva wondered if the walk was meant to give her one last chance to think things over.

"There it is," Drake said, pointing to a berth three slots down. Neva glanced up, then hurriedly back down at her feet again. Here in the massive, open space of the dock, she could see far enough ahead to detect the upward curvature of the ring. The inverted horizon made her feel vaguely nauseated, and she wondered again if she were doing the right thing. Judging by Drake's pallor, his ship's crew didn't make regular stopovers planet-side.

What am I giving up? Sunlight, wind, water, the song of birds...

So what? Harvest is gone. Could I walk in a field somewhere else and not think of home? Better this life, this sterile, metal existence. At least it won't remind me of a past that's dead and gone.

"Why are the lights on the console blinking?" she asked, to give herself something else to think about.

Drake smiled grimly. "We don't like to make long stopovers on some stations. I had a certain amount of time to talk to you before I had to come back. The flashing lights mean the ship's already in countdown to undock."

She frowned, feeling the vague stirrings of unease once again. "I thought ships normally stayed in dock at least a few days, for refueling if nothing else."

"They do. Some other docks, we would. But here—" he broke off sharply. "Damn."

Startled, Neva glanced up at him, then in the direction he was looking. A triad of Zats had emerged from one of the offices that lined the inner wall, opposite the berths. Their blue uniforms were marked with an insignia she didn't recognize.

Ice formed in her gut, and she felt her hands tremble. *Planet killers.*

You killed Devin. And Mom and Dad and little Jordan, and...

"Stay calm," Drake murmured to her. "They don't have any particular reason to stop us, but they might anyway. This station's a hell of a boring assignment these days, and they could be looking for something to do. Just smile, be pleasant, and let me do the talking."

They almost reached the waiting airlock before the Zats intercepted them. Neva had to suppress the urge to break into a run as the uniformed men approached. Their uniforms weren't the gray or black of soldiers, but that hardly made any difference. The Zatvian military controlled practically every aspect of life in the Cooperative, at least in places like this where they had a strong presence. If their grip was looser elsewhere...Neva didn't know about it.

"Good day, Citizens," said one of the men. Drake stopped and waited for them to approach, his stance casual, a friendly smile on his face. Neva tried to mimic him but failed miserably.

"Officer. Is there a problem? I hope Customs hasn't had any difficulty clearing our cargo."

"None at all." The customs officer glanced briefly at the console, before flicking his eyes back to them. He looked bored and cold, and Neva wondered if he wouldn't rather be back inside his office. "Your stay with us was rather short. No problems on your end, I hope?"

"Just a tight schedule." Drake put his hand lightly to Neva's elbow again, and this time she managed not to flinch, instead letting him steer her towards the waiting airlock.

"Then I'll try not to take up too much of your time," the officer said smoothly. "May I see your papers, Citizen?"

Curse it!

Drake stopped, his smile still in place. "Of course." Without missing a beat, he pulled out two d-chips and handed them over.

Two?

One of the flunkies took the chips and clicked them into a reader. The officer glanced briefly at the screen. "Just coming off medical leave from an industrial accident, eh?" he asked Neva.

Hoping that she didn't look nervous or guilty, she just nodded, unable to trust her voice.

The officer pursed his lips, but then motioned to his lackey. The man passed the chips wordlessly back to Drake.

"Have a good day!" Drake said cheerily, even as he headed for the airlock. Neva hurried after him, not daring to look back. At any moment, she expected the Zats to demand they halt. They would be hauled off to holding cells, questioned...and then Goddess only knew what. Shot by a firing squad if they were lucky.

The airlock whirred and clanked open, revealing a utilitarian boarding tube on the other side. A puff of chill air ruffled touched Neva's face; apparently, the pressure had been slightly off from that of the dock. The tube bounced and swayed alarmingly when they hit it, and she grabbed wildly for a handhold that wasn't there. The cold air burned her lungs and leached warmth from her so fast that she was shivering violently by the time they reached the other lock.

The surface of the lock was pitted and burnished from its travels. Machinery whined and groaned somewhere on the other side, and a moment later the lock slid open, revealing a small chamber with a second lock. The smell of the ship—sweat, spices, oil, and metal—enveloped Neva, oddly comforting after the sterile scent of the dock.

A woman stood waiting for them just beyond the innermost lock. She was of medium height and stocky build, her skin as dark as good chocolate. Her clothes had a worn, utilitarian look to them: an olive tanktop, pants with an abundance of pockets and pouches, and boots with heavy tread. The waist-length dreads that framed her pleasant face had gone completely gray from age.

"Hello, Neva," she said. "I'm Captain Iluka Toora. Welcome aboard the *Exile*."

* * *

The grinding and clanking of loading had died away some time ago. Silently hoping that he wasn't making a terrible mistake, Rat opened the crate that he and Jasmine had hidden in. The cargo hold was dark as space, so he took out a tiny flashlight that he'd stolen from an electronics shop on the station. Its narrow, intense beam showed him only portions of the hold at a time. The claustrophobic space was crammed with barrels and crates, and he wondered briefly what was in them. Maybe they held more medical equipment like what he'd displaced to make way for Jasmine and himself.

sleep? (curled up in the crate, warm, dark, safe)

Rat lifted Jasmine gently out and set her on his shoulder. "Can't sleep now, sweetheart," he murmured as she slipped her tail around his throat. If they got trapped in the hold while the ship was accelerating out of the system, they would be done for.

The holds were strapped to the ship's long spine, each mated to an access in case some emergency required that the crew get inside while in transit. While the ship was in dock, the rotation of the station's great wheel provided the illusion of gravity, so at least Rat didn't

have to try to keep Jasmine calm in null-g. He clambered carefully over the rest of the cargo, shining his beam around until he found the access hatch.

The hatch opened soundlessly, and he ducked through it, palming it closed almost before he was out. Rat found himself in the narrow cylinder of the ship's spine, unlit for now. The cold instantly sank its teeth deep into him, and Jasmine hunkered down on his shoulder.

cold, don't like, go back (warm safe nest, dark, sleep)

Fortunately, the hot holds were the closest in to the inhabitable parts of the ship. Rat found the access easily with the flashlight's narrow beam. *My luck's held out so far*, he thought as he palmed it open. *Just don't let there be anybody standing on the other side of this door.*

* * *

Captain Toora led the way to a lift at the end of the tube-shaped corridor. "We'll get you settled in your quarters before we pull out," she said as the doors whisked closed behind them. The lift jerked and muttered to itself as it began to move. "I'm afraid there isn't much in the way of luxury accommodation on board a small freighter like this one. You can have your aunt's old quarters. We've left all of her things as they were, so you can go through them at your leisure."

Drake cast his captain a grim look. "I suppose you heard what went on outside?" he asked. Now that they were on board, he had dropped the cheerful façade.

"Most of it was in range of the pickups," Iluka replied. Her lips pursed slightly, as if she were annoyed. "Damned meddling bureaucrats."

"You had faked papers for me," Neva said, trying to keep an accusing note from her voice. "Did you know I'd agree to come?"

"It never hurts to be prepared," Drake replied with a wink. "Although I had hoped to get off of Moldar without using them. With any luck, no one will connect you with Neva Whitestone—she'll disappear with no record of departure. But I'll cook some more papers up when I have the chance, just to be safe."

Fake transponders, fake papers... "Is this a good time to ask what exactly I've signed on for?"

The lift doors slid open, revealing a dimly-lit corridor. The *Exile*—or the *Cuckoo*, or whatever its name was—had seen hard use in its time. The decking was scuffed and stained, and the bare metal walls had tarnished. "Get settled first," Iluka advised. "Drake, show her where her quarters are. Once you've done that, bring her up to the bridge." The captain's dark eyes shifted back to Neva's face. "We'll introduce you to the rest of the crew and answer all your questions then."

"This way." Drake led her out of the lift and down the short corridor; their boots rang off the battered decking. A number of doors opened off the corridor, all of them unmarked. Drake stopped in front of one and palmed it open. "Welcome to your new home."

The room was tiny, and the furnishings inside made it feel even more so. The bed was bolted to the floor, and a safety web stretched neatly across it, holding the covers in place. The single chair was set into a track that would let it slide back and forth a short distance, although for now it was locked in place. The drawers for her things were built into the walls themselves. The air smelled faintly of herbs, and Neva felt her heart contract at the familiar scent.

“Like Iluka said, we left all Agnes’ stuff alone,” he said, opening a drawer. The smell of herbs intensified, and Neva saw that it contained all of the things that Agnes must have used in her rituals. Herbs, colored stones, small lights that would take the place of candles on board a ship where any fire was a hazard. She opened another drawer and found it full of clothing; a necklace with a pentagram lay atop the rest. Neva reached out and picked up the necklace, the metal cold against her fingers.

“Do you follow the path?” Drake asked.

“No.” She dropped the pentagram and closed the drawer again. “Not anymore.”

A com light beside the door came on. “Drake?” said Iluka’s voice from the speaker. The sound was distorted and a bit scratchy.

Drake straightened, suddenly all business. “Here.”

“We just had a hatch-open light come on up here. Two, actually—one from a hot hold, and the next from the spine.”

“Damn.”

Neva frowned. “What does that mean? Some kind of malfunction?”

“Not likely, not two in a row like that.” Drake strode back to the corridor, and she followed. “Do you know how to use a Zatvian issue firearm?”

A gun? “I thought the Protected Worlds Treaty banned all firearms except for authorized personnel,” she said, half-trotting to keep up with his long stride.

He stopped in front of a locker and popped it open. Inside, carefully secured, waited several deadly-looking rifles and handguns. “I rather think it does at that,” he agreed, handing her one of the guns. “Here’s the safety. Click it off, then just point, press, and hold. So easy even a Zat grunt can use it.”

She bit back the obvious questions—like *what are you doing with Zat-made weapons?*—and simply nodded. “I had a little training before they shipped me to Mabon.”

“Good. Come with me. Don’t shoot anyone unless I say to.”

“What’s going on?”

Drake started back down the corridor, moving quickly but silently, like a big cat on the prowl. “Somebody’s on board who isn’t supposed to be.”

The unfamiliar, shadowy corridor suddenly took on an ominous quality. Neva hefted her gun; it was heavy, and felt strange in her hands after all this time. Drake led the way to a cross-corridor, and then to another hallway that paralleled the first. There was a small workstation, now dark, that might be used to monitor cargo loading, and she guessed that they were close to the hatch that had tripped the alarm. Most of the rooms off of this hall seemed to be utilitarian; she saw one marked “laundry” and another simply “processing.”

A faint sound echoed from far down the corridor. Drake froze for a moment, listening, then gestured to the nearest door. “That’s the galley. Wait in there, and for God’s sake don’t shoot any of the crew.”

Without waiting, he started towards the sound, moving in that loping prowl. Neva wished he had taken her with him, but she knew why he hadn’t. She was an unknown factor as far as he was concerned; he had no way of knowing how she’d hold up in a fight, or which way she might run. Although she hadn’t known him long, she had the feeling that she would best impress him simply by following orders, so she opened the door to the galley and stepped inside.

The lights came up, triggered by her movement, and for a moment she blinked in the sudden glare. She had the blurred impression of a large metal table, track chairs, and walls

lined with panels that no doubt marked where the cookers and other implements folded away. Then her vision cleared...and she realized that there was a man on the other side of the table blinking back at her.

Neva froze, her gun half-up, torn between the instinct that said no one was supposed to be there, and Drake's warning not to kill her unknown crewmates. The hesitation cost her. With a muffled cry, the man lunged over the table, grabbing for the weapon. Neva struggled to hang on; for a moment, they grappled. Then the gun hit the floor with a harsh clank, spinning away to a distant corner.

Neva tried to turn, intending to run, but he was on her in an instant, all desperate strength. An arm snaked around her torso, pinning her arms to her side, while another pressed hard against her neck. She kicked back wildly, but he evaded.

"Don't, please, I don't want to hurt you," he whispered in her ear. His breath stank—*everything* about him stank, as if he hadn't bathed in years. "Please, I don't—"

She jerked her head back, cracking him in the face with the back of her skull. His hold loosened, just enough for her to get an elbow into his ribs. He staggered back, and she palmed the door back open, dashing into the corridor.

"He's down here! The galley—!" she managed to yell, before hands grabbed at her shoulders.

"I'm not here to hurt anyone!" he said again. "Please, I—!"

Boots pounded down the corridor at them. "Neva, get down!" Drake roared. "You, stand still! Don't move!"

At that moment, something small and white bounded out of the galley, hit the deck, and launched itself at Drake. Drake yelled, reeling back, and Neva had the impression of huge eyes, fur, and teeth.

"No, Jasmine, don't!" the intruder shouted. The white creature came loose from Drake's flailing hand, bounded off the wall, and landed in the intruder's arms.

Two other figures appeared from behind Drake. One was a tall woman with tattoos on her dark-skinned face. The second was a man, pale like Drake, but with short hair gone silver with time. The woman stopped farther back, her gun trained on the intruder, but the man ran closer and shoved his weapon against the stowaway's head.

"Shoot that thing!" the woman shouted.

"No!" The stowaway flinched, and then closed his eyes as the man's grip tightened on the gun. "She didn't mean to hurt you. She thought you were going to kill me. D-don't hurt her."

Drake swore softly, and Neva saw that blood was flowing freely from his wrist where the creature had bitten him. "Marcus, Anusha, stay ready, but don't fire unless either of them does something threatening."

Marcus glared down at the stowaway, his blue eyes cold with fury. "He's a Zat spy, Drake. I say we shoot him now, then toss him out the airlock when we're clear of the station."

"Not a spy," whispered the stowaway.

Neva thought he was telling the truth. Now that she had a moment to study him, she could see all the marks of long privation. The stowaway was thin to the point of gauntness, and although his skin probably should have been golden, ill health had left it a sickly yellow. A small, fuzzy goatee covered his chin. His dark hair was worn in shoulder-length dreads, and her skin crawled to think what sort of vermin might be in there. The rest of him was

filthy, smeared with dirt and oil, and his clothes looked old, ill-fitting, and mismatched.

"If he's a spy, the Zats have fallen on bad times indeed," Drake said at last, but his expression remained hard. "Who are you? What are you doing on this ship?"

The stowaway swallowed convulsively. "I-I was just trying to get away," he said. His voice was soft and hesitant. "I needed to get away from the Zats."

"Really? And what have you done that the Zats want you so badly?"

The stowaway opened his eyes and looked not at Drake, but at Neva. His eyes were a startling shade of amber that she had never seen before on a human being. "They...my parents had a shop on Moldar...I helped them...the Zats killed them for sedition...everyone dead, everyone gone...the Zats have been looking for me ever since."

Neva stared at him in shock. It wasn't her own story, not quite, but so close that she felt it like a blow to the heart. "God and Goddess," she breathed. "How long?"

"Not sure. Years." He began to rock back and forth, his gaze going unfocused. "Hide. Run. Keep out of the light. Get out of there, you little rat, you don't belong here." For a moment, his eyelids fluttered, a series of rapid blinks that startled Neva. Then he shook his head and stared at them, as if he had lost track of what was happening.

"He's crazy," Marcus said with a disgusted snort. "I say throw him out the lock. Keep the pet—maybe we can sell it."

"No!" The stowaway hunched protectively over the creature. "Don't hurt her! She's an innocent."

You'd never hear those words out of a Zat's mouth. "Can't you see he's sick?" Neva demanded, gesturing at the huddled figure. All eyes turned to her, and she suddenly felt awkward. "Look, I don't know what's going on here. But he could have killed me, and he didn't."

Drake's eyes narrowed suddenly. "Where's your gun?"

Neva felt her face heat. "In the galley. We struggled, and I dropped it."

Anusha gave her a look of searing disgust. "That's what we get for taking on grounders," she muttered, and went to the galley. A moment later, she returned with the gun.

Com crackled. "Drake. We've only got twenty minutes until undock."

"You've been following this up there, Iluka?"

"Yes. Lock him in the laundry for now. We'll decide what to do with him later."

Drake nodded in Marcus' direction. The other man kicked the stowaway hard in one ankle, making him yelp. "You! Get up, and keep your hands where I can see them. That pet of yours better not do anything, either, or I'll shoot the both of you, got it?"

The stowaway nodded, holding up his hands as he struggled to his feet. Neva could see him trembling, maybe out of fear, or maybe out of simple weakness. "He needs medical attention," she said quietly. "And I should have a look at that bite, Drake."

"Later." Drake turned and headed towards the lift, beckoning for her to follow. She tried to read his expression and failed.

The lift moaned and clanked its way up to the bridge. The doors slid open, revealing a relatively small room crammed with chairs and consoles. Captain Toora sat one post; nearby, a lean, dark man with tattoos like Anusha's bent over his board intently.

"Take the empty seat at nav2," Drake ordered, pointing towards a chair. "And don't touch anything."

As Neva slid into the chair, Drake took what must have been his own station beside Iluka. "Report," she said crisply.

“Not much to tell, other than what you heard over the pickups,” he said, clipping a bud to his ear. “A damned stowaway—probably hid in a cargo crate.”

Iluka’s look was grim. Swallowing hard, Neva said, “He had the chance to hurt me, and he didn’t. He could have gone after my gun. I don’t think he meant us any harm.”

“That’s a shame if it’s true, but the boy picked the wrong ship to get on,” Iluka said bluntly. Behind her, the lift door open and disgorged Anusha and Marcus, who went immediately to their own posts. “Report.”

“The stowaway’s locked in the laundry, like you asked.” Marcus scowled as he drew the safety web across his chair. “Captain, we should just jettison him as soon as we get far enough out.”

Neva’s blood went cold. “That would be murder.”

“It would be self-preservation,” Marcus shot back, giving her a hard look.

“I won’t have any part in murder. I thought Agnes wouldn’t have, either, yet she served with you.” Neva drew herself up, refusing to look away, refusing to be cowed. “Tell me why she did. Tell me if she changed so much that she would condone killing someone for trying to escape the Zats.”

“It isn’t that simple, girl,” Iluka said. “And you’re right—Agnes would have argued for him to live. No decision’s been made yet. But you have to understand that Marcus has a point, too. I’m sure you’ve guessed by now that the *Exile* isn’t just an innocent freighter.”

“Then what are you?”

Drake’s smile was thin and without humor. “Pirates, Neva. You’ve just signed aboard a pirate ship.”

Chapter 2: Acceleration

Pirates.

Neva sat very still, feeling her heart beat against her ribs. She tried and failed to make sense of what Drake had said, to reconcile it with her dead aunt's keen sense of honor, and failed. "I think you should explain," she said at last, not knowing what else to do.

"We're on mark for undock," said the dark man with the tattooed face. He turned his head to the side, as if listening for something, and Neva saw that his eyes were covered with a film of white.

Iluka immediately powered her chair around to face her boards. "Sorry, Neva. Operations take precedence over questions. For the moment, you just need to trust us. Or, if not that, then trust your aunt's judgment."

I would have trusted the Agnes I knew. But war does strange things to people. Neva knew that better than anyone.

Anusha sat the station next to Neva. "Secure your web," she said. The accent that colored her words was beautiful, but the tone was abrasive. "The last thing I want to do is pick bits of grounder out of the controls."

Neva felt herself flush, but she bit back a retort as she snapped the safety web into place.

The blind man smiled into space. He wore some kind of headpiece over his dreadlocks; its leads trailed like snakes to the controls in front of him. Gloves covered both hands; they were also connected to the boards by cables. "You must forgive my sister, Neva," he said mildly. "She's in a good mood today. Normally she's much more irritable. Welcome aboard, by the way."

"Thank you," she said, wondering if he was serious about Anusha's temperament.

"I'm Tarak, the pilot of this bucket," he added.

The pilot? "I thought you were blind."

Anusha snorted indelicately as her hands moved over her board. "Piloting a starship isn't like driving a car, grounder. There is no direct visual input. Sensor readings can be converted into whatever signals work for the pilot. My brother—"

"Minds on business, people," Iluka said, cutting off what sounded like the beginning of a tirade.

Anusha shot Neva one last angry look, then turned all her concentration on her work. The soft murmur of voices filled the air, different stations communicating with one another, and even Neva could tell that this was a crew that had worked together for so long that they all but anticipated one another's actions. Feeling even more the outsider, she sank back into her chair and watched the display in front of Anusha scroll through column after column of cryptic symbols.

There came a louder clang than before, and a slight tremor vibrated through the ship. "Station clamps released," Marcus reported.

Iluka nodded. "Release our clamps and let's get moving."

"Clamps away."

"Firing thrusters," Tarak said smoothly at almost the same moment.

Acceleration pushed Neva gently against the web that kept her strapped in, and she closed her eyes against the sudden sensation that the ship was standing on its nose.

"We're clear," Tarak reported.

"Set our course."

"Course laid in," Anusha answered.

"Begin rotation."

"Down" gradually became to the floor once again as cylinder rotation kicked in. Neva opened her eyes, saw the schematic suspended above Anusha's board. The bright dots represented ships, planets, asteroids—that much at least she knew. The lines might be projected courses, or they might be something else that her grounder's brain didn't comprehend.

Thrusters realigned them with a series of gentle, but disorienting, corrections that pushed Neva alternately against the web or the seat.

"On mark," Tarak said, and relaxed into his chair.

Although it was imperceptible to Neva within the ship, she knew that meant they were moving out-system along whatever lane the station had assigned them. "How long until jump?" she asked.

Iluka powered her chair back from her board. "Three shifts, more or less. We like to run light."

Marcus let out a barking laugh, although Neva couldn't guess what amused him.

"One burn—acceleration, that is—per shift, with the longest last," Iluka continued, ignoring him. "So close in to the station, we don't want to be going too fast. Too many other ships moving in the area, too many little in-system jobs that might not be showing up on the beacon if their operators are drunk or stupid. The ship is programmed to move hard if it detects a collision hazard, and I'd hate for any of us to end up jammed headfirst into a bulkhead. Did the transport that brought you to Moldar brief its passengers on take-holds?"

Neva nodded, relieved to know *something*. "They said to grab for the nearest one if an alarm sounds."

"Right. Any time you're walking around the ship and we aren't at dock or in hyperspace, look for the nearest take-hold and be ready to run for it. Chances are you won't get much warning. All the rooms have safety webs, too, folded up in marked compartments, in case you need to ride out sudden maneuvers. Got it?"

"Yes."

Iluka sighed and cast Neva an unexpected, though weary, smile. The faint light from the boards highlighted her grizzled hair and traced the lines on her face. "So. As Drake said, the *Exile* is a pirate vessel these days. Not what you expected, I'm sure."

"No," Neva said warily. *If I don't go along with them, will they put me out the airlock along with that poor stowaway?*

Do I care? It seemed an abstract question, in some ways. She felt as if all the days since Mabon had been stolen from death already. The doctors had been thieves, forcing her body to keep functioning even though her spirit had already gone on. *I'm a ghost, possessing my own*

flesh.

“We didn’t set out to be pirates, unlike some,” Iluka said. She stared at her boards, as if they could help with her story. “I used to be a simple trader. Ran a small, family ship, not one of the big commercial freighters. My mother did it before me, and her mother before her, and I never looked to do anything else.

“I’m sure you know the history of the Zatvian invasion as well as anyone. Toompoah was the first system to be attacked. As luck would have it, that was my homeworld. I was away, running my usual route, when it happened. Toompoah was declared a Zatvian Protectorate, and the Zats swore up and down that they had no further expansionist desires. We’d been on the edge of their space, after all—they had good reasons for invading us, or so they said. No one else had to worry. So no one else did.”

“At least, not until the Zats had gobbled up four or five more systems,” Drake put in.

“Sometimes not even then,” Anusha added bitterly. “Didn’t New Breyers try to make a treaty with them?”

Marcus flushed, and Neva guessed that must be his world of origin. “It didn’t help, did it?” he muttered.

“I won’t bore you with the details,” Iluka went on, picking up the thread of conversation again. “Suffice it to say that my family and I offered our ship to anyone willing to fight the Zats. Once open war was declared, we were even able to get some upgrades, make our sad little freighter into something with a fighting chance. Weapons, bigger engines, that sort of thing. After the Alliance was formed, we were given a letter of marque that said it was fine for us to attack all the Zat ships we could handle and steal their cargo.”

“They call you a privateer when you’ve got government sanction,” Drake put in with a faint smile.

“Then things started getting bad. Or, rather, even worse than before.” Iluka sighed and glanced at Neva. “The rest of my crew—and they were all my kin—got killed one way or another. Every ship available was thrown into the conflict, and if yours couldn’t fly, then you sat station on one that could. Personnel were scattered all over the board. Agnes ended up as our medical officer.

“And then Harvest was attacked.”

Neva pressed her lips together, trying not to think.

“The war ended. And we realized that we all had a choice. We could go home—those of us who still had homes, anyway—and try to get along with the Zats. Or we could try to hide from them. Or we could keep doing what we’d been doing all along—attacking their shipping routes. Stealing whatever we could from them. Sending it to where it was most needed.

“It wasn’t a decision I could make alone, so I put it to a vote. It was unanimous. We would remain privateers—pirates, now that we didn’t have any nice official letters to make things pretty—and take our chances. The ship was renamed the *Exile*, and we—and a few others who thought like us—restarted the war.”

“Not that the Zats have noticed,” Drake said dryly.

“They’ve noticed.” Marcus scowled in Neva’s direction, although she didn’t think his anger was meant for her. “The only reason we aren’t wanted in every station in Zat territory is because we can fake our signal, and Drake can cook up all the phony papers we need. Even so, there’ve been some close ones. And that’s why we’ve got to put that shambles in the laundry out the lock. We let him off at a port, he goes to the Zats and blabs, and it’s all over

for us.”

“He did say that he got on board to get *away* from the Zats,” Drake pointed out.

“Then he’ll get caught, and get tortured, and then he’ll blab.”

“Possibly.”

“We’ll put it to a vote, then,” Iluka said calmly. She glanced at Neva. “That’s how we do things here on the *Exile*. Something like this, everyone on the crew gets a vote. Except during an emergency or a battle—then you take orders, understand?”

Neva nodded uncertainly. At least it seemed that these people were fair. And they weren’t the bloodthirsty outlaws she’d feared. *I should have trusted Agnes more.*

But we’re voting on a man’s life. She remembered the huddled stowaway, remembered how malnourished he’d looked. Remembered, too, the odd series of blinks he’d given during the moments when he seemed to lose track of where he was.

Marcus has a right to be worried, though, argued her practical side. *It isn’t just the stowaway’s life we’re voting on—it might be all of our lives.* Even if she didn’t care much about hers, she doubted the rest felt that way.

“Aye or nay, then,” Iluka said, powering her chair around so that she could see them all. “Aye means a vote for letting him live. Nay means a vote for killing him. Drake?”

“Aye.”

“Marcus?”

“Nay.”

“Anusha?”

“Nay!”

“Tarak?”

The blind pilot didn’t turn his head in Iluka’s direction, but instead tilted it towards Anusha. “Aye. Sorry, sis.”

“Neva?”

“Aye!” she said firmly.

“And I vote ‘aye’ as well,” Iluka said, nodding her gray-haired head. “Looks like he stays on this side of the hull. The question now is what are we going to do with him?”

“He needs medical attention,” Neva said. Relief washed over her, startling because it had been so long since she had felt anything so strongly. *I used to want to save lives.* She remembered herself as she had been only a few short years before, when she had first applied to medical school. That idealistic young girl seemed like a stranger now. *But maybe she isn’t completely gone after all.*

“Coming up on mark for burn one,” Anusha reported in her clipped tones.

A single warning blast sounded over the allship com, although whether that was automatic or something they were doing for the stowaway’s benefit, Neva didn’t know.

“Initiating burn,” Tarak said. His blind eyes gleamed faintly in his dark face, and Neva wondered what had happened to him and how long he had been that way. “Nice and gentle.”

The change *was* gradual at first. As the ship began to accelerate, Neva felt as if an invisible hand gently pushed her back in the seat. Then the world began to tilt around her at the same moment. Every instinct of her body screamed that something was horribly wrong, that the ship was tumbling backwards out of control. She grabbed at her seat, unable to help herself, convinced that she was now lying on her back with the front of the ship as the ceiling.

The force pushing her against the seat began to increase. Experimentally, she tried to lift

a hand; she could, but it felt as if a heavy weight had been attached to it. Braces held Tarak's and Anusha's arms in position over their boards. Conversation ceased except for operational chatter, a soft, almost lulling flow of voices. Neva closed her eyes, drifting for a few moments between sleep and waking, past and future.

After a time, the sense of heaviness eased, and the world reoriented itself. "Cutting engines," Tarak said, leaning back from his board with a satisfied air.

Iluka freed her safety web and stood up, back popping as she stretched. "All right, then. Drake, you have the bridge. Marcus, Neva—let's go take a look at our stowaway."

* * *

Rat blinked as the door to the laundry opened. He lay cradled in the safety web, Jasmine tucked up under his chin. Despite the fact that he had no memory of ever being on a ship before, he'd felt the ship's movements and *known* what sort of maneuvers it was undergoing. All the course corrections had stopped some time ago, and now the crew was moving around, so the ship must have gone first law, coasting along until it was time for another burn.

Jasmine shifted warily as she caught the scents of strangers, remembering **danger**. Rat stroked her absently, trying to soothe her, to tell her to be still. *It's all right.*

It isn't all right.

Three people stood on the other side of the open door: the gray-haired man who had pointed a gun at him earlier, a dark woman he hadn't seen before, and the pale woman who'd caught him in the galley.

The whispers rose sharply, making him flinch. One of them was clearer than the rest. **probably scared, wondering what's going to happen (pity, sorrow) Goddess he smells bad (huddled man, pathetic and dirty) hid from the Zats (hatred) clever, orphan like me**

Rat bit back a moan. He hadn't meant to grab that, but the whispers had been so loud in the corridor, when they'd been pointing the guns at him, and he'd been so scared that if they didn't stop he'd lose control. *Told her own story back to her—parents lost, family lost, everything lost. Made her feel sorry for me.*

But what else could he have done? He didn't have a story to tell of his own. Or not much of one.

As for the little he did have...they'd probably shoot him on the spot if they knew it.

"What's wrong with him?" the man asked. He was big and burly, and Rat wondered if the disgust in his voice was for physical weakness or mental disturbance. Or both.

"I won't know until I can run some tests," the younger woman replied. She took a step towards him, but the man grabbed her by the arm and gave her a warning look.

"You don't know what he might do. Don't get in reach."

Rat let out a laugh that bordered on hysteria. *You're in reach already. All of you.*

Please don't let me kill them.

"Laugh if you want," the man said, mistaking the reason behind the sound. "But make the wrong move, and it'll be your last."

"Not going to hurt her," Rat mumbled, willing it to be true. His head hurt, and he suddenly realized how fast his pulse was fluttering. *Can't lose control now. Can't.*

"Look at him," the woman said, pulling away. "He can barely stand up."

The older woman spoke up for the first time. Her brown eyes were fixed directly on Rat, and he saw in them a clarity he could barely imagine. "What's your name?"

“Gone,” he said. He tried to rock back and forth, but the safety web wouldn’t let him. He remembered his invented story then, and clung to it. “Zats killed my family.”

just like mine (pity, rage, grief, hate) don't think about it I wish I had died I did die remember ghost

“I died then, with my family,” he murmured, repeating what the whispers told him, even as he tried not to focus on them too hard.

All of the loudest whispers were full of pain then, and he closed his eyes and covered his ears, trying to keep them at bay. “I ran and hid,” he went on, telling this tiny piece of his own story now because he didn’t dare listen too hard, afraid that it might trigger a blackout. And worse. “There are places to hide, even from the Zats. If you don’t mind living hard. Eating what you can find. Shopkeepers yelled at me. Didn’t like me in their trash. Get out of here little rat.” He blinked and dropped his hands, not able to remember if he’d answered the question. “I’m Rat.”

The pale woman sighed, and Rat didn’t need the whispers to tell him that she thought he was crazy. She moved closer, and this time the man didn’t stop her. Her ash-colored hair was raggedly cut, feathering around a face that would have been unremarkable except for its scars. Three parallel lines of red ran from her left cheekbone to her upper lip, and another scar bisected her right eyebrow. The edge of a larger scar showed on her chest, near the base of her neck.

Somebody hurt her. Zats?

“All right, then, Rat,” she said. “I’m Neva. I’m a...I’m the ship’s medic. Let’s get you into a shower, all right?”

* * *

The lift doors rattled open, and Drake glanced up automatically, picking out the reflection in the burnished metal that edged the boards. Iluka’s familiar silhouette walked towards him; a moment later, he heard the hum and snap of her safety web as she sat down. That was one of her rules—you stayed webbed if you were sitting or lying down anywhere, just in case. Like most of her rules, it was a good one.

“How’s our stowaway?” he asked. His wrist ached where the animal—some kind of primate—had bitten him. Drake thought that it had acted out of fear instead of viciousness, not that the distinction made it hurt any less.

Iluka frowned at nothing while she tied her dreads back from her face. Without being asked, Drake shunted scan from Marcus’ empty station to her boards. In the year and a half—relative—they had served together, he’d gotten used to seeing her there, at his left hand, and he knew without words what she’d want. There was comfort in that, a sense of routine, like what developed between people who’d been married for a long time.

Drake’s heart flinched back from that line of thought. *Rachel...* He could still see her, as clear as if she’d died yesterday. They’d spent half a lifetime together, after all.

“He says his name is Rat,” Iluka said at last. “I suppose that alone should tell you something.”

“He’s crazy,” Anusha put in from her station. “You weren’t down there, Tarak, or else you wouldn’t have voted against me.”

“Fight on your off shift, Anusha,” Drake said. Anusha was hurt and angry that Tarak hadn’t backed her up in the matter of the stowaway. To her, it was a personal betrayal, and

never mind that Tarak had used his best judgment. He wasn't supposed to do that, he was supposed to follow her lead.

God save him, there were days when Drake felt like he was herding cats. Or three-year-olds.

"He's in the shower now," Iluka went on, ignoring them all for the sake of peace. "Neva's going to look him over after he's disinfected. And after that...I'm haven't decided, yet. Marcus is with them, to keep an eye on things in case Rat does turn out to be violent."

Drake nodded, glad that someone else was down there with Neva. She'd put up a hell of a fight when the stowaway had cornered her initially, but her lack of training showed.

She's got guts, though. It took a lot for her to come this far. It probably took more than any of us could guess just to walk out of that hospital and back into the universe.

The scars had been a shock when he first saw her, although he supposed they shouldn't have been. A shock...and a painful reminder of failure.

"I'll go on galley duty," he suggested. Giving his hands something to do would keep his mind away from past sorrows. *And a little coffee and food probably won't hurt anyone's temper.*

Iluka started to nod—then froze abruptly, her brows drawing sharply together. "Hold it. I've got a Zatvian ship changing course."

Scan came up on Drake's board. The Zat ship had initially been headed out-system in a different lane altogether, but had begun to make a decisive turn. Its transponder ID came up: the *Emancipator*. A warship.

"Anusha, give me a projected course for that thing."

Anusha leaned closer to her display, as if proximity could help her run the numbers faster. "She's still trimming up, Captain. Coming around and...damn it, she'll cut across our lane."

Coincidence, maybe. But ships didn't change course, heedless of the lanes and risking collision, without damn good reasons.

"How far down our timeline?" he asked, and Iluka put up a counter that displayed the lag time between them and the Zatvian ship. The red numbers were depressingly low, and dropping even as he watched.

Damn it.

"It might be coincidence," Tarak suggested, echoing Drake's earlier thought. "Surely they wouldn't have let us leave dock if they suspected anything."

"Unless whatever's got them stirred up didn't reach the right ears until too late," Iluka replied grimly. "You know the Zats—they love their bureaucracy, and if a private found something out, it would have to be approved in triplicate all the way up the ranks before anyone authorized action."

"It couldn't have been our papers." *I hope.* "If everything hadn't checked out, they would have pulled us in then and there."

The com bud in his ear crackled, startling him. "Priority: transmission from the *Emancipator*," he said, pressing one finger to the link to hear better. "They're ordering us to return to station immediately."

"Stars fry them," Anusha muttered. "They want to board us."

As always, Iluka remained perfectly calm, never wavering. "Transmit: This is Esme Winterwalker, Captain of the *Cuckoo*. We are a peaceful trader and are aware of no complaints against us. We have time-sensitive cargo with guarantees of delivery. Any delay

in our schedule will result in heavy fines. End transmission.”

“And since when do the Zats give a damn about that?” Anusha asked. The display in front of her cast sickly light over her face, but Drake could see the familiar anger in the tight set of her mouth, the dark blaze of her eyes.

Seconds ticked by on the counter while their message made its way back to the warship and they replied in turn. The com squealed in his ear again. “Transmission.”

“Might as well put it on bridge com, where we can all hear it.”

Drake clicked a switch, and a harsh voice filled the bridge. “...of the Zatvian Cooperative. Information has reached us that you are carrying a biological hazard on your ship. In accordance with article 54, subsection 23-A, part F of volume 12 of the Protected Worlds Treaty, you must submit to search by authorized personnel.”

Tarak arched a brow. “Biohazard? That’s a new one.”

“Doesn’t make any damned sense, either,” Iluka muttered, chewing absently on the end of one long dread as she thought. “Unless they’re just suspicious but don’t have anything concrete.”

Anusha scowled. “I’ll bet it has something to do with that damned stowaway.”

Iluka shook her head. “Doubtful. If it did, why not tell us? No one wants a stowaway on board, and the quickest way to get us to cooperate would be to alert us that he’s here. They’d have us stuff him in a pod and jettison him for them to pick up at their leisure. No, they’re looking for an excuse to board us.” She frowned at nothing for a moment, then focused again. “Transmit. *Cuckoo* to *Emancipator*. Please check our manifests as registered with the station. You will find no record of any proscribed materials. End transmission. Anusha, Tarak, what are our options course-wise if we strip?”

“Present vector only takes us back out to Refa-III,” Anusha responded after a few moments. “Narrowing vector changes down to what the ship can actually make without tearing apart, we’ve got two choices. We can come out over Lamto—it’s a longjump, but Lamto’s got the mass to pull us in, no problem.”

“It’s also an inhabited world. If we have to jump too far in system, we risk dragging God-only-knows how many rocks and dust in with us and raining them down on their heads. The other possibility?”

“Edith’s Point. It’s got just enough mass to make a shortjump. But that vector’s further off our current trajectory.”

“Damn it. Lay in the course anyway. Tarak, sound the take-hold and get ready to initiate burn on my mark.” Iluka thumbed the cap off of a control on her board. “I’m blowing the holds.”

* * *

Neva stood in the ship’s tiny infirmary and silently wondered how she was supposed to help anyone. Compared to what she had seen during her stint in school and her long stay in the hospital, what equipment the *Exile* had was outdated at best and primitive at worst.

At least Agnes kept it neat and well stocked. The foldaway cabinets held a wider range of drugs than Neva had initially expected. There was also a diagnostic bed that belonged in a museum, and a variety of scanners, some current and others as antique as the bed. A tiny sterile room opened off the main chamber. Its main function was as a surgery, but heavy-duty filters would allow it to double as a quarantine area if the need arose.

Her patient sat quietly on the bed, his eyes fixed on the floor, as if he feared to look at her. The shower had greatly improved his appearance—Neva had made certain that he used an insecticidal shampoo—but he still looked tired and sick. His disastrous clothes were in the laundry, and the green scrubs she'd found for him to wear made his yellowed complexion look even worse. The knobby ends of his bones were visible through his skin, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

Whoever he is, he's had a bad road. At least there were people who helped me after...after everyone died. By the looks of him, he didn't have anybody.

The little primate wandered around the bed beside him, her overlarge eyes dilated with curiosity. Unlike Rat, his pet had stayed clean and well-fed. *As if he saw to her before himself.*

"What's her name?" Neva asked.

Rat flinched, as if startled. He glanced up, just a quick flash of those extraordinary eyes from beneath the shadow of his dreads. Then his head ducked back down. "Jasmine," he said to the floor.

"May I touch her?"

He nodded. Neva carefully held out her hand, keeping it below the level of the animal's head so as not to intimidate her. Jasmine cocked her head and sniffed carefully at Neva. After a few moments, she withdrew and went to sit close by Rat, watching Neva intently. One miniature hand was held close against her chest.

"Her paw's been hurt—I should look at it."

Rat shook his head. "Not hurt. Born that way. You know what she is?"

"I'm not sure. Some sort of primate, obviously."

Rat nodded, although he still didn't look straight at Neva. His voice was low and soft, and she had to strain to hear him. "She's a le-murr. A manufactured animal. Genetically messed around with for the last few hundred years. There's a breeder on the station."

Neva remembered the sign. "Patil's Perfect Primates, right?"

He nodded again, as if he'd rather use a gesture than speak aloud. "Her paw was like that when she was born. Imperfect. So they were going to cull her. I didn't want her to die."

He trailed off, forcing Neva to fill in the blanks. "That was good of you."

Rat shrugged.

A timer pinged softly behind Neva, making Rat flinch yet again. She turned to the display, knowing that the rest of the crew would call her stupid for putting her back to a stowaway. But Marcus was in the corridor, glaring at them through the open door, a gun in his hands and a look on his face that said he was ready to blow away Rat for breathing.

A quick scroll through the results told her nothing unexpected. "You have a minor infection—run-down as you are, your immune system isn't in the best shape," she told Rat with a glance in his direction. His head lifted slowly, as if drawn by her words despite his determination to stare at the floor. "Mostly, you just need food. How long have you been epileptic?"

He stared at her blankly. "I...what?"

Neva remembered the series of rapid blinks he'd demonstrated earlier, the way he'd seemed to lose track of things for a few moments. "Do you ever have blackouts? Seizures?"

Surprise showed in his amber eyes—then immediately vanished behind a more guarded look. "Sometimes," he said at last. "They...only started recently."

Neva sighed. "I'd like to run some more tests, but there isn't much I can do here. And I

know there are a number of treatments, but the most effective ones are far beyond my training. There are some drugs that might help.”

An odd look of hope crossed briefly over his face, then was gone. “Thank you,” he whispered, and went back to staring at the floor. His long, thin hands clenched slowly in his lap.

An alarm blared suddenly, shockingly loud in the small space. Startled, Neva looked automatically at the com speaker, wondering what could possibly have gone wrong.

Hands grabbed her from behind, jerking her back hard against the bed. *No!* she thought, and felt a blaze of anger. *I was trying to help him, and he's going to use me for a hostage, or kill me, or Goddess only knows what. Curse him, curse them all!*

Marcus swore furiously, lifting his gun, but Neva was in the way and he couldn't get off a shot. Rat had one wiry arm around her, pulling her back against him and pinning her arms, so she snapped her head back hard. Her skull cracked against his chin, and she heard his teeth meet with a click. A startled bark of pain escaped him, but he didn't let go, yanking her back down and pulling the safety web over them both.

The safety web...

“Take hold!” Rat yelled at Marcus. “Take hold, take hold!”

The entire ship jolted, as if kicked by a giant. Marcus fell heavily against the doorway. “They've blown the holds!” he exclaimed incredulously. The shudder that had rocked the ship ceased, and he swore again and dove away from the door, no doubt headed for the emergency station in the hall.

The alarm fell abruptly silent. Neva realized that she was lying mostly on top of Rat, Jasmine snuggled in beside them. His body was all hard angles, nothing but bone, and the ketone residue of hunger rode his breath. Blood leaked from his lower lip where his teeth had caught it, and she felt a stab of guilt. “I'm sorry!” she said, trying to maneuver so that most of her weight was off him. “I...you startled me.” She hated admitting ignorance, but there was one thing she could say that would no doubt explain it to him. “I'm a grounder.”

“It's okay.” So close, his almond-shaped eyes looked enormous in his lean face. “What's going on?”

“I don't know.” Neva swallowed hard, remembering Marcus' words. “Marcus said they blew the holds. I don't even know what that means.”

“The cargo holds—they're strapped on to the spine of the ship. You can dump them if you need to drop mass,” he said. “If your engines are damaged, it can make the difference between going where you want and going out of control. Or...if they aren't...you do it so you can move faster.”

He sounded worried as hell, as she certainly didn't blame him. “Either way, that doesn't sound good.”

“No.” His amber eyes glanced briefly at her face, then away, although with both of them sandwiched in the same safety web there weren't many other places to look. “Neva, what is this ship? They've got guns...and now this...”

Neva sighed. “I only just came aboard myself,” she said. “But I'm afraid you picked the wrong ship to hide on.”

“Why? What are they up to?”

“Fighting the Zats.”

To her surprise, the look of worry eased from his face. More proof that he was crazy, she thought—anyone sane would be scared by a pronouncement like that.

The com clicked, and Iluka's voice came on, calm and collected. "Initiating burn. Possible evasive maneuvers."

* * *

"*Cuckoo*, you are in violation of the Treaty! New charges brought by the captain of this vessel: creating a navigational hazard, reckless endangerment—"

"Shut him up," Iluka ordered tersely.

Drake cut off the link to bridge com, although the *Emancipator's* officer continued to howl threats in his ear. Scan showed their holds falling away from them, racing through the system at angles to the lanes. They might as well have launched missiles—no small insystem craft could possibly get out of the way fast enough, and he prayed that the beacon output was correct, that there wasn't anything out there for the loose holds to hit. The red numbers of the lagtime clock had started to climb again as Tarak began their burn.

"Alert! Alert!" Iluka said. "Scan's picked up weapons fire."

The ship lurched, trying to save itself. A great hand seemed to shove Drake back and to one side, and he felt his heart laboring against the drag. Ominous lights flashed across all the boards.

The push eased, and Iluka swore. "We've got to go as soon as we can get up to speed."

"But the g's—" Tarak argued.

"It's that or have a firefight here in the lanes. Go. Push it as far and hard as you can."

"Aye, Captain," said Tarak. He might argue once, but he'd take no for an answer. Not like his sister at all. "I'm laying in autopilot in case I black out."

"Do that."

Tarak ran his hands over the controls, arcane gestures that fed information back and forth from him to the ship. "Hold on—this one's going to be bad."

* * *

Acceleration pushed Neva hard against the safety web—and against Rat, who was between her and the wall, which was the direction that seemed to be *down* for the moment.

This is crazy, she thought, riding the edge of panic. *I should have stayed on the ground. I should have died on Harvest.* Anything but this mad world, where up didn't stay *up*, where instincts hard-wired from millions of years of planetary evolution were confounded.

The force shoving her against Rat increased, and she felt heavy and weak, barely able to move. Rat's breath was coming fast and shallow, and to her horror she realized that the weight of her body on his was slowly but surely compressing his chest. She struggled frantically, trying to push herself off him, but there was nowhere for her to go.

No!

(...standing in a room, everything white (walls, ceiling, floor, desks), blinding, except the shapes on the floor (no no no), too still, Zat uniforms, black cloth spattered with red (blood), dead (fear) did I do it what happened oh gods oh gods oh gods

What...?

Not enough blood to the brain...causing me to hallucinate. Pressure spiked in her head, and her vision hazed purple. Something wet trickled down her face, and she tasted blood in her mouth. *Just like those Zats.* It was too much...she couldn't breathe...

The ship jumped.

Chapter 3: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Paradise

I killed her. Oh gods, no, no, I didn't mean to, didn't want to, oh gods help me...

Rat unhooked the safety web, rolling Neva's limp form off him. His own breath came in gasps, and deep shudders wracked his frame. The ship had gone into hard acceleration, almost more than he could stand, and he had started to panic...hadn't been able to breathe...hadn't been able to control it...had one of his seizures...

And killed an innocent woman, the first person he could remember who'd really tried to help him.

Jasmine clung to the safety web, her eyes enormous, her fur bristling in fear. When he moved, she jumped and landed on his shoulder, burying herself under his dreads as best she could, her small body trembling pitifully.

don't like don't like don't like

Hands shaking, Rat rolled Neva carefully onto her back. Blood had run freely from her nose, stark against her white skin, her scarred face. *Oh gods, I'm so sorry...*

Pale eyebrows quirked together, and she moaned faintly.

Relief hit him, so hard that he almost fell. Clinging to the edge of the bed with one hand, he frantically wiped the blood from her face with the other. "Neva? Neva? Neva?"

Hazel eyes stared at him in incomprehension for a moment, then seemed to clear a bit. "Rat? W-what happened?"

Rat only shook his head, not knowing what to tell her. She started to sit up—then bent over and vomited weakly on the floor. He hovered around her, wanting to help, wondering if it would be better if he stayed away.

I did this to her. To them. What if I killed somebody?

Again.

"Sorry," she managed to say at last. She sat very still on the edge of the bed, her head bent over almost between her knees. "Goddess, my head hurts. Can you open the med locker?"

Grateful for some direction, he did as she told him, locating some painpatches and putting them on her neck, over the vein. He cleaned the floor, too, without being asked, then retreated to the opposite side of the little room. He crouched in the corner and watched her warily, half-scared that she would just keel over despite all the evidence that said she was feeling better. Jasmine came out from under his hair and sniffed the air suspiciously. **don't like (blood-smell, med-smell)**

"I don't like it, either," he said to her, forgetting for a moment that they weren't alone.

Neva looked puzzled. He shook his head and patted Jasmine, and after a moment Neva smiled faintly.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm feeling better. I remember...there was an alarm...the ship was accelerating, right?"

He nodded. "Jumped."

"We're in hyperspace?"

"Yes." He huddled deeper into himself, half-afraid to look at her.

Neva absently wiped the residue of blood from her upper lip. "No wonder I blacked out if they compressed two burns worth of acceleration into that short a time. There must have been some kind of emergency—I can't imagine they'd do something like that without good reason."

Rat linked his hands around his knees and began to rock back and forth on his heels. *Zats*. He'd caught a flash, right before the seizure had hit him. Something from one of the bridge crew, maybe, about *Zats* chasing them, shooting at them.

He shivered. *I did get on the wrong ship, didn't I?*

Neva climbed to her feet, moving like an old woman. At least she was blaming all her aches on the acceleration. *But what else could she do? How could she realize that I did something to her?*

He had to keep control, that was all. He'd been given another chance. He couldn't slip up again. *Just hold on hold on hold on...*

"Rat?" she asked gently. Startled, he looked up and found that she was standing right in front of him, a medkit in her hand. He'd lost the minutes in between, somehow. "We have to make sure the rest are all right. No one's answering on com. I need your help."

Rat nodded again, feeling a rush of relief. He could do that—could follow directions. Maybe if someone told him what to do, if he didn't have to think or worry for himself...maybe that would help.

Neva led the way out into the hall. The decking was cold against his bare feet, and he wondered if they'd let him have his boots back. It would be nice to have something to wear other than the scrubs, too, although at least they were clean. *Feels strange to have something clean against my skin. Clean skin, clean clothes, clean hair.*

He blinked sharply, realizing that his mind was wandering again. *Focus!*

Marcus hung suspended in the web at the emergency station in the hall. The station was nothing more than an alcove with a web and a take-hold, meant for precisely the kind of emergency they'd found themselves in. The big man's eyes were closed, and there was dried blood on his face as well. Limp and pale, he didn't look nearly as intimidating as he had when pointing a gun at Rat's head, and Rat felt a faint flush of pleasure.

Shouldn't feel that way. He might not be nice, but I could have killed him.

I might still kill him.

Shut up! I won't. I'll do better next time. I won't lose it again.

Rat held the medkit while Neva used scanners and patches to do things that he didn't comprehend at all. Apparently, medicine wasn't something he had understood Before, because no insidious knowledge drifted from nowhere into his consciousness.

It was nice to be ignorant. Safe. Free from whatever nasty surprises lurked in the depths of his brain.

By the time Neva was done, Marcus had started to come around. "What—what happened?" he grated.

"We're not sure. We're going to the bridge next," Neva said soothingly. "Get to your quarters and lie down, all right? I'll come and check on you soon."

Marcus gingerly let himself down from the web, swaying on his feet for a moment before finding his balance again. His eyes hardened when he caught sight of Rat. "I can't leave you alone with that."

up to no good, damned stowaway, like stealing from a ship, waste of air and water (dirty scummy smelly) worthless

Rat picked up Jasmine and cuddled her close, trying to think about her fur and how good she smelled. The nagging whispers receded gradually. Jasmine snuffled at him with a wet nose, then clambered onto his shoulder and started to contentedly groom his hair.

"He's been helping me," Neva told Marcus sharply. "He could have killed me twice already if he wanted to."

"He's crazy. Don't expect him to act rationally."

Neva's lips pressed into a thin line that made the red scars on the left side of her face stand out. "I'll take my chances."

"It isn't just you. After all we spent on you, getting a new face put on, you owe us. We didn't do it so you could get killed."

New face?

Neva spun around and walked away; Rat could all but taste her rage. And her humiliation. Startled, he scurried after her, giving Marcus a single, backward glance. The older man slumped against the wall, watching grimly, and there was the promise of death in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Rat said, once they were on the lift and the door had slid shut.

"Not your fault."

Seeing that she didn't want to talk, Rat hunkered down in one corner, cradling Jasmine to him. The lift clanked and groaned its way to the bridge, and he wondered what would happen if something went wrong and they got stuck. Would they have to climb?

Fortunately, he didn't find out. The lift jolted to a halt, the doors opening onto the dimly-lit bridge. Shadowy shapes moved around, and Rat recognized the older woman who had come to see him earlier.

Neva strode onto the bridge like she owned it, and he followed, clutching the medkit. Conversation drifted past him: Neva asking who needed aid the most urgently. He followed her obediently from station to station, handing her things from the kit, doing whatever she told him. Keeping quiet, mostly, not looking directly at faces or thinking too hard about anything.

When they were done, he went and crouched in an out-of-the-way spot, keeping his head down. The pressure of their gazes beat at his thoughts, and the whispers hissed softly in his mind. **crazy...something wrong with him...don't trust...helped us...maybe just scared...**

Be quiet, he thought at them—but not too hard. Just inside his own head, where it wouldn't hurt anyone.

"Rat," said the older woman, and he reluctantly looked up at her. He thought he remembered someone saying her name—Iluka.

She's sitting the captain's station.

"Captain?" he asked, hoping that he was right.

He must have been, because no one corrected him. "You're being helpful—that's good. Nobody gets free passage aboard the *Exile*."

He bobbed his head. She looked stern, he thought, but she hadn't had him put out the airlock, so maybe he could trust her to be fair. "I'll do whatever you need," he said, and

hoped that they wouldn't ask anything too bad of him.

"That's right, you will. We could use a pair of hands to scrub the chemical toilets, clean the galley, and polish the floors."

Rat nodded again. Nobody in their right mind wanted to do those kinds of jobs, but then he wasn't in his right mind, was he? "Yes. Yes, yes. I can do that. Thank you."

Iluka's mouth twitched into a reluctant smile. The expression emphasized the lines bracketing her mouth and eyes. Rat thought they made her look dignified. "Don't thank me yet, boy," she said, settling back into her chair. "Not until you've heard what kind of ship you're on."

* * *

Neva set aside the tablet she'd been reading from and rubbed tiredly at her eyes. The words had begun to blur some time ago, and she knew that she should have stopped before her comprehension went altogether. But that would have meant trying to sleep, and she knew already that as soon as she stopped concentrating, all the memories and fears buried in her brain would rush in to fill the gap.

I could take a sedative. But that would leave her muzzy-headed, which wouldn't do if a disaster arose. *Which seems likely on this ship, no matter what Drake says.*

They had eaten in the small galley—Drake had made a light meal, after explaining to Neva that they usually took turns on galley duty. "Keeps us from getting bored with our own cooking," he'd said with a faint smile.

While they ate, Iluka had explained the situation on board the *Exile* to Rat. Rat had just nodded, his strange eyes betraying nothing. He had eaten slowly and with apparent relish; after he'd made certain Jasmine had her fill, Neva had seen him stuffing extra food into his pockets, as if he feared they wouldn't feed him on any kind of regular basis. *Or maybe it's just habit.*

Drake had offered to settle Rat and his pet in the laundry, where a spare hammock could be strung for him. Of them all, except for Neva, Drake seemed to feel the most pity for their stowaway.

And for her, too. As they finished eating, the various crewmembers had put away their dishes and departed without explanation, leaving Neva sitting at the table, uncertain what to do. "Get some sleep," Drake had said as he put his own things away. "Everyone's going off-shift for a while, so we shouldn't need you."

"Everyone?" she asked, surprised. "The ship is on autopilot, then?"

"No pilot," Rat had muttered in the direction of the table, as if afraid to look up at her.

Drake nodded. "He's right. We're in hyperspace now—we couldn't change direction or speed if we wanted to. Once the Savvies—the Savrasa Jump Engines, that is—kick in, a ship's committed. We'll keep going as we are until we come across a mass big enough to pull us back in."

"And if we don't?"

"Keep going forever," Rat murmured.

"Which we won't," Drake said, putting the last of the dishes into the washer. "Tarak is one of the best. Anusha, too. They won't steer us wrong."

So Neva had gone to her quarters—her aunt's quarters—feeling less than reassured despite all of Drake's words. Hoping to distract herself with some work, she had located a

tablet and called up everything she could find on epilepsy from the infirmary's records. Normal treatments involved nanobots that monitored neural activity and effectively short-circuited any seizures before they could begin. But that was far beyond Neva's training, and certainly far beyond the antiquated equipment aboard the *Exile*.

It'll have to be drugs, then. First thing tomorrow—whatever “tomorrow” meant on a ship, far from any definitions of day and night—she would run a comparison between available medications and Rat's blood panel. *I have to do an inventory, find out what the ship has and what it might need. I could start on that...*

But no—she was tired and apt to make mistakes. She should just put down the tablet, turn out the lights, and go to sleep.

In a dead woman's room.

It had bothered her ever since she had closed the door behind her, although she'd done her best not to acknowledge it. The smell of herbs, sandalwood, and patchouli filled the air of the tiny room, a constant reminder that it didn't belong to her.

Once, it might have. Once, the smell would even have been comforting, helping to ease her transition into this new life. But for two years there had only been the antiseptic scent of the hospital, and the sudden change only brought home how much Neva had lost.

I'll get rid of it all. It isn't as though I'll need any of Agnes' ritual things.

She started to set the tablet down on top of the desk, then remembered the strict warnings she'd received about leaving anything unsecured. Although it seemed the rules were relaxed a bit in hyperspace, there was no point in not cultivating good habits. Sliding off the bed, she went to the wall and pulled out one of the drawers at random, intending to put the tablet inside for the moment.

Lying neatly secured in the drawer were more of Agnes' personal things. There was a small box of tarot cards, some gaudy earrings, a mortar and pestle...and a holo that flashed an image at her in response to her touch.

Neva picked up the holo with trembling fingers, certain that she didn't really want to see it but compelled to look anyway. She recognized the scene immediately: Wight's Beach, almost four years ago. Sapphire waves lapped sand so white it seemed to blaze in the bright sun. A man grinned broadly at her, while the woman who clung to his back waved wildly.

The doctors did do a good job on me, Neva found herself thinking in the numb moment before shock set in. The woman in the picture didn't look exactly like her, but they might have been mistaken for sisters. As for the handsome, smiling man...

Devin.

Neva flung the picture down and slammed the drawer shut. Desperate to get away, to get out of a room that held too many memories, she opened the door and ran blindly down the corridor. Fortunately, the infirmary wasn't far; she sealed the door behind her and lay down on the bed, shivering.

This is stupid. I can't run forever. I can't—

Why not? It's all gone—why make things worse by remembering?

After a while, the shivers stopped. She realized that the infirmary didn't smell quite like the hospital had...but it was close, and she found herself relaxing. Closing her eyes, she resolutely shut away her troubled thoughts and let sleep take her.

* * *

Neva chose to ride out their re-entry into normal space on the bridge. Apparently Agnes had sat scan at times, in addition to her medical duties, and Iluka had informed Neva that she would be trained on it as well. For now, she sat the station beside Anusha, her hands in her lap while she watched everyone else work.

Almost everyone, she corrected herself. Rat and his pet were riding out transition in their makeshift quarters in the laundry. She had begun a cautious regimen of injections during the previous shift, but only time would show if they would help.

"We're on mark for drop," Tarak said. His hands wove dizzying patterns above his boards, as if the ship were an instrument that he played. Red numbers appeared above the stations, counting down to re-entry.

Since there didn't seem to be a crisis at the moment, Neva said, "May I ask a question?"

Anusha ignored her, but Iluka said, "Go ahead," although she didn't look up from her boards.

"The Zatvian ships that were chasing us would have recorded what trajectory we jumped on. Won't they just come through after us?"

"Zats don't know about this place, grounder," Anusha said with a tight grin.

"As far as they're concerned, we jumped into nothing," Iluka explained. "Edith's Point isn't on the charted lanes. Discovering new mass points is a tricky business. Large ones can be discovered using telescopes, of course. But smaller ones like Edith's are much harder to find. Plenty have been charted by people who don't necessarily advertise their existence to the rest of the universe."

How do they find them? Neva wondered, but didn't ask. The countdown clock was down to seconds, and there was a sudden flurry of activity between Tarak and Anusha, pilot and navigator shunting information back and forth. The clock hit one, and Neva closed her eyes against a sudden, illogical rush of fear that something would go horribly wrong in transition.

Her gut seemed to register a drop, as if the ship were falling out from under her. Letting out a sudden yelp, she clutched at her seat...and heard Anusha's mocking laughter.

"We're in," Tarak reported. "Hold for braking."

The hard series of brakes was almost as disorienting as acceleration had been. "Hold," Iluka said once they had hit whatever speed she was looking for.

"We're first law," Tarak reported, settling back in his seat.

"Scan's up. Where's the beacon, Drake?"

"Shunting to your station now. Wait a minute...I've got...what the hell?" Drake pressed the bud into his ear, a confused frown on his face. "I'm getting chatter. A distress call."

"We aren't the only ship that uses this point as a course change. Anyone we know?"

"That's just it." Drake's face looked even paler than usual. "The transponder output is Zatvian."

* * *

So much for secret mass points, Neva thought.

As soon as Drake made his announcement, the bridge exploded into chaos. Anusha hotly declared that he had to be wrong, Marcus said it had to be faked, and Tarak began to swear.

"Eyes on your stations, people!" Iluka yelled, and there was instant silence. "Switching to active scan. Drake, verify that signal against our records—it might be faked, although why someone would risk pretending to be a Zat out here I can't imagine."

Neva felt as if her stomach had been tied in knots. *Were they waiting for us? But no, that's not possible. And Drake said it was a distress call.*

It could be a trap. If the Zats know that pirates are using this point, they might set up a trap.

"Active scan matches beacon output," Iluka said after what seemed forever.

Anusha shook her head in disgust. "You just told them we're here."

"We're moving a hell of a lot faster than they are," Iluka replied calmly. "Not much they can do to interfere."

"Maybe the distress signal is real," Drake suggested.

"It's a trap," Marcus said firmly, echoing Neva's thoughts. "We should do a fly-by and blow them out of the system."

Yes, Neva thought...and then felt a wash of shame. They're sending out a distress signal. There could be people hurt on board. People who had nothing to do with Harvest. What's wrong with me?

"If the transponder isn't genuine, it's a hell of a fake," Drake said at last. "Assuming that it is real, we're sharing space with Zatvian transport vessel *New Beginning*. She's fairly small—Y-class."

Iluka powered back her chair, as if giving herself room to think, and scowled at nothing. "Damn it. All right, here are the facts. To start with, Edith's Point is compromised."

"Zats have got Star Riders working for them now," Marcus muttered with a hard look at Tarak and Anusha.

"Shut up!" Anusha snarled back.

"Save it for the off-shift," Iluka said, and they subsided. "We don't know how they found out about this place, and it doesn't matter at the moment. What matters is what we do about it. Our original plan was to change vector and head straight for Paradise. We can still do that.

"Our other option is to investigate this transport. We need to get the ship overhauled at Paradise, and to do that we need something to trade. Since we had to jettison our holds at Moldar, right now we don't have enough barter to buy us a drink. This ship might be what we need to pay the bills."

"What about the people on board?" Neva asked uncertainly. "If they've had an emergency, they might need help."

"They're Zats," Marcus said shortly.

"I know, but—"

"But what? Do you think they shed tears over Harvest?"

Her breath caught, and for a moment it was hard to think. They're Zats. They deserve to die. All of them. Marcus is right.

"I say we take their holds," Tarak said after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Aye," Anusha agreed. Everyone else seemed to think it was a good idea as well, so Neva just nodded when it came her turn to vote. No one suggested asking Rat for his opinion; she supposed that half-mad stowaways were expected to take what they were given without comment.

"All right, then," Iluka said. "Set up a series of brakes and bring us in, but do it slow and keep a sharp eye out. I don't want any nasty surprises."

* * *

It took them the better part of a shift to get close enough to receive a clear image of the transport on scan. As they went through a series of decelerations that would ultimately match course and acceleration with the disabled ship, Drake broadcast a response to the distress call, pretending they were an innocent freighter prepared to render aid. Whether or not the Zats would believe the lie was another question altogether, given that neither ship was strictly where it was supposed to be.

He set up a lagtime clock, explaining to Neva that it would take time for their message to travel to the other ship, and time for their reply to return. But as the numbers went into the negative, she began to worry.

“Why haven’t they answered?” she asked during a break in activity.

Drake shook his head. He looked tired, she thought, and she wondered when he had last slept. “They have to formulate a response, for one thing. They’re also probably deliberating whether they ought to respond at all. If I were them, I would certainly be asking myself who we really are, and what we might be up to.”

But as time went on, and they received not so much as an acknowledgement, she saw that everyone else was becoming nervous as well. Drake sent another message, in case the first had become garbled in transmission. Again, there was no response.

As they drew close, Iluka put the scan up on the main monitor. Neva stared at the shadowy shape of a ship made visible only by the computers, as there were no stars near enough to shed much light on it. The image meant little to her, but she heard someone give a low whistle.

“Is it just me, or are all their holds hot?” Marcus asked.

Iluka nodded. “They are.”

Drake stroked his beard absently. “That’s a lot of fragile cargo they’re carrying.”

“A lot of expensive cargo,” Marcus agreed.

“We only have hookups for two of those holds,” Iluka pointed out. “We can’t just force them to blow the holds, either, and grab them with the tug like we would cold holds. If we want what’s in them, we’re going to have to board.”

* * *

The com light on the laundry wall flickered on; something was wrong with the unit, and voices buzzed and rattled over it. “Rat. Report to the bridge.”

That was it, and the light went off again. Apparently, the captain was a woman of few words.

Or something’s gone wrong.

No. He wouldn’t think that way. He wouldn’t assume anything. He wouldn’t worry about the future, or the present, or anything else out of his control. He’d just do as he was told, like he’d done during the passage through hyperspace.

Marcus had kept an eye on him most of the time, and Rat suspected that the other man had given him the hardest, most disgusting tasks possible. But he didn’t care—if he worked hard enough, if he concentrated on what his hands were doing, then the voices got so quiet he could barely even tell they were there. He hadn’t done anything crazy, had just done the best job he could and then gotten out of the way when his shift was over. Not even Marcus had been able to find fault with him.

go?

Jasmine squatted on top of the fold-out dryer, playing with a toy he'd made out of some spare junk that Drake had let him have. He'd welded it together to make a ball-like shape full of nooks and hidey-holes, then put bits of food inside so she'd have to figure out how to get at them. She seemed to like it.

"Just me," he said, and envisioned him leaving and her going to sleep while he was gone.

(Neva holding a needle)

"No more shots. Not now. I don't think." He couldn't tell if the shots had helped any or not. He still heard the voices. *But maybe...maybe...*

The hope felt unfamiliar, and he wasn't certain what to do with it. Had he ever hoped for anything before? He must have, surely, just as he must have been a child, must have learned to read and write and a thousand other things, but he had no memory of it.

Pulling on his jacket, he left the room and hurried to the bridge. Living in the laundry let him clean his clothing after every shift, and the luxury of it amazed him. *Not to mention food whenever I want it. And a place to sleep without worrying someone will catch me.*

Please don't let me screw this up.

Iluka glanced at him when he entered the bridge, and he read worry in her eyes. Marcus was busy checking over a rifle; he looked happier than Rat had ever seen him. Neva seemed a little nervous, but she smiled when she saw Rat. She always smiled at him.

Like I'm a human being instead of an empty hole.

That was different, too, and he thought that maybe he liked it.

"Ever worn a 'suit before?" Iluka asked him, and he felt any pleasure drain away.

He hated it when things just...came to him, out of that vast dark place that had eaten his life. So he usually didn't try to probe it, didn't try to ask any disturbing questions that might jostle loose something he couldn't deal with. But he had no choice now, so he pictured a spacesuit and asked himself what he might do with it, how he would put it on.

"Yes," he said. He knew. Who had taught him...what the circumstances had been...that was gone, swallowed by the void.

"Then get ready. Marcus, Anusha, you're with us. Drake, you've got the guns, just in case. Neva, keep an eye on the scan, yell if you see anything new show up, and don't touch anything."

"Where are we going?" Rat asked as Iluka, Marcus, and Anusha swept past him and into the lift.

"We're boarding a ship, monkey-boy," Anusha said. There was a feral gleam to her eyes that made him uneasy.

"We aren't arming him, are we?" Marcus asked, giving Rat his normal unfriendly stare.

Iluka's dark eyes assessed Rat briefly. "Not yet. You're along to carry things or do whatever else we tell you, understand?"

He nodded. "I do, but why do we need 'suits if we're going aboard another ship?"

"The ship put out a distress call, but it was general—we don't know what went wrong. If it was life support...better to be ready for the worst than find it out after we're breathing their air."

That made sense to him. He wondered if they were going to help the other ship or steal from it, or both at once. *What if there's a fight? What if I have another seizure?*

The drugs will help.

*Maybe they won't. Maybe—
Shut up!*

The lift stopped, and they piled out. "I'm watching you," Marcus said as he passed.

It didn't take long for them to get 'suited up. The pirates had obviously done this enough times for there to be no awkward fumbling. Rat found that he was equally experienced; he barely even had to think about where various hoses and attachments should go.

The weight of the 'suit felt familiar, as did the hiss and sigh of the air pumps in his helmet. Another lift took them up to the airlock. Since it was in the spine of the ship, outside the rotating cylinder that housed crew and operations, there was no gravity unless they were docked at a station and locked into its rotation. That, too, was familiar; he found that he could guide himself easily, his body seeming instinctively to know which moves would keep him going in the right direction and which would send him careening off at an angle.

Are they starting to wonder about me?

They grabbed take-holds outside the airlock and waited. There came a soft bump as the ship mated up with its counterpart. Tarak's voice sounded over the com in Rat's helmet. "We're matched."

"All right, people, look sharp," Iluka said. "Rat, you get in the middle."

So I'm not at their backs.

They cycled through their airlock and found themselves facing the first set of doors on the other ship's lock. The metal was abraded from its passage through space, but not heavily so. A newer ship, maybe, or maybe they'd just replaced the lock for some reason. Iluka signaled to them, and Anusha and Marcus brought up their weapons, ready to fire. Rat did his best to keep to one side, out of the way.

Iluka took the panel off a recessed hatch, uncovering the lock's emergency controls. A moment later, the doors slid open.

A 'suit with a dead body in it floated gently out.

Chapter 4: Lost Souls

“God damn it!” Marcus yelled. His rifle swung to bear on the inner doors of the *New Beginning*'s airlock. The doors, however, remained ominously shut. There was nothing but the slow drift of the body, prodded along by air currents as the ships' atmospheres mixed.

Rat could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Voices buzzed over the com: Drake demanding to know what was going on, Iluka explaining, Neva querying if she was needed. But louder were the whispers, which spiked suddenly to a near-roar...

dead, he's dead...it's a trap, must be a trap...distracting us while they get ready to...

what the hell is going on here?

been dead a few days at least, glad we wore the 'suits, can't smell anything (maggoty stench)

For a moment...there wasn't anything at all, and he lost track of what was happening. Then everything snapped back into focus, and he realized that he'd had another seizure. Just a little one, though, one of the quiet ones where he forgot what was going on around him for a few minutes.

But not a big one. Maybe the drugs are helping?

No one else seemed to have noticed. During the seconds that he'd misplaced, the body had floated further into the *Exile*'s lock. Marcus made a disgusted face and shoved it back the other way. It spun wildly, and Rat got a look at its face through the visor of its 'suit. The corpse was that of a man; his dead skin had an unearthly pallor to it. Spots of dried blood decorated his face and the inside of the visor.

The 'suit...Zatvian military issue, but the insignia...some sort of supply unit, in charge of getting stuff from here to there.

He didn't ask how he knew that.

The body revolved again, and its eyes seemed to meet his. Decay had set in, and they had started to desiccate, contracting back into their sockets as if they couldn't bear to look on the world any more. “He's been dead for more than one shift. Zats wouldn't leave a corpse lying around to foul up the air filters. They'd have frozen him, not left him to rot. Why haven't they retrieved him?”

“People do crazy things in an emergency,” Iluka said. “We won't find just floating here talking. Drake, you and Neva better 'suit up and get down here.”

* * *

It took them a while to join the others in the airlock, mainly because Drake had to show Neva how to put on and operate a 'suit. It felt awkward and heavy—at least, until they got

into the spine, where there was no gravity.

Goddess and God, don't let me throw up, Neva thought as her stomach protested the sudden lack of any referent. She closed her eyes, which made things worse, then opened them again and watched while Drake glided easily away from her. She pushed off, collided with a wall, and rebounded into him. He grabbed her elbow to steady her, and she felt her face burning from embarrassment.

As soon as she saw the body, however, she forgot both her humiliation and her queasiness. Although it was impossible to do more than a cursory inspection while wearing the bulky 'suit, what she did see disturbed her.

"He's been dead a few days," she said once she was done. "I can't be more precise without taking him to the infirmary and running some tests. If we do that, though, I want him sealed in a bag first."

"Disease?" Marcus asked, and she saw his eyes widen behind his visor.

"I can't say. There's no obvious cause of death that I can find by doing a visual examination."

Iluka kicked off and glided to the control panel inside the *New Beginning's* airlock. "All right—leave him for now, then. We've still got a ship to board."

"If there's disease—" Marcus started, then stopped.

"The 'suits will protect us." Iluka inspected the panel carefully. "Look sharp, people. We don't know what's waiting for us on the other side."

Rat had moved out of the way. Since she was still new to the crew and had the least combat experience, Neva decided she should probably join him. She glided closer; seeing her intention, he caught her wrist and pulled her in beside him. It was hard to read the expression in his amber eyes, but his small smile didn't entirely disguise his worry.

I'm worried, too, she thought, and tried to squeeze his arm to convey her sympathy. She didn't know if he could even feel it through the bulky 'suit.

The inner lock opened easily. There was nothing beyond it that Neva could see except empty corridor.

"I don't like this," Anusha said. "We told them we were coming—even if they don't suspect anything, there should be someone waiting for us here."

"And if they do suspect something, why just let us on the ship without a fight?" Drake added as he peered warily into the dimly-lit hall in front of them. "Even if their com is down, they would have picked us up on sensors. And if their sensors are down, opening the outer lock doors would have triggered an alarm."

No one said anything for a long moment. Then Iluka nodded, as if she had come to a decision. "All right. We're going to split up. Drake, take Neva and Marcus and check crew quarters. Anusha, you and Rat come to the bridge with me."

They moved slowly along the spine of the ship until they reached the lift. Iluka's group went down first, and Neva could feel her heart race as she waited, afraid that the next sound over the com would be screams or gunfire. Iluka's quiet "all clear" did little to alleviate her tension.

The return of gravity made Neva feel less like a liability. As the lift swished softly open onto the level of the crew quarters, Marcus sprinted out and to one side, his gun held at the ready and Drake covering him from within the lift. But the corridor was empty.

Unlike the *Exile*, this ship was new and in perfect repair. No scuffs marred the gleaming floor, and the stenciled icons on the doors were sharp and bright. The nearest door identified

the laundry; Drake opened it while Marcus made ready for an ambush. None came.

They kept opening doors as they went. The silence was almost complete; she could hear nothing but the breathing of her companions and the muffled growl of the air systems in her helmet. She strained to catch any other sound, any groan of the lift or rumble of the engines, but the pickups on her 'suit brought her nothing. So when she did finally hear something, her first thought was that her ears were playing tricks on her.

"What's that noise?"

The other two stopped moving instantly. "Water?" Marcus asked after a moment.

One of the doors they hadn't come to yet was marked as a shower. Drake nodded towards it, then leveled his gun. Marcus came up on one side and gingerly hit the controls with an outstretched hand.

The door opened with a soft sigh. The room was tiny—the small shower cubicle, toilet, and sink took up most of the available space. Although the walls of the cubicle were mostly opaque, Neva could see something dark lying slumped against the door. The sound of running water came from within.

Already certain what she would see, she stepped inside and opened the shower door. The corpse slid out, dead skin sloughing everywhere after having been immersed in water for an unknown number of shifts. Marcus made a sound like he was going to be sick, and even Drake took a step back. At least the self-contained atmosphere of the 'suits prevented any outside smells from reaching them.

The opening of the door caused the shower to cycle off. Bits of decomposed matter had partially blocked the drain, leaving the cube flooded with dark water. While Drake quietly reported their find to Iluka, Neva turned her attention to the corpse. She'd seen far worse things, both in medical school and on the battlefield. "No obvious signs of trauma," she said over the com. "It looks like he's been dead for a few days. Without a further exam, I can't say for certain what killed him, but if he simply collapsed in the shower, it must have been quick."

"But that's crazy," Marcus said shakily. "Why would the rest of the crew just leave him in the shower with the water on?"

The com crackled. "Judging by what we're seeing on the bridge," Iluka said, "it's because they're all dead, too."

* * *

This is a nightmare, Rat thought. And then wanted to laugh, because *everything* in the last two years had been a nightmare.

The lights on the bridge were dim and soothing, reducing the sprawled bodies to shadows. There were three women and two men, all at their stations. All going about their normal routine when...something...happened.

"We've got to get off this ship," Marcus said over the com.

"Not yet," Iluka replied as she went to the captain's station. She carefully eyed the man's body, then slid his chair back so that she could get access to his board. "We need to find out what happened here."

"Whatever happened, they didn't get much warning," Anusha said. She prowled the bridge with her weapon held loosely in her hands, although whom she thought she would shoot, Rat didn't know. "*We* might not get any, either. I'm with Marcus."

“I didn’t ask for a vote,” Iluka said. “We’re going to do our best to find out what happened here. Get the boards up and run a diagnostic on life support first—if something went wrong and CO got in their air, it might have killed them before they could do more than get off a distress signal. We’ll take one of the bodies back for Neva to look at, too—Rat, go ahead and unhook one of these and get it to the lift. Drake, take your group and look for any survivors, then head for the holds. In the meantime, I’ll offload everything I can from their database. I still want to know what a Zat ship was doing at Edith’s Point.”

The idea of moving one of the corpses disturbed Rat, as if he were taking a body from its tomb. Choosing the smallest—and thus easiest to move—of the women, he went to the pilot’s station. The pilot’s chair was still locked in place, so he unlocked it and slid it back. As he did so, the dim light illuminated more of her face, and he felt as if his heart had frozen in his chest.

It hadn’t been obvious on the body in the airlock—null g had kept the blood from dripping like it would in gravity. But on this victim, the pattern was clear. Blood had run from her eyes, nose, and mouth, streaking her brown skin in a mask that was all too familiar.

For a moment, memory—his first memory—overlaid the face of the pilot: another woman in a Zat military uniform, her face pale against the bright, fresh blood. She lay in a white room, unmoving as all her compatriots.

Oh gods, what happened, what—

No. I didn’t do this—couldn’t have done this.

Then who did?

“Is there a problem, Rat?” Iluka asked, and he realized that she must have heard his gasp and seen his hesitation.

“No,” he forced himself to say. “I just—I just wondered what killed her.”

“That’s why we’re taking her for an autopsy,” Iluka said, and he heard the irritation in her voice.

crazy bastard, don’t have time for this (nervous) got to know what happened (fear) let my crew be okay

He carefully unhooked the safety web from around the body. Rigor mortis had come and gone, so she was limp when he wedged his shoulder under her stomach and hefted her. Her hands struck his legs lightly as he walked, as if protesting the move.

Maybe I’m wrong, he thought as he laid her carefully inside the lift. *Maybe there’s something else that could cause bleeding like this. Something that could kill a lot of people at once, but wouldn’t leave a mark on the ship otherwise.*

But if I’m right...

Could there be someone else out there like me?

* * *

Drake’s team found the rest of the crew scattered throughout their quarters, plus two in the galley, accompanied by a meal that had long ago gone cold. As it had seemed more and more likely that there were no survivors, their search had sped up considerably, until they barely did more than note the locations of bodies and move on.

What happened to these people? Neva wondered uneasily. With any luck, there would be some simple explanation that the medscanners would easily diagnose. *I’ve never heard of an illness that acts this quickly, at least not on this scale. Bad air, maybe? Some problem*

with life-support, like Iluka suggested? Aren't there supposed to be monitors and safeguards to prevent that sort of thing from happening? What sort of system failure would it take for none of them to trigger?

"That's it," Drake said as they arrived back at the lift. "We'll go on to the holds."

When the lift arrived to take them back up, it contained a new addition—the corpse that Neva was supposed to autopsy. Someone—Rat, most likely—had arranged her carefully on the floor and closed her eyes. Neva wasn't certain if she should be touched by this gesture or angered—the dead woman had, after all, been a Zat.

They followed the spine to the holds. Neva tried to mimic the movements of her companions, but she still lacked the sense of how much force it took to do anything in weightless conditions, and ended up either zooming too far or floundering out of reach of a wall, so it took longer than it should have to reach the first holds.

Massive hatches opened off either side of the spine for as far as the eye could see. Beside each one was a panel whose glowing indicator lights meant nothing to her. Drake stopped and examined the first one he came to. "We were right. All these holds are hot."

Marcus seemed to have gained back some of his equilibrium now that they were away from the dead crew. "Then lets see what they're hauling that's so fragile," he said. "If we're lucky, it'll be pharmaceuticals, and we'll make a bundle off this little haul."

The door to the hold was locked, but Marcus took out a small device that he attached to the panel. Within a minute, one of the lights on the panel turned green, and Marcus removed the lock pick and stowed it back in its pouch.

The hatch opened onto darkness, and Neva realized belatedly that the holds probably didn't even have lights built into them. But Marcus was prepared for that, as well; he unclipped a small hand light from his 'suit and shone it inside.

Drake whispered something in a language Neva didn't understand. Alerted by the horror in his voice, she floated around him to get a better look at the shadowy interior.

There were people in the hold.

Restraints locked around their ankles held them to the floor. There were so many of them that there was little movement, even in weightlessness and the swirl of air currents caused by the opening of the door. A quick glance showed styles of dress from systems all across the Zatvian Cooperative. There were men, women, and children; infants, youths, and elders.

They were all dead.

* * *

"It says here that the *New Beginning* was a 'relocation ship' carrying five-thousand 'settlers,'" Iluka said. She sat in the chair that had been occupied by the dead captain. His body now sprawled on the floor where it had been unceremoniously dumped.

"And what does that mean?" Drake asked. Rat thought that he looked even paler than usual, although he'd never lost his composure during the aftermath of the grisly discovery in the holds.

Iluka shook her head. "I don't know, but I've never heard of a colony ship that chained its passengers to the floor. Obviously, they were taking all those people somewhere. But where, and to what fate...maybe the Ancestor Spirits know."

"It couldn't have been anything good," Anusha said. "All those people crammed into

holds, stuck in zero g in the utter dark, without any light at all..."

can't see can't breathe so scared (closet, confined space, darkness)

Rat shuddered, trying desperately to ignore the whispers that rose up around him. *At least the dead don't whisper.*

Is that what happened? Is there—was there—someone like me on this ship? Someone stuck in a hold, with all the voices beating at him, five thousand terrified people all screaming at once in their heads?

He took a deep breath and fought for calm. He was being crazy—paranoid—that was all. How could anyone kill so many so quickly? He couldn't have—or at least didn't think he could have. There was no reason to imagine this had anything to do with him.

"With any luck, the logs will tell us what was going on and what happened," Iluka said. She pulled a data harvester free from the boards, where it had spent the last few hours copying everything it could from the Zats' files. "For now, we need to get down to business. Marcus, do you read?"

Com crackled in Rat's helmet. "I read."

"You got Neva settled?"

"I just left her and the bodies in the infirmary."

"Get back over here, and bring some crates with you. We're stripping the ship—anything we can carry goes with us. Personal items, unspoiled food from the galley, anything we can use or trade." She pushed back from the captain's board and stood up. "As for me, I'll take a look at what the harvester pulled. With any luck, the intel in these files is worth more than the entire ship put together."

* * *

Neva slumped into a seat at the table in the *Exile's* galley. Her head ached faintly, and she wanted desperately to curl up and sleep. She could feel the expectant eyes of the rest of the crew on her; everyone had come to this informal meeting, with the exception of Anusha, who was monitoring the boards up on the bridge. Drake slid a plate in front of her, along with a cup of coffee. Ignoring the food, she wrapped her hands around the coffee mug, soaking up the warmth.

"No, Jasmine," Rat said softly, and she looked up to find the enormous eyes of the le-murr staring at her.

Neva managed a smile and plucked a grape from her plate, passing it to the little primate. Jasmine took it from her and chewed happily, and Neva wryly decided that there was at least one being she could satisfy at this meeting.

"I've completed the autopsies," she said at last. Although she didn't really want to look at any of them, she folded her hands in front of her and forced herself to meet Iluka's calm gaze. "Both on the Zats from the airlock and the bridge, and the two bodies we took from the holds. None showed any signs of disease."

Marcus let out a sigh of relief.

"The two from the holds were somewhat malnourished and dehydrated, but not enough to have resulted in serious health problems," Neva went on. "All four showed signs of extensive hemorrhaging of the brain and sinus cavities."

Marcus shifted uneasily in his seat. "You aren't saying that someone beat everyone on board that ship in the head, are you?"

“Of course not. There’s no sign of trauma to the scalp or skull.”

“Then what the hell happened?”

Neva bit her lip. “I don’t know. Something caused ruptures of most of the blood vessels associated with the brain, resulting in massive intracranial bleeding. But I can’t track down a cause. And, going by the fact that the crew seemed to die at their stations, it must have happened near-simultaneously to all of them.”

Marcus leaned over the table, glowering at her. “All at once? That’s impossible. You missed something.”

“I double-checked everything. I even ran tests on the diagnostic equipment to make sure I wasn’t getting bad readings. There’s nothing I can identify.”

“Then go back and look again!”

“Don’t yell at her!” Rat shouted suddenly.

The room fell abruptly silent, everyone staring at him in surprise. His amber eyes were fixed on the table, however, and he cradled Jasmine close, rocking back and forth like a giant metronome.

“That’ll do from all of you,” Iluka said into the silence. “Neva, put one of the bodies on ice. I know our equipment here isn’t the best, and there might be things it could miss, so as soon as we get to Paradise, we’ll find a ship with more advanced scanners and see what they can find. Make it one of the bodies from the holds—once we’re done, if there’s anyone on Paradise from the same system who wants to see to a proper burial, we’ll turn it over to them.”

“Any luck with the ship’s files?” Drake asked.

Iluka took a sip of her coffee. Steam curled up around her broad, strong-boned face, wreathing her gray hair like a crown. “No. Most of what we pulled off their boards is locked up with military-grade encryption, and probably booby-trapped on top of it. We’ll take that to Paradise as well—Monk will love the challenge.”

“Who’s Monk?” Neva asked.

“Systems information expert,” Drake said, as if that explained anything.

Deciding that she didn’t really need to know for the moment, Neva chose to address a more urgent question. “What do you want me to do with the other bodies?”

Iluka looked grave. “We’ll put them back on the *New Beginning* when we set the charges.”

“Charges?”

“I’m not comfortable just leaving all those folks to rot,” Iluka said. She sounded tired, suddenly, and old. “The Zats, sure, but not everyone they were carrying like cargo. And I don’t like the idea of just leaving the ship for the Zats to find, either—there’s too much evidence that we went aboard. The longer the Zats don’t realize that someone else knows their secrets, the better for us all. The best solution is to pack the ship full of explosives and detonate it once we’re far enough out.”

“That could result in quite a navigation hazard,” Tarak pointed out mildly.

“Edith’s Point is no good to us if the Zats know about it.”

“They can’t all know about it yet, or else the warship would have followed us through from Moldar.”

“They’ll spread the word fast enough.”

“Unless they don’t want the rank and file knowing this route,” Drake said quietly.

Iluka exchanged a look with her first officer. “Zats keeping secrets from other Zats.”

Interesting thought. But not one I'm willing to bet our lives on."

There was nothing to be said after that, and the meeting broke up quickly. As Neva rose to leave, she saw that Marcus remained sitting. His head was bowed, and he pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He looked up quickly, then winced. "Just a headache."

"I can give you a painpatch. Unless you think I've misdiagnosed you, and it's really a tumor, in which case I'll be happy to operate."

Marcus' grunt told her he didn't think she was very funny. Neva went out and left him alone.

* * *

They sent the signal to detonate after the *Exile* had completed its first burn.

Iluka called everyone to the bridge to stand witness. Long-range scan provided a false color image of the derelict ship. Without any fanfare, Drake sent the signal, then sat back and waited with everyone else while it crossed the gulf of space between them.

A bloom of fire appeared, dotted with specks of black. Then, the oxygen consumed or dispersed, it died back into darkness.

And that's all there is, Neva thought grimly. *Just a flare, and then nothing. All those people gone. Dead. Into nothing.*

Before Harvest, she might have comforted herself with the thought that they were going on to the Summerland. But that had been when she still believed in anything but pain.

"From the stars we come, and to the stars we return," Tarak said.

"To the stars," Anusha repeated.

Feeling cold, Neva turned and left the bridge.

Chapter 5: Deceleration

“Hold for drop,” Tarak said.

Neva braced herself against the disorienting feeling that accompanied re-entry into normal space. The journey through hyperspace from Edith's Point had taken several shifts longer than their previous jump. Neva had divided her time between learning to sit scan—Iluka and Anusha had set up simulations since there was nothing to scan in hyperspace—, monitoring Rat's regimen of injections, and searching all the *Exile's* medical files for some clue as to what might have happened to the ship full of dead bodies they had discovered back at Edith's Point.

It was a search that had proved as fruitless as the endless speculation amongst the rest of the crew as to what the Zatvians had been doing there in the first place...and what intentions they'd had for the five thousand people packed into their cargo holds.

“Transition complete. Welcome to Paradise.”

“Welcome to the ass end of the universe,” Marcus muttered.

The ship braked hard, and Neva felt the safety web pressing into her, keeping her from becoming a stain on the forward bulkhead. After a few seconds, the force eased. Her board flared to life as it intercepted data from the system's beacon, and she hurriedly found the green icon that represented the *Exile*. No other dots showed up anywhere near them, so—assuming that the beacon was really displaying everything in the system as it was supposed to—they were in no immediate danger of running into anything.

“Scan's up—all clear,” she reported. There were a host of other ships moving in and out of the system, all of them showing yellow, meaning that the *Exile* recognized their signals as more or less safe. If any of them had been outputting a Zat identity, it would have shown bloody red.

“System's quiet,” said Marcus. Iluka had ordered him to back up Neva on scan, which she suspected was a nice way of saying “keep an eye on the grounder so she doesn't get us all killed.”

“Beacon's got mail for us,” Drake called from where he sat com. “Nothing marked urgent.”

“Download it for later,” Iluka ordered. “Who's home?”

Home, Neva thought as she leaned forward and found the cluster of icons that surrounded the station of Paradise. *Goddess. Is this home now? This place with no wind, no trees, nothing that makes up a living world...*

Paradise was a station of sorts, far off the official maps. Drake had told her that it had been founded by Star Riders, then opened up to outsiders after the Zatvian victory. It was a safe haven, he claimed, a place where they could dock and conduct repairs without fear of

discovery. Where they could refurbish their guns, retrofit their ships for combat, take on illegal supplies, and generally conduct their business away from the prying eyes of the Zatvian Cooperative.

But, inevitably, such a place attracted less savory characters. Drake had also said that they always went armed on Paradise.

Judging by Anusha's dark look, it took Neva a few moments too long to pull up the ship list from beacon. Trying not to blush, she read off the names of ships: "*The Morrigan, Vengeful, Dreadstar, Void Runner, Red Cloud*—"

"Confirm on the *Red Cloud*," Iluka interrupted.

Neva blinked, thrown off her pace. "Uh, confirmed. The *Red Cloud*. Berth 12-A."

"Is there an empty berth near them?"

"Yes—right beside them, it looks like."

"Hot damn." Iluka grinned, her teeth bright in her dark face. "Drake, send a request into Control for that slot."

"Friends of yours?" Neva asked.

"Our best allies out here," Iluka said while Drake sent their message. "Probably some of that mail we got is from them—they usually let us know where they've been and where they're going. They fought by us in the last days of the war, then went renegade and kept fighting when the order to surrender came. They'll battle the Zats until their last breaths—and make the Zats pay for it in blood."

"Shall I send them our compliments?" Drake asked.

"Do that." Iluka leaned back in her chair, her dark eyes gleaming. "Remind Joshua he owes me a beer."

* * *

The ship underwent a series of timed brakes over the next two shifts that shaved their speed down to something safe for in-system. Once they were on course for their final approach to docking, Iluka called a meeting in the galley.

"This isn't a pleasure trip," she said once they were all settled. "Shore leave, yes, but keep on your toes, all of you. As soon as we're done bribing the dock master, Drake and I will take the data we pulled from the *New Beginning* to Monk and see what he can get out of it. I'm calling a Captains' Council as soon as I can. The rest of you, enjoy yourselves but stay alert. Neva and Rat don't know the ins and outs of Paradise yet—who wants to see to them?"

"I'm not babysitting during my shore leave," Marcus muttered, shoving his empty coffee cup away from him.

Neva's temper flared. All through the voyage, they'd treated her like a liability, as if the fact that she was a grounder meant that she was stupid as well. "And I don't need one," she snapped.

"I'll go with them," Tarak said unexpectedly.

Startled, she glanced at the pilot. His milky eyes stared at nothing, and she wondered again what had happened to blind him. Surely the injury must have been recent; otherwise, it would have been corrected long ago.

"Tarak," Anusha began, but fell silent when he held up his hand.

"I'm going out," he said, and Neva heard the edge of exasperation in his voice. "What other dock can I set foot on without raising too many questions?"

“But the clans—”

“You give our greeting to the clans.” Tarak smiled slightly to soften the words. “Don’t worry so much, sister. I’m sure Neva and Rat will take good care of me.”

At Neva’s side, Rat flinched sharply, as if Tarak had struck him. His long dreads hid his face, preventing her from reading his expression.

“Is there a hospital on station?” Neva asked, hoping to change the subject—and remind them all that she wasn’t simply a useless burden. “I’d like to get a second opinion on the body we have in deep freeze.” *And find out if they have any nanobots that might help Rat with his seizures. He said the drugs have made them better, but I’d prefer a more permanent solution.*

“There’s a doctor, but I wouldn’t trust him to treat a hangnail,” Drake said grimly. “Better talk to the *Red Cloud’s* chief medic.”

Iluka nodded in agreement. “We’ve heard back from the *Red Cloud’s* captain, Joshua Ten Bears. We’re set to rendezvous with them as soon as we hit dock. You can talk with their medic then. Michael Shot With an Arrow. He knows his stuff.”

Which won’t do us any good if his infirmary is no better than ours, Neva thought grumpily, but swallowed the words before they reached her mouth. When she had been at school on Harvest, she’d never imagined that she wouldn’t have the best equipment available in front of her at all times. *But then, I’d never imagined that I would be serving on a pirate ship, hoping to live just long enough to...*

To do what?

But to that she had no answer.

* * *

As soon as the docking clamps were secure, the crew assembled in the spine in front of the airlock. Iluka and Drake had changed into more formal clothing during the last shift. Both wore long coats over clean white shirts, loose pants, and boots. Iluka added a hat with a jaunty feather in it over her gray dreads. For the first time since Neva had met him, Tarak was entirely stripped of the equipment that allowed him to pilot the ship, although he held a slender white rod in one hand that she assumed was meant to help him navigate around the station. Anusha whispered furiously in his ear, but he ignored her, and after a while she subsided.

Drake opened the weapons locker and passed around an assortment of small firearms. “Don’t draw this unless someone else pulls a gun first,” he advised Neva. “You probably won’t have to use it—most disputes on Paradise are settled with fists, or knives at the worst. But if someone points a weapon at you, shoot him without hesitation. Understand?”

Neva nodded and secured the gun at her belt, even as she wondered whether she wanted to spend much time on the station if it was really so violent. *Not to mention that everyone will be staring at me again.*

She touched the scars on her cheek unconsciously; realizing what she was doing, she forced herself to drop her hand. *Tarak must attract his share of attention, too,* she thought, glancing at his blind eyes. *And Rat will be with us.* He had taken a gun from Drake without comment, putting it away hurriedly and turning all his attention to Jasmine, who perched on his shoulder, one hand in his dreads. Going by the expression on his face, he wasn’t any more pleased about leaving the ship than she was. *Between Tarak and Rat, I wonder if anyone will*

even notice me at all?

"Keep your eyes open," Iluka ordered as she punched in the code for the lock. "And no sleeping away—it's back to quarters for everyone, got it?"

The airlock clanged open, revealing the short boarding tube. The air was biting cold, and Neva was shivering by the time they reached the other end and stepped out onto Paradise.

The first thing that became apparent to her was that this was no well-ordered, Zatvian-run installation. The dim orange lighting cast shadows that only added to the confusion of umbilicals, gantries, and loading equipment that tangled the docks. Sparks flew from an obvious patch on one of the electrical lines, and the faint stench of scorched insulation mingled with the smells of lubricant, fuel, and sweat. The decking was gouged and stained from abuse, and its character changed abruptly from one place to another, as if the builders had simply used the materials on hand without worrying whether or not they conformed to each other. It looked as if Paradise had been roughly stitched together from the corpses of other stations, and keeping the juryrigged parts working together was a too big a job for the local authority to worry about.

A large group of people awaited them beside the boarding hatch. They were uniformly black-haired and copper-skinned, with high cheekbones and dark eyes. Iluka let out a whoop when she saw them. "Joshua, you dog! You still owe me a beer from Hader-alpha."

"Was it my fault the station police kicked down the door before the next round?" asked one of the men. He was very tall, and his long hair flowed down to his waist. The feather of some large bird was tied into a braid on the left side of his handsome face.

"Maybe not, but you took shameless advantage of a convenient distraction," Iluka said even as she clasped his hand. "Let me introduce you to my newest crew members. This is our medic, Neva Whitestone. Neva, Joshua Ten Bears, captain of the *Red Cloud*."

Joshua gave her a smile that made her mouth feel dry. "Neva. Agnes was your aunt, yes?"

"I, uh, yes," she said, then cursed herself for sounding stupid. *I have been in space too long if seeing an attractive man can turn me into a brainless teenager.*

"She was a good woman," Joshua said simply, then gestured to the people with him. "A few of my crew members. This is Rena Crow Wing, my first mate. Bill His-Horse-Falls-on-Him, first gunner..."

Neva quickly lost track of the names and simply nodded her head politely. The *Red Cloud's* crew compliment must be many times that of the *Exile*, and she wondered at the disparity. When Joshua came to the medic, Michael Shot With an Arrow, Iluka spoke up. "Neva's got some things she needs to talk to you about, Michael. Got some cargo for you to look at, too. Nothing to be talked about on the open dock, not yet anyway."

Michael looked curious, but only gave Neva a smile. His long hair hung in twin braids to either side of his face; to Neva's surprise, he had a narrow scar across his chin. It looked old, and she wondered why he hadn't had it removed. "Of course."

"There's one other thing," Neva said quickly. Probably the *Red Cloud* was no better off than the *Exile*, but it never hurt to ask. "Rat has been suffering some epileptic seizures. I've tried some drugs, but he could really use nanobot therapy. It don't suppose..."

"Not a problem," Michael's dark eyes shifted to Rat, and again Neva saw his unspoken curiosity.

"Rat's our other new crewmember," Iluka explained. "Cabin boy right now, but he's

starting to fit in.”

Rat straightened a little, seeming surprised and pleased.

“Our stowaway, you mean,” Marcus said.

Rat deflated immediately.

Iluka gave Marcus a hard look. “Whatever he is, he’s *ours*.”

There was a tense moment of silence, then Michael shrugged. “I know more battlefield medicine than neuro, but we’ll see what we can do with those ‘bots. Come on board and we’ll get started.”

“Marcus, deliver that other cargo to the *Red Cloud*.” Iluka ordered. “With your permission, Captain.”

“Given.” Joshua’s shrewd eyes stayed on Iluka’s face, as if he could read her thoughts. “Maybe we ought to have that drink on board, away from other ears.”

“Love to, but later. Right now, Drake and I have an urgent appointment with Monk. Tag along if you want.”

The group began to break up, with Marcus heading back to the ship and the rest drifting away. “I’ll come with you, since I did offer to shepherd you new ones,” Tarak said to Neva with a smile, his teeth bright in his dark face. “If you’ll do me the honor.” He offered his elbow, as if he meant to guide her rather than the other way around, and Neva took it.

Michael led the way up the boarding tube to the *Red Cloud*’s lock. Like the *Exile*, the *Red Cloud* appeared to have seen hard use; the decking was worn in places, and there was even a burn scar on one of the spine’s inner walls, as if there had been a firefight at some point. Michael led them to the lift; Tarak lightly swept the rod in his free hand back and forth in front of him, as if testing his footing.

The buttons on the lift presented a startlingly large array of choices. “Big ship,” Neva said.

Michael smiled. His loose, red shirt contrasted nicely with his bronze skin. Rows of some kind of decoration neither thread nor bead added color to the fabric, and she wondered if it signified anything. “The *Red Cloud* is a warship,” he said. “Didn’t you know that?”

“But I thought all the warships were decommissioned after...after the surrender.”

“They tried.”

“But—don’t the Zats realize what this is? I mean, the *Exile* can pass as an ordinary freighter, but you couldn’t possibly hide a warship...could you?” She realized even as she asked that she had no idea. *He probably thinks I’m a stupid grounder.*

“Not within range of scanners,” Michael agreed cheerfully.

The lift doors opened, and he led the way out. The infirmary was a short way down the hall; when Neva stepped inside, she stopped so quickly that Tarak nearly lost his balance. She had expected a primitive cubbyhole such as she had to work in, put into a ship almost as an afterthought against the inevitable hurts and accidents that accompanied a long voyage. But this...

I’ve seen worse setups in a hospital.

Michael led the way across the large room and gestured to a gleaming new exam table. A flag hung on the wall behind it: red, with a ring of what looked like some sort of white tents arranged in a circle in its center. The whole was fringed in deep blue. “Sit, if you will, Rat,” Michael said. “Neva, tell me what you’ve done already for our patient.”

Feeling suddenly intimidated, she did so. *He’s going to think I’m a fool, period, not just a stupid grounder. He’s good enough to run the sickbay on a warship; I’m just a medical*

student who didn't even have the chance to graduate. Her face burned with humiliation, and she cursed the fair skin that would show her blush so easily.

Michael listened to her solemnly, however, with no indication that he had anything less than respect for her. When she was done, he nodded. "Good. Thank you, Neva." He turned his attention to Rat, who was trying to keep Jasmine from getting into any of the equipment. "How long have you had the seizures?"

Familiar as she was with Rat's halting conversation and uncertain responses, Neva found her attention drifting. As she scanned the banks of state-of-the-art diagnostics, however, she remembered her other companion. "Have you asked if they could do anything to help you?"

Tarak had remained by the door when she led him inside. Now he turned his face towards her, blind eyes seeming to search for hers. "Of course," he said with a small, regretful smile. "The *Red Cloud* has resources that we don't, but even they can't have everything. When the ship was built, it was done with the assumption that, even though they would be gone for long stretches of time, they would eventually be stopping back planetside. It was mainly outfitted for emergency medicine; replacing nonessential organs like eyes was far down on the list of priorities. Or so they told me."

Although his tone remained placid, Neva thought she caught a trace of bitterness. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged and absently tapped his rod against the floor. "You had nothing to do with it."

"How...if you don't mind my asking...how did you lose your sight?"

Tarak's mouth tightened. "The Zats—how else?" he asked at last. "You must know how they hate Star Riders."

"I don't even know what Star Riders are."

To her surprise, he laughed. "Forgive me—I forget that my life isn't the center of the universe. The Star Riders are...well, we're many things. Travelers, mainly. We go where we will, wandering from star to star, the galaxy our home. Most of the mass points that the Zats don't know about—including Paradise here—have been discovered by us. You can imagine how well the Zats love a people devoted to discovering new routes, who value their freedom to go and do as they will above all else, and who acknowledge no authority over them other than that of the universe itself."

Neva winced, then remembered he couldn't see it. "I don't think they would be happy about that, no."

"No. They hate us. And they want to know what we know." All trace of Tarak's normal good humor was gone; instead, the young man in front of her was grim as death. "They capture and torture us, wanting us to tell them the routes we use so they can extend their hold over space. It was during one such interrogation that they took my sight." He paused a moment as painful memory overtook him, then resumed. "Anusha rescued me before they could do worse, but there was no way to repair the damage. According to the Zats, I'm a wanted criminal—if I'd gone to a hospital, they would have identified me immediately and turned me in. And as for our side...we were busy losing a war. There were too many dying soldiers in desperate need of attention. No one had the time or resources to waste on me."

"So Anusha insisted I learn to compensate. She built my rig for me, forced me to use it, then got us a berth. Or tried—no one would take us. Everyone laughed at her—at me. A blind pilot...what use could I be to anyone?"

"But Iluka took you?" Neva asked uncertainly. Tarak had always seemed so composed,

so at peace with himself, that she had never thought to pity him before. *Or I was just too wrapped up in my own problems.*

"Indeed. Iluka's kin were dead; she took anyone willing to fight. I proved myself to her...and to me, to be honest. I never had Anusha's certainty." Then he smiled again. "Don't waste your pity on me, Neva. I don't need it. I never wanted to be anything more than a pilot, and once I was able to do that again, nothing else mattered. Anusha...well. She's a different story."

"Neva?" Michael called from across the room. Excusing herself from Tarak, she went to where Rat still sat on the exam table, looking distinctly nervous.

"I'll inject the nanobots with this," Michael told them, displaying an ordinary-looking syringe. "They'll migrate through Rat's circulatory system, eventually taking up residence at various points in his brain. Once there, they'll transmit information to here." He picked up a tablet off the table's tray, which he gave to her. "This will give you a good picture of his neural activity over time. As the nanobots learn what is normal and what isn't, they'll be able to recognize the signs of an impending seizure and short-circuit it."

"Sounds good." She put a hand to Rat's shoulder. Even though he had gained weight since they'd found him, he was still thin enough that she could feel bone under muscle. He glanced up at her, just a quick flash of amber eyes before he looked back down.

"Thank you," he said quietly, fervently. "Thank you."

"No problem." Michael found the vein in Rat's arm and slipped the needle expertly in. Blood swirled a moment in the syringe as he drew back, then vanished into the vein along with the clear solution that held the nanobots. "That's it," Michael said, putting a small skin patch over the tiny hole to stop any bleeding. "And now that we're finishing up with this...why don't you tell me what 'cargo' Marcus is bringing to my infirmary?"

* * *

Monk's hideaway was tucked far back in one of the less-accessible areas of Paradise. Unlike a station that had been planned ahead of time and build on a deliberate schedule, Paradise was an unwieldy conglomeration of whatever parts its denizens had been able to steal or salvage. Other bits and pieces had been manufactured onsite, but even those had been built as needed rather than as part of a master plan, and so did little to add order to its design.

Because of this, there were nooks and crannies of every kind where illicit business could take place, well-shielded from unwanted observation. And because some of that illicit business included robbing passers-by, Drake kept a wary eye on their surroundings. Although Iluka looked unflappable as always, she had both hands stuck in the pockets of her coat—one on the data harvester they had used to pull intel from the boards of the derelict Zat ship, and one on her gun. Joshua, who had accompanied them, wore a rifle on his back and a brace of knives at his belt.

The lifts could only take them so far. The final one let them out into a dimly lit corridor; rust blossomed across the metal decking like some insidious disease. Trash had accumulated in the corridors, and Drake caught a glimpse of shining eyes and sleek fur. Mice and rats had accompanied humans into space, stowaways on the earliest colony ships, and had been with them ever since. *Which I suppose makes our stowaway's moniker even more appropriate.*

He wanted to ask Iluka what had possessed her to lay claim to Rat, instead of dumping him here at Paradise to fend for himself. There was no denying that Rat had been useful—

had worked hard and not complained. But that didn't change the fact that he was crazy. Unstable.

Maybe Michael can help straighten out his head. But what Rat probably needed was a few decades worth of therapy to go along with all the shots and 'bots. And psych-docs were in damn short supply out here, especially since the Zats seemed to think that mental illness was a crime to be punished.

Maybe that's why Iluka decided to keep him—if the Zats would do one thing, then she'd do the opposite. If so, it wasn't the straightest thinking he'd ever gotten out of her. But now wasn't the time to ask. Joshua was their friend, their ally—but he wasn't crew, and you didn't talk private business in front of outsiders, no matter how close they were.

The filament lights flickered spastically, casting odd shadows over the exposed pipes that ran along the walls. A body slouched in a corner, either drunk or dead. The air smelled like vomit and bad booze, and Drake uneasily wondered how well the filters were maintained. The corridor ended abruptly in a graffiti-covered wall, as if the builders had simply decided they'd worked long enough and quit. Someone had come along later and welded a series of rungs onto the wall to form a makeshift ladder. Iluka muttered something about being too old for this type of exercise, then started to climb.

The rungs ended just below a trapdoor. Before they reached the top, their movement tripped some unseen sensor; a disembodied voice came from hidden speakers in the darkness. "Go away and leave me alone."

The voice was badly distorted, whether on purpose or because Monk didn't care to get better speakers, Drake didn't know. Iluka stopped climbing, resting for a moment to catch her breath before answering. "Monk, it's Iluka Toora. I got a job for you."

There was a pause. Then: "Something difficult?"

"Would I bother you for anything else?"

The trapdoor slid open, and blue-white light spilled out, frosting Iluka's gray hair where it stuck out beneath her feathered hat. She climbed through, and Drake and Joshua followed.

The room they found themselves in would have been spacious, had not almost every spare inch been crammed full of equipment. There were tangles of wire, bits of transmitters, and rows and rows of mysterious-looking gear whose function Drake couldn't even guess at. In the midst of this warren lurked a single, well-padded chair, its surface patched and taped from countless years of use.

The man who sat in the chair was small and wiry; he looked as if he didn't eat much, even though Drake was fairly certain he had the means to buy and sell the entire station twice over. Tiny, matt-black antennae stuck out from his shaved head at various angles, and cables ran from skull jacks to the different boxes and boards around the room. He looked as if he were part of the equipment, some strange parasite drinking down data like blood. His shirt was dirty and stained, as though cleaning it would take precious time he'd rather devote to something else. The legs of his pants hung empty over the edge of the chair; Monk's own legs had been amputated just beneath his hips, lost to Zatvian fire and gangrene. In another time or place, new ones could have been grown for him, but Paradise lacked the resources for such a procedure.

Monk toggled his chair to face them. The bluish-white light that spilled from the single filament hanging overhead reflected oddly in his pale eyes, giving them a manic gleam. "What have you brought me, Captain? A present?"

Iluka fished the harvester out of her pocket and handed it to him. "This came off a

Zatvian ship,” she said. “Encryption and booby-traps all over it. You get me clean data, and if it’s sellable we’ll split the profit with you. Fair?”

Monk nodded absently, already mumbling to himself as he took the harvester and plugged it in. Within moments, he seemed to have forgotten about his guests altogether.

“A Zatvian ship?” Joshua asked, raising one dark eyebrow.

Joshua knew how to be patient—that was what made him such a damned good warship captain. He knew when to let the quarry to come to him, instead of chasing it down and getting himself shot up in the process. It was why he was still alive when so many others were nothing more than scattered particles floating in space.

“The *New Beginning*,” Iluka explained. She spared a glance for the oblivious Monk. “Should be safe to talk here—Monk doesn’t care, and he’s got this place so shielded from eavesdroppers you can barely get a call in.”

Drake turned away while she launched into a narrative of the events at Edith’s Point. The sights from aboard the derelict ship had haunted his dreams enough already; he didn’t want them intruding into his waking life as well. But it was impossible to forget the pathetic bodies crammed into the holds, their sunken eyes and slack mouths seeming to plead with God for some explanation as to what had happened.

And did You give them an answer they could accept?

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Joshua said once Iluka had finished. “Not at all. ‘Relocation’ ships using hidden routes to move people...that can’t mean anything good. Any idea where they were headed?”

“That’s what we’re hoping Monk can tell us.”

As if the sound of his name broke him out of his wired trance, Monk spun his chair in their direction. “This is going to take a while. A real challenge.” A bright grin stretched his mouth, making him look almost child-like. “Come back two shifts from now.”

Drake knew that the surge of disappointment he felt was ridiculous. Even Monk couldn’t work his way through the maze of Zat security instantaneously. Still, he had hoped to have answers now rather than later.

The expression on Iluka’s face told him she’d had the same futile hope. “We’ll come back just before the Captains’ Council, then,” she said as she lifted the trapdoor. “And pray to the Ancestor Spirits that Monk gives us some answers for them.”

* * *

“I thought you would like to do a little sight-seeing,” Tarak said with no apparent irony. “The open market is one of Paradise’s more appealing sections, if only because the worst scum can’t take the scrutiny and do most of their dealings elsewhere. Not that you won’t find anything illicit going on here—we *are* pirates, after all.”

“So I see,” Neva agreed as they passed yet another table heaped with weapons of every sort, from brass knuckles to laser rifles.

They had left Michael Shot With an Arrow behind on the *Red Cloud*, getting ready to do a second autopsy on the body they had brought. With any luck, the more advanced equipment on the warship would find something her examination had missed. In truth, she would rather have stayed in the infirmary and observed, but Tarak had seemed eager to go onto the station. Remembering what he had said earlier, about being unable to walk openly on any other dock, Neva had acquiesced.

He had suggested they first go to the open market, then to a bar that was apparently a favorite hangout for the crew. Neva wasn't entirely sure that she wanted to spend her time socializing, but the market had sounded good. She'd imagined it as something like the farmers' markets on Harvest, where folk from the surrounding areas came in and sold whatever they could grow or craft.

To say that her imaginings had proved wrong was an understatement. Although the open market had been set up in a cavernous space inside the station, thousands of booths, curtains, kiosks, and semi-permanent shops had turned it into a veritable warren. Brightly colored birds, escaped from some vendor, soared about the ceiling screeching loudly. Merchants yelled enticements to potential customers and imprecations at one another. A woman danced to the sound of a flute, while recorded music poured out of competing kiosks. The air was thick with exotic smells: cooking food, spices, incense, perfumes, hot metal, and beer. A rainbow of silk scarves spilled from a table, a man juggled yellow and red balls, and the signs of the more permanent vendors threw a lurid glow over them all.

Neva glanced over her shoulder to make certain Rat was keeping up. He walked a few paces behind her and Tarak, with Jasmine riding on his shoulder. His head was bowed, his eyes fixed on the floor in front of him rather than on any of the bright distractions of the market.

Concerned, she pulled Tarak to a halt. "Are you all right, Rat?"

He glanced up only briefly, a quick glimpse of his startling eyes before he went back to staring at the floor. "Too many voices. I d-don't like it here," he mumbled, so quietly she had to strain to hear him over the ruckus. "Just...just want to get out. Go away. Be quiet."

Tarak tilted his head back slightly, nostrils flared. "I smell incense. Are we near *The Rowan Tree*? It will be a small shop—one of the more permanent ones. We can get out of the crowd there."

Neva spied the sign, which was small and relatively inconspicuous amidst its blaring neighbors. "Come on, Rat," she said encouragingly, holding her free hand out to him. "We'll find somewhere to sit, all right?"

He grabbed her hand like a drowning man; she had to force herself not to wince at the strength of his grip. Compelled to guide not just one but both her companions, she pulled the two men with her toward the promised solace of the shop. But as she started to step through the curtains that hung in its doorway, she froze.

As Tarak had said, the scent of incense did indeed waft from behind the gently swaying curtains, a smell so familiar it struck all the way to her deepest childhood memories. And above the curtain, attached to the bent metal that made up the doorway, was a small pentagram.

No. It can't be.

Rat whimpered softly, and she realized that she had no choice. Gritting her teeth, she dragged them through the curtain and into the shop's quiet interior.

Inside, the smell of incense was even stronger, permeating everything. The shop appeared to sell clothing; racks of neat coats, shirts, and pants hung in orderly rows. A woman had been sitting in a chair towards the back of the room, but now she stood up and came towards them. She was fair-skinned and dark-haired, and a necklace with a small gold pentagram hung around her throat.

"Merry meet, Tarak," she said with a smile as she approached. "I didn't know the *Exile* had put in. Where is Agnes?"

Tarak's grin faltered and disappeared. "I'm afraid she isn't coming, Gretchen. Agnes is dead."

Neva looked away, unable to watch the bloom of grief in Gretchen's eyes. "Do you have somewhere our friend can sit down?" she asked, more harshly than she had intended. "He isn't feeling well."

Rat had straightened a bit, but there was a bruised look around his eyes, and he flinched a little, as if some invisible opponent pummeled him. Jasmine's pupils were huge in the dim light; Rat had taken her from his shoulder and was now cradling her against his chest, petting her with an oddly determined air.

"O-of course," Gretchen murmured, gesturing vaguely to the chair in the back.

Neva left Gretchen and Tarak to continue their talk, focusing all her attention on getting Rat comfortable in an attempt to blot out the sounds of conversation. "Feeling any better?" she asked, crouching in front of him so that she could pet Jasmine as well.

"I'm sorry," he whispered hoarsely. "Maybe...maybe I shouldn't have left the ship."

Maybe neither of us should have. But that was too close to the pain that threatened to well up inside of her, so she shoved the thought brutally aside.

"You're going to be all right." She squeezed his knee and got a wan smile in return. "Those 'bots should have taken up residence in your brain already. See?"

Pulling the tablet from its pouch at her belt, she tapped in a few commands. A schematic of Rat's brain dutifully leapt into being, various parts sparking and flaring as neurons fired.

"That's me?" he asked tentatively, holding out his hand but not quite touching it.

"Yep."

"And this will tell you...what's wrong with me?"

Neva hesitated a moment. Although Rat was quiet and kind, it was also clear that his mind wasn't in perfect working order. *But what else should I expect? Goddess, the man's spent the last two years on the run from the Zats who killed his family, living out of the trash, without anyone to help him. It's amazing he survived at all. After that, who wouldn't be a little crazy?*

"Yes," she said firmly. "You're going to be just fine."

His slow, uncertain smile made her heart ache. "Thank you."

"Just doing my job." She gave Jasmine a final pat and stood up, hoping they could leave soon. She glanced towards the front, meaning to find Tarak, but instead discovered Gretchen hovering nearby.

The other woman's eyes were red with tears, but she wiped a hand over them and struggled to smile. "Tarak was just telling me that you've taken over for Agnes. Your aunt...she mentioned you more than once."

Unexpected bitterness welled up inside Neva. "Funny—she never mentioned you to me. Or anything else. She never wrote at all after Harvest."

Gretchen blinked, clearly taken aback. "I'm sure she wanted to. She was probably afraid of attracting the Zats' attention to you. You were the only thing she had left."

Neva shrugged, not in the mood to listen to some stranger make excuses. "And did it occur to her that she was the only thing I had left?"

Gretchen's lips pressed together. "I was born on Harvest, too. I left years ago, but most of my family died in the attack. So I know how you're feeling right now. I felt it as well, and so did Agnes. When she came here after, we performed the Passage Rite, to honor all those who went to the Summerland. It seemed to help her through her grief. If you would like, I'd

be pleased to conduct it with you as well, to honor your dead.”

Neva stared at her incredulously for a moment. A sharp bark of laughter struggled to escape, but she held it back. “You said you were born on Harvest. You said your family died there. You know what happened. And yet you still believe?”

Gretchen looked taken aback. “The Goddess did not will the death of Harvest.”

“Then She didn’t save it, either.”

“Humans have free will, to do evil as well as good. The threefold law—”

Some tenuous thread deep inside Neva snapped. “They killed a planet!” she shouted, clenching her fists. “What the hell could be worse than that?”

Before she knew what was happening, she found herself pushing her way back out through the curtain. She had to get away from this woman, from this place, from these memories...

The ceaseless roar of the crowded marketplace washed back over her. Closing her eyes, Neva leaned against the wall of the shop, wishing that it would all just go away. Why had she come here? It would have been better to stay on board the *Exile*. She and Rat could spend the rest of their lives hiding there, until they either grew old or—as seemed more likely—were blown into dust by the Zats.

After a few minutes, the curtain stirred beside her. Rat came out, leading Tarak. Jasmine had moved to Tarak’s shoulder and was busy investigating his dreads, perhaps hoping to find some treasure hidden within. “Are you all right?” Rat asked as soon as he spotted her. He looked pale and none too well himself.

The sight of her patient was unexpectedly calming. “I’m sorry—I shouldn’t have run off like that. How are you feeling? Better?”

He nodded, then flashed her a faint smile that didn’t seem entirely truthful.

“I should apologize,” Tarak said, absently rearranging Jasmine’s tail so it wasn’t poking into his ear. “I had forgotten that Gretchen was from Harvest.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Neva said, striving to tamp down the tangle of emotions seething inside. “Let’s find that bar you wanted.”

* * *

loud noisy bright (light in eyes) want sleep (snuggle mommy)

Not long, not long, Rat thought, soothing Jasmine with his hands. She’d crawled off of Tarak, whom she’d taken a liking to, and back into Rat’s lap once they sat down at the bar. *Sinclair’s* was a small cubbyhole not too far off the docks that seemed to be both tavern and club. On the other side of the main room from the bar was a dance floor; bodies jumped and writhed in time to music. Rat could smell the dancers’ sweat, and he wondered vaguely if he had ever done such a thing himself. If so, he had no memory of it.

Beside him, Neva tipped back a small glass of potent liquor, then put the empty on the bar with a loud clank. She looked haggard, as if she hadn’t slept for days. The scars stood out stark against her pale skin, and her hazel eyes were haunted.

Her pain in Gretchen’s shop had been like a scream in his head, drowning out the other voices. *But she still tried to take care of me, even when she was hurting.*

That pain was muted now, dulled by alcohol and distance. But he could still feel it, like glass scratching against his skin, like a whisper at the very edge of hearing. He tried not to listen, instead focusing on Jasmine’s soft fur and simple wants.

The bartender wandered down to refill Neva's glass. The flashing lights from the dance floor strobed off his bald head. "You drinking anything?" he asked Rat in a grating voice.

bored quiet night, shift will be over soon, just order a damn drink something easy

Rat shook his head quickly. He didn't know what would happen if he drank. *Can't risk it. Can't. Might go crazy again. Might kill everyone.*

No. Won't happen. Won't.

The bartender gave him an unfriendly look. "Drink, dance, or get out. That chair's for paying arses only."

Neva put down her glass so hard that Rat was surprised it didn't break. "Fine. Let's go back to the *Exile*."

"Come, Neva—after two years in the hospital, you want to go sit on the ship?" Tarak asked. "Live a little! There's a whole universe out here waiting to be enjoyed."

sick of the ship it's a prison (can't breathe) can't go out anywhere else damn Zats too obvious (agony, retina-killing flash of light) want to dance (want to see) touch skin again

"We'll dance," Rat said quickly.

Neva peered at him a little unsteadily. Then she shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

The pound of the music sent spikes through his head; he could feel its vibrations in his heart. People of all kinds crowded the floor, and Rat caught sight of some of the crew from the *Red Cloud*. Not wanting Jasmine to get knocked off his shoulder by the flailing limbs, he lifted her to an exposed girder that ran across the ceiling. Excited and intimidated at once, she raced back and forth along it, her tail held high.

Someone called out to Tarak in recognition, and a few moments later a laughing man had taken the pilot's hands and pulled him close. Rat thought he felt a flash of pleasure from them both, but it was hard to be sure—there were too many voices beating like moths against the inside of his skull. Casting about for something to focus on to keep them at bay, he settled on Neva. The bright lights flashed off her hair, turning it white, then tingeing it blue. She flung her head back, moving easily with the music, the scars standing out in sharp relief against her pale skin.

Pretty. And nice. She's always nice to me, even when she thinks I'm crazy.

He moved closer, feeling oddly drawn to her. Neva saw him and grinned, motioning with her hands for him to dance, too. For a moment, it seemed that she had forgotten her earlier hurt, too caught up in the music and the movements to think of her sorrow. Rat tried to move the way she did, hoping that some unknown skill would float up from the black space in his mind and help him. But this time the blank that was his life refused to give up any secrets, so the result was more a flailing jerk than anything near as graceful as she was doing.

A few people stared at him, but he was used to that and didn't care. Neva threw her head back and laughed aloud, which made him feel good. Encouraged, he let himself go just a little, concentrating only on his own body and hers, acutely aware of the beat of his heart and the rush of blood in his veins.

I'm alive, he thought, surprised.

still alive, no, shouldn't feel this way (guilt, face of a handsome man, a tree, a beach, a sunset) how can I enjoy this, but Devin would want it (grief) Devin's dead, can't say what he'd want anymore, everyone's dead, I should be, how can I feel alive?

Rat stumbled, putting his hands to his head in a futile attempt to block out the whispers, the feelings. *I didn't mean to listen—didn't know I was listening. Gods, have I gotten so used to this—to her?*

Neva had stopped dancing. "Rat? Are you all right?"

She reached for him, but he jerked back, avoiding her touch. "I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine," he said, a litany to keep her at bay. *What if I had hurt her without meaning to? What if, what if, what if?*

"Do you want to sit down? We can get you some water—"

"No!" He stepped back again, desperate to put distance between them. *I have to get away from her.* "I need air, that's all. Just going outside for a minute. You stay here—dance."

He spun away and staggered blindly towards the entrance, bumping into other bodies as he did so. Jasmine raced along the girder above him, and a moment later he felt the familiar weight as she landed on his shoulder. **go home? (ship smell, hammock, sleep, eat)**

Yes. Yes, we're going home. But did he dare? Neva had said the nanobots would cure him, but they hadn't—the voices hadn't gone away, hadn't even gotten any quieter.

When he'd stowed away aboard the *Exile*, he'd chosen the possible deaths of a ship full of strangers over the deaths of even more people on Moldar Station. But they weren't strangers anymore, were they? They had faces now.

Maybe I should run away—stay here, or find another ship.

But then what? Would he condemn Paradise just to save the *Exile*?

He thought of Neva. *Yes.*

No.

Oh gods, I don't know what to do. Help me. Even if you hate me, even if you did this to me, even if I did something wrong and you're punishing me—help me make the right decision now.

"Where are you going, you and your pretty pet?"

Rat looked up, startled. He had been so wrapped in his problems that he had lost track of his surroundings. They were in a round corridor that looked as if it had started life as a conduit, but now carried people instead of cables and pipes. The light was bad—nothing more than the faint yellow glow from a far-off filament—but he could make out the dim shapes of the men in front of him.

A footstep—make that behind him as well.

His heart started to beat faster, and he swallowed hard. "Just going to my ship."

One of the men stepped forward. He looked much like all the rest, dressed in a ragged and patched shirt and trousers. His hair was lank, and he smelled as if he hadn't bathed in a long time. *The same way I was, before the Exile.*

The man smiled, revealing rotting teeth. Metal gleamed in his mouth, as if someone had made an attempt at dentistry and failed. "You got to pay a toll for coming through here."

(slick feel of blood and flesh against knuckle, desire, hurt, screams, laughing)

Rat shook his head, feeling tremors start in his arms and legs. The whispers rose up all around him, like the circle of men, telling him of violence and dark desires.

"No?" the man asked in mock-surprise, misinterpreting Rat's gesture. "Well, well. We were just going to take the pretty pet for the cook pot, but now I'm thinking we'll have to take something else." He held up his hand, displaying a rough-made knife so rusted it barely reflected any light at all. "Maybe a lot of other things."

Then they were coming at him, and he felt panic spike. "Jasmine, run!" he shouted, and tried to run himself, but something hit him in the gut and the whispers just got louder and louder...

"NO!" he screamed, even as his muscles convulsed. He caught a faint glimpse of men

falling all around him, blood pouring from their noses and mouths...and then the darkness took him, and he knew no more.

Chapter 6: Life and Death

Music shivered along Neva's nerves, and she closed her eyes, trying not to think. She had thought—hoped, anyway—that drinking and dancing would take her mind off Gretchen and all the old memories that the encounter had brought up. And for a sweet moment of rhythm and heat, it had...until she had looked at Rat and been reminded suddenly, aching of Devin.

But why? There was no answer to that, at least none that made any sense. Devin had been many things, none of which applied to Rat even on a good day.

Then Rat had run off, with only a hurried explanation, leaving her standing alone on the dance floor like a fool.

An undefined feeling of guilt lodged in her gut, as if she had swallowed a scalpel and it cut her slowly from the inside. She shook her head, angry at herself, angry at Rat, although she didn't even know why.

"Are you all right?"

Neva turned to find a man she vaguely remembered from the *Red Cloud* standing beside her. His blue shirt was edged with sweat—the air amidst so many bodies was close and hot—and strands of his long hair stuck to his face.

"I'm fine," she said automatically. "I'm sorry—I don't remember your name."

"Daniel Long River." He had an easy smile that she liked immediately. "Paradise is a dangerous place for a newcomer to wander alone. Perhaps I should stay with you until you return to your ship...?"

Is he flirting with me? The feelings of guilt returned full-force. *I feel like I'm betraying Devin by even looking at another man.*

But Devin was dead—that was the hard fact, the cold fact, which she had lived with ever since the doctors on Dios-II had finally admitted that the same explosion that had taken her face had also taken the life of her betrothed.

Before she could formulate a reply, however, Daniel frowned slightly and pressed one hand to the headband that held his dark hair out of his eyes. For a moment, he took on a listening attitude, and the frown deepened. His lips moved slightly, as if he sub-vocalized a response to some unheard speaker.

When he dropped his hand and turned his eyes back on her, his look was grave. "I have received bad news. Your friend has been attacked. My crewmates fear he is severely injured."

* * *

God and Goddess, no!

Neva ran down the corridor to where Rat lay like a doll someone had broken and then discarded. Two crewmen from the *Red Cloud* stood guard over the scene; one of them grabbed her arm when she stumbled over a body. Startled, she looked down and saw that Rat wasn't the only one lying unconscious in the corridor.

Why did I just let him run off like that? Why didn't I stop him? Go with him?

Because I was too busy feeling sorry for myself, that's why. Goddess, what sort of healer am I? What sort of friend?

Pushing aside her anger and fear, she focused on the man who had steadied her. "What happened?"

He exchanged a glance with the other man who had been standing guard, and she realized belatedly that they were twins. Both were tall, copper-skinned, and black-haired like the rest of the crew from the *Red Cloud*, and she wondered if the warship was manned by an extended family.

"When we saw your friend leave, they followed him," Daniel said as he came up behind her. "I elected to remain behind and stay with you."

One of the twins nodded. "We lost sight of your friend briefly and took a wrong turn. When we found him again, we saw that many men were attacking him. Before we could do anything to help...they all simply collapsed."

Neva took a closer look at the other shapes lying around Rat in a rough ring. All of them seemed like hard-bitten men, and knives littered the ground around them. Blood masked their faces, and with a thrill of horror she remembered the dead aboard the *New Beginning*.

What if I made a mistake? What if it was an illness? What if we brought something back to the station with us?

One of the Rat's attackers groaned and coughed. As he tried to push himself up, however, the nearest of the twins casually kicked him in the head. He dropped to the floor like a bag of wet laundry.

"They're not dead?" Neva asked, weak with relief.

"None of them are dead, but we don't know what happened to them. There was no sign of a weapon."

Neva stepped over the prostrate forms of Rat's attackers and knelt beside him. Jasmine crouched by his head, clearly agitated, and Neva made soothing sounds as she bent over Rat's prone body. She saw no signs of blood on his face, at least, and relief flooded her. Putting her fingers to his throat, she felt the flutter of his pulse, fast but regular. His eyelids flickered open, revealing crescents of white.

"Can you hear me?" she asked. He moaned again and rolled over, as if trying to get away from her.

"He has epilepsy," she explained, glancing briefly at the crewmen from the *Red Cloud*. "It looks as if he's had a bad seizure, so he'll probably just want to sleep for a while." She turned back to him and gently wiped his dreadlocks back from his face. "What I don't understand is why the nanobots your medic injected didn't stop it."

"Epilepsy doesn't explain what happened to these other men." Daniel looked down at her gravely. "I think it would be best to get him back to your ship. Something odd occurred here."

"What are you going to do with those men?"

"Don't worry about them."

"They're hurt."

"They were going to harm your crewmate—perhaps even kill him."

Neva took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Daniel was right when he said that something was odd. But if it was something that they had brought back from the *New Beginning*—some kind of virus or bacterial infection—why hadn't any of the crew been affected? For that matter, why didn't Rat seem to be affected? So far as she could tell, he'd simply had a seizure. Not normal for most people, but certainly nothing mysterious, either.

"Let's go," she said, and stood up.

* * *

The crewmen from the *Red Cloud* supported Rat between them; with any luck, it would look to passers-by as if they were helping a drunken friend get home. Neva walked with them, carrying Jasmine, who was by now whimpering in her distress. By the time they got back to the docks, however, Rat seemed to revive a little, though he remained unsteady on his feet.

When they got to the panel outside the *Exile's* berth, she punched the com button, hoping against hope that there was someone inside. A moment later, the speaker crackled and sputtered back.

"Drake Morgenstern."

"Drake! It's Neva. Something's happened to Rat."

It was less than five minutes before the lock opened and Drake came through. He slid an arm around Rat's shoulder to brace him, sparing a nod of thanks for the other crew. Rat mumbled something incoherent and stumbled up the boarding tube.

They took him directly to the infirmary and laid him on the exam table, where he lapsed into what appeared to be perfectly normal, if deep, sleep. Jasmine tucked up against him, content again, and went to sleep herself.

"What happened?" Drake asked, sounding slightly breathless after the exertion of supporting Rat.

Neva shook her head slowly. "I'm not entirely sure. But I think the captain needs to hear this."

* * *

Neva told them everything that she knew, which was distressingly little. They sat in the galley, hunched around one end of the long table like conspirators. When she had finished, both Drake and Iluka were silent for what seemed like a long time.

"But these men weren't dead?" Drake asked at last.

"No. They seemed to be regaining consciousness, even."

Drake frowned and stroked his short beard. "Are you sure it was the same thing, then?"

"Of course not." Neva sighed in frustration. "The blood on their faces...it looked like the same pattern as from the *Zat* ship. But that doesn't necessarily mean that there was any connection at all."

"And these men all collapsed at once? At the same time as Rat?"

"That's what the twins said."

Iluka scowled at her coffee. She still wore her formal coat, although her hat was gone.

“What could cause that?”

“And no weapons were used—no concussion grenades, or tasers, or anything?” Drake asked.

Neva shook her head. “No. Nothing that the men from the *Red Cloud* could see, anyway.”

Iluka took a sip of her coffee, then made a face and pushed it away. “They wouldn’t miss anything so obvious—not that crew. Joshua’s probably got every one of them wired to the gills every time they set foot outside that ship of theirs. If there was anything like a weapon discharge, they would have picked it up.” She stared into space a moment, her brown eyes going thoughtful. “What about those ‘bots that Shot With an Arrow gave Rat? They record and transmit data, right? Could their readings tell you anything?”

“Maybe. I haven’t looked yet.”

“Do it.”

* * *

This doesn't make sense.

Neva leaned forward and rubbed her eyes tiredly. She sat in one corner of the cramped infirmary; Rat slept on, oblivious. It made her feel odd, as if she were spying on him without his knowledge.

The 'bots must have malfunctioned. There was something wrong with them to begin with, and they just broke down altogether.

But the data didn’t look like a malfunction. It didn’t look like anything at all that she could identify.

She had reviewed all the data the ‘bots had transmitted to her tablet, from the moment of their injection on. The beginning of the recording showed nothing abnormal. But as time had passed—as they had gone onto the station—strange flares of activity had surged across Rat’s brain...activity that matched no known patterns that she could find in the *Exile’s* databanks.

Not normal—but not trauma-induced, or pathogenic, or any other cursed thing I can find.

The abnormal activity came and went unpredictably for most of the recording. Then, in the last ten minutes, it became increasingly prevalent. In the final three seconds, there was an enormous flare that lit up the tablet like a supernova.

And then nothing. Absolutely nothing. So far as she could tell, every nanobot in Rat’s brain had been fried by that final surge.

Which should be impossible. Our bodies can't generate that kind of electrical field.

Nothing added up.

Five men. Five men felled by an unseen blow. Hemorrhaging in their sinuses at the very least. If the pattern is the same as that on the New Beginning, they may have had it in their brains as well.

If the pattern is the same. If. Humans are incredibly good at pattern recognition—to the point where we start to see cause and effect where there's really nothing but coincidence.

Five men felled by an unseen blow. One man in an epileptic seizure—except his brain activity doesn't match that diagnosis at all.

Five men felled by an unseen blow, at the same moment one man goes into a seizure, and every 'bot in his brain fails.

Whatever happened to Rat, it was different than what happened to the men around him. And they were all around him, in a circle, when they went down. As if he were the epicenter of whatever took them out.

Neva closed her eyes. What she was thinking was impossible. *Maybe I should go to bed myself. Maybe I'm too tired to think straight. Maybe I still haven't sobered up all the way.*

Rat moaned and rolled over. Glad to have some distraction, Neva bent over him. "Rat? Can you hear me?"

His amber eyes blinked open. "My...my tongue hurts."

"You bit it." Neva reached for a squeezebag of water and handed it to him. "Here—drink this. You had a seizure, but it's all right. We got you back aboard the *Exile*. You're safe."

He took the water and drank it down thirstily. When he had drained the bag, he settled back, a look of terrible resignation in his eyes.

"Those men," he whispered, so soft she could barely hear him. "I killed them, didn't I?"

* * *

The crew gathered in the galley, their faces grave, as if they were jurors at a trial. *And maybe, Neva thought, they are.*

It was late in the shift, but no one looked tired. As soon as Neva had reported her findings—and Rat's words—Iluca had pulled the rest of the crew back on the ship as quickly as she could. At first they had been disgruntled over having their leave canceled, but as Neva quietly outlined everything that had happened, their expressions had become more and more grim.

Rat sat at the opposite end of the table, well away from anyone else, his head bowed so that his dreadlocks hid his face from them all. He had said nothing throughout Neva's recitation, only quietly stroked Jasmine. His silence felt like an accusation, as though she had somehow betrayed him by reporting what she had found, what he had said.

I just want to help you, she thought desperately. But I don't know what's going on anymore.

Iluca leaned forward once Neva finished speaking. The lines around her eyes and mouth looked more pronounced than usual, as if the years had laid a heavy hand on her. "And what did that mean, Rat?" she asked. Her voice was pure steel. "What could you possibly have done to them? You didn't so much as touch them, did you?"

Rat flinched, as if the captain had struck him. "No. I didn't touch them," he whispered.

"Then what? Why would you ask if you had killed them?"

"Because...because it wouldn't be the first time I had killed someone like that."

There was utter silence following his pronouncement. Finally, Iluka stirred again. "Explain."

Rat swallowed convulsively. He looked up briefly, met Neva's eyes, then turned away again. "I lied to you. All of you. I've been lying since the moment I came on board."

"I knew it," growled Marcus.

"Be silent," Iluka snapped, and the gunner subsided with a surly look.

Rat wrapped his arms around himself, as if he were cold. "I...I said that the Zats were after me because they had killed my family. That isn't true. Or...it might be. I don't know. I don't know anything—who I am, where I came from, anything. My memories begin two years ago. Before that...there's nothing at all. Like the rest of my life was...amputated. Just

gone.

"My first memory is...I was standing in an office. It was on Moldar, after the takeover—a Zat office. My clothes...were just normal, that's all. No uniform, nothing like that. There was a jacket on the floor in front of me. Maybe I dropped it—I don't know. There were Zats in the room, too...but they were all dead. There was blood on their faces...blood on the white walls."

Neva straightened suddenly, her heart pounding. "When we jumped the first time, headed out from Moldar, I had a hallucination. I saw the scene you just described."

But that's impossible—it was lack of blood to the brain, that's all. Just a hallucination.

"It isn't impossible," Rat said softly, as if she had spoken the thought aloud. "And it wasn't lack of blood to the brain. Not yours, anyway. Mine. My memory."

What the hell? She swallowed hard. "What...what are you saying?"

Rat glanced at her briefly. His amber eyes were haunted, and a haggard look clung to him, as if he had begun to fray around the edges. "I'm saying...that I can hear whispers...things...your thoughts, I guess. And sometimes, like when we jumped...I whisper back."

Neva frowned, trying to sort through his wandering explanation. "Like...mind reading? Is that what you're saying?"

"This is ridiculous!" Marcus burst out. He glared at Rat, then at Neva, as if accusing her of some bizarre conspiracy. "Mind reading! That's hocus-pocus nonsense. What next—are you going to fly around the ship on a broom?"

"I agree," Anusha said coldly. Fury burned in her brown eyes, although Neva wasn't entirely certain of its origin. "Ridiculous. If that's the best our medic can come up with, maybe we should get another, before this one starts trying to treat us with leeches and mandrake root."

Rat's head snapped up, and Neva saw the blaze of anger in his eyes as well. "You were locked in a closet when you were a little girl. That's why you're scared of enclosed places now."

He said the words as if he meant to bludgeon Anusha with them. She rocked back, her eyes going round, and for a moment she seemed at a loss. Then she spun on her brother. "Damn you, Tarak!"

"I didn't tell anyone about that," he said hurriedly. "You know I wouldn't, Anusha."

"*You* told me," Rat said, and Neva reflected that she had never seen him so...was confident the word? As if finally telling his secret had freed him from all the fear and the uncertainty that had plagued him. "Aboard the *New Beginning*, after we found the bodies in the hold. You thought how awful that must have been, to die locked up in the dark like that, but the thought was all tied up and confused with your own memory."

He stared at Anusha, challenging her. For a moment, the navigator stared back, her breathing ragged, as if she had run a long way. Then she looked away.

"You-you're lying," she said, but there was a slight quaver to her voice. "You're a Zat spy—that's what it is. You must have found someone who talked, some record..."

Tarak looked like a man who had missed a step in the dark. "Everyone else who could have known that is dead, Anusha."

"There have always been rumors about secret psy projects," Drake said uncertainly.

"There have always been rumors about alien civilizations," Marcus pointed out, his voice harsh. "But no one's ever found anything more complex than a bacteria. Crazy people

and conspiracy nuts are the only ones who believe in telepaths, Drake. This is all some kind of trick.”

“I’m not lying!” Rat’s hands clenched on the tabletop. “Th-think of something. Something no one else knows. Think it! Shout it at me!”

“Damn you—!”

“Her name was Genevieve!”

Marcus paled sharply. “No. No, you bastard. Don’t you say that. Don’t you—!”

“Sit down!” Iluka said, her voice like a whip crack. Marcus had risen to his feet, as if he would rush Rat, and for a moment Neva thought he might ignore the captain and attack. But then, slowly, he sat down again.

“Let’s put aside the question of what’s real and what isn’t, for the moment,” Iluka said. “Get on with your story, Rat.”

His confidence seemed to drain away, and he looked back down again. “Anyway. I was in a room, with dead Zats. I didn’t know what had happened. I didn’t know who I was, or where, or anything else. I just...I was disoriented and scared, so I ran. I didn’t even know where I was running to. Nothing was familiar—it was like I’d been born in that room.”

“You didn’t have any identification on you?”

“No. Nothing. Maybe it was in the jacket. I didn’t pick it up before I ran, so I don’t know. Maybe I didn’t have any. Maybe I wasn’t anybody.” He swallowed hard, shivering. “Later on, when I heard the bodies had been discovered, I realized that they would be looking for me. So I kept on hiding. Run and hide, stay out of the light, stay out of sight. Away from sensors, away from people. Hide and run, find food where you can. Get out of there, you little rat. You don’t belong here.”

Drake’s frown was more thoughtful than angry, at least for the moment. “So you don’t know for certain that you killed the Zats, then? You don’t actually remember it?”

“No. Don’t remember doing it. But what else could have happened? I knew I had to hide, so I did. But...there were so many voices. People talking inside my head—but not really talking, not sentences exactly. Fragments, words, all mixed up with images and feelings. I realized I was going crazy...except that sometimes something would happen that made me think maybe it was real after all, not just hallucinations. I didn’t know.

“I escaped from the Zats and hid. Things—skills—would sometimes come back to me from...before. But no memories with them. None at all. It was hard, hiding, even when things would come back that helped. I was scared and hungry all the time. And the more tired I got, the worse the voices got, the worse the pressure inside my head...until something happened. I lost consciousness, and when I came to, I found out that everyone nearby had passed out, too. I’d hurt them somehow.”

“But they lived?” Neva asked tentatively.

“Yes. Yes.” Rat began to rock back and forth, like a metronome. “But hurt. Nosebleeds. Headaches.”

Something terrible slipped into place. “Like Marcus and I had after the jump.”

He closed his eyes. “Yes.”

“You bastard!” Marcus shouted.

“Be quiet.” Iluka leaned forward and stared fixedly at Rat until he finally looked up and reluctantly met her gaze. “Let’s say for a moment that what you say is true. You can hear our thoughts. Play with our brains.”

“I can’t...it isn’t the way it sounds. Not like talking to someone, like hearing a

conversation. Not so clean. And I can't make anybody do anything—I tried, once or twice, when the Zats were close. When I needed to stow away, I tried to make a guard look the other way, so I could get into the cargo bay. I couldn't. She just got a nosebleed. I couldn't, I swear."

It was a slender defense at best. Iluka's frown deepened. "Say every word is true—and I'm not saying I believe you, not when you've lied to us already. How did this happen? What did the Zats want with you?"

Rat hunched deeper into himself. "I don't know, Captain. I don't."

Neva took a deep breath, trying to sort through her emotions. *He played on our feelings, telling us that his family was dead.*

They might be dead. As far as he knows, they never even existed to begin with. Would that be worse or better than knowing for certain they were gone?

"It seems obvious that he was a prisoner of the Zats," she said at last. "Rat, did anyone on Moldar ever recognize you that you could tell? Did anything ever seem familiar—even if it was only a sense of déjà vu?"

"No."

"So maybe you were from the station, but maybe you weren't. Maybe the Zats caught you and took you there."

"Why would they do that?" Tarak asked.

"Experiments. Obviously they did something to him—used him like a human guinea pig. But then it backfired on them." *The threefold rule indeed.*

Iluka frowned. "It's possible, I suppose."

"And maybe that's what happened on board the *New Beginning*. Maybe those people—or some of them, anyway—were being experimented on, too."

Drake's eyes were hard. "What about that, Rat? Could you do something like that? Wipe out a ship?"

Rat shook his head frantically. "No. No, no, no. Couldn't. The only time...the only time I know I killed somebody—think I killed somebody—was the Zats on Moldar. Nobody else on the station got hurt, though—just the people right around me. But...I got scared it would happen again. So many voices."

Drake nodded. "So you stowed away on the *Exile*."

"Yes." Rat closed his eyes. "Fewer voices. Less pressure. Fewer lives if something went wrong."

Marcus stood up. Every muscle in his arms and back stood out beneath his shirt, as if he had to restrain himself from attacking Rat on the spot. Apparently, whatever reservations he had about the truth of Rat's story had vanished. "You worthless piece of shit. You came on board knowing you might kill us! Damn it, we should have put you out the airlock the moment we laid eyes on you!"

"Yes," Rat whispered.

"No!" Neva stood up as well, facing Marcus. "Don't you have any compassion? He's a victim! The Zats did this to him—messed around with his head so that he doesn't even know his own name anymore! *They're* the ones you should be angry with, not him!"

"*They* didn't put him on this ship! If he's so worried about hurting people, why didn't he throw himself out an airlock on Moldar, solve everybody's problem?" Marcus turned a look of burning hatred on Rat. "Ever since he came here, he's been poking around in our brains, listening to our private thoughts, violating us—"

“No! I tried not to listen, try not to, I don’t want to hear—” Rat broke off suddenly. His eyelids fluttered rapidly, and Neva saw a tremor go through him.

Hex it, he’s going to have another seizure.

Acting on blind instinct, she reached out and grabbed his thin wrist. “Rat. Listen to me. It’s okay. Relax.”

She tried to think calmly, even though her heart was pounding. The image of Wight’s Beach came back to her, the soothing waves on the sand, and she concentrated on it as hard as she could. She remembered the sand beneath her bare feet, the soft cry of the gulls, the gentle wind off the ocean as the moons set beyond the stacks. Peaceful. Tranquil.

Jasmine’s fur, which had been bristling, gradually settled back. Rat blinked, then seemed to focus on Neva’s face. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, although whether he spoke to her alone or to everyone she didn’t know.

“All right. This is what we’re going to do,” Iluka said. She sat straight in her chair, her eyes fixed on Rat’s face, as if he were a wild animal that might bite. “Tempers are running too high to make a decision right now. Everyone go off duty—sleep, discuss amongst yourselves, ask your gods for guidance, whatever seems best to you. Beginning of next shift, we’ll meet back here and take a vote. Drake, escort Rat to the laundry and put an executive lock on the door. As for you, Rat...I suggest you go quietly. I’m not happy with you right now, and you don’t want to give me an excuse to put you out the airlock.”

Rat only nodded, unspeaking. He stood up when Drake beckoned, but all the fight seemed to have drained out of him. His footsteps shuffled over the decking, as if walking were almost beyond his power. Jasmine clung to his shoulder, her huge eyes seeming baffled by the turn of events.

On impulse, Neva followed them. Drake glanced at her but didn’t say anything. When they reached the laundry, Neva touched Rat’s sleeve lightly. Startled, he looked up, as if he hadn’t even realized she was there.

“I’m your friend,” she said. “Not just your medic, Rat. I am. Trust that.”

Rat gave her a feeble attempt at a smile. “Thanks. My first, that I remember, anyway.”

He went inside the small room to his hammock, which hung over the wash unit. Then Drake closed the door, sealing him away from view.

* * *

“Come in,” Iluka called.

Drake palmed open the door to the captain’s cabin. It was a small room, barely larger than any of the regular crew quarters. Different than what they’d had aboard the *Isaiah*, before they’d run afoul of the Zats.

Thinking about the *Isaiah* brought a familiar pain to his heart, but it was an old one, and the twinge seemed more habit than anything else. He wondered if that meant he was healing, if someday he’d be able to remember the happy times he and Rachel had shared without the memories being overshadowed by the grief. There had been a time when he hadn’t wanted to heal—when he’d clung to his sorrow as if he’d been the only one to have ever hurt.

Stupid, that.

Iluka stood by one of the foldout cabinets, a bottle of rum in one hand and a glass in the other. Setting it down, she pulled out a second glass without being asked and splashed the dark liquor into it. The dusty-amber lighting of the room brought out hidden sparks in it, and

he wondered if the spectrum complimented the sun of Iluka's homeworld or simply the décor. The rest of the room, from the walls to the image of the Rainbow Serpent above the desk, was muted earth tones, the palette of a dry, barren land.

Iluka handed him the glass of rum, and he lifted it in salute. "*Mazel tov*," he said, and drank it down in one gulp. It left a pleasant warmth in his belly, and he remembered his younger days, when he'd been all too familiar with every bar in every station.

That had been before his more recent days...when he'd seen nothing of any station *but* the bar, lost in a haze of alcohol because it was the only thing that could blunt the pain. It had been a lot harder shaking off the hangover at forty than at twenty.

"When did we get so old?" he mused aloud.

Iluka cast him a startled look, then chuckled wryly. "Ask myself the same thing every morning. It seems like I ought to be Neva's age, young and full of fire, ready to take on the universe. Can't understand why I've got these aching joints and this gray hair. Then I remember all the crazy things I did when I *was* her age and realize where all the aches came from." She took a sip of her rum, eyeing him over the rim of the glass. "Besides, you're too young yourself to be complaining. A gray hair here or there doesn't make you an elder by a long shot."

Drake snorted. "Yes, grandmother. Let me get your walker before you fall over."

The lines in Iluka's face creased briefly as she smiled. Those wrinkles told a tale of laughter, so there must have been a time when she'd smiled a lot more than she did these days. He wished he could have known her then.

"You didn't come here to discuss the vagaries of age," Iluka said. She pulled the couch out of the wall and sat down, gesturing for him to join her. He did so, and she poured him another drink.

He sipped it this time. Getting drunk in Iluka's cabin didn't seem like a good idea tonight. "No. I came to see what the captain thinks about our problem."

"Rat." The last vestiges of the smile vanished from her dark face. "Right now, the captain's damned mad, Drake. The captain is right pissed. Rat came on board and knowingly put my crew in danger. Worse, he didn't tell me about it. I don't like being ignorant when I've got a hazard on my ship."

Drake arched a brow, not at the things she said, but the ones she didn't. "But...?"

"The captain is damned mad...but Iluka Toora is asking herself if there's any good fortune to be had here. Anything we can use against the Zats."

"So you believe him?"

Iluka sighed and took a larger drink from her glass. "Mind reading. It's like something from a Dreamtime story, isn't it? I'll tell you something about me, Drake. I never listened to the old tales much when I was young. Didn't see what use they were to me, when I was going to be out among the stars, trading with other people who had beliefs of their own." She shook her head. "Sorry—I'm wandering. What I mean to say is that I put stock in what I can see and feel for myself. If you'd asked me yesterday if I thought mind reading was possible, I would have said no and called you a fool. But I saw how Anusha and Marcus reacted to what Rat said to them. I know that there's something strange going on—those men who attacked Rat didn't just trip and fall down all at once."

"Anusha might be right—Rat might have found some records, talked to someone..."

Iluka arched a brow. "Do you really believe that?"

Drake stared into the depths of his drink. "No. I can believe that the Zats might want to

put a spy on board. But I think they'd come up with a better cover than 'I'm a half-crazy telepath with amnesia.'"

A faint smile touched her mouth, then disappeared. "One would think, yes."

"So what do we do with him?"

"We make him useful."

Drake snorted. "I don't know how useful he's going to be."

"The way he is now, maybe not very. But there might be ways of fixing that."

"That's a lot of fixing to do."

"Neva did something. Didn't you see? She defused him somehow, after Marcus had got him riled up."

Drake shook his head in bemusement. "So you're just going to give him to our medic and say 'fix him'? That would be a tall order for a psych-doc."

Iluka shrugged. "Maybe. But Neva's all we've got."

Poor child. "You're ignoring the other problems—the ones that Marcus and Anusha are going to be citing as reasons to send him for a spacewalk without a 'suit. Assuming he really does have these powers, it's our brains he's going to be poking around in."

Did I ever think about Rachel around him? It made him angry—and vaguely jealous, as if he'd found another man looking at naked pictures of his dead wife. "Say every word he's spoken is true. Can you just sit there day in and day out, knowing he's listening to everything you think? That your most private memories are an open book to him?"

Iluka's eyes narrowed slightly. "That doesn't sound like what he described. And he also said he tried not to listen."

"So you're going to trust him? I'm sorry, Iluka, but that's a long way to trust a good friend, let alone someone we barely know."

"Maybe." She dropped her empty glass into a bag, where it would be secure until she could take it to the galley for washing. "But I keep remembering something he said."

"What's that?"

"That he came on board the *Exile* because he was afraid he'd kill again."

"And that's supposed to reassure us?"

Iluka smiled grimly and without humor. "Oh yes. Because he made a cold choice. A rational choice. The lives of an entire station over the lives on one little ship. Marcus is taking that decision personally—but the truth of it is, it *wasn't* personal. In Rat's mind, the numbers were all that mattered. He took the risk of getting on an unknown ship with an unknown crew, leaving behind a station where he'd managed to hide from the Zats for two years. Risked his life to save strangers. Or more strangers than he thought he might kill, anyway. Tell me that wasn't an honorable choice, Drake. Step back, get over taking it all so personally, and then tell me he should have stayed on Moldar instead."

Drake was silent for a long time, thinking about what she had said. "You know he might still kill us," he said at last.

"He didn't kill those ruffians on Paradise." She shrugged. "It's a risk. He might go insane and fry all our brains along with his own. He might get control over... whatever it is he does... and still not be of any use to us. Zats might blow the lot of us out of the sky tomorrow and make this whole damn conversation pointless."

"Or the crew might vote to be rid of him."

"And how will you vote, Drake?"

"You know how I'll vote. I just came here to find out *why*."

She let out a short bark of laughter. "I'm not asking blind loyalty from my first mate. You know better than that by now, or you're not half as smart as I thought you were."

Drake dropped his glass into the bag with hers and stood up. "It's not blind," he said. "It's knowing my captain's the smartest woman in the sector, and being intelligent enough to trust her judgment."

Iluka laughed and shook her head. "Get out of here, you dog. Get some damned sleep, hear me?"

"I will." He turned to the door. "You do the same."

"Not likely, thanks to our stowaway. Cursed Captains' Council is next shift, too, and I still don't know what I'm going to say to them. I ought to just stick Rat up in front of them and see who's left standing. Solve both problems at once."

"If only." The door opened, and he stepped out. "You get some rest yourself, Captain."

She waved him away irritably, but he thought he saw the flicker of a smile before the door closed between them.

* * *

Rat lay in his hammock, counting the beats of his heart. It helped him mark time as well as pass it, but even so it felt as if he had lain suspended in the darkness for years. Jasmine moved about their room, her sharp eyes easily able to navigate even with the lights turned down so far that Rat couldn't make out anything at all.

Neva will take her, he told himself over and over again. Neva won't let anything bad happen to her. Won't let them sell her on Paradise.

Jasmine was his only family—the only thing he had at all, really, not counting the clothes on his back. *So at least there won't be anything for the rest of the crew to fight over once I'm gone.*

He wondered if there was anything he could have done differently to avoid what had happened. But even if he hadn't been found out on Paradise, surely he would have betrayed himself eventually. In an odd way, it was actually a relief to know that he didn't have to hide his secret anymore. If only it didn't mean that he was going to die.

The door opened, startling him. Drake stood on the other side, a dark silhouette framed by the light in the corridor. *So soon? Surely it hasn't been that long. Surely. Surely.*

I don't want to die.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, fighting for calm. Briefly, he wondered if he could escape somehow. If he could knock them all out without losing consciousness himself, he might be able to get off the ship.

And then what? Hide on Paradise? How long would that last?

Did it on Moldar. It would be even easier here.

But the thought of going back to that desperate existence weighed down his spirit. *I can't. Can't condemn Jasmine to that, either.*

Just...got to take whatever's coming. That's all. Just got to stay calm, stay focused, and just...not worry too much about it.

"It's time," Drake said.

Rat nodded and climbed down out of the hammock, forcing himself to concentrate fiercely on what he was doing, forcing himself to ignore the whispers that had started to scratch at the edges of his brain, wanting entry.

Drake took him back to the galley. A ring of faces waited at the other end of the table, and Rat cast a brief glance over them, not daring more. Anusha and Marcus both looked furious, and their anger and fear were like hammers in his head. Neva tried to give him a smile, though; that made him feel a little better.

"All right," Iluka said; her tone gave nothing away. "You all know why we're here. I'm calling another vote. Damn all if we've ever had to vote on anything as often as this. Drill's the same as the first time—a 'nay' vote means you're for getting Rat off this ship, and an 'aye' means you're for keeping him."

Rat's throat felt suddenly dry. He wrapped his arms around himself, rocking back and forth, praying that he didn't lose what tenuous control he retained. The whispers were all around, and he wanted to scream at them to be quiet so he could listen to the vote, that it was too important to miss, but he didn't dare for fear of hurting the crew.

"Anusha, how do you vote?" Iluka asked.

Rat could feel the navigator's stare. "Nay," she said coldly.

I shouldn't have said that about her childhood. She hates me now. She'll hate me forever, even when I'm nothing but atoms, for seeing that. For saying it out loud.

"Marcus?"

"You think I want that *thing* crawling around in my brain? Nay!"

"Tarak?"

The pilot hesitated. His blank eyes stared at nothing, and for a moment he seemed about to speak, before lapsing back into silence again. "I... abstain," he said at last.

Anusha was on her feet. "What? What the hell is wrong with you, brother?"

"Sit down!" snapped Iluka, and even though she remained seated her presence seemed to tower over Anusha. "Your brother has the right to abstain, just like everybody else at this table."

Anusha sat down slowly, but the air was full of **betrayal**. Rat closed his eyes.

"Drake?"

"Aye. Don't look at me that way, Marcus. I've thought about it, and my reasons are as good to me as yours are to you."

"Neva?"

"Aye!" she said immediately. Rat chanced a look at her. She was staring at him, determination in her hazel eyes. *She said she was my friend—please let that be true. Please. I need a friend. Please.*

"It looks like the deciding vote is yours, Captain," Drake pointed out mildly.

Iluka nodded grimly. "Rat. You've taken orders until now—I can't complain about that. You're going to keep taking them, hear me? No matter what."

He looked up and realized that she was telling him something important. *That's the price. She'll let me stay, let me live...but she's going to ask me to do things. Maybe bad things.*

"Yes, Captain," he whispered.

"Aye."

"Damn it!" swore Marcus, jumping to his feet. "Captain, are you out of your fucking mind? You, too, Drake! Can't you see what's in front of you—he's dangerous! He'll kill us all!"

"No," Rat said, denying it frantically, praying that Marcus was wrong. "No, no, no, no. Not hurt."

“It’s been decided,” Iluka said, her voice hard and cold as he’d ever heard it. “So shut up and sit down, Marcus. Rat, you put so much as a fingernail out of line...and I’ll shove you out the airlock myself. If I ever think you’re a danger to this crew—if I ever think you’re poking around in our minds deliberately—you’ll put *yourself* out the airlock once I’m done with you. Got it?”

“Yes, Captain,” he said, and looked down at the table. But not before he’d caught a single word from her, whisper become a shout.

weapon

Chapter 7: Dangerous Alliances

"Message from Joshua," Drake reported. "He'd like to stop by for a chat before the council."

Iluka swore mildly and adjusted the cuffs of her formal coat once again. After the conference to decide Rat's fate, she'd gone to hit her shower and dress for the Captains' Council. Drake had headed up to the bridge to see if they'd missed any important messages during their down time. For the most part, the notes that glutted their mailbox were queries from other captains, wanting to know why she was calling the council in the first place. As if they thought she would simply demand their presence for no reason.

Idiots.

He'd deleted most of the messages without passing them on—there was no point in answering them, and Iluka trusted him to sort the truly important things from the junk that would just prove a distraction to her. Joshua's query he'd flagged as urgent, even as he resigned himself to skipping his own shower.

"Call him in," Iluka said, sounding far less pleased than usual at the prospect of a visit from the warship captain. "Tell him to meet us in the galley—at least we can have coffee while we wait."

"Aye, Captain."

"What's the status of the crew?"

"Rat and Neva are on board. The rest are back on leave." Drake spun his chair to face her. "I thought it would be best to let Marcus and Anusha work out their feelings somewhere else, out of easy reach of our stowaway. Tarak needs to do some thinking, too, I'm guessing. Although I doubt Anusha will leave him to it."

Iluka frowned slightly. "Damned mess is what this is."

"Aye, Captain."

"Don't you 'aye, Captain' me, Drake Morgenstern. You're having second thoughts of your own."

Drake hesitated, then shrugged. "I suppose. I don't know. I hope you're doing the right thing. What Neva said last shift is true—Rat is a victim, and I hate to hold what he can't help against him. I just don't know if the *Exile* is the best place for him."

"Noted. Now let's get that coffee."

Drake had just poured two cups from the brewer when Joshua wandered in, so he fetched a third and set it down in front of the *Red Cloud's* captain. Joshua took it with a word of thanks, but the courtesy sounded distracted. His black brows were drawn down over his sharp nose as he regarded them over the edge of the cup.

"Morning, Joshua," Iluka said mildly, as if such planet-born words had any meaning

here in space, far away from anything resembling a habitable world.

Joshua nodded. He had dressed for the council as well, in a blue shirt stitched with dyed porcupine quills, pristine trousers, and boots. A bone gorget encircled his throat, and eagle feathers hung from his gleaming black hair. Drake had heard that Waga Chun, the world that had given birth to the *Red Cloud* and all her crew, had a more complex ecosystem than any other world humans had yet managed to terraform. Rumor said that it was so good it didn't need any tweaking or artificial controls—just let it run, and predator and prey, parasite and host, bacteria and virus, fungus and plant, kept on interacting the way they'd evolved to back on old Earth, keeping each other in check and sustaining the thousands of delicate cycles life needed to get along. Before the war, students from a dozen systems had fought tooth and nail to get into the biology programs at one of their universities.

Knowing the Zats, it wouldn't surprise Drake to learn they'd razed most of the planet to the ground by now.

"Is your crewmember well?" Joshua asked. Which Drake pegged as a polite, roundabout way of saying *what the hell is going on here?*

"He's fine," Iluka answered carefully. Canny veteran of a thousand trading ventures, her face gave nothing away.

Not that Joshua would be put off that easily. "My crew reported that he was attacked. That his attackers...collapsed...unexpectedly. Daniel Long River believes that your crewman has dreamed of black-tailed deer." He smiled slightly. "By which he means that Rat can harm a man with his gaze alone."

"By which he means your men are wired to the teeth and none of their readings made a damn bit of sense."

"What readings?"

"None at all?" Drake asked, surprised. Whatever Rat had done, it seemed to have gone completely under the radar.

Joshua set his coffee cup down. "Iluka. What happens aboard the *Exile* is your business. But if you've come across some kind of weapon undetectable to conventional scanners, I would have expected you to share it with the rest of us."

Iluka let out a dry laugh that held very little humor. "Some of my crew would love for me to give him to you, Joshua, and wash our hands of him. Daniel was right—or got the gist of it, anyway. Seems that our boy Rat got himself fiddled around with by the Zats. They poked his brain one too many times, and as a result I'm sitting here at dock with an unstable crewman who's got an ability he can't control."

Joshua's face assumed a look of polite disbelief. "Iluka..."

"Truth—by the Ancestor Spirits, I swear I'm not making things up."

"Explain, then."

"I can't. What happened to those men who attacked Rat? Or are you getting sloppy in your old age?"

Joshua smiled slightly. "Of course not. My crewmen retrieved them so that Michael Shot With an Arrow could conduct an examination. They all had very distinctive patterns of hemorrhaging in their sinuses and brains. He said that the brain trauma was similar to someone who had received a concussion...which we all know they did not."

"No."

"He also said there were similarities between their injuries and that found on the body you sent to him earlier."

"I know," she said quietly, in response to the edge that had crept into his voice. "And I don't know why. With any luck, Monk will have been able to crack the logs and we'll find out just what happened on that ship. They were dead when we got there—our boy had nothing to do with it. Says he doesn't have that kind of ability. As for any connection it has with what was done to him...I just don't know."

Iluka put her hands on the table, palms down and fingers spread. "Joshua, this is nothing you can use. I don't even know if it's anything I can use. Half the time I think I must be crazy to believe in it at all."

Joshua watched her with sharp, dark eyes, and Drake uneasily guessed that there were more questions than answers going through the warship captain's head. "Trust, us, Ten Bears," he said tiredly. "When have we ever kept anything back? We made the Harvest Run with you."

A faint frown touched Joshua's mouth at the mention of that last, desperate—and futile—attempt to prevent the Zats from wiping all life from the surface of Harvest. It had been a hell of a jump after jump, risking their lives on mass points that *might* be big enough to pull them back in. Ships had been lost during the run, good crews gone to the other side of nowhere and unable to get back to real space. The *Exile* and the *Red Cloud* had raced each other all the way...only to come out at last over blooming desolation, a hairsbreadth too late to change anything.

Half a billion human lives on Harvest, and God alone knew how many of other kinds, and every last one of them laid at their door. If they had only gone a little faster, dared a little more, jumped a little farther...

It made a terrible bond between them. In the depths of the night, when thoughts of Harvest still haunted Drake, he wondered if it wasn't even worse for those aboard the *Red Cloud*, who had lived their whole lives under a credo of bravery and honor. They were the very best at what they did...but the very best still hadn't been good enough.

"All right," Joshua said at last. He set his cup down and pushed it away. "I trust you. I would offer Michael's services, but I have the feeling Rat needs a *wicasa wakan*—a spirit doctor—more than a *pejuta wicasa*."

"We work with what we have." Iluka shrugged. "I wish Agnes was still alive to deal with this, but she's not."

A soft *ping* sounded over the com, letting them know it was time to get moving. Iluka sighed and stood up, wincing slightly as she did so. "Not enough sleep and all that walking and climbing in front of us. We'd better get going."

She didn't tell Joshua not to talk about Rat in front of anyone else, Drake noted. She didn't have to, and the admonition would have been an insult to the warship captain. *Now may the Lord forbid any of our own crew from speaking out of turn to the wrong ears*, he thought, and a shiver touched him, as if the cold of space had briefly come inside.

* * *

Neva stood outside the laundry that served as Rat's quarters. "Rat?" she called uncertainly. "It's me. May I come in?"

After the crew meeting, Neva had gone straight to her own room and collapsed, snatching some much-needed sleep. Not enough—her eyes still ached, and she had felt cranky and out of sorts even before she'd noticed the message that had come for her while

she rested. The header said it was from Iluka; the only content was two words.

"Fix him."

Easier said than done, she'd thought, staring at the message with a growing sense of anger. *This isn't the kind of thing they teach you in medical school, by the Goddess!*

A trip to the communal shower had helped soothe her temper. She had met no one else on her way to or from the shower, and she wondered if the rest of the crew had abandoned the ship, at least temporarily, to get away from Rat.

Stupid. If he were going to do anything, he would have already.

In more honest moments, she admitted that her crewmates probably didn't like the idea of someone else reading their innermost thoughts. *She* certainly wasn't overjoyed by the prospect. But she also didn't delude herself into believing that her thoughts were so incredibly interesting that anyone would *want* to pry into them.

The door slid open. Rat stood on the other side, looking as if he hadn't slept in days. His dreads hung lank around his face, and his golden skin was shadowed beneath his eyes. He looked faintly puzzled to see her.

"Neva?"

"Yes." She hesitated, then touched his arm lightly. "How are you doing?"

Rat shrugged and looked down at the floor. "Fine. I ought to get some work done. Filters could use changing soon, and the galley needs scrubbed down. But I thought it might be better to just...stay out of the way."

"I wanted to see if you need anything. Can I come in?"

"Sure." He stepped back and gestured at the laundry units before flashing her a faint smile. "Have a seat on the couch."

Neva clambered up on top of the units. Rat slid sideways into the hammock, so his legs dangled over the side. Jasmine had been playing with the hammock, hanging upside-down from its anchor lines; now she leapt easily through the air to land beside Neva.

"Hey there," Neva said, holding her hand out so the little le-murr could sniff it.

"She helps me," Rat said, apropos of nothing. When Neva gave him a questioning look, he gestured at the le-murr. "Jasmine. I can think about her...focus on her...and it doesn't hurt her."

Neva leaned forward, intrigued. "Really? Why?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. She was little when I stole her—maybe she's just used to me. Maybe it's because she's not human. I don't know. If I pay attention to her, it helps me hold on. I used to have the seizures all the time, at first, but after I got her I hardly ever had them anymore."

"That could be an important clue when it comes to figuring out how to help you," she mused. *Focusing on a mind he couldn't hurt helped. I wonder if he learned how to focus his own mind—calm it at will—if that would give him more control?*

Rat clasped his hands in front of him, staring at his intertwined fingers. "You said the nanobots would help. But they didn't."

"Because you fried them," she pointed out dryly. "And besides, this isn't a simple case of epilepsy like I thought."

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to lie."

"I understand why you did." Neva sighed and settled back, trying to find a comfortable position on the hard metal surface of the units. "I'll be honest with you, Rat. The captain wants me to help you. But I want to help you, too."

Amber eyes met her gaze, and she read his puzzlement. "Why?"

She started to give him a flippant answer, then stopped. *It isn't a bad question.*

So what's the answer?

When I left the hospital, I didn't want anything at all. Then, when Drake talked me into coming on board the Exile, I thought I wanted revenge.

Before the war, when I first went to school, I wanted to help people. That would have been answer enough, then. Is it now? Do I still have that in me?

"Yes," Rat said, then covered his face with his hands. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't—the whispers were so loud—"

"It's all right." She leaned over and grabbed his wrists, gently pulling his hands down. "Rat. Look at me."

He did, reluctantly. Neva held his gaze steadily, until she felt him relax. Letting go of his wrists, she said, "See? Nothing bad happens when you look at me, does it?" She smiled faintly and touched the raised ridges of scar tissue along her cheek. "Not that I'm that pleasant a sight."

His eyes traced the scars. "How did you get hurt?"

"Don't you know?"

"No." He shook his head. "It...it isn't like that. It hurts you to think about it—I feel that. There are...fragments. But what I see and hear and feel...it isn't like holding a conversation. There are layers and layers. Things get lost, jumbled up."

"Oh." She took a deep breath, then let it out. "I was injured during a Zatvian attack. I was on Mabon—one of Harvest's moons—manning a gun emplacement. But their ships came in too fast for us. I don't know what happened exactly—there was some kind of explosion."

Her memories of the moment her life had changed were vague, damaged by shock and concussion. There had been screams, she remembered, and heat, and searing pain as something tore through the emplacement, slamming through bodies and machinery with equal ease.

Devin had been there, beside her. Standing to her right, in the direction of the attack. If she had seen how he died, the memory was lost in the pain and confusion.

She swallowed hard, struggling for composure. "Next thing I knew, I was in the hospital on Dios-II," she said, trying to cover the deconstruction of her life with words.

Rat bowed his head, and she felt a flash of guilt, knowing that she was bombarding him with her own grief. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It certainly wasn't your fault."

He shrugged. "I know. I just...I'm sorry, that's all. I'm glad you're still alive."

The comment caught her off guard. *Am I?* She hadn't been when she came on board.

I kept wondering what I had to do out here, back in the universe against my will. She looked at Rat's grave face and startling eyes. *Maybe this is it. Maybe I'm here to help him.*

It wasn't the purpose she would have looked for, but it was better than the thin dreams of revenge that had brought her on board in the first place.

She could only hope that she was up to the task.

* * *

The Captains' Council met in the station's offices. Drake reflected wryly that even a

bunch of outlaws and pirates had somehow managed to develop a bureaucracy, although he would bet that Paradise's stationmaster had a lot more head-breakers and a lot fewer bean-counters in his offices than most. The bribes were probably better, too.

The room was dominated by a long table whose surface had been scarred by fire sometime in its past. Most of the captains currently on-station had answered the summons; they sat ranged around the table with their first officers beside them. There were Star Riders with their tattooed faces; hard-bitten pirates who had been outlaws even before the war; a smattering of well-dressed opportunists who had managed to survive as businessmen, albeit on the black market; and a few old soldiers who had refused to acknowledge the order for surrender. Friends and enemies, quantities known and unknown. Most of them looked peeved to be here, but a few had grimmer expressions, and he wondered what they had heard.

The stationmaster was there as well. Bernard Bellicose he called himself; God only knew what name he had been born with. He had a big, tough wrestler's body that made Drake think he might have been a professional athlete before the war; maybe Bellicose was a stage name. Bernard's bullet-shaped head was bald, and his gray-brown beard reached almost to his belt. Two head-breakers even bigger than Bernard stood behind his chair, their arms folded and their faces stony, ready to mete out whatever punishment their employer deemed necessary.

At the moment, Bernard didn't look very happy—in fact, he looked like he was thinking about having his goons hit someone. That someone was probably going to be Drake.

"Captain Toora got her damned council," he growled in a broken voice. "So where the hell is she?"

Come on, Iluka, Drake thought as he rose to his feet. Iluka and Joshua had gone to Monk's hideaway to pick up whatever data he'd managed to crack for them. Drake had gone straight to the council on the off-hand chance that Iluka was a few minutes late.

But she's more than a few minutes late now.

Drake tried to thrust aside the worry that ate at him. Iluka could look after herself—and if she got into a situation that was more than she could handle alone, then Joshua would be there to back her up. And if there was anything on the station that Joshua couldn't handle, then half the crew of the *Red Cloud* would be there in under ten minutes at the first distress call he sent. No need to worry.

But he did anyway.

"First let me convey my captain's apologies to everyone," Drake said. He wasn't the protocol officer for nothing, after all. "She wanted to make certain that she had the fullest picture possible to present to you at this meeting. Unfortunately, she's been delayed getting some of the information, but she should be here shortly."

"I don't like this," Bernard said bluntly. "I don't like waiting, and I don't like having a ship that's been stripped to the spine sitting at my dock. What are you going to pay your dock fees with? You've got credit here, but not that much credit."

A dozen pairs of eyes fixed on Drake, and he suddenly felt like a sheep surrounded by wolves. No doubt the *Exile's* holdless condition had been noticed by almost everyone. After all, cargo—or the lack of it—was the first thing that would catch a pirate's attention.

"We have something better than cargo—we have Zatvian codes," Drake said, hoping it was true. If Monk hadn't managed to get anything useful out of the data harvester, the *Exile* was in trouble.

"Codes? From where?" asked Harini Chandrashekar, captain of the *Devi's Challenge*.

Gold glittered at her wrists, waist, throat, ears, and nose, so that she gleamed and shone when she moved. The bright colors of her sari contrasted with the dark walls and the sober attire of those around her.

Drake sighed mentally. He was in it now, and could only hope that Iluka showed up before much longer. “That is one of the reasons Captain Toora called the council in the first place. Edith’s Point is compromised.”

“Impossible!” scoffed one of the Star Riders.

Drake felt his lip curl. “Tell that to the Zat ship we found adrift there.”

A worried murmur spread amongst the captains. And well it should—if Edith’s Point was compromised, what other formerly-hidden outposts might also be known to the Zats? Would there be an armada bearing down on Paradise next?

But Harini focused on a single word. “Adrift?” she asked with an arch of one elegant brow.

Now came the hard part. “Dead in space,” Drake said. “Along with all her crew. And her cargo.”

He launched into the tale of what they had found aboard the *New Beginning*. As he spoke, Drake watched the captains, trying to gauge their reactions. Some of them maintained neutral expressions, not allowing their thoughts to show. But many others looked increasingly worried.

Silence descended on the room when he stopped. “Interesting,” Harini said at last. Her dark eyes gave nothing away. “But I want more than speculation. If you cannot provide the ship’s logs, I at least want proof that things are as you claim.”

“I’m not lying,” Drake said firmly, trying to keep his anger down. “What reason could I—could any of us—have for lying about something like this?”

“You would ask for proof in my place—do not deny it. As for the reasons behind lies, they are not always obvious.”

“I’m not lying! I—”

The door opened suddenly, admitting Iluka and Joshua. Iluka looked winded, as if they had run most of the way, and her hat sat askew on her gray dreadlocks. She cast a quick look around the room, then nodded. “Sorry I’m late. Thanks, Drake—I’ll take over from here.”

He nodded, relieved to see her. “I just finished telling them about the *New Beginning*, Captain.”

She met his eyes briefly, and his relief turned to dread when he saw her grim look. *Something’s wrong.*

“Your first mate said that you have Zatvian codes to trade,” Bernard said, eyes narrowed. His head-breakers shifted restlessly behind him.

Iluka barely spared him a glance. “Here’s your damned codes,” she said, and tossed a data tab in Bernard’s direction. It hit the table with a soft click. “I just got back from Monk’s place. He managed to decrypt some of the files, including some of their codes. Unfortunately, we still don’t know what their mission was—their orders are sealed behind a fence he can’t get through.”

Gavin Ionas, who had been a pirate long before the Zats had ever left their system, let out a low whistle. His green eyes—rumor had it one wasn’t an original—were almost hidden behind the untidy fall of his gray-streaked bangs. Bands of tattoos wound around arms corded with muscle, disappearing beneath his frayed, sleeveless shirt. Gavin boasted that each sigil in the tattooed bands represented a different ship he had robbed. “Damn. That’s

some heavy-grade security.”

Iluka nodded wearily. “Exactly. Some new stuff, Monk says, that we don’t have the cracking tools for. Not yet, anyway. What we do have is mostly day-to-day operations—boring stuff. Nothing that tells us why they had all those people in the cargo holds.”

“You said ‘mostly,’” Harini observed.

She’s one to watch out for, Drake decided. Not much got by her. She’d be a good ally—or a vicious enemy.

Iluka nodded. “I did indeed. And that’s where things start to get even hairier than they already were.”

She took a second data tab out of her pocket. Joshua silently handed her a battered reader that Monk must have lent them. Looking increasingly troubled, she slotted the tab, then laid the reader down on the table and punched the start sequence.

The audio-only portion of the logs began. The normal sound of ship’s operations filled the air; the soft murmur of voices as the crew communicated amongst themselves. Knowing what was in store for the speakers, Drake felt the hair on his neck stand up. It was as if he listened to the voices of ghosts.

“Braking complete,” said a dead woman’s voice from the reader’s small speaker. *“Lieutenant Starnes reports that he is in position to exit the ship and initiate repair on the com mast.”*

“Tell the lieutenant to go when ready,” came a male voice—the captain, no doubt. *“Damned nuisance, but I suppose we’re lucky the rock didn’t put a hole in our hull.”*

Then an alarm sounded, so shrill that several of the listeners jumped and Drake felt his own heart lurch.

“Priority, priority! We’ve got an incoming ship!”

Another ship? Up until that moment, Drake had assumed that the *New Beginning* had met its fate alone in the blackness of space.

“To my boards!” the dead captain barked. *“Get an ID on that thing!”*

There came a moment’s pause, then: *“There’s no transponder output, Captain!”*

“Pirates,” the captain said in disgust. *“Ready missiles. What’s our lagtime?”*

Panic edged the response. *“They’re coming down on us fast, Captain; they’ve barely slowed...”*

Then the screaming started.

Iluka made no move to turn off the reader, just stood and listened to the dying shrieks of men and women in agony. A few of the other captains flinched or looked away. Harini’s face betrayed nothing. One of the Star Riders began to smile, an expression of joy as he listened to the death-throes of the Zatvians.

Drake gripped the edge of the table so tightly that his knuckles turned white. The sounds were horrible, relentless. Then, one by one, the screams began to die away.

Dear God. Was it an attack? Does someone have a weapon we don’t know about?

Or...was it one of us? A pirate ship? Did the crew’s panic infect the people in the holds? If there were more telepaths like Rat imprisoned in there, could the crew’s own distress have set them off? And if so, what happened to the other ship? Did it just turn tail and run when it realized something terrible was happening on board?

At last there was nothing but the soft hiss of dead air. Iluka switched off the recorder. “It isn’t much, I know. But it’s the best clue we’ve got.”

Gavin’s small eyes were narrow. “What else did you find in the files?”

“Not much. Zatvian codes and transponder IDs. Those I’m willing to trade. But this log...this is something big. This is something that affects us all. That’s why I called you all here—to listen to this, to listen to my story. To warn you.”

“Against what?” asked the Star Rider who had smiled at the screams. “Something nasty happened to the Zats. So?”

“So we don’t know what it was. Or who did it to them. Or even if it was something they were carrying themselves that did them in.”

“Sounds to me like you’ve got more questions than answers to trade,” Bernard said gruffly.

“For now.” Iluka nodded in his direction. “What happened to the Zats? And, perhaps even more importantly, what were they doing at Edith’s Point in the first place? Not just how they found out about it—though I’d like to know that, too. But why was a ship taking a few thousand people through a back route, away from normal Zatvian space? What were they up to that they didn’t want to advertise even to other Zats?”

Could there be a split in the Zatvian Cooperative? Drake wondered. And if so...was the other ship Zatvian? Flying with its transponder turned off?

Hanging back out of identification range and then attacking with its own bunch of telepaths?

The last thought made him cold. God, if that was true, they were all dead. There would be no defeating the Zats, not with that kind of power at their disposal.

There was a moment of silence. Then Harini stirred. “Do we know where *the New Beginning* was going at least?”

Iluka smiled, but it was a predatory smile. “We do indeed. They were headed for Zatvian Outpost 32-G, Sector 2.”

Gavin scowled as he tried to correlate the Zat way of naming things with the designations they’d all memorized decades ago. “That’s Gethsemane, isn’t it? But that’s not even an inhabited world. Nothing there but a station and some miners.”

“That’s right.”

The Star Rider snorted. “Well that doesn’t tell us a damned thing about what they were up to.”

“No. No it doesn’t. But I’m betting that someone on Gethsemane Station does know.”

“And I suppose they’re just going to tell us if we ask nicely?” Gavin demanded sarcastically.

Iluka’s dangerous smile never wavered. “Not us, no. But sooner or later, someone is going to notice that the *New Beginning* is overdue. Someone is going to send a courier to find out what happened to it.”

Joshua watched her shrewdly. “What do you have in mind, Iluka?”

She leaned over, both hands flat on the table, and her eyes were as fierce as a knife. “I have a little proposal to make. Anyone want to help me steal a ship?”

Chapter 8: Calling the Quarters

"Everything locked down?" Iluka asked from her seat at the captain's boards.

Rat's voice crackled over the com. "Aye, Captain."

"Locked down tight," Marcus said at the same time. "I checked."

"Didn't tell you to do that, Marcus." Iluka's voice sounded mild, but foreboding sent a chill up Neva's spine. She wouldn't have wanted to be the recipient of that deathly-quiet tone.

Maybe it bothered Marcus. Neva didn't dare take her eyes off her own boards long enough to find out. "I'm just looking after the lives of the crew," she heard him say. But what he didn't say echoed even more loudly on the bridge: *I'm checking behind Rat because I don't trust him, I don't like him, and I'm not going to miss any opportunity to let everyone know about it.*

It made her angry, but she bit her tongue. Her attention was supposed to be on scan right now, no matter that they were still coupled to Paradise Station. The squabbles of her crewmates couldn't distract her; she refused to give Anusha an excuse to criticize her performance.

"You'll see me in my quarters as soon as we go first law," Iluka told Marcus, ending the conversation for the moment. "Right now we've got a ship to move."

The crew had spent the last four shifts in frenzied activity. They had taken on critical supplies, but no more—the *Exile* remained stripped to run. Iluka, Tarak, and Anusha had spent hours in meetings with the captains, pilots, and navigators of the other ships accompanying them on the voyage out, charting the intricacies of burn and jump to coordinate their emergence from hyperspace. From what Neva had picked up, they were shaving their room for error down to a hair.

All so that they could intercept a Zatvian courier ship running a known route.

And then what? Iluka and Drake were playing their hand close to their chests; apparently, this was one of those times of emergency when democracy went by the wayside and the captain became the sole power on board. The rest of the crew didn't seem happy about not knowing the plan beforehand, either, which consoled Neva a little. At least she wasn't being kept out of the loop simply due to her inexperience.

The *Exile* began its undocking sequence. As they started to move, Neva concentrated on the scan in front of her rather than the uneasiness of her stomach. "The *Red Cloud* is leaving dock," she reported when she saw one of the other dots back away from the mass of the station.

As the *Exile* and the *Red Cloud* oriented and set course, a small spray of other dots released from Paradise, like seeds blown loose from a thistle. Neva read off their identities:

Devi's Challenge, Vengeful, Grendel, and Seventh Chrysanthemum. Their allies in...whatever Iluka had planned.

There's more to this than just intercepting a courier ship. Isn't there?

We're pirates. Why should there be anything more? Whatever messages the courier is carrying will be worth something to someone.

The captain came back from a council and announced we had a rendezvous with an unsuspecting Zat courier ship. I don't know what all was said at the council, but I know some of it had to do with the New Beginning and the data we pulled from its logs. But what is the connection?

Their first burn was hard, shoving Neva deep into her seat. They were in a hurry, and although they weren't pushing the limits of human endurance the way they had when fleeing Moldar Station, they weren't tarrying, either. All of the ships stayed in sync throughout the burn, colored dots making a cryptic pattern on Neva's board.

At length, the pressure eased and normalcy returned. "We're first law," Tarak reported cheerfully. He sounded glad to be back in space.

"All right. You all know the drill." Iluka powered her chair back, released her web, and stood up. "Marcus, Neva, with me."

What does she want with me? Neva wondered. Anusha gave her a look from the next seat, one brow arched as if curious to know what Neva had done wrong.

Neva paused just long enough to secure her board before getting up and following Iluka and a very surly Marcus to the lift. As they got on, Iluka punched the button for the level that included crew quarters. Ignoring Marcus for the moment, she turned to Neva. "From now until I tell you different, you're working full-time on your special project," she said. "You'll attend to any medical emergencies that come up, of course, and when we reach our target you'll sit scan, but otherwise Rat is now your only concern."

It wasn't the lightest burden Iluka could have laid on her. "I don't know if there's anything I can do," Neva reminded her. "I'll do my best, but I don't have a degree in psychology, or even in neurology. I don't know if I can help him."

"I have every confidence in you," Iluka said. Her dark eyes glinted, and Neva had the feeling that there were few excuses that would be accepted should she fail.

I can't do this! a part of her wailed. *And: It isn't fair. Agnes should be here, not me. I should be home on Harvest, starting my practice with Devin.*

And what about Rat? Is it fair that he's here, his past lost to him, half-crazy thanks to an ability he didn't ask for and can't control?

"Yes, Captain," she said quietly.

The lift bumped to a halt. As Neva got out, she thought that Marcus gave her a quick, piercing look from under his grizzled brows. But when she turned towards him, he was already walking away, following Iluka to her cabin and whatever punishment she decided to mete out.

Neva took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and went to the door leading to Agnes' old cabin. She had never been able to think of it as hers, maybe because she had left almost all of Agnes' possessions untouched. Even the bed looked unused; Neva still often slept in the infirmary.

Too many ghosts, she thought. But if she were to help Rat, she would somehow have to overcome those ghosts. She might not be certain of much in this affair, but she did know without doubt that upsetting him with her painful memories would only make her job harder.

Her hands trembled as she slid one of the drawers out of the wall. The pentagram that had once hung around Agnes' neck remained, and Neva picked it up, turning it over and over again in her hand.

She was still standing there staring at it when the com chirped, requesting entrance. She absently punched the panel by the door; it swished open, revealing Drake.

"I came down to stretch my legs and make a galley run," he said, holding up half of a muffin as if to prove the truth of his words. "Thought I'd see if you want anything."

Neva's mouth quirked wryly. "I don't think I can get what I need from the galley."

"What do you need, then?"

She closed the drawer, then realized that the pentagram was still in her hand. The gold had warmed to the temperature of her skin. "Did you know Agnes well?"

"Well enough."

Neva uncurled her hand so that the pentagram dangled in the space between herself and Drake. "I keep wondering if Agnes still believed by the time she died. Gretchen said they had performed the Passage Rite together on Paradise Station, to mourn Harvest. But how could it make any difference? How could one ceremony—one candle of human belief—mean anything when set before the utter darkness that engulfed Harvest? How could Agnes or anyone else still believe in a loving Goddess when She let an entire planet die?"

"You don't go for the little questions, do you?" Drake asked wryly. "People have been asking that in some form or other from the beginning. Hundreds of thousands of years, probably, and nothing much has changed. I don't know if that means that no one has ever come up with a good answer, or if each of us must find our own answer. I can only tell you that Agnes continued in her worship, that she found comfort in it."

Neva absently touched the scars on her face; they felt smooth and tough, a yet-painful contrast to the rest of her skin. "I don't. I can't."

Drake was silent for so long that she began to wonder if the discussion was making him uncomfortable. But when he spoke, she realized that he had only been thinking hard, trying to give her an answer to a question that perhaps didn't have one. "There are some who believe that God has no hands but ours. That when humans do evil, God can only stop them by using the willing hearts of those who have not turned their faces away."

Neva's mouth tasted bitter. "And who stopped the Zats from destroying Harvest?"

A shadow passed over his face. "There were people who tried, Neva. And if they failed, it wasn't because they didn't give everything. I know that for a fact."

She hadn't known. At the hospital, when they finally thought she was strong enough to learn the truth, that everything and everyone she had ever loved was gone, they had only said that the Zats attacked and Harvest's shattered defenses weren't enough to stop the hail of asteroids. "What happened?" she asked, uncertain what to think or feel.

Drake shrugged. "Word of the Zats' plan got out somehow. There were some who didn't believe it. As for those that did and were close enough to even hope to make a difference, they raced the Zats all the way. Some of them abandoned their posts, let the Zats overrun stations that good men and women had died to protect, just because there was a thin possibility that they could make it in time. Some of them gambled everything on dangerous jumps that would get them to Harvest faster than the usual routes...and they failed. Ships were lost. And in the end, it didn't make any difference. A whole planet died because they were a little too late. The greatest failure in human history."

Neva swallowed heavily, but it was a moment before she found her voice. "At least they

tried.”

“So what brought on this crisis of faith today, if I may ask?”

She forced her mind away from what he had told her. “I’m flying blind here, Drake. I’ll keep doing brain scans on Rat, keep analyzing the chemistry, but none of that is going to do what Iluka wants. I’ve looked up some psychology reports when I’ve had the time, but what I’ve read makes me think that psychology can only do so much. This is unexplored territory. So I’m just going to have to go with my gut.”

“If Iluka says you’re up to this, then you are.”

“I hope you’re right. There are things I learned as part of my upbringing on Harvest that might at least help restore some order, some calm, to Rat’s mind. But I can’t separate them from the context I learned them in.”

“And that’s what has you troubled?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t envy you,” Drake said after a moment’s thought. “And I don’t have any answers for you. Except maybe, if you can, to seek your own healing along with Rat’s.”

Neva closed her hand gently around the pentagram, hiding it from view. “I don’t think that’s possible,” she said. “I think I’ll just have to settle for enduring.”

* * *

Rat paused outside the door to Neva’s quarters, feeling unsure of himself. *So what else is new?*

The shift hadn’t gone as he’d imagined it would. Normally, he would have spent the time between burns attending to the thousand little chores that needed to be done: cleaning the galley, scrubbing the toilets, vacuuming dirt off the floors, or making certain that everything was stowed tightly and not about to come loose and turn into a projectile during the next acceleration. Instead, Iluka had called him over com to say that he was relieved of duty for the time being. Marcus would take care of things.

Confused, he’d wondered what he had done wrong now, even as he’d asked what he ought to do instead. Although he’d half-expected her to tell him to stay locked in his room, the captain had said simply that he would be working with Neva and to contact her for further instructions. A call to the *Exile’s* medic had resulted in an even more cryptic conversation. Neva’s first question had been about his religious beliefs, to which he could only say that if he had any he’d forgotten them along with everything else. Then she had asked him to come to her quarters at a set time and abruptly cut him off.

He’d wished then that he had been speaking to her face-to-face, so that he could have picked up something of her mood. The thought had horrified him. Was he getting so used to the voices that he was beginning to look on them as a tool? Would he start deliberately trying to pluck sense from the chorus of whispers and sensations that filled the minds of those around him?

What was he becoming?

The question occurred again, now that he stood in front of Neva’s door with Jasmine on his shoulder. The le-murr caught Neva’s scent. **(pale human, comfort) nice, like her**

“So do I,” Rat said, patting Jasmine absently. *Gods, please don’t let me hurt Neva.*

Bereft of anything else to do, he finally punched the pager on the wall panel. A moment later, the door slid open, and Neva beckoned him inside.

He had never been in the room before, but for the most part it had the same functional layout as the others he had seen, both on the *Exile* and the *New Beginning*...and probably other ships that he could no longer remember. The lighting was turned down low, however; the twilight soothed his nerves and made Jasmine perk up.

Four chunks of stone lay around the room, equidistant from each other. Each was a different color: yellow, amber, blue, and green. Their presence jarred him, made his nerves twitch with the desire to secure the hazard before the ship had to move.

Two thin pillows sat in the center of the floor; beside one lay a pouch and what looked like a simple iron knife. Neva went to one pillow and folded herself onto it, then beckoned him over to the other. Her hazel eyes were grave as she linked her hands in front of her.

can I do this (uncertainty, grief, pain, hope) want to help (Iluka's voice "fix him") not sure how I'll react let alone him

Rat struggled for breath and tried to ignore the whispers, forcing himself instead to focus on the sensation of the pillow underneath him, of Jasmine as she left his shoulder and quested around the cabin.

"I told you before that the captain wants me to help you," Neva said, her voice betraying none of the inner turmoil that he could sense so acutely. "When you said that focusing on Jasmine helped control the seizures, I started to wonder if maybe you could benefit from learning some meditation techniques. Ways to calm your mind, order your thoughts."

His thoughts were so scattered that he couldn't imagine ordering them, but he nodded anyway. "All right."

"We're going to start slow, okay? Nothing big. I don't want you to feel like you're under any pressure." For the first time since he'd entered the room, she smiled at him, and it was a genuine smile that made him feel a little more relaxed. "Don't get caught up in what you think I expect from you."

He nodded, looked down at his hands, then remembered her forcing him to meet her eyes when she had come to him in the laundry. Half-scared, although he didn't know why, he returned his gaze to hers. "Where...where do we start?"

Neva's smile faltered a little, and for a moment all he heard was **pain**. "What I'm going to do might seem a little unorthodox, but it's the way I learned and I think it will help you. Just give it a try, and if it doesn't work for you, then we'll find another way, all right?"

"All right."

"What I'm going to do is create a sacred space in this room. A safe space, where you can feel secure. The ritual will help you get in the proper frame of mind. I'll walk to each of the four altars—the stones—and say some words. When I do, I want you to visualize a pure white light coming from the tip of the *athame*—the knife. When I walk to the next altar, imagine the athame drawing a curtain of the same white light through the air, so that when I return to the beginning there will be a sphere of light around us. Can you do that?"

"I guess." He didn't see the point in it, but what did he know? Nothing but surviving and hiding, and whatever bits and pieces floated up from the blackness of his past.

"Good." From the pouch beside her pillow, she withdrew a small vial. The scent of sandalwood filled the air when she removed the stopper. Taking each of his hands in turn, she put a small dab over each pulse point, then a third on his forehead. "Just breathe in and let it relax you," she murmured encouragingly.

He obediently took a deep breath, and was surprised to find that the odor did soothe his nerves. After anointing herself as well, Neva took up the athame and went to stand before the

yellow stone. Pointing the athame at the stone, she said, "Powers of Air, Breath of Transformation, come." Her voice caught, quivered, then strengthened. "Be welcome in this sacred space. We ask that you stand firm to guard and protect. So mote it be."

Rat did as she had asked, trying to imagine that a white light shone from her knife. At least this sort of concentration was harmless, especially if he used it to help distract himself from the soft, continuous whispers that echoed inside his head.

He watched as Neva walked to the amber altar and spoke again, this time with greater confidence. "Powers of Fire, Spark of Creation, come. Be welcome in this sacred space. We ask that you stand firm to guard and protect. So mote it be." He let the words flow through him and wondered what they meant, what significance they had to her that he didn't understand.

"Powers of Water, Rain of Inspiration, come. Be welcome in this sacred space. We ask that you stand firm to guard and protect. So mote it be."

"Powers of Earth, Rock of Foundation, come. Be welcome in this sacred space. We ask that you stand firm to guard and protect. So mote it be."

When she was done, she came and sat before him again. **I can do this (happy/sad, Mom, Devin, Agnes)** "Now we're ready to start."

Jasmine wandered over to sniff at one of the altars, and a sudden worry touched him, perhaps snagged from some half-understood whisper from Neva that he hadn't even been aware of catching. "What if she breaks the circle?"

"Don't worry. Other animals can't break a circle. Only humans. Jasmine has the Goddess' blessing to come and go as she wants."

"Oh. All right."

"Now, get yourself comfortable as you can, and just relax."

Rat wasn't certain he could do that, but he tried.

Neva closed her eyes. "Just shut your eyes," she instructed. "Relax. Let the world around you fade away. There's nothing you have to worry about right now—no ship, no universe, nothing outside of the circle. Believe that you are safe in this place. The only thing you need to think about is your breathing. Breathe slowly, in through the nose, out through the mouth. Concentrate on it. Feel its rhythms. If you like, feel the rhythm of your heart as well."

He did as she asked, struggling to concentrate on his breathing, to let go of everything else. It was hard—for two years he'd been doing anything *but* let go, clinging doggedly to the here-and-now, terrified of what he might do. The whispers nagged softly at the edge of his consciousness, never ceasing.

Don't think about them, don't listen to them. They don't mean anything, just white noise. Just worry about breathing.

He concentrated, and after a while it got easier. The whispers seemed to fade from his awareness, not vanishing altogether but becoming more like the constant hiss of air from the vents or the unending hum of the ship's engines. Background noise that didn't demand his attention.

There was only the slow, measured rhythm of his breathing: the primal, ancient beat of life itself.

* * *

That went better than I expected, Neva thought.

She finished putting away the stones she had used to mark the four elements. On Harvest, she had learned the altars as the four directions, but such things had no meaning in space. The scent of sandalwood lingered on her skin, and she wondered if she had time for a shower before the next burn.

Probably not. But there might be time to go to the galley for a quick snack.

Her stomach grumbled, agreeing with the thought. Before the ritual, she hadn't eaten, both because she wanted to purify herself and because of sheer nervousness. She hadn't been at all certain that she could remain calm while calling the quarters. Indeed, her worst fear had been that her sharp grief would send Rat into a seizure. Her second worst fear had been that stilling Rat's thoughts would have the opposite effect of what she hoped, and unleash a powerful burst of telepathy that would harm the rest of the crew.

But that didn't happen. And Rat said it worked—a little, anyway. He said that he could ignore the voices while we were in the circle.

There was still a great deal of work ahead for them both, of course. It was a long leap from being able to successfully still the mind during meditation and being able to do it during times of stress. Part of the reason behind using the ritual and the soothing scents was to create controlled circumstances that would make it easier for Rat to slip into a meditative state. The world outside, however, was anything but controlled. Would he be able to translate anything he learned in the circle to real life?

There's no way of knowing. But even if he can't, it will be worth it if I can buy him even a little peace. Feeling better than she had in a long time, Neva went out into the corridor and headed to the galley.

A step sounded in the corridor behind her. Startled, she turned and found Marcus standing there, his blue eyes fixed on her and an unpleasant expression on his face.

"You surprised me," she said. He didn't respond, and she felt uneasiness begin to stir in her stomach. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"You're helping that freak, aren't you?" he asked without preamble.

Neva narrowed her eyes. Marcus had made no secret of his dislike of Rat, so perhaps she should have expected such a confrontation. "I'm helping Rat learn to control his abilities, yes," she said carefully.

"Helping make him even more dangerous, you mean. Helping turn him into a bigger threat to us than he already is."

Neva brought her chin up, her nervousness giving way to anger. "I'm easing the suffering of a patient who has had terrible things done to him through no fault of his own. I would have thought that anyone on board this ship would be sympathetic to a victim of the Zats."

The dim lighting of the corridor gleamed off Marcus' gray hair. "I know what you've been saying. I know you think he's a poor lost little puppy who only needs to be understood. You're a fool."

"I disagree. And so, apparently, does the captain."

Marcus shook his head. "You're twice a fool if you think that, grounder. Let me tell you a story. I got it from one of Ten Bear's men as payment for a bar tab. Did you have snakes on Harvest? Poisonous ones?"

Neva flinched inwardly at the mention of Harvest, but found enough equanimity to nod. "We had snakes, yes. Some might have been venomous." It troubled her that she couldn't remember.

Marcus seemed satisfied by the answer. "Then here's the story. There was once a woman who found a viper that had been caught outside in an early snow. The snake was half-frozen and couldn't even move. The woman felt sorry for it—it was cold and helpless, after all. So she picked it up and took it to her house, where she nursed it back to health. And as soon as it was well, it bit her, and she died."

Neva swallowed against a growing sense of outrage. "Rat isn't a viper."

"You're wrong. He is. You don't see what he is because he's weak now, just like the snake in the story. But being weak doesn't change his nature. He's still a viper, and as soon as you make him strong, he'll poison us all."

"You're wrong. And since the captain agrees with me, then you're going to have to live with it."

Marcus smiled, but there was no humor in the expression. "You really are naïve, aren't you? Iluka isn't stupid. *She* hasn't forgotten he's a viper, not for a second. She just thinks that she can get him to bite the Zats instead of us. And that's where she's made a mistake."

Neva felt cold. "Did she tell you that?"

"No. Didn't need to. I've served with her long enough to know how she thinks."

He's wrong. He has to be.

Then why the sudden haste? Why is Iluka so eager for me to work with Rat? I thought it was because she recognized the danger that having an uncontrolled...talent...like his apparently represents. But what if I'm wrong? What if it has something to do with this Zat courier ship we're suddenly going after?

Goddess, if that's so then where do I turn? What's the right path?

"No," she said finally. Firmly. "No, you're wrong about everything, Marcus. I'm sorry that you don't see it, but I hope that eventually you will. In the meantime, however, I suggest you let me do the job the captain has given me."

Marcus' face flushed slightly. "Someday you're going to look back on this conversation and wish you'd listened to me."

The warning claxon sounded, advising everyone to take hold for burn. "I have to go," Neva said, and pushed roughly past him.

He didn't try to follow her. He didn't need to—the doubts he'd raised did it for him.

Chapter 9: Ambush

“Drop in minus twenty,” Tarak reported. Although the words were routine, the tension in his voice warned Neva that the situation was anything but ordinary.

“Look alive everyone,” Iluka said. “There’s no station here, not even any mining operations—it’s nothing more than a mass point for turning, so there shouldn’t be anything unexpected out there. But we’re coming out of jump with five other ships. If the others did what they were supposed to, if there weren’t any glitches along the line, if nothing happened to shave someone’s speed down just a hair or put their vector off a fraction, everything will be fine. It’s a chancy business we’ve got here, so Neva you keep your eyes on scan and read off those ships the second you see them, hear me?”

Fear soured Neva’s stomach. *The crew is putting faith in me. I can’t let them down.* Of course the ship’s automatic alarms would sound if anything went horribly amiss...but no automatic system could tell them if their plan was going right or not. That would be Neva’s job, and if she missed something, the movements that had been so carefully choreographed on the other side of hyperspace could all unravel.

“Minus four,” Tarak said. “Three. Two. One. Hold for drop.”

The universe fell out from under Neva, a moment of disorientation while their jump field hit normal space and dissipated. For a heart-stopping second, scan remained blank while the ship’s sensors searched for any information. There was no beacon in this system; everything they got would be from their own passive pickups or active scanners, or from the *Red Cloud*’s transmissions, which would be broadcast to them.

The scanners would scream “here we are!” to anyone else in the system who might be listening. But with so many ships making such a tight jump, there was no choice.

The board flared and lit up. “I’ve got the *Red Cloud* ahead of us, down the well.” She started the lagtime counter between themselves and their sister ship. “Receiving Zatvian transponder signal, the *Hermes*, courier class.”

“Receiving transmission from the *Red Cloud*,” Drake reported. “Joshua is ordering the *Hermes* to brake and prepare for boarding.”

The marker for the *Zat* ship burned crimson, like an angry eye. It looked almost stationary relative to the *Red Cloud*, which was bearing down on it at a good fraction of *c*. They had caught it at just the right moment, when it was in the midst of using the gravity of the mass point to turn. Even a courier ship stripped down to almost nothing but engine couldn’t hope to get up enough velocity to start the Savvies before coming under the warship’s guns.

The *Exile* braked, just enough to stay out of the *Red Cloud*’s way. They were the first line of backup, meant to convince the courier that it had no ultimate opportunity for escape

even should it somehow disable the *Red Cloud* with a lucky shot. The rest of the ships were supposed to take up similar positions but hang farther out from their quarry.

Another blip appeared on the screen. “*Devi’s Challenge* is in and on course,” Neva said as the blip merged with the projected course and flashed. “Same for the *Vengeful*.” Another moment, then, “*Seventh Chrysanthemum* is in. Off course by 0.4 degrees, but they’re correcting.”

“Acceptable,” said Iluka, although she didn’t sound pleased. “And the *Grendel*?”

“No sign.”

“Damn.”

“Receiving transmission,” Drake interrupted. “From the *Hermes*. They’re...I don’t believe it. They’re telling Joshua that he and his crew are under arrest, and ordering the *Red Cloud* to accompany them to the nearest military base.”

An incredulous laugh escaped Anusha, who was otherwise intent on the flow of information between her boards and her brother’s. Iluka only shook her head. “Somebody on that boat’s got brass ones. Marcus, uncap and keep an eye on the situation. Don’t shoot unless it looks like the *Red Cloud* is in some kind of trouble—we want that courier intact and able to move.”

For what? Neva wondered. But she kept her questions behind her teeth, knowing this wasn’t the time to be asking.

There came a quiet click as Marcus uncapped the firing controls. His mouth was set in a grim line, all his attention focused on his boards. Neva wondered if he would fire anyway out of spite, then told herself the thought was unworthy. Still, it didn’t entirely leave the back of her mind.

“Joshua has politely declined the *Hermes*’ offer of an escort to the nearest prison,” Drake reported.

“They’ve got to have picked up the rest of us by now,” Anusha said. “Why are they being so stubborn?”

“Wouldn’t you be?” Neva asked without thinking. The comment earned her a glare from Anusha.

“They’re buying time to destroy files,” Iluka said, and slapped the edge of her boards with an angry hand. “A military courier is going to be carrying all kinds of things we’d love to get hold of. Damn it!”

“Transmission from the *Red Cloud*—” Drake began.

And then the world turned inside out. A giant hand seemed to slam the *Exile*, hurling Neva back into her seat so hard that she felt the metal on the other side of the heavy padding. Alarms screamed, and red lights flared across all the boards. Tarak let out a startled cry of pain.

The universe lurched again, dropping out from under Neva. For an instant she felt weightless, and wondered if the cylinder’s rotation had stopped. Then she was kicked sideways, body straining against the safety web, which gave just enough to keep from injuring her with a sudden stop.

“What the hell?” someone shouted.

Agony spiked up Neva’s spine, but she forced her eyes to her boards, searching for an answer. The collision alarms seemed to be clanging inside her head as well as outside, making it impossible to think. Half the scan disappeared for a moment, then came online again as fail-safes took over. A dot flashed, alternating the green of a friend and the red of

warning.

"The *Grendel*," she read.

Goddess and God, they came in close enough to catch us in their jump field before it dissipated.

"Drake! Com! Now!" Iluka barked. Apparently Drake understood the abbreviated order, because a moment later Iluka began shouting. "Ancestors curse you, Gavin! What the hell is your pilot doing, coming in on top of us like that? I'm going to rip your damned liver out through your ear!"

A yellow flare on her boards grabbed Neva's attention. "Alert! The *Hermes* is firing on the *Red Cloud*!"

They were far enough in now that lagtime had been shaved to almost nothing. Apparently, the *Hermes* had seen the confusion caused by the *Grendel*'s unexpected arrival and decided to seize the chance. "They're firing again. Course change and acceleration—they're going to run."

"Oh no you don't," Iluka muttered. "Tarak, move to intercept."

"Negative, Captain. I'm getting a red light from the engines—we've got a coolant leak. Something must have come loose."

Iluka's eyes narrowed, but she kept any curses to herself. "Marcus! Fire a warning shot across their bow. Let them know we aren't out of it yet."

"The *Grendel* is moving to intercept," Neva reported. She could taste blood in her mouth where she had bitten her tongue, and she wondered suddenly if Rat was all right, tucked away down below. *If he stayed in the safety web, everything should be fine. But if he started to move around...*

"Our mass did their braking for them," Anusha spat. "Damn them!"

Neva couldn't let her concentration break, but fear mounted behind her eyes. *Goddess, don't let that move have put Rat into a bulkhead or the stupid washing machine.* She could imagine his mangled body, or Jasmine's, bones broken and organs ruptured from impact.

Com crackled, startling everyone. "We're okay." Rat's voice.

"Jesus Christ, we've got a fucking situation here!" Marcus snarled back. "Shut it!"

"Stay put," Iluka ordered at the same time. "You hear me, crazy man? Stay in that damned laundry!"

"Aye, Captain."

Neva wanted to say that it was her fault—that even from the laundry Rat had sensed her fear for his safety. *And that would go over so well with Marcus and Anusha, wouldn't it?*

Is Rat getting better? Enough to pick up on strong emotion without being pushed over the edge himself?

Maybe. Or maybe he was getting so used to "hearing" her from all the hours they had spent together in the circle over the last few weeks that he had become attuned to her even at a distance.

There were too many possibilities, all of them distracting from the matter at hand. Forcing herself to focus on scan, she said, "*Red Cloud* is also moving to intercept." Two new dots suddenly appeared, moving away from the warship. "I think they've launched fighters."

"Don't think, be sure," snapped Anusha.

Neva bit down her own anger and looked again at the transponder signatures. "Yes. Two fighters. They're moving up on the *Hermes* pretty fast."

"Priority! Transmission from the *Hermes*," Drake said. "They're standing down."

The red dot on Neva's board slowed sharply. When she had dutifully reported it, Marcus laughed. "We've got them."

"Looks like," Iluka agreed. "They've probably wiped everything out of their damned memory by now, but that doesn't matter."

It doesn't? So what is it that we're after here?

"Transmission from the *Red Cloud*. Joshua says they'll secure the courier."

"Send him our compliments, and advise him we've taken damage." Iluka scowled. "And get Gavin back on com. Tell him he's a dead man if he doesn't cough up whatever we need to fix what his idiot pilot broke."

* * *

Neva wandered into the galley, aching and weary. The crew had suffered an assortment of injuries during the near-collision with the *Grendel*, and her duties had kept her busy far past the end of the shift. Fortunately, no one had been seriously hurt; mostly, she had tended a series of bruises and minor cuts, although Tarak had wrenched one of the muscles in his arm.

Tarak had still been at his boards when she saw to him...Anusha, too, and Iluka. The pilot and navigator had been busy assessing damage to the ship, while Iluka kept the com hot between herself and the other captains. At least Drake, Rat, and Marcus had been able to get some sleep before Iluka ordered them all to assemble.

Rat was in the galley when she came in, quietly serving coffee and sandwiches. He handed Neva her favorite, along with a quick smile when their fingers brushed.

"Thanks," he murmured, too low for anyone else to make out.

"For what?"

He shrugged, his gaze dropping awkwardly to the floor. "For worrying about me."

She had been right—he had heard her. Despite her weariness, she dredged up a smile. "No problem. You did good," she added. He'd held up under what had to have been a stressful situation, in close proximity to a crew whose emotions had been running high.

Not that it meant he could have done it if he'd actually be on the bridge with them. Or walking around on a station with a thousand people. But it was a start.

Iluka entered, and everyone else fell silent. Her gray dreads were damp, as if she'd snatched a shower. Taking a cup of coffee from Rat with a nod, Iluka sank into a chair, the stiffness of the movement revealing her fatigue.

"First off, good job, everyone," she said. Her dark eyes went from face to face, as if weighing some quality known only to her. "We got our ship. Now I'm guessing you all want to know what we're going to do with it."

"The thought crossed our minds," Marcus growled. "You said we didn't want the data, so what the hell do we want?"

The corner of Iluka's mouth quirked into a small smile. "The data would have been nice. Joshua's got his crew on board the *Hermes* right now, salvaging anything they can. They're also sweeping the ship to make sure there aren't any nasty surprises on it. Once it's secure, his shuttle is going to come by and pick up some of us. We're going to get on board the *Hermes* and fly it straight to Gethsemane."

There was a moment of shocked silence. Then Tarak said, "Gethsemane is where the *New Beginning* was headed, isn't it?"

“Good boy.” Iluka leaned back, her expression grim. “We’re going to Gethsemane disguised as Zatlavian Inquisitors looking into the *New Beginning’s* disappearance.”

“Inquisitors?” Neva asked, confused by the reference.

“The Zats who keep an eye on other Zats,” Iluka explained. “Make sure everyone is being a good little citizen of the Cooperative. They investigate all kinds of internal affairs. Military, but they don’t fight—they come in after the battle is over and supervise interrogations. They also look into any reports of misconduct. And from what I hear, the verdict is guilty until proven innocent.”

Tarak’s mouth thinned to a tight line, and Neva remembered that he had lost his sight to Zatlavian torturers. Had these Inquisitors been involved?

“If they think someone’s loyalty is in question, they’re merciless,” he said, his voice slightly hoarse. “The other Zats are terrified of them.”

Iluka nodded. “That’s what I’m counting on. We’ve got some uniforms and some genuine Inquisitor codes to back up our claim. I’m gambling that there hasn’t been enough time for the *New Beginning* to have been reported missing, for the report to get back to Zatlavian headquarters, for it to be shuttled to the right official’s desk, and for them to dispatch someone to investigate. We should get there ahead of any real Inquisitors.”

“But there’s a chance you won’t,” Drake added. He looked uncharacteristically grim.

“Exactly.” Iluka nodded. “We’re going to go to Gethsemane and tell the stationmaster that we’re investigating the *New Beginning’s* disappearance. With any luck, we’ll find out why it was hauling five-thousand prisoners off to a system that doesn’t even have a colony outside of the station.”

“How the hell are we going to do that?” Marcus demanded. “If we’re supposed to be Zats ourselves, we can’t just ask, can we? They’d expect us to already know.”

“That’s right. And that’s why this is a voluntary mission for everyone except me...and Rat.”

Rat had been sitting quietly beside Neva, but now he straightened sharply. She saw him swallow, saw his golden skin go a shade paler. “Captain?”

Iluka met his gaze down the length of the table. “The whole time I’m intimidating the stationmaster, you’re going to be listening in to his thoughts. Chances are pretty good that if I’m talking about the *New Beginning*, he’s going to remember what the ship’s mission was. And you’re going to pick it right out of his brain.”

Neva felt her heart sink. *So that’s what it was all about. Marcus was right. Iluka never wanted me to cure Rat—just get him under enough control to be useful.*

“Captain, with all due respect, that’s crazy!” Marcus exclaimed. “Think about what you’re doing! All the codes, everything we use to carry out this charade—after this, none of those can ever be used again, because the Zats will know they’re compromised. You know how valuable those codes might be—don’t just throw them away!”

Iluka didn’t glance at him, but kept her gaze aimed straight at Rat. “I’m not going to throw anything away, Marcus.”

“Captain, you’re insane to pin all your hopes on that wreck. You can’t do it. It’s suicide.”

“I don’t think it is,” she said. “Am I right, Rat?”

Neva saw him swallow again...but he hadn’t looked away from Iluka’s steady stare. Which at least was better than he could have done the other side of jump. “I...I’ll do my best, Captain.”

Iluka nodded. "You do that. So. Rat and I are going. I used to pilot before I took captain's chair, and the *Red Cloud* is lending us a navigator. Drake, you're in command of the *Exile* while I'm gone. Tarak, the boards here are set up for you, so here is where you stay. The rest of you can go or stay as you wish."

"I'm going," Neva said quickly. Her heart was in her mouth, and a part of her wondered if she'd lost her mind. As Marcus had said, it seemed like the nearest thing to a suicide mission.

But I can't let Rat go it alone.

He won't be alone—Iluka will be with him.

Doesn't matter. She tried to imagine staying behind on the *Exile*, tried to imagine the weeks of waiting, wondering if the ruse had worked, if he had been able to stay in control...or if he and Iluka were both dead. *Or worse. If the Zats got him back, would they start their experiments again? What else might they do to him?*

No. She had lost everything else in her life and hadn't been able to do anything about it. She wasn't going to risk losing her patient—her friend—if there was anything she could do to prevent it.

Iluka nodded. "Glad to have you along, medic. Hopefully we won't need you, but it never hurts to be prepared. Anyone else?"

"I'm staying with Tarak," Anusha said.

"That's what I figured. You staying too, Marcus?"

"No. I'll go."

The response shocked everyone into brief silence. Marcus sat back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest, a defiant look on his face. When he didn't offer to expound on his reasons, Iluka nodded. "All right. Then everyone who's going with me, head back to quarters, rest up, and be ready to move when the shuttle comes. Pack light—we shouldn't need much, and courier ships aren't made to be spacious. We'll be pushing the passenger limit as is."

"Can Jasmine come?" Rat asked.

"It might help," Neva said quickly, before Iluka could deny the request. Rat flashed her a grateful look.

Iluka sighed. "All right. But that's it. No personal effects."

Rat shrugged. He didn't have any.

"One more thing," Iluka added as Neva started to push her chair back from the table. "The original plan called for the *Exile* to follow us through. There's an old Star Rider trick—do a short jump, come in as far out from a mass point as you can, then shut systems down fast. Just sit there in the dark and listen. No active scan, no transponder, no engines, nothing to let anyone know you're there. The idea was that the *Exile* would do that so we would have backup if we really needed it. But Gavin's blown that to hell. We can fix the coolant leak, but the engines are going to need repair, too, since they took damage before Tarak could shut them down."

Marcus shrugged. "So we go in alone."

Iluka hesitated. Drake, however, scowled openly. "No. Harini Chandrashekar offered to take the *Exile's* place. *Devi's Challenge* will be your backup."

"She's taking a risk, Drake," Iluka reminded him mildly.

"I'd feel better if it were the *Red Cloud* watching your back."

"You'd feel better if it were you, you mean. Harini beat Joshua to the punch with her

offer. Says she can keep up with the courier if she dumps all her holds here for pickup later. She's put herself on the line to help us, and if she wants to keep an eye on things, we can't say no."

"We could."

"Not and ever have her cooperation again." Iluka leaned back and stretched. "And with any luck, we won't need her. We'll walk in, get our information, and walk out again. Easy as you please."

Rat flinched.

Chapter 10: Masquerade

Rat entered the Gethsemane system with his eyes closed. Iluka chatted with Nathan Crow Wing, the navigator borrowed from the *Red Cloud*, for the duration of the mission, their voices quiet as they homed in on the mass that would bring them back in.

The *Hermes* dropped out of hyperspace, and the familiar sensations of transiting to normal space flowed over and around Rat. Jasmine clutched hard at his hair. **don't like**
Calm. Deep breath. Calm.

But there was no calm to be had after a week of hyperspace, trapped in close quarters with his companions. Courier ships were built for speed, which meant huge engines and tiny crew compartments; five bodies came close to pushing its capacity. Five bodies, and no real escape from any of them, almost every moment shared with someone else whether he willed it or no.

It would have been enough to irritate even a normal person. Had been, really—he could hear it in the whispers that got louder and more insistent as tempers frayed and his own control began to slip.

Have to get control. Have to do better before we hit deck on the station.

Please don't let me screw this up. Don't let me get everyone killed.

I hate this

Rat opened his eyes and glanced at Neva in time to catch the queasy expression on her face. When she saw him looking, she dredged up a pale grin. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to space travel.”

“We’ve got beacon,” Nathan reported. “Lane assignment to your board, Captain.”

Iluka nodded. “Got it.” Her dark hands danced over the controls, the pattern oddly familiar, and Rat forced himself to look away.

He had been on the bridge of the *Exile* only briefly during operations, and each time his attention had been on other things. If he had ever been on a ship prior to that...he had no memory of it. Yet he had realized even before they hit hyperspace that the operations Iluka and Nathan carried out felt very routine, as if he could have predicted everything they were going to do before they did it.

He *knew* ship operations on some gut level, as if they had been drilled into him. As if he had once done them himself.

Maybe not. Maybe I haven't. Maybe it just seems that way, but if I actually had to do something I'd be lost. Maybe I'm wrong.

I've worked a bridge before. I know it.

No. Don't know it. Don't know anything. But I feel it.

He hadn't mentioned it to anyone else, though. He had tried not to say or do anything

that would draw attention. Far better to stay quiet and still, and not give Marcus any reason to glare at him with accusing eyes.

The ship braked, pressing everyone against the safety webs. As soon as the maneuver was complete, Iluka flicked on the com. "Courier ship *Hermes* to Outpost 32-G, Sector 2. This is Major Miriam Greyson, Internal Affairs and Inquisitorial Agency, Grade 3. I am transmitting clearance codes to you now. Upon receipt of said codes, you will reroute all traffic away from nearby lanes and prepare a berth for us that will allow immediate docking. Greyson out."

She switched off the com and leaned back. "Did I sound imperious enough?"

"Are you sure this is the right tactic to take?" Neva asked hesitantly. "We want their cooperation, don't we? If we make them angry, aren't they going to take a closer look at us?"

"Inquisitors don't ask—they tell, at least when it comes to the rank and file Zats," Iluka replied. She locked her boards, then powered her chair around to face them. "If we come in all nice and polite, it will make them wonder. Besides, I intend to keep them hopping as fast as I can—with any luck, they'll be too busy following orders to ask any hard questions until long after we're gone."

"Someone is going to be sweating when they get that message," Nathan added, unlatching his safety web and stretching. "Hopefully by the time we get there, they'll be expecting the worst—courts martial, accusations, interrogations. When they find out that you're asking about the *New Beginning*, they'll be too relieved to question any further."

"You aren't going with us?" Neva asked.

Nathan shook his head. "I'm going to be minding the store here."

"And keeping the engines warm, in case we need a quick escape," Iluka added grimly. "Harini won't be here for another two shifts at the minimum, and when she does come in she's going to have to lay far enough out not to be detected. We're on our own in hostile territory. Don't forget that for a second, no matter how well things seem to be going. I want you all on your toes."

not us you have to worry about (dirty slinking thing)

Rat forced himself not to look in Marcus' direction. He caught an image of himself as he had been the first day on the *Exile*, filthy and crawling with fleas, but he didn't think his eyes had ever been that shifty. He was damned sure that his expression had been one of terror, not the sly smirk that memory had substituted.

I can't worry about what Marcus thinks about me. I can't.

Easier said than done. Marcus' dislike of him was strong, and strong emotions gave the whispers clarity.

They ate dinner on the bridge, as they had every shift since coming on board. The courier was too small for a galley; meals came in tear-open packs and squeeze tubes. "Think we can intimidate the station master into giving us a good meal?" Neva asked wistfully, earning a bark of harsh laughter from Iluka. Afterwards, they got what sleep they could; Rat lay awake in his bunk, occasionally hearing the muted sighs of dreams and silently worrying about what was to come.

* * *

The station complied with Iluka's orders without question. As they drew closer, Nathan reported that all the little in-system miners that worked the asteroids had moved well out of

their way. He turned on the exterior cameras, giving them something of a view.

"This is one of the dirtiest systems I've ever been in," he commented as the screens flickered to life.

Neva looked at the monitors, but saw nothing that gave her any idea what he had meant. "I don't understand."

Nathan stretched like a cat; he had stayed on the bridge while the rest of them had changed into their Inquisitor uniforms, and was no doubt tired of sitting. "The system is full of dust, asteroids, and comets. There's only one planet—if we were coming in at a different angle, you'd be able to see where its orbit has swept the debris clear over time. The station is in geostationary orbit in the 'shadow' it makes in the dust."

"Is the planet inhabited?"

"No. The star is pumping out too much radiation for any kind of terraforming. You might get a planetside mining operation going, but the safety precautions would make it expensive as hell, so it's never been tried." He leaned forward and pointed at one of the monitors. "See the dark places? That's where dust is blocking any light from either the stars or the system's own sun." His hand moved, pointing to a cascade of glittering lights. "That's ice, reflecting in the sunlight. It seems to glitter because of all the other dust clouds and asteroids eclipsing it, then moving away again."

"Damn nightmare system," Iluka grouched. She wore her false Zatvian uniform disturbingly well. The matte black, edged with brown, made her look cold and commanding. Her long hair was pulled back into a tight tail, emphasizing the strong bones of her face. "By the Ancestors, they'd better have the lanes swept. I don't want to end up with a hole in our hull because they missed a rock."

Neva tugged uncomfortably at her own uniform. She hadn't been able to bring herself to look into the mirror after putting it on. Just touching the thing, let alone putting it on, made her feel soiled. And seeing her friends, the people she was counting on, wearing the hated insignia on their coats made her stomach queasy.

"Why would the Zats bring five-thousand people to a system like this?" Neva wondered aloud, trying to take her mind off things. "If there aren't any inhabitable planets, what were they going to do with them?"

"That's what we're here to find out," Iluka said, checking her boards absently.

"Station should be coming out of eclipse any minute," Nathan reported. A moment later, light flared in the forward camera, reflecting from the station's ceramic skin. "They're transmitting docking information. Looks like we can glide right in, no waiting, just like you asked for, Captain."

Marcus leaned forwards to peer at the screen. "What else is in dock?"

"Mostly asteroid miners and in-system haulers. A Zat supply ship." Iluka's lip curled. "And a damned Klegger."

"A Klegger?" Neva asked.

"Midsize gunship—small enough to be fast and maneuverable, large enough to be a threat."

Rat flinched, although Goddess only knew why. He sat beside Neva in an observer's seat, his hands clasped tightly together and his eyes fixed on nothing. If the uniform had given Iluka an imperial look, it only emphasized how worn and tired Rat had become. All the confidence he had gained had been lost again during the voyage to Gethsemane. Neva wondered if taking his hand would make things better or worse, given that contact seemed to

enhance his ability to hear thoughts.

Perhaps in response to some impulse of Rat's, Jasmine clambered into his lap, then onto his shoulder. She tried to groom his hair, but like Iluka he had tied it back into a tight tail, and it frustrated her efforts.

We'll never pull this off, Neva thought suddenly. *There are too many things that could go wrong*. She touched her face lightly, feeling the smooth layer of artificial skin that hid her scars. It had been a parting gift from Michael Shot With an Arrow, made to mimic her own complexion. Supposedly, it would last for at least two shifts before drying up and falling off. *Plenty of time...for us to end up in the brig or worse, anyway*.

She forced her hand back down. *No. We can do this. We will. Somehow*.

Docking didn't take nearly long enough. The clang of the clamps latching on rang throughout the ship, accompanied by a slight jolt. "They've got us," Nathan reported. Standard phrasing, but in their situation the words had an ominous ring.

"All right." Iluka stood up and brushed off her uniform, searching for any stray thread or hair. "You mind the store for us, Nathan. Keep sharp—if something goes wrong, you might need to pull out fast."

Rat gently removed Jasmine from his shoulder. "Will you look after her?"

"Sure." Nathan reached out, and Jasmine reluctantly transferred her weight from Rat's arms to his.

"Does everyone have their emergency kits?" Iluka asked. She had insisted they all carry certain items, in case things went disastrously wrong and they ended up separated. Neva wondered if the kits—small flashlights, bandages, and a com that would transmit a single distress signal to the ship—would really be helpful in an emergency, or were simply there for psychological comfort. In addition to their kits, Iluka also carried a data harvester on the off-chance they found access to a computer when no one else was around, and Marcus bore a lock pick and a small magnetic grapple inside his coat pocket.

When everyone nodded, Iluka went on. "Once we're on station, I'll do all the talking. Don't speak up unless anyone asks you a direct question. I want you all to stand there and look intimidating, understand me? Everyone armed?"

Neva touched the gun holstered at her hip, then moved her hand away as if she had been burned. *I've fired weapons before. In the last defense of Harvest, I manned a battery. There's no reason to lose my nerve now*.

Iluka stopped in front of Rat. "No slouching, boy!" she snapped, and he straightened hurriedly. "Heels together! Look me in the eye!" She raked her gaze across them all, and Neva quickly straightened herself. "Remember—we're not just Zats, we're Zat Inquisitors, and all those peons out there have to answer to us! I want you all to walk out onto that dock like you *own* the place, you hear me?"

"Aye, Captain!" Marcus barked, followed a moment later by Rat and Neva.

Iluka nodded grimly. "Good. Don't forget, or I'll have your hides. Let's do it."

The air in the boarding tube was so cold it seemed to scour Neva's lungs. The tube bounced wildly under them, and she staggered a little; Marcus and Rat both reached to steady her, but Marcus was faster. Then the lower lock hissed open, and the smells of the dock flooded in: fuel, lubricant, and cold metal.

The stark lighting of the dock blinded Neva momentarily, and she blinked to clear her eyes. Rat cringed just a little, and she unobtrusively—she hoped, anyway—put a hand to his back. He straightened at the touch.

A group of dark shapes in gray Zatvian uniforms awaited them a few paces beyond the lock. A sudden rush of hatred flooded through Neva at the sight, catching her off-guard. *Planet killers.*

You murdered everyone I ever loved. You stole my life, everything, from me.

On one level, she knew that it was unlikely that these particular Zatvians had anything to do with Harvest. It didn't matter. *They're all guilty. All of them. Soulless fiends.*

Rat glanced at her. For a moment, she found herself looking into amber eyes full of desperation and fear. The corners of his mouth had gone white, and she belatedly realized that her rage and grief had hit him like a hammer blow.

I'm sorry. She took a deep breath, struggling for calm. *Forgive me.*

After a moment, he looked away. She did so as well, forcing herself to stare at the Zatvian contingent. They clustered around an older man, who looked as if he desperately wished that the station would spin into the sun and save him from this encounter. Nevertheless, he stepped forward and managed a passable salute. "Welcome to Outpost 32-G, Sector 2, Major Greyson. I'm Jonathan Bright, dock master."

Iluka scowled, and he visibly wilted. "I see," she said in a tone as cold as the void outside. "And where is the stationmaster?"

The dock master paled slightly. "He-he's indisposed, Captain. Sick in bed under doctor's orders."

"Really. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh no! Nothing serious."

"Nothing serious, yet he was unable to rouse himself out of bed long enough to meet us as I requested?"

There came a moment of awkward silence. The dock master glanced at his companions, but they were all busy looking anywhere but at him. "I...I'll see what I can do, Major."

"Do that."

"I'll call him myself. If you'll just give me a few minutes—"

Iluka's scowl deepened. One or two of the Zats sidled away from Bright, as if to distance themselves from him professionally as well as physically. "You're going to call someone who should have damned well been here in the first place, and leave us freezing our asses off on this dock while you do it?" She shook her head in disgust. "They told me this was the backwash of the universe, but I didn't think it would be this bad."

"Oh no, of course not, Major!" The dock master turned to one of his underlings and snapped his fingers. "Escort the major and her assistants to station offices immediately."

Iluka looked slightly mollified. "I presume there will be hot coffee waiting for us?"

"Of course! Anything you want!" Bright shot a hard glare at his staff, clearly trying to convey that they would be scrubbing toilets for the rest of their lives if they did anything to make him look bad.

"Well, then." Iluka nodded, seeming pacified. The underling—a corporal by his uniform—beckoned for them to follow and then started off at a brisk pace. The rest of the welcoming committee moved uneasily to either side as Iluka and her band came through. Remembering that she was supposed to act imperious, Neva favored a random man with a scowl as she passed by. He drew back farther, and she thought she caught a glimpse of fear in his eyes.

That was easy. And the way they're falling over themselves to make Iluka happy...

They're afraid of us. Of me. Zats, afraid of me. I could make them squirm, make them

sweat, make them fear...

The sudden rush of power startled her. *This isn't real. I can't fool myself into thinking that it is. They're only afraid because they believe I'm a heartless Zatvian Inquisitor. If they knew the truth, they wouldn't be afraid—they'd be angry.*

The corporal led them to a lift, and they all crowded on. Neva found herself standing beside Rat towards the back. The brim of his cap shaded his eyes, but she thought his golden skin had taken on a yellowish hue. A drop of sweat slid slowly down one side of his face, despite the cold of the docks.

Goddess, the one man we're depending on for this mission is the one most likely to let us down.

"Corporal," Iluka said abruptly, making the man jump.

"M-Major?"

"Is this station always run in such a slipshod manner?"

The corporal went pale and his mouth worked for a moment before he found his voice. "N-no, Major. That is, we're very efficient here. Very! Usually."

Iluka snorted. "If you say so. Your stationmaster and dock master have great responsibilities. We have to be sure that our trust has not been...misplaced."

The corporal looked bewildered. "Yes, Major Greyson. That is, I wouldn't know about that."

"Of course not." Iluka subsided, and the grateful corporal turned his attention to the indicator beside the door, perhaps counting the seconds until he could get away from them. As he did so, Iluka casually glanced over her shoulder at Rat and arched a questioning brow.

He straightened slightly and shook his head. *No.* If the corporal knew anything, Rat hadn't caught it.

Neva chanced putting her hand lightly on his arm. *You're doing well,* she thought, hoping he would hear her. *I'm proud of you.*

The lift doors opened, and the corporal scuttled out. They stepped into a quiet, carpeted hall in what must have been the heart of station offices. The pale beige carpet nearly blended into the white walls, whose monotony was broken only by the occasional, evenly-spaced poster. Neva read them as she passed by. STAMP OUT SEDITION, said one; YOUR LOYALTY WILL ENSURE THE COOPERATIVE NEVER FALLS—REPORT TRAITORS! demanded another.

Office doors stood open along the corridor, the workers inside trying to get a glimpse of their visitors while still seeming busy with their own tasks. Although Iluka strode past as if they were beneath her notice, Marcus and Neva both glared at anyone unlucky enough to meet their eyes. Rat followed Iluka's example and stared straight ahead, but Neva noticed that his hands had begun to tremble.

Keep it together, Rat. You can do this. I know you can.

Goddess, help him.

The corporal led them into a room that contained only a plain, white table surrounded by chairs. A moment later, another staff member hurried in with a tray of steaming coffee cups. Iluka took one and sat down. Rat sat by her, but Marcus prowled the room, frowning occasionally at nothing. Neva wiped her finger experimentally along the back of a chair and made a show of inspecting the non-existent dust there.

Neva had hoped they might have a few moments of privacy to let Rat collect himself, but even as the corporal and the coffee-bearer excused themselves, there was a brief commotion at the door. A moment later, a tall, pale man came in. He wore the same gray

uniform as the rest of the station staff, but it had a slightly rumpled appearance, as if it had been hastily put on. There were circles under his eyes, and his color was bad.

"Stationmaster Karl Lundquist," he said. His voice was hoarse, and Neva could hear the telltale signs of congestion. "I'm sorry—I'm unwell, and my doctor felt I should stay in bed."

Iluka narrowed her eyes slightly. "So I'm told," she said without any sign of sympathy. "But you understand that if the Cooperative is to stay strong, then those who make up the Cooperative must also remain strong."

The stationmaster flushed. "Yes. Of course." He glanced briefly around the room. "If your people would like to rest while we conduct business—"

"They stay with me," Iluka said sharply. "For security reasons."

"I assure you that my security—"

"Is woefully inadequate from what I've seen." Iluka sat forward in her chair abruptly, making the stationmaster start back. "Despite what you may think, Lundquist, this isn't a social call. We're here to investigate the disappearance of the *New Beginning*."

Neva risked a glance at Rat, but if he had gotten anything from the stationmaster, he didn't show it.

Lundquist seemed startled. "That was fast. We only reported her overdue two months ago."

"And do you think we would dawdle when it comes to such an important matter?"

Rat's hands tightened on the armrests of his chair.

"I thought this was only one initiative among many," the stationmaster said cautiously.

"Of course it is. It is, however, the only one that has misplaced an entire ship." Iluka's voice was caustic enough to etch metal. "When did you realize that she was overdue?"

"Surely you've read the report."

"I want to hear it directly from you. In my experience, the contents of a report often don't match the facts. Mistakes are made. Shoddy work is treason against the Cooperative."

Rat shrank back.

The stationmaster didn't notice, too busy coping with the sudden terror that flashed across his face. "I assure you, we are very diligent here. Very diligent."

"I'll be the judge of that."

He swallowed hard and nodded. "I've found...that is, as stationmaster, it has been my experience that ships do not always keep to schedule. You would have to ask a ship captain as to why that is—I, for one, would think it ought to be easy to get from point A to point B in a timely manner. It's just physics, after all. I waited ten shifts before filing a report that the ship hadn't arrived on time. I only delayed so long because I've found that ships usually arrive within that time frame if they're running late. The *New Beginning* never entered this system."

"Is that all?"

"What else could there be? The ship didn't come in—how could we know where it went instead?" The look of helpless panic intensified on the stationmaster's face. "There are pirates, navigational hazards, malfunctions—anything could have happened to it. But we couldn't know that. I assure you, we did our part. We were fully prepared to receive the colonists."

Rat gasped and averted his face.

The gesture was too obvious for even the ailing stationmaster to miss. He frowned uncertainly. "What...is there something wrong with your man?" he asked.

"Poison!" shouted Marcus suddenly. He lunged forward and dashed the coffee cup from the table in front of Rat, sending its contents onto the wall and floor.

Iluka snapped to her feet. "What is the meaning of this!" she shouted at the confused stationmaster.

"What? I'm sure I don't—"

"Out of the way!" Iluka grabbed Rat's arm and hauled him to his feet, propelling him towards the door.

Taking the cue, Neva ran in front of them, barely waiting for the doors to open. "Clear the way!" she barked at the huddle of staff members outside. They scattered in confusion, and she snatched at Rat's free arm, dragging him after her. "Get back, damn it!"

"But wait!" shouted the stationmaster, scrambling behind them. "I don't understand! What —"

Marcus shoved the sick man aside. "You heard Iluka, damn it—out of the way!"

It took Neva a moment to realize what he had said, and then it was only because of the sudden silence all around. The staff members were exchanging confused looks...but the puzzlement on the stationmaster's face was already giving into suspicion. "Iluka?" he asked. "I didn't realize anyone on your team had that name."

"That is none of your concern," Iluka said coldly.

"I'm sorry, Major, but could you show me some identification? Just to be certain? I'm sure you understand our concerns about security."

Iluka scowled and let go of Rat's arm. "Of course, I understand perfectly," she said, reaching towards her pocket. The dim lights of the hall gleamed off her gun in the instant before she shot the stationmaster dead center in the chest.

The hallway erupted into confusion. Unarmed office staff dived out of the way, while station security scrambled to find cover and draw their own weapons. Iluka laid down a blistering screen of fire, joined an instant later by Marcus. Within seconds, the white walls were scorched brown and the beige carpet melted. The stink of burning synthetics filled the air.

"Run, damn it!" Iluka shouted.

Neva shook herself free from the paralysis that had gripped her, turned, and ran for the lift. Rat came on her heels, followed closely by Iluka and Marcus, who were trying to retreat and shoot at the same time.

A brown streak appeared on the wall near Neva's head, and an instant later she smelled the stink of singed hair. Then the lift doors were in front of her, and she slapped the call button. The doors opened immediately, and she tumbled inside, the rest after her. Marcus paused, his arm sticking out the doors as he emptied his gun's charge into the hall. The doors started to close, and he jerked his arm inside at the last possible second.

Iluka punched a button on the panel, swearing furiously at it as she did so. "Let's hope nobody thinks to freeze the lifts."

Neva watched the levels tick by on the screen, her heart in her mouth. Somehow, it had all gone wrong, and she wondered wildly how they would get off the station now. Rat slumped against the wall beside her, his face averted. "I'm sorry," he mumbled suddenly. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"No time for that now," Iluka said sharply. "Although I want to know why in hell Marcus decided that would be a good diversion, when there were a thousand other damned things he could have said that wouldn't have been suspicious!"

Marcus flushed sharply. "It was the first thing that came to mind. I had to cover for him—he was giving us away!"

"A flinch doesn't give us away, Marcus. Accusing the stationmaster of poisoning us and using my damned real name does! I told you to leave the talking to me, and you disobeyed orders. We'll discuss this later, make no mistake. For now, look sharp. Docks are coming up." She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out the tiny emergency com. "I'm sending up a flare to Nathan. At least he'll have some warning before they start trying to board the ship to arrest him."

An alarm began to shrill out of the tiny speaker on the control panel, making Neva's heart jump. A few seconds later, the lift jolted hard—and stopped.

"Damn it—somebody's taken charge up there a lot faster than I'd hoped," Iluka muttered.

Marcus pointed up. "The ceiling—there's an emergency panel in case of power loss."

"Get it open."

The panel was just out of Marcus' reach. "Lift me," Neva said quickly. He grabbed her by the waist without argument, hefting her towards the ceiling. His fingers dug painfully into her ribs, but she ignored the discomfort, shoving as hard as she could at the panel. It slid easily to one side. Grabbing the edges of the opening, she hauled herself up far enough to belly flop out onto the top of the lift.

The shaft seemed to go up forever above her, although it was hard to tell because there was no illumination except for that leaking out of the lift itself. The light dimmed as Iluka scrambled out, followed by Rat. Rat turned and helped pull Marcus up.

As soon as they were all out, Marcus pulled the magnetic grapple out of his coat pocket. "There should be some sort of access tunnel where the maintenance bots go in and out, when they need to inspect the lifts," he said, peering up into the gloom. "I think they're usually every other level."

"Let's hope you're right, or else we'll be climbing for a damned long time," Iluka said grimly. She pulled out her flashlight and switched it on. The white beam played over the featureless metal of the walls, then over the magnetic tracks the lift car rode. She raised it higher, and after a moment it revealed a small, recessed panel.

"That's it." Marcus stepped back, playing out some of the rope from inside the grapple. He swung it a few times to get up velocity, then threw.

His aim was good. The grapple arced up gracefully, its line playing out behind it, and impacted with the wall above the recess with a loud clang. He jerked on it hard, testing the hold, then nodded. "We're good."

"Go on up," Iluka said. "Remember, as soon as we open that panel, a light's going on somewhere. They're going to know what we're up to, so do this fast!"

The end of the line had a small handle; Marcus grasped the rope, then slipped his foot into the handle as if it were a stirrup. As soon as his weight was on it, the grapple reacted, reeling in its line and hauling him up into the shadows. They heard an oath; then the soft hiss of the panel being pushed open. A moment later, the line unreeled back down to them.

Neva went next. The grapple jerked her up with frightening speed, and she closed her eyes against a wave of vertigo. When her ascent slowed, she opened them again, and found herself staring at a narrow tunnel. Marcus lay flat on his belly, hand outstretched to her.

Don't look down. Don't look down.

Somehow, she managed to scramble into the tunnel with Marcus' assistance. Her heart

hammering in her chest, she crawled past him; there was barely enough room.

Rat came next, then Iluka. *This is taking too long*, Neva thought in despair. She didn't know how much time had actually passed since they had opened the panel, but it felt like forever. Although muffled by distance, she could still hear the alarms echoing from the rest of the station.

"Start moving," Iluka hissed, and Neva crawled blindly forward on her hands and knees. Fortunately, the tunnel wasn't long; a second hatch at the other end opened out onto what seemed to be a storage bay. The low shapes of maintenance bots lurked in the semi-dark, their power-down lights casting an amber glow over everything. Neva stumbled to her feet and stood to the side while the others scrambled out.

"The good news is that we're only two levels above the dock," Iluka said, shining her flashlight around the bay. "The other good news is that emergency accesses are usually near the lifts, so we shouldn't have to run all over the station to find one. I don't suppose anyone happened to take a close look at the evacuation map on the wall beside the lift?"

"I did," Marcus said.

Iluka's teeth flashed white in the dimness. "Good boy, Marcus. Keep it up and maybe I won't have you cleaning the hull without a spacesuit when we get back to the *Exile*. Take the lead."

Marcus led them silently through the bay. There was a human-sized door at one end, and they went out through it into a deserted corridor. Once out of the bay, the alarms gained volume. Red lights flashed in the utilitarian hallway, and a mechanical voice advised all non-military personnel to return to quarters for immediate lockdown.

In other words, they weren't likely to meet any innocent station workers, which was the one bit of good luck in the entire mess that Neva could see. Marcus led them quickly through the corridors, heading back in the direction of the lift. Within a few minutes, Neva spotted a red-lit sign that read EMERGENCY ACCESS.

"Good work." Iluka opened the hatch. "Let's move before they find us."

The hatch led to a simple tube that ran vertically between station levels. Rungs lined one side, providing a ladder in the case of a simple secondary power outage, or handholds in case of a major outage that included loss of station rotation. Red emergency lights glowered from beside each rung, providing sullen but adequate illumination. Iluka started down first, followed by Marcus, then Rat, then Neva.

Neva's arms began to ache as they climbed down. *Maybe I should think about working out more*, she reflected wryly. *Maybe I should have anticipated that we'd end up running from the Zats.*

And speaking of the Zats, where are they?

The station is a big place—maybe they don't have enough personnel to cover the whole thing, and we've lucked out and ended up in a zone that isn't being watched.

Maybe I should just be grateful that we haven't run into them and not question it.

Maybe.

"I'm at dock level," Iluka called up from below. "As soon as I open this door, be ready to move."

White light flooded in as Iluka pushed the hatch open, obscured as first the captain, then the two men tumbled out. Neva followed fast, emerging just behind Rat. She had no idea where they were in relation to the *Hermes*; the tangle of gantries and umbilicals made a crazy maze of light and shadow that obscured any referents.

Iluka apparently had no such difficulties. "All right—let's run," she said, and started away from the wall.

Bright light seared Neva's vision. Iluka cried out; her body jerked wildly, then spun around before collapsing limply to the floor.

"Snipers! Get to cover!" Marcus roared, whipping out his gun and returning fire.

Neva ignored him and dropped down by Iluka, expecting that at any moment she would feel the searing agony of blaster fire in her own flesh. Iluka lay still and unmoving, the whites of her eyes showing under half-open lids. She had been shot in the chest, and the front of her uniform was dark with blood from veins that hadn't been fully cauterized by the hit. The stink of burned flesh and cloth filled the air.

Neva grabbed her wrist and was rewarded by the thin flutter of a pulse. "She's alive!"

"Get to cover, damn it!" Marcus shouted.

A shot struck near them, scoring the metal wall. Rat dropped down by Iluka, slid his arms around her, and flung her inert form over his shoulder with a grunt. "Which way?" he gasped as he staggered to his feet.

Neva grabbed his arm and ran for a stack of cargo containers. Somehow, they made it to cover without being hit. Sandwiched between the wall and the containers, Rat let Iluka's body slide down so that some of her weight was off him. Marcus pressed his back to containers, then risked a look around the edge. He was greeted with another round of fire, forcing him back.

"Damn it—it's an ambush," he said.

"That's why we didn't run into any troops on the way down," Neva realized. "They knew we had to get back to the ship, so they just waited here for us."

Marcus swore furiously and checked the charge on his gun. "God only knows how many of them there are between us and the *Hermes*. We're going to have to fight our way through."

"That's not our only problem," Rat said quietly. When they looked at him, he pointed silently at the words stenciled across the containers they hid behind.

WARNING: CONTENTS HIGHLY VOLATILE. DO NOT EXPOSE TO HEAT OR FIRE.

"Oh hell," Marcus said.

Chapter 11: Running Blind

A barrage of shots peppered the wall above them, forcing the fugitives to crouch down behind their scanty bit of cover.

The scanty, explosive bit of cover, that is, Neva thought, unable to take her eyes from the glowing red letters of the hazard warnings.

Marcus wiped a mixture of sweat and grime from his forehead. “We can’t stay here.”

“Thanks for stating the obvious.” Neva touched Iluka’s forehead. The captain’s eyelids fluttered, and she mumbled something incoherent. Her breathing was fast and irregular, and a bubble of blood formed at the corner of her mouth. “Iluka’s in no shape to run, and we can’t leave her here.”

“We won’t.” There was a look of determination in Marcus’ blue eyes that Neva had never seen before. He removed Iluka’s gun from its holster at her hip and weighed it in his hand. “Neva, when I say go, you’re going to start shooting in the direction that fire is coming from, and you aren’t going to stop until we hit cover or you run out of charge, got it?”

Neva swallowed once, hard. Her career in the military had been brief and disastrous, and she wasn’t entirely sure she could shoot anyone—even a Zat—in cold blood. *They’re under cover. I won’t even see their faces. And even if I do...it’s them or us.* “Yes.”

Marcus’ eyes narrowed slightly as he transferred his gaze to Rat. “And you—you’re going to carry Iluka and run as fast as you can down that dock. Drop her or get her shot, and you won’t have to worry about the Zats, because I’ll put a hole in your head myself.”

Rat’s mouth whitened at the corners, but he only nodded and picked Iluka up. She struggled weakly. “What are you...put me down...”

“Hush,” he soothed absently, tightening his grip against her struggles.

Another flurry of shots hit the wall. The Zats were still aiming high, but it wouldn’t take long for them to figure out their mistake. “All right,” Marcus said, lifting a gun in each hand. “Let’s go, before they hit the damn containers and blow this whole stretch of dock open to space.”

He burst out of cover, squeezing off a series of shots the instant he was clear. “Go, go, go!” he yelled, and Neva dashed out behind him, Rat on her heels. She got a glimpse of the dock, its shadows confused by the strobe light of weapon fire. Marcus seemed to be aiming low, in the direction of the berths, so she followed suit. In the confusion of shadows and smoke, she couldn’t tell if she hit anything or not.

“Go, go!” Marcus shouted at her, and she belatedly realized that she’d stopped running to aim. Leaving him to cover their retreat, she raced down the dock, following the stumbling shadow that was Rat. The lighting was bad, and she tripped over an unseen cable. The decking stripped skin from her hands and knees, but she barely noticed in the scramble to get

back to her feet.

A low *whumph* sounded, a deep throb in her bones accompanied by sudden light that flung the gantries and umbilicals into stark, searing relief. Then all illumination went out, leaving only utter darkness.

The scream of alarms reached through the ringing the explosion had left in her ears. Red emergency lighting came on, although it did little more than show her the outlines of objects, leaving all detail lost in shadow. Marcus grabbed her and hauled her to her feet; she didn't remember falling the second time. He half-supported, half-dragged her into the deepest tangle of shadow. Something moved in front of them, and Neva's heart seized in the instant before she realized it was Rat, still carrying Iluka's inert form.

"Keep going," Marcus growled. Rat ducked into the shadows, and Neva followed, trying to choose her footing and praying that she didn't break her leg on some unseen obstacle. They wove in and out of gantries, cables, and cargo containers that had been abandoned in place when the original alert had sounded. The caustic smell of burning chemicals came to her, and she wondered what had blown and if it had taken anything else with it when it went.

The decking shuddered under her feet, and she felt more than heard a distant thump. "Goddess, what now?"

"They've sealed the section," Marcus said. Although she couldn't see his expression, Neva heard worry in his tone. "The explosion must have tripped the automatic systems. Thank God we're almost to the *Hermes*—if we'd ended up on the other side of those doors, we could forget about ever seeing the ship again."

Rat stopped, so abruptly that Neva almost walked into him.

Marcus gave him a shove. "What the hell is wrong with you *now*?"

"We're there. Almost." Rat's hands were busy holding Iluka, so he gestured with his head. "There's the berth for the *Hermes*. But it's open around it."

"And they've probably got at least one sniper out there," Marcus said in disgust. "All right. Let's give it a test."

He stripped his coat off and balled it up. Ahead of Rat, a clear space ran straight to the airlock that led to the *Hermes* and safety. *It doesn't look that far. If we just ran, we might make it.*

Marcus flung the balled-up coat into the coverless space. A moment later, shots streaked from three different directions. The coat hit the deck a smoking, melted ruin.

Goddess.

Marcus scowled in the dimness. "We might be able to run if we put down enough fire as a cover."

But to Neva's surprise, Rat shook his head firmly. "No. They're too spread out. You'd be shooting at one, and the other two would be picking us off in the meantime."

The burned smell had gotten stronger, and Neva saw a drift of smoke float across the sullen glow of the nearest emergency light.

Rat saw it as well. "Fire," he whispered, and she heard the sudden terror in his voice.

"It's all right," she said. "It's down the dock. It won't get to us."

"It doesn't need to, grounder," Marcus said. "Whatever they lit off, it's smoking like a son of a bitch. If the filters clog, or the rest of the station shuts down the airflow to keep it contained here...we'll suffocate a lot faster than you might think, especially if there's a fire eating up the O₂."

"We can't wait," Rat said softly, so that she had to strain to hear him over the alarm

claxon. "The snipers will have already called in our position. We'll have more soldiers coming up behind us any time now."

"You want to take a walk over to the berth, be my guest," Marcus snapped. "Just leave Iluka here."

"No. Not that." But Rat gently let Iluka slip from his shoulders to the deck. His amber eyes tracked the darkness above their heads. "When I tell you, throw something again. Get them to shoot."

"What the hell are you up to?"

Rat ignored Marcus. Instead, he grabbed the scaffolding above his head and began to haul himself up.

"What the—get back down here!"

"I need better visibility," Rat said grimly, and kept climbing.

Neva felt a tingle of fear. "Rat, they'll see you!"

"No they won't." He stopped about ten feet up, braced himself against the scaffolding, and drew his gun. "Throw something."

Marcus wasn't having any of it. "I said get down here!"

"Neva, throw something!"

Neva pulled the small flashlight from her pocket and flung it blindly towards the berth. On cue, shots blazed from three directions as the Zatvian snipers reacted. At almost the same instant, Rat aimed and fired.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

There came a scream that trailed off into a gurgle. From another direction, Neva saw something falling, heard a sickening crunch as the sniper's body slammed into the decking only feet away from the airlock.

For a long moment, the only sound came from the wailing alarms. Then Rat scrambled down. "Come on," he said, and walked boldly across to the airlock, leaving his bewildered companions to pick up Iluka and follow.

* * *

How did I do that?

How did I know I could?

Didn't know. I just felt it, deep down.

Rat forced his feet to work, forced his knees not to shake as he walked up to the airlock. He could smell the seared flesh of the sniper who had fallen nearby, and his stomach threatened to turn. The whispers pounded at him; if he concentrated, he knew that he would hear the same questions that already tormented him.

And maybe...maybe something more, something he didn't want to hear.

The gun felt right in his hand, horribly so. He'd known from the second that Iluka had given it to him, before the start of this ill-fated mission, that he'd fired one before, often enough that he was comfortable with it. As if it were an extension of himself.

I must have been a soldier. Must have been. A POW, like Neva said back on Paradise. The Zats caught me and fiddled with my brain, but before that I was a soldier. At least now I know I fought them, that they didn't take me easy.

And they aren't going to today, either. I don't know how they caught me before, but they won't this time. They won't get the chance to hurt Neva.

Not if I have to kill every last one of them.

The airlock opened in front of him as if by magic; Nathan must have been watching on the outside cameras. Rat didn't slow, just hit the boarding tube as fast as he could and trusted that Neva and Marcus were bringing Iluka behind him.

The lift let them out onto the bridge. Jasmine cleared most of the small cabin in a single bound, latching onto Rat's hair and swinging onto his shoulder. Her joy reverberated inside his skull. **mommy back**

Nathan spun his chair, his brown face grim. "What happened?"

"Tell you later," Marcus grunted. "For now, we need to get the hell out of here. What's our status?"

"The station has been demanding I power down, open the airlock, and surrender the ship. I've got everything warmed up and ready to go from our side, and I released our docking clamps when you hit the inner lock. Problem is, the station still has a grip on us."

Marcus scowled and ran a hand through his iron-gray hair. "That isn't the only problem. Iluka's been hurt. Without her, we don't have a pilot."

Neva had strapped Iluka into one of the observer seats and was busy hooking up an IV. "I'm trying to get her stabilized," she said. "I've given her a sedative for the pain, and to keep her calm if she starts to come out of it. She isn't in any shape to fly anything anywhere."

Marcus rubbed at his eyes. "Then we're screwed."

Rat found his gaze dawn inexorably towards the boards where Iluka had sat while piloting the ship. Where her dark hands had worked out patterns that had felt so familiar to him.

I can't. I can't do it. Everyone's life depends on this—what if I'm wrong? What if I screw it up?

But I wasn't wrong about the damned gun, was I?

"I can pilot," he said.

Marcus stared at him in disbelief for a moment, apparently too surprised to even gather words. "You?" he demanded when he found his voice. "You think I'd let *you* pilot this God-damned ship? This is all your fault to begin with!"

Neva started to object, but Rat waved her to silence. It took all his courage, but he locked eyes with Marcus and refused to look away, even when the **rage** and **hate** grew too strong to ignore. "It's me or no one."

Marcus' mouth tightened into a thin, white line. "Since when do you know how to fly a boat? I didn't hear you say anything about that before."

"I don't know. I don't remember learning. But from the moment I saw Iluka work these boards, I knew that I could."

"You're going to get us all killed."

"Maybe. Or we can die here sitting at dock. Your choice."

"Think quick," Nathan said, pointing at the view from the dockside camera; he must have left its umbilical in place when he severed the rest of the links between ship and station. "We've got company."

Apparently, word had gotten out that the fugitives had slipped through the net and regained their ship. An entire troop of Zatvian soldiers, kitted out in full battle gear, stood

just outside the airlock leading to the boarding tube. One of them was fiddling with the status board beside it; a moment later, the lock opened and the soldiers went inside.

"They overrode their end," Nathan said grimly. "And they'll cut a hole through our lock in less than five minutes. We've got to do something."

"If they haven't launched a ship yet, they'll have one in countdown," Rat said. He could feel his heart beating in his throat, feel fear and adrenaline twining in his veins. "Once it gets free of the station and moves in behind us, we won't have a chance. So get of my way, Marcus."

For a moment, he didn't think Marcus would do it. Then the other man turned abruptly, went to the observer seat that Rat had occupied, and webbed himself in.

Rat swallowed his relief and went to the pilot's chair. The board was live in front of him, familiar as an old friend he hadn't seen in years. "Neva, can you take Jasmine?" he asked, knowing that he was going to need the extra freedom of movement.

"I've got her."

"Is Iluka secured?"

"Yes."

Rat took a deep breath and exchanged a glance with Nathan. The navigator looked grim, but there was something in his bronze face that made Rat think he had already anticipated Rat's next move.

Oh gods. But he couldn't let himself think about what he was going to do; couldn't let himself feel anything about it. Because he had meant it when he realized that he would kill every Zat on the station before he let them take Neva.

"We have to get free from the station's docking clamps," he said, amazed that his voice didn't shake. In a small vessel like the courier, weapons fell under the pilot's jurisdiction, so he reached over and uncapped the firing switch.

"We're clear behind us," Nathan said. Unruffled, as Rat had expected.

"What are you going to do?" Neva asked, and for an instant Rat could almost taste her fear.

He didn't answer. "Take hold," he said, and fired the reverse thrusters up to full power.

They didn't go anywhere—no surprise there. As the engines began to creep up towards red line, Rat hit the firing switch, and unleashed all the power of the ship's guns directly into the vulnerable belly of the station.

Acceleration slammed him into the web; someone behind him cried out in shock. Light blazed across all the forward cameras as the oxygen from the breached section rushed out into space in a ball of flame. Something hit the hull, a grinding shriek followed by a series of squeals as debris rebounded off the ship.

But they were out, clear, away from the rapidly-receding station. An ugly hole gaped where they had been berthed, and a trail of debris streamed out into space.

Some of that debris was human, he knew. If the guns and shrapnel hadn't killed them, the soldiers in the boarding tube would have died within seconds of being exposed to vacuum.

Not a good way to go.

"We've lost pressure in the airlock," Nathan reported. "They must have cut through the outer door. Everything inside reads as normal."

"You...you blew the dock," Neva said. Rat could hear her horror, and it cut at him like knives. "The station..."

"The whole station didn't go," Marcus cut in unexpectedly. "Damn the luck. The section seals were already down, and anybody who wasn't a Zat trooper would have evacuated to the inner rings as soon as the alerts went off."

Rat felt a flash of gratitude towards the other man. He hoped that Marcus was right...because for all he knew, there might have been innocent freighter crews trapped on that dock when he opened it to vacuum.

"Priority!" Nathan said suddenly, even as lights began flashing across the board. "Active scan is picking up a Zat Klegger just above station nadir and coming our way."

"Where the hell did they come from?" Marcus demanded.

"The body of the station was between us, so we couldn't ping them," Nathan said grimly. "And station isn't showing it on beacon."

The Klegger had been meant to come around behind them at dock, Rat guessed, and use the threat of its guns to make them comply with the boarding party. *I was right.*

"They're pinging us," Nathan warned. "They'll shoot the second they have a lock."

"Then we won't give them one," Rat said, and was surprised at how steady his hands were as he moved them to the controls. "Take hold."

The *Hermes* was a courier—built for speed, its mass ratio all engine and not much else. Which made it not only fast, but maneuverable.

They changed direction sharply, the sudden acceleration like a great hand shoving them hard from the side. Rat bit his lip, keenly aware that the edge he risked crossing was not the limitations of the ship, but those of their very fragile bodies.

"I've got weapons fire," Nathan reported. "It's a clean miss."

"Give me a look at the system."

It came up on his boards, a three-dimensional representation of the system, showing not only the station and any traffic that the beacon wasn't hiding, but also the approximate location of the larger asteroids and dust clouds.

"Take hold—we're going to full burn," Rat warned. A moment later, the flashing dot that signified the *Hermes* began to move away from the station. "I'm shutting off all the autos and going manual."

"Are you crazy?" shouted Marcus.

"That might not be the best idea in a dirty system like this," Nathan pointed out cautiously.

Rat flinched at the wave of doubt that crashed down over him. *Not mine. The whispers. Just ignore them. I can do this. I can.* "Did you kill the transponder?"

"Of course. Not that it will help. The system is too crowded with debris to turn off active scan, so we're screaming 'here we are' to anyone nearby."

"That's why we need to get just a bit ahead of them." Rat watched as the Klegger finished maneuvers and took up an intercept course. "Neva, I'm going to push this as far as I can. If you think I'm going too far...if Iluka's vitals drop...tell me."

"All right."

He glanced up, caught a faint glimpse of her reflection in the forward screens. She was leaning over and checking Iluka again, so her expression was hidden from him. He had the sudden urge to listen to the whispers to give him some clue as to what she was thinking.

Stupid. Don't get distracted, not now.

"We're almost out of the planet's shadow," Nathan reported. "Our vector is going to take us into the main asteroid field soon. You might think about slowing down before we hit

that.”

He didn't, though. Time slipped by; Rat kept an eye on the Klegger, but the distance between the two ships remained relatively constant.

He didn't need Nathan to tell him when they entered the dusty environs of the system, outside the path that the planet swept during its orbits. A high-pitched tone came to him, first soft, then growing louder, then fluctuating wildly up and down, like a strange song.

“What's that?” Neva asked in alarm.

“Dust hitting the hull,” Nathan replied. “This ship will be burnished bright as a mirror if we make it through alive.”

At first, the song of the dust on the hull had an eerie beauty, but as the hours crept by it began to wear on their nerves. Neva was entirely focused on Iluka, but the soft murmur of the thoughts of the men began to rise in pitch as the incessant keening became maddening.

Rat focused on the erratic orbits of the nearest asteroids, adjusting course as needed. “We're going first law,” he said at last, and killed the main engines, leaving only the thrusters online.

“You might think about slowing down,” Nathan said again as the pressure of acceleration eased. “Especially since you aren't flying on autos.”

“No. I know what I'm doing.”

“And what is it you think you're doing?” Marcus asked, and Rat felt the familiar flicker of belligerence. *Maybe it's just as well. I wouldn't know what to do if Marcus suddenly started to agree with me.*

Rat had Nathan put the scan onto the main screens, so that everyone could see. They had tracked a straight path away from the station over the last few hours, headed directly towards what looked like the worst part of the system. The largest asteroids showed in red, but there were thousands of smaller ones that the beacon couldn't track. *And gods, but I hope there aren't any illicit miners out here who aren't showing up on beacon. If we run into one, there won't be enough left of us to fit into a coffee cup.*

“I'm taking us here,” he said, and pointed at a clump of large asteroids.

crazy bastard (fear, explosions, dead ships)!

is he certain/sane/right Marcus doesn't think so (doubt, worry) wish I knew more

“Shut up!” Rat shouted, even though no one had even said anything. Shock dimmed the outcry in his brain, and he gripped the edge of the board hard, letting it bite into his palm. “Just... just be quiet, please. I can't be distracted. Can't be.”

crazy bastard

No one said anything aloud—maybe no one dared to. **fear** made Rat's muscles tense, but he ignored it, forcing himself to focus on guiding the ship. *Have to keep it together. Have to.*

Gods, don't let me kill us all.

It was a task that required every iota of his concentration. Smaller asteroids tumbling around the edge of the field began to show up on scan. At first, they were easy to avoid, but as the *Hermes* penetrated deeper into the enormous asteroid belt, it became much harder even for so small a ship. Something hit the hull, screeching down the side with a hellish cacophony that made them all jump. The feed from one of the port cameras flickered and died.

Not good.

“The Klegger has slowed,” Nathan reported. He seemed unflappable; Rat wondered

what he had been through on the *Red Cloud* that allowed him to treat what must seem like a suicide run with such equanimity.

"Is it still coming after us?"

"*Huh*. It's entered the field."

They continued on. More rocks, too small to be seen by scan until they were on top of them, screamed down the hull. Rat watched as the amount of debris between the *Hermes* and the Klegger built up. They had been picking up the bounce of the Klegger's active scan ever since they had left the station, but now it grew fainter and fainter, broke up, came back...and finally stopped altogether as the intervening dust and debris created an impenetrable screen.

They were getting closer and closer to the clump of large asteroids. "Take hold. I'm braking," Rat said, and heard/felt sighs of relief. The *Hermes* slowed, until by the time they were abreast of the group they had matched speeds. Rat oriented the ship and let it slip into the midst of the formation.

The outside cameras didn't show much...mostly shadow, with a few glints here and there where sunlight found a way through the soup of dust. He ran through passive scan: thermo, x-ray, every pickup they had, until he found the one that seemed to give him the best view of their immediate surroundings.

"Kill active scan," he said.

Nathan arched a brow. "We aren't going to get very far without that."

"We don't have to."

Active scan died, and their picture of the system suddenly shrank into what little the passives could pick up. The huge bulk of the largest asteroid rolled into view, then filled it. Rat killed the collision alarm before it could sound, then gently, gently fired thrusters so that they were riding just off the asteroid, in the shadow of its metallic bulk.

"I'm shutting down engines," he said, and did so, hoping that he had oriented the ship correctly and that it would simply first law along in a relatively stationary position to the tumbling rocks around them.

"So now what?" Marcus asked. "We sit here and hide?"

"The scan-shadow of the asteroids should keep the Klegger from seeing us, until they come in right on top of us. So if we're lucky...yes."

And since when have I had any luck?

No one said anything after that. They drifted in silence, the waiting seeming to distort time, until Rat wasn't certain how long they had been there. There was no way of knowing where the Klegger was, if it had wandered off to nose about some other part of the system, or if it was lying just on the other side of the asteroid.

They won't give up. And if I were the captain of that Klegger...I'd come this way. I'd be looking for any debris to show that we ran into something...or any sign of engines...or anything else that the asteroids might be hiding. I'd have to stay out of the really tight spots because of the size of the ship, so I'd be coming in about fifty degrees off system axis.

I'd come slow and cautious. And if I got here...it would be right about...now.

He stared at scan, feeling his eyes starting to burn. His hand hovered above the firing switch; as the moments slipped by, the muscles in his arm started to ache.

The nose of the Klegger came out of the asteroid's shadow, almost exactly where he had predicted. There was no thought involved; his hand hit the switch the instant he saw movement, even before his brain had registered that it *was* the Klegger and not an asteroid on an eccentric orbit.

The courier's guns were relatively small, but at such close range they were more than enough. Fire bloomed like silent flowers as the guns tore a hole through the Klegger's cylinder, then vanished as the oxygen dissipated into space. A series of smaller explosions ripped through the ship; something critical had been hit, and the hull buckled and tore, disgorging streams of debris.

Rat didn't wait to see if the blow had been fatal. "Engines up! Take hold!"

The nearest asteroid rolled past, almost skimming the belly of the ship. "Give me active scan," he said, deciding it was a bigger risk to run blind. They angled away, climbing out of the plane of the system toward less-crowded space.

"The Zat ship isn't moving," Nathan reported.

Marcus laughed gleefully. "We got the bastards!"

We? Rat wondered sourly. He shook his head and adjusted their course. Since the Klegger was no longer a factor, getting clear of the asteroid field had become the highest priority.

He put them on a gentle burn, then cut it a few minutes later, going out much slower than they had come in. As they neared the edge of the asteroid field, Nathan spared him a brief glance.

"Good work," he said. "You're quite the pilot. Iluka is lucky to have you."

"Good job, Rat," Neva added, and he felt an unexpected flush of pride. He straightened slightly, feeling a smile finally come over his face.

I did it. Me. I saved us from the Zats.

"Priority!" Nathan shouted, the same moment the alarms began to scream.

They had just reached the edge of the field; no longer blocked by dust and rock, the scanners suddenly unfolded a wide panorama before them. A ship barreled down at them, having been hidden from their view by the very shroud that had protected them.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Marcus demanded.

Rat didn't care. "Take hold!" he warned and lit off the main engines. They were moving, accelerating as fast as safety would let them...but the other ship had more *v* to start with and had them in its sights. There was nowhere to run.

The entire ship shuddered, and for an instant the smell of burned insulation filled the cabin, before the filters sucked it away. Red lights exploded cross the boards, and Rat was flung to the side, against his web. He fired thrusters almost automatically, fighting to stabilize the ship, but nothing responded. Alarms screamed as the Zat warship locked its targeting system on them, and Rat knew that the next shot would kill them all.

Neva, I'm so sorry, I tried, I did, gods please—

Explosions erupted along the side of the Zatvian ship. Even as Rat watched in shock, it was hit again and again, until it disintegrated altogether in a silent, rapidly-expanding sphere.

Com crackled. "This is Harini Chandrashekar of *Devi's Challenge*. Excellent flying, Iluka Toora, but next time don't forget to watch for traps."

"Thank God!" Marcus muttered.

Even Nathan seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. At Rat's nod, he flicked on the com. "This is Nathan Crow Wing. Captain Toora is injured, and we've taken a bad hit. We request permission to come aboard."

"Granted. Our shuttle will gather you up."

"Thank you, and for the rescue as well."

"That is why we came. We picked up an alert from the station when we dropped out of

hyperspace. A convoy including that warship entered the system shortly thereafter. Their timing could not have been worse from our standpoint. The station sent them here to ambush anything coming out of the asteroid field, and so we coasted in hoping to ambush them in turn. Chandrashekar out.”

For the first time in hours, Rat allowed himself to relax. Powering his chair away from the boards, he glanced back into the cabin. Neva had been checking Iluka's pulse, but now she looked up, as if she'd felt his gaze on her. The makeup that had concealed her scars was flaking off, and there were dark circles under her eyes, but she managed a wan smile for him nonetheless.

It made him feel better about...everything, really, he decided. Just...good.

But as he turned back to his now-useless boards, he caught Marcus' eye. It was just for an instant before the other man looked away, but Marcus might as well have shouted the thought aloud.

who are you?

* * *

Colonel Mirra Hunter strode along station dock, the rest of her team hurrying to keep up. Rage throbbed in her veins and made her head ache with its insistent pulse. *Is Command assigning fools to the stations, now? Incompetents? Dropouts? How else could things have gone so wrong so fast?*

The lift opened before she reached it, disgorging a harried-looking man. The instant he saw her, his face paled at the sight of the Obsidian Blade insignia on her uniform. Normally the respect and fear that the Blade inspired made her proud; today, however, it only annoyed her further.

To his credit, it only took the man a moment to recover and give her a crisp salute. “Jonathan Bright, dock master,” he said, identifying himself.

The dock master—no wonder he looked like death warmed over, considering that a good portion of his precious docks were now open to space. Once she was done with him, he would wish the docks were his only problem.

She gave him her most disarming smile. After a moment, he hesitantly smiled back. “Would you care to explain how a group of pirates was able to infiltrate your station, cause such havoc, and escape?” she asked in a cold voice utterly at odds with the smile.

It threw him, as she had intended. He began to babble something about it all being the fault of the stationmaster, who had been killed by the imposters. She waved off his explanation with an irritated gesture. Blame was the provenance of the Inquisitors, who were still on board the ship that had brought them, waiting their turn. Mirra had more important questions.

“What were the pirates after?”

Bright shook his head helplessly. “I don't know. Whatever it was, they didn't get it.”

“If you don't know what they were after, how can you be certain they didn't get it?” When he only looked confused, she sighed in irritation. “Are there any vidlogs?”

“Yes—the conference room is under surveillance any time it's occupied. That's standard procedure.”

“Show them to me.”

An uncomfortable silence fell as the dock master led Mirra and her team to the lift, and

thence to the station offices. Uncomfortable for Bright, anyway, whose attempts at small talk failed utterly in the face of Mirra's indifference. As for the colonel, she had more important things to worry about than the discomfort of some flunky stationed here at the arse-end of the Zatvian Cooperative.

What really went on here? And does it have anything to do with Project Zero?

Intel had received a report from one of their spies, suggesting that the colony ship *New Beginning* had met a mysterious end, then been found adrift by pirates. There had been just enough detail to the spy's report to suggest that the *New Beginning*'s demise fit the pattern of a Project Zero casualty. Two convoys had been subsequently dispatched, one to the point where the *New Beginning* had allegedly met its untimely end, and the other to Outpost 32-G, Sector 2, where the ship was supposed to have put in to port months ago. Mirra had been unlucky enough to draw the short straw and get sent to the Outpost...and straight into a mess that she was now going to have to sort out.

Everything had seemed normal when they first put into the system...until the nature of station chatter had changed from routine to alarm. The *Liberator*, the warship with the convoy, had responded to the station's request for help.

And got itself blown straight to hell. The captain was a fool.

None of the remaining ships were capable of tangling with the pirate vessel that had put an end to the *Liberator*. According to the station, it had picked up any of the surviving fugitives in the courier ship, turned itself around, and was even now heading back out-system, free and clear. It made her blood boil to know that ruffians who had spat in the face of the Zatvian Cooperative were getting away so easily.

If I had the rest of the Blades here, they wouldn't get away. They would learn the true meaning of fear before they died. They would learn why the Zatvian Cooperative will grind them and all their kind into dust.

But the Blades hadn't been there, save for her, and she had been stuck on a passenger ship with no way of taking the situation in hand.

What she *did* have was a station with a hole in it, a dead Klegger, and a dead warship. Not to mention a hell of a lot of questions, starting with how it was that a simple band of pirates had managed to cause so much destruction.

The fool in front of her didn't have any answers; that much was clear. She would have to find her own.

After what seemed an interminable wait, Mirra at last found herself alone in one of the station offices, the vidlogs loaded on the monitor in front of her. Settling back in her chair with a cup of coffee in one hand, she prepared just to watch, without any expectations that might cloud her thinking and cause her to miss a vital clue as to what the pirates had wanted.

A picture of the empty conference room came up. The door opened, and a group of people walked in...

She sat up sharply, causing the coffee to spill across her hand. She ignored the burn, too shocked by what she was seeing on the monitor.

Impossible. It can't be him.

Telling herself not to over-react, that she was simply noting a superficial resemblance and nothing more, she froze the image and zoomed in on the face of one of the infiltrators. Slowly, she advanced the vid one tenth-second at a time. The man had been partially turned away from her at the outset, but as the vid crept forward he pivoted full into the camera...and grew more familiar, not less.

His hair was long now, and he sported a scraggly goatee that hid his chin...but the rest of his features were unmistakable.

Mirra stared into those amber eyes that she'd always found slightly unnerving, her heart beating almost painfully in her chest. The rational part of her mind knew that she would have to obtain verification—but that should be easy enough. He must have shed skin cells all over the conference room; a simple DNA analysis would either confirm or deny his identity.

But Mirra didn't have to wait on any tests. In her heart, she knew.

After two long years, she was back on Xian Jackson's trail. And this time, she'd find him...no matter what it took.

Chapter 12: Suspicious

Rat stopped in front of the door to Harini Chandrashekar's cabin, feeling as if he were about to face a firing squad.

At least a firing squad would be quick.

It had been almost a week since *Devi's Challenge* had rescued them. The ship had hightailed it out-system without further challenge from the Zats; they were too far out and physics had been on the *Challenge's* side. But before that shuttle had come, Marcus had made one thing clear: say nothing to anyone about anything.

"Any questions about our mission, about what we might have learned—tell whoever is asking that it's for the captain to say," he'd warned them with a glare. "And that includes no talking among ourselves. Assume that every room is bugged."

To her credit, Harini had been patient—at least outwardly—with their stonewalling. With Iluka in the infirmary, healing from a hole in her chest and a collapsed lung, she'd been willing to bide her time until her questions were answered. But even when Iluka was strong enough for visitors, there had been things she wouldn't—couldn't—tell Harini.

Because no one knows what the New Beginning was bound for...except me.

There hadn't been an opportunity to tell anyone before the shuttle had picked them up. Now they couldn't talk secrets, even amongst themselves, because someone might be listening. So it had burned inside of him ever since, a hot coal in his gut that made him sick whenever he thought about it.

With the end of their hyperspace transit in sight, it seemed that Harini had finally run out of patience. She had sent for him alone, which worried him deeply. Had she somehow realized that he was the secret-keeper of the group? That he—or his messed-up brain, anyway—was the *reason* for the secrets?

The door to her cabin opened, and Rat stepped warily inside. The lighting in the room was focused on Harini's ornate wooden desk, leaving the walls shrouded in dim shadows. The faint scent of sandalwood hung in the air, reminding him of Neva. In one corner of the room, a statue depicted Shiva dancing upon the back of a demon.

"Come, sit down," Harini said. "Would you like some tea?"

He had been trying to look anywhere but at the captain, but realized that he couldn't continue to do so without arousing her suspicions. She was a strikingly beautiful woman, and her pale blue sari emphasized the elegance of her movements. When he nodded, she poured two cups of tea from the pot at her elbow.

Rat sat warily and took the cup she offered him. Hot steam brushed his face, carrying with it the scent of spices: cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom. "Thank you, Captain. It's good."

She smiled slightly, a webwork of wrinkles showing at the corners of her dark eyes as she did so. "I believe that's more words than I've heard out of you since you came on board."

He shrugged.

"The quiet type. Discreet. I value that." She took a sip from her own teacup. "Iluka must value you as well, or she would not have brought you with her."

Rat felt as if a trap closed around him. "I don't know. You'd have to ask the captain."

Harini let it pass without comment. "My shuttle crew salvaged the logs from the *Hermes* before scuttling it. There isn't much, of course—someone had disabled the voice pickups even before we left for Gethsemane. Nathan Crow Wing, no doubt—such tricks are common for his kind."

"His kind?"

"Spies, of course. Spies and warriors and mystics, and whatever else Joshua Ten Bears has tucked away on board the *Red Cloud*." Harini's dark eyes bored into his through the thin veil of steam from her cup. This whisper rose, made stronger by the enforced concentration, but he made himself breathe deeply and stay calm.

*(*distrust*)*

"The *Red Cloud* isn't just any warship, you know," she went on. "They say that Joshua's government gave him everything they had, everything he asked for when the time came and they realized that he would be their last hope. There are secrets on board that ship paid for in blood. Secrets they won't share with anyone—not even their good friends on the *Exile*. Not even if it would save all our lives."

Rat felt a chill despite the warmth of the tea. Was it true? Or was it simply rumor? "I don't know anything about that," he said at last.

"Of course not. And I have gotten off the track." She made a dismissive gesture with one elegant hand; the gold bangles about her wrists chimed softly with the movement. "Everything else was recorded, however. Each command put into the boards; each move the ship made. My pilot in particular was impressed."

Rat felt his heart rate increase; this was something he hadn't expected.

"They say you were flying the *Hermes*," she prodded, when he said nothing.

Rat shrugged. "Only leaving Gethsemane. Not coming in."

"Coming in was straight down the lane. It was the leaving that was impressive." Harini set her tea aside and leaned towards him. "Would you like a berth with the *Challenge*?"

"What?"

"A berth. I'm offering you a position on my crew. Whatever Iluka is paying you, I can do better." A faint smile touched her lips. "After all, I actually had cargo in my holds prior to this little trip. Unlike Iluka, I'm not running on credit stretched so thin that she won't be able to fuel her ship if the information we took from the *Hermes* fails to be lucrative. These are troubled times, my friend, but a smart man can do well for himself."

She's offering me a job. Me. It finally sank in, but it still seemed unreal. *I had to stowaway just to get on board the Exile, and now I have a captain who actually wants me on her ship? Who thinks I might be useful?*

For a moment, he imagined what it might be like to be welcome on a ship. To have crewmates who didn't resent his presence. To be...normal.

But could I do it? Could I pull it off? Now that I'm a little better, could I pass myself off as a normal human being?

Even if I could, it would mean leaving Neva behind. The only friend I've got in the

universe.

"I can't," he said aloud. "I'm sorry, Captain. I am."

He couldn't tell from her expression whether or not she had expected his answer. "Are you certain? Think carefully, my young friend."

"No. I can't."

"Very well, then." Harini settled back in her chair, her eyes hooded. "If you change your mind before we leave hyperspace, you have but to tell me."

He nodded, stood up, and left. A part of him was relieved to have the interview over with.

But another part of him wondered if he had just given up his only chance to live a normal life.

* * *

Neva looked up when the door opened. She sat on the bottom bunk, a tablet loaded with medical texts in her hand.

Although *Devi's Challenge* was far larger than the courier had been, space was still tight with a full crew compliment plus Neva, Rat, Nathan, and Marcus. Iluka had been confined to the infirmary, and the rest of them had been shoved into any empty slot that could be found. Neva and Rat had ended up sharing the only passenger compartment. Although utilitarian, it was far better than hammocks in the rec room, which had been the fate of Nathan and Marcus.

Her roommate stood in the doorway, looking vaguely puzzled. His expression cleared a little when Jasmine raced over to him and bounded into his arms.

"How did it go?" Neva asked. When the summons had come from Captain Chandrashekar, she had been surprised...and then troubled. Harini was no fool, and it was no accident that she had asked for Rat alone.

Like a lioness instinctively cutting the weakest animal from the herd.

"All right." Rat sat down on the lone chair in the room. "She offered me a job."

Of all the things Neva might have expected, this wasn't one of them. "A what?"

He recounted his conversation with Harini. When he was done, Neva found herself smiling. Whatever Harini's ulterior motives might have been, she wouldn't have offered a berth to someone solely to get information. "See how far you've come?"

A rare smile passed over his face. "I don't know. It doesn't...I still feel as if there's a long way to go. I wouldn't have come even this far without you."

Neva's tablet chimed softly, reminding her that it was time to check on Iluka. "I'll be back soon, and then we can meditate, if you like," she said. As she passed by him on her way out, she paused and set her fingers lightly on his shoulder. "Anyone could have done what I did. The accomplishment is yours."

"You're wrong." He glanced up, and she found herself marveling for a moment at the depth and clarity of his amber eyes. Giving his shoulder a brief squeeze, she turned and left.

* * *

"You know what they're going to say."

Devi's Challenge was large enough that its infirmary contained a separate room for long-

term patients, in which Iluka had been settled at the beginning of the journey. The door to that inner room stood open, and her voice drifted out. Neva froze, wondering who was with the captain and if she should interrupt their conversation.

Whoever it was didn't answer. After a long moment, Iluka continued. "They're going to say that the rumors were all true. That you're a collaborator. That you deliberately gave us away."

"But I didn't!" protested her visitor.

Marcus.

"Didn't say that you did. Didn't say that you didn't, either. I'm damned put out with you, Marcus. Intentionally or not, you blew our cover on Gethsemane."

"I didn't mean to! I was trying to cover for that wreck you decided to could handle a mission like ours!"

"That wreck saved all our lives, or so Nathan tells me."

"And don't you think that's suspicious? You're put out with me, someone you know, someone who's watched your back before, but you'll trust a man who says he can't remember his own name? What proof do we have that Rat hasn't lied to us from the start? I tell you, Captain, that wasn't ordinary flying he did. That isn't something you learn running a freighter. I don't like it. I don't trust it."

"This isn't about Rat. This is about you. This is about that black mark on your name. There are people who are going to remember that, who are going to say I was wrong. That I was a fool to take you on board. Were they right, Marcus?"

"Captain, this is crazy. If I were a collaborator, a traitor...if I deliberately gave us away on Gethsemane, then why would I fight so damn hard to get us all off that station alive? Ask Neva—she was there on the docks with me, when you were out of commission. It would have been easier to just shoot Rat and hand you and Neva over to the Zats if I were really working with them."

The infirmary com chirped, making Neva jump. Marcus stepped out of the inner room to answer it—and stopped dead, staring at Neva. Realizing that she had ended up spying on their conversation, even if that hadn't been her original intent, she felt her face heat.

The com chirped again. Glad for the excuse, Neva turned quickly away and punched it. "Yes?"

"Captain Chandrashekar requests the presence of Marcus Werner in her office."

Neva glanced over her shoulder. Marcus didn't look pleased. "I'm on my way," he said gruffly.

Neva killed the connection. "Chandrashekar talked to Rat, earlier," she told him.

"So now it's my turn." Marcus had apparently decided to pretend that Neva hadn't overheard anything damning. "What does she think she's going to get from us?"

"I don't know. She offered Rat a job."

Marcus stared at her for a moment, his blue eyes startled and angry. Then he turned and left without another word.

"Neva? That you?" Iluka called from the inner room.

"Aye, Captain." Feeling cold, Neva went in to Iluka.

Like Marcus, the captain mentioned nothing about the conversation Neva had overheard, as if it had never occurred. As for Neva...she couldn't stop thinking about it.

Marcus, a collaborator. What did he do to earn the accusation in the first place, and could it be true?

What he told Iluka makes sense, though. It would have been easy for him to hand us all over to the Zats after she was shot. Instead, he took charge and did his best to save us. He wouldn't have done that if he had betrayed us.

Unless his conscience pricked him once Iluka got hurt.

That's ridiculous. And even if it wasn't, Rat would have realized that Marcus was plotting against us.

Wouldn't he? What was it Rat said—that it isn't that simple? That all he gets are a jumble of impression and emotions?

Goddess and God, I've been helping him learn to ignore what he "hears" for weeks now. If one of us is a traitor, would he even pick up on it?

* * *

Drake lay on his bunk and wondered if he ought to help himself to some of the sedatives in the infirmary, or simply resign himself to yet another restless sleep cycle.

He'd never had trouble sleeping as a young man. Then after Rachel had died, he hadn't slept so much as passed out whenever the alcohol-induced haze he'd lived in had dictated that he do so.

Iluka changed that, though. He still remembered his first glimpse of her, standing over his bunk in the drunk tank on Hell's Front Door Station, her hands on her hips and no pity at all in her hard eyes. "They say you used to be somebody," she'd said, while his pickled brain still tried to figure out where he was and what was going on. "I say you might be somebody again. What do you think about that?"

At the time, he'd almost hated her, even though he'd taken up her offer to become first mate on the *Exile*. She'd made him sober up, abandon the shards of his old life that he'd used to lacerate his soul, and build something new. It had been a hard road, and there had been more than one shift when he'd contemplated jumping ship and going back to the oblivion of the bottle.

An angel, sent by God. Not that most would picture a messenger angel as a dreadlocked, black-skinned woman in her sixties.

Drake sighed, punched his pillow into shape, and rolled over yet again. Iluka would skin him alive if she knew that he hadn't done a damn thing but worry about her since she'd left. The repairs to the *Exile's* engines had been finished within a week, leaving them nothing to do but move out into the darkness away, from the mass point, and hang there, waiting. There hadn't even been another ship passing through to break up the monotony.

Tarak and Anusha had spent their time laying in endless courses, plotting and planning routes to every conceivable world. It was a game to them, something they had been doing since they were children. Over meals, they speculated about mass points that were only rumors even to them, arguing whether or not certain Star Rider legends were true or merely the products of too much rum.

While I sit around and worry over whether my captain has pushed her luck just a little too far this time. I should have insisted on going myself, or in her place. Instead, I let her kite off with two young fools, and Marcus for her only real backup.

No, that isn't fair. Neva isn't a fool. But she's...inexperienced. Not who I would have chosen to go. And Rat won't be any use at all if they get into a tight spot.

He rolled over again. *It's in God's hands. Worrying doesn't help anything.*

The com beeped, startling him. There were few reasons that Tarak would wake him in the middle of his off-shift. "What is it?"

"A ship just made drop, Drake. *Devi's Challenge*."

"Any sign of the *Hermes*?"

"Negative."

Something had gone wrong. "I'm on my way."

* * *

Home at last, Neva thought.

The airlock between the *Challenge's* shuttle and the *Exile* opened with a soft puff of displaced air. Marcus helped Iluka through; although mostly recuperated from her injury, she still wasn't up to making zero-g maneuvers without assistance. Rat grabbed Neva's hand to steady her; his jacket bulged over his chest, where Jasmine hid beneath it.

Home.

Drake waited for them in gravity, a grin splitting his bearded face. "Welcome back," he said, then frowned when he saw that Iluka's arm was in a sling. "You're hurt."

Iluka snorted. "Zats got in a lucky shot, that's all. Tell you all about it in the galley—just give us a chance to settle in." She glanced around critically. "See you managed to keep my ship in one piece."

"Aye, Captain. The *Exile* is ready to go on your command."

They moved off, Drake briefing Iluka on the repairs to the ship as they went. Marcus walked away as well, in the direction of his quarters, without a word spoken to anyone. Neva sighed, hitched her bag higher on her shoulder, and thought longingly of peaceful sleep in her own bed. "It's good to be back," she said.

Rat had been watching Iluka and Drake, a faint smile on his face. Now he glanced at Neva, and the smile grew, just a little. "Yes. It is."

* * *

Rat sat in the galley, sipping from a cup of coffee and trying not to think about what he knew was to come. Instead, he let the pleasure of being in a familiar place with familiar people—even if they weren't all his friends—wash over him. It wasn't a feeling he was used to, after two years on the run, with no memories to ground him.

Drake cleared away the remains of the meal the crew had shared, and refilled Iluka's coffee without being asked. "Don't fuss—my legs didn't get shot off," she grouched, but Rat suspected she liked the treatment.

"So are you going to tell us what happened?" Anusha asked, her patience finally coming to an end.

Iluka put down her coffee and regarded them all with dark eyes. "Yes." Her gaze shifted to Rat alone, pinning him. "So. You felt something on Gethsemane. Marcus said not to talk on the *Challenge*, just in case, and he was right. You've had plenty of time to think about what you got from the stationmaster; now it's time to share with the rest of us."

She was right—he'd had plenty of time to think about it. But all the time in the universe didn't make it any easier to say. "You have to understand...what I get...it's not like a conversation. Not like me sitting here telling you something. Not so clear. Thoughts are

messy, mixed up with feelings, impressions, memories.”

Marcus's gray brows drew sharply together. “If you're saying that we went all that way for nothing—”

“No.” Rat swallowed, then forced his eyes to meet Marcus's briefly. “That isn't what I'm saying. I listened hard as I could, the whole time we were with the stationmaster. As hard as I dared, anyway. Iluka asked him about the *New Beginning*, and he started talking about...about how they were ready for the colonists.” He took a deep breath, wondering how to explain the murky tangle of whispers and images he'd gotten. “And that was how he thought of them. Colonists. But they weren't.”

Iluka spoke, calm but unyielding, as if she were trying to help him marshal his scattered thoughts. “What were they, Rat?”

“Slaves,” he whispered. “And worse. They were going to put them to work mining the planet, the one that isn't considered habitable.”

Drake frowned uncertainly. “Damned expensive proposition.”

“Not if you don't care whether your miners die.” Rat focused on the table, trying to keep his breathing even, his thoughts calm. “They were going to send the slaves down there and reap the profits, and if a few thousand died...there were always more to be had.”

“Death camps.” Drake's voice had a flat quality to it, as if the words were too terrible themselves to be invested with any further emotion.

“In the end. Yes. The stationmaster...he didn't know much, I don't think, but I got the impression that this is happening on a massive scale. People being rounded up and put on slave ships, transported to wherever the Zats need expendable labor. I don't know if they're taking slaves only from places where there has been trouble, rebellion, or if they're just depopulating worlds they want for themselves. I don't know.”

“Is that all?” Iluka asked quietly.

“Not quite. The stationmaster...like I said, he really thought of them as colonists. Even though he knew they were slaves. It's hard to explain, but there are layers to thoughts. Sometimes people can hold two incompatible thoughts at the same time, and believe them both.” Rat shook his head. “I think...I think that might be what they're telling people, though. The average citizens, anyway. That they're undertaking colonization projects, opening up new worlds and new opportunities.”

“And in the meantime, they're shipping slaves by secret routes, so that no one realizes what's really going on,” Iluka guessed.

“I think so.”

“I believe it,” Drake said, and now bitterness tinged his voice. “Zats are no different than anyone else—the rank and file will swallow any comforting lie they're told and ignore an ugly truth even when it's shoved in their faces. Want to exploit a planet that isn't yours? Ship off all the old inhabitants, then move in with a clear conscience, telling yourself the whole time that everyone who used to live here left because they wanted to, not because they were put in chains and stuffed in cargo holds.”

“It's an old scheme,” Iluka agreed. “But we're on to them now.”

Rat asked the question that had been aching inside him ever since Gethsemane. “So what do we do about it?”

“Alert the other captains, or those we think we can halfway trust.” Iluka pushed her chair back from the table and stood up. “I'll come up with some lie that explains how we learned about it—tell them that we used a data harvester on the Zats' computers when they weren't

looking, maybe.”

“How can we hope to stop this, though?” Tarak asked. He had been silent throughout, his blind eyes staring into nothing.

“I don’t know. Intercept the slave ships, maybe, and free those on board. Although where they’ll go after, I don’t know. Maybe Star Riders can help with that.” Iluka leaned across the table and put a hand to Tarak’s shoulder. “We’ll come up with something, never doubt it.”

One by one, the rest of the crew drifted from the galley, all of them looking troubled. Rat found himself alone, except for Jasmine, who was busy prying apart a fruit with her clever fingers. For a moment, Rat envied her intensely.

Should I have told them?

What would he have said, though? How to explain the final picture he’d received from the late stationmaster, the one that had made him cry out in horror and had inadvertently led to their disguise being blown?

There had been nothing but an image from memory, one that Rat wasn’t even sure the stationmaster had witnessed in person or merely seen on a vid. What connection it had with the *New Beginning* and the colonist-slaves he couldn’t guess. If it had any at all, and hadn’t just been the product of a random firing within the stationmaster’s brain.

The thing in the memory might once have been a girl or a woman. But now it was...merged with something else, some monster out of nightmare.

She wasn’t real. She couldn’t have been real. Just some twisted thought of the stationmaster’s, with nothing to do with anything.

Perhaps if he repeated it enough, he would even come to believe it.

* * *

Mirra Hunter finished her missive, wrapped an Obsidian Blade seal around it, and recorded the whole thing to a data tab. One of the station’s workers waited at her elbow; as soon as she handed it to him, he set off at a fast clip, headed for the docks where a courier ship was already warming its engines.

The dock master was waiting for her in the hall outside. “We have a vessel for you,” he said. “It’s only an F-class, but that’s the best we could do. We’re a mining station, not a military installation.”

His pale eyes begged her to be reasonable. Mirra ground her teeth in silent frustration. “Then that’s what I’ll have to take,” she said at last. She didn’t doubt that the dock master had commandeered the best vessel he could—he wanted her gone just as badly as she wanted to leave. “And crew?”

“My best people. Again, though...you must understand. Most of the military personnel stationed here were lost with their ship.”

Mirra’s mouth twisted in displeasure. Blades didn’t take the leavings of others, by the gods. They were the elite of the elite, and Command was smart enough to provide them with only the best.

No one had foreseen the unexpected twist her investigation had taken, however. Above all else, Blades had to be adaptable; even with the best equipment straight from Command’s black labs, combat was unpredictable. Mirra would make due with what she had.

“Get them on board and warm up the engines,” she said. “I want to be outbound by the

end of this shift.”

Leaving the dock master gaping like a man in vacuum, Mirra strode away in the direction of her quarters. Time was not on their side; Xian's trail was getting colder by the second. They had the vector that the pirate ship had left the system on; it headed straight for a known mass point. But from there, several possibilities existed...and that was only counting the destinations on the charts, let alone whatever secret places the Star Rider scum had uncovered and shared with their outlaw friends.

In the meantime, the courier would be pushing its crew to run her message. Her seal on it would ensure that they would be given top priority in lane assignments. If everything went as planned, the other Blades would be well on their way to join her by the time she came out of hyperspace. From there...

With any luck, someone will have left us a pointer, to let us know which way Xian went. It wasn't a certain thing—dealing with spies never was. Their very nature was duplicitous. If there is no pointer, then we'll split up and search every mass in reach.

Xian was still as clever as he had ever been—the fact that he had managed to elude capture for two years proved that much. *But I'm smarter. This time, there's no war to distract us, no crisis that will demand pulling the Blades elsewhere. No leaving his capture to ordinary soldiers who can barely find their own butts with both hands.*

Xian could run as far and as fast as he wanted. Because the moment he stopped for breath, Mirra would be there, waiting.

Chapter 13: Shore Leave

The soft glow of the small lights that Neva had set around the edge of the circle bathed the room in yellow twilight. Rat sat across from her, breathing in the scents of sandalwood and listening to the soothing sound of Neva doing the same. The whispers were faint, receded almost to nothing, just a murmur that told him she was relaxed and content.

I'm doing better. I am.

The whispers would never cease, but he could banish them from his conscious attention most of the time now. So long as there were no strong emotions flying at him, anyway.

Even then, I'm better. I didn't have a seizure on Gethsemane, even though what I heard from the stationmaster upset me. Before we began this, I think I would have. I'm certain of it.

Has any of this helped Neva, too? He knew that his friend was damaged in her own way. Both of them had been broken into pieces and patched back together, but his injuries were all on the inside.

She was hurt inside, too. Inside and out, far worse than I could ever imagine. He thought that she seemed a little calmer these days, a little more healed. Her hands no longer shook when she drew the circle with her athame. The words of the ritual brought peace now as well as grief, and he thought that some of her anger with the universe had drained away.

The light gleamed off the pentagram necklace that she now wore, the only memento that remained of her family. Her eyes were closed, the pale lashes like wings against her cheeks. The red ridges of scar tissue across her cheek and brow were still new enough to stand out against her white skin, and yet he had grown so used to them that they had become just a part of her, rather than a constant reminder of what she had endured.

But what do they matter? It's the scars inside that hurt the most, that take the longest to heal.

The com beeped, and Neva opened her eyes. Rat looked away, suddenly embarrassed to have been caught staring.

Anusha's voice sounded over com. "All personnel, report to duty stations. Thirty minutes until we reach End of the Line."

* * *

"I thought everyone was joking," Neva said. She stood at the foot of the boarding tube, gazing in disbelief at the sporadically-flickering sign that hung above the berth console: WELCOME! YOU HAVE REACHED END OF THE LINE.

"That's what the original miners who came here called it," Iluka said. Although Tarak had remained onboard to baby-sit the ship, the rest of the crew had disembarked. Now Iluka

led them away from the berth, through the standard tangle of gantries, umbilicals, and loading equipment that seemed to characterize every dock that Neva had seen on their journeys so far. There was a lift nearby; Iluka summoned it, then ushered everyone inside.

"But the Zats changed all the names, didn't they?" Neva asked once they were off the open dock. The inside of the lift was covered in graffiti scrawled in several different languages. PANGI SUCKS VACCUM said the nearest piece of wisdom, and Neva wondered who or what Pangi might be and what he, she, or it had done to offend the writer.

"They did," Drake agreed. "And it has an official designation. But End of the Line isn't the kind of place the Zats have much interest in. When it was first founded, it was a big mining operation. Most of the ore has been depleted by now, though. These days, we could fit its entire yearly output in our holds—if we had any holds."

"Which is why we're here," Iluka added, watching the level numbers tick by. "Like Drake said, this isn't exactly prime real estate—it's not even on the way to anywhere important. And it's never caused the Zats any overt trouble—during the war, the governor rolled over and surrendered before they were within two systems of here. So there isn't much of an occupation—a couple of officers who got on someone's shit list to land this assignment, plus their staff. Enough to maintain that official presence the Zats are so in love with, but that's about it. So End of the Line has become something of a smuggler's haven—all sorts of black-market stuff comes through here, nice and quiet. Star Rider ships can even dock—there's one berthed on the other side of the ring, as you might have noticed when we came in."

Neva winced—she had missed that. Although she'd read off the list of ship names when they were coming in, she still had no feel for what those names and registrations meant or implied.

The lift slowed, then opened onto an explosion of color, noise, and movement. In sharp contrast to the nearly-deserted docks, the marketplace before them was packed with bodies. People of every type made their way up and down the promenade, some stopping to browse the shops and kiosks, while others pushed through the crowd as if lives depended on their haste. A musician played on an exotic, but discordant, wind instrument, while a scantily-clad young man danced seductively to the beat. A few feet away, a group of what appeared to be freighter hands huddled around a woman shuffling cards; when she stopped, there came a mixture of curses and celebratory cries, and money changed hands.

An old man who reeked of alcohol lurched out of the crowd towards them, then grabbed Marcus by the elbow with one grease-stained hand.

"The aliens are coming to get us!" he yelled, revealing a gap where his front teeth should have been.

"Back off!" Marcus shoved the old man away with a snarl.

The man spun around in circles for a moment, seeming at loose ends, then staggered into the crowd. "Get us all!" Neva heard him howling. "Get us all!"

Anusha shook her head, then cast a glance at Rat. "Finally, we found somebody crazier than you, monkey-boy." But she grinned when she said it, and the words lacked the acid edge Neva had come to expect from her.

"I thought that Star Riders had legends about aliens," Drake said curiously.

Anusha snorted. "More like stories the granfers and granmers come up with to entertain the kids, or each other if they've had too much beer. I believe them as much as I believe that fool."

Neva watched the man disappear into the distance, wondering if there was anything that could be done for him. Clearly, he had psychiatric problems...but hadn't she been able to help Rat?

That was different, though. I don't have any training in this sort of thing...and anyone who did has been put out of business by the Zats.

Feeling suddenly depressed, she asked, "So why are we here?"

"Three reasons." Iluka held up one finger for each. "One is to round up some black-market information so we can get holds back on the *Exile*. The second is to have Anusha make contact with the Star Riders here and find out if they've heard anything about the Zats moving slaves. And the third is simple enough: shore leave."

"Shore leave?"

"Shore leave. We've been hard at it without a break since before you came aboard. End of the Line may not be anyone's idea of a vacation resort, but it does have the entertainments that most miners or freighter crews are going to be looking for: booze and brothels. You've all got four shifts to enjoy yourselves. Just keep one hand near your money and the other near your weapons."

"One more bit of advice for those who haven't been here before," Drake added. "The station was built in the good days before the ore started to run out, so it was built big. Refineries, docking space for huge freighters with hundreds of crewmembers each, things like that. Since then, a lot of it has been mothballed to save expenses. So before you open any doors, make sure there's air on the other side."

Wonderful, Neva thought sourly. None of this sounded even remotely appealing, and she wondered if Iluka would object to her turning around and going back onboard the *Exile* to keep Tarak company.

"Meet back here in four shifts," Iluka reminded them. "And if anyone sees any aliens, ask them what the Zats are up to, all right?"

The captain set off at a brisk pace, clearly having some destination already in mind. Drake went with her; she cast him an exasperated look but said nothing to dissuade him. Marcus and Anusha headed off on separate tangents, leaving Neva and Rat alone.

Neva eyed the crowds once again. "How are you feeling?" she asked, half-hoping Rat would provide her with some excuse to return to the ship.

He straightened a little, and she wondered if he would always hold himself slightly hunched, as if expecting a blow at any time. "Good. I think. Yes. Good."

Not the most reassuring answer. "We can go back to the ship if you need to."

"No." He shook his head, then seemed to hesitate. "If you want to go off by yourself, it's okay. Jasmine and I can manage." He touched the le-murr on his shoulder, as if reminding himself of her presence. She had looped her tail around his neck and was watching the crowd with wide-eyed interest.

And do what? "I'd rather we stayed together, if that's all right with you."

His quick smile told her that he had been more worried about being left to his own devices than she'd realized. "What do you want to do?"

"While we're here, we might as well sightsee," Neva decided, looking around at the crowded marketplace. "Let's start walking."

It didn't take Neva long to decide that Iluka's claim that the station was a smuggler's den must be true. After all, how else to explain the bewildering number and variety of items for sale? Jewelry, military rations with the insignia scratched off, old coats that might have

been uniforms re-dyed for civilian use, vids, readers, data tabs full of news years out of date, incense, toys, and religious paraphernalia crowded tables, shelves, and bins. There was even more being sold from under the counter; Neva caught sight of a man examining a battered Zatvian rifle that seemed to have appeared from nowhere, and which vanished just as quickly when he handed it back to the vendor with a shake of his head.

The brightly-flashing lights of one kiosk caught Rat's attention, so Neva drifted towards it. The owner, an enormous cinnamon-skinned woman with green-dyed hair, gave them a huge smile. "Greetings, sir!" she said to Rat, gesturing towards a display case as she did so. Inside was a complicated-looking apparatus with several odd attachments hanging from it. "Something to help with your lady's pleasure?"

Rat's eyes widened. "Er, no," Neva said, steering him away. Once they were out of earshot, she shook her head. "I'm not even sure what that was meant to do."

"I'm more worried about where the attachments were supposed to go."

Neva laughed, and after a minute Rat started to laugh, too. The sound lightened her heart unexpectedly.

"How are you holding up?" she asked once they had caught their breath.

"Okay." He touched Jasmine, who investigated his fingers with her nose, perhaps hoping for a treat. "Maybe...is there somewhere quieter we can go?"

Neva hoped he was talking about audible noise; if he referred to the babble that existed only in his head, they might have a problem. "Sure. Maybe we can find a bar that sells decent food."

They passed over the first few bars they came to; the places looked either too rowdy or too seedy. There were plenty of others to choose from, however, and it didn't take long before they found one that seemed safe enough. It was relatively large, but the crowd around the bar was sparse, and the counter had been cleaned at least once since the station had been built. There was a dance floor populated with couples, but the music wasn't unbearably loud as it had been in some of the other clubs.

As they approached the bar, however, a gray-haired man slouched on one stool looked up—and let out a loud groan.

"Not you two," Marcus growled. He tossed back the rest of his drink and stood up. "I have to put up with you and that freak onboard—do you have to follow me here, too?"

Neva frowned, nonplussed. "We didn't know you were here. We're just looking for somewhere to sit down and get some food. We won't bother you."

"That's right, because I won't be here." Marcus brushed by them, grumbling under his breath as he went.

Rat watched him go, distress bright in his amber eyes. "I'm sorry."

Neva slid onto the stool Marcus had vacated. "His problem, not yours."

"It's my fault he doesn't like you."

"It's his fault," she corrected. "Sit down and forget about him. We're supposed to be relaxing. Captain's orders, remember?"

The troubled look didn't leave his eyes, but he did as she told him. The barkeep took their orders for chaat, and a fruit snack for Jasmine. Neva got a glass of the local beer, but Rat asked for water. The barkeep had never had such a request, apparently, because he asked Rat for clarification three times before shrugging and heading off to fill their order.

"No beer?" Neva asked when they were alone again.

Rat shook his head. "I don't...I'm afraid of what the alcohol might do to me."

A reasonable worry, she decided as the bartender brought their drinks. She knew exactly how alcohol affected normal brain function—but Rat's brain was anything but normal. *A few drinks might be fine, but enough to get him drunk might be a disaster.*

Or a few might not be fine. One might be enough to send him out of control.

Or ten might not make any difference at all. There's no way of knowing.

"I wish I could tell you whether it would be safe or not," she said at last. "But when I was in med school, I didn't study much neuro. I didn't think I would need more than the basics."

"What were you going to do?" Rat asked. "I mean, specifically."

Their food arrived, and Neva used the distraction to give herself time to think. "I don't know," she said at last. "I mean, I knew that I wanted to help people. To heal people. But I didn't have any driving passion beyond that." She shook her head. "I guess I just thought that I would find work in a practice, treat the general, everyday problems that most doctors see. Get handfasted to Devin. Live an uneventful life."

The description felt hollow to her. *Is that all I wanted? Is it what I want now?* Somehow, it no longer felt right to her, although she couldn't imagine what she might have chosen differently. *And does it really matter anymore? Harvest is gone, and the chances that I'll ever practice medicine anywhere other than the Exile are slim to none.*

Perhaps Rat sensed her distress, because he turned the conversation to lighter topics as they finished their meals. When they were done, he glanced at Neva, then in the direction of the dance floor.

"Would you...that is, I was wondering..."

"Would the lady care to dance?" asked an unfamiliar voice from Neva's right.

Startled, she turned to the speaker. A young man leaned against the bar, his handsome face lit up by an easy smile. Like Rat, he was golden-skinned, although his eyes were dark and lacked an epicanthic fold. Black hair hung in rows of braids to his waist; gold and copper wire threaded through the braids, sparkling whenever he moved. He wore a necklace decorated with gemstones carved into the likenesses of animals, and his clothing was stylish. A series of small stars were tattooed on his right cheek, beneath the eye.

A Star Rider, like Anusha and Tarak.

"Forgive me for intruding," he said, giving a little bow to Neva. Rat, he ignored altogether. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Keid."

"Neva," she replied automatically.

"A name as lovely as the one who bears it," Keid said with a dazzling smile. "I fear this station offers little in the way of cultivated entertainment, but there is always dancing. Would you do me the honor of spending a little time on the floor with me?"

Neva looked at him skeptically. His outrageous flattery appealed to a part of her, and yet put her off at the same time. *No wonder Rat says mind-reading is confusing.*

She started to tell Keid that she would stay where she was, thanks, but something made her hesitate. *It's just a simple request to dance, Neva. It isn't as if he's asking you to marry him. He isn't even asking you to like him.*

Besides, he's gorgeous.

"All right," she said. "I'll be back after this song, Rat, okay?"

Her companion nodded, but didn't look directly at her, so she had no way of guessing his thoughts. She remembered he had been about to ask her something before Keid had interrupted. "I'm sorry—what were you going to ask me?"

Rat shook his head. "Nothing important."

Keid offered his hand, and Neva took it, letting him lead her to the dance floor. The music was slow enough to force couples to dance close together. Keid took the lead without asking, a bit of arrogance that annoyed Neva immediately. "So, Neva, is this your first time visiting End of the Line?" he asked lightly.

"No," she lied. Although she felt certain the question was harmless, there was no sense in giving away more of the *Exile's* business than she had to. "What about you?"

"I have been everywhere at least once," he bragged.

Oh, please.

"But what of your companion?" he asked, leaning closer to her. "He will not be jealous of our dance, will he?"

The very idea was ludicrous. "No."

"Then perhaps you will be free for...other things...later on?"

Goddess save me, this is getting old fast. "I'm sorry, but I have to get back to my ship." No matter how gorgeous Keid might be, it wasn't worth putting up with his personality.

The crowd shifted, and Neva looked away from her partner's dark eyes, hoping for an opportunity to change the topic. Five men and women, all dressed in the casual jumpsuits of dockhands, stood in a loose circle around them. All of them were staring at her and Keid, and none looked happy.

"Keid," said a big, dark-skinned man with a shaven head. His voice was a deep rumble that vied with the bass of the music.

Keid's smile faltered, then recovered. "Ah, Parson, what can I do for you?"

"You know what. You have something of ours. We want it back."

Neva felt her heart sink. *Fantastic. I dance with one man, and end up in the middle of a dispute.*

"I see you all have things to discuss," she said, taking a step away from Keid. The dockhands didn't move, however, and she found herself bumping up against a chest that felt as solid as a wall.

"I'm afraid I don't have any idea what you could mean," Keid said to Parson. "What's more, you're interrupting a very personal negotiation." He nodded significantly in Neva's direction. She restrained the urge to punch him in the face.

Parson was unmoved. "We'll see about that. You and your hooker are coming with us."

"His *what?* I'm not a—"

"Save it." Something cold and hard poked her in the back, and with a sudden frisson of fear she realized that it was the muzzle of a gun. "Come on—and don't think about making a scene. You won't like the results."

* * *

Rat sat the bar, shredding a napkin and determinedly *not* listening for any whispers that might come from Neva. He didn't want to invade her privacy, he told himself. Instead, he focused on Jasmine, who sat on the stool next to him, playing with a fork. She enjoyed the attention, at least.

It helped him block out Neva, but it didn't help him escape his own thoughts. There was no reason, he told himself, to be upset just because she was dancing with someone else. No reason to take an immediate and utter dislike to Keid. No reason to feel the slightest bit of

resentment towards the suave, charming, handsome, and presumably sane man. No reason at all.

The napkin torn to shreds, he set about reducing it to its component molecules.

One song ended and the next began, but Neva didn't come back. *This is crazy. So what if she's dancing with Keid, having a good time? Who cares?*

I don't like him. That's what it is. I...just...don't...like...him.

Calm. He took a deep breath, reaching for the inner stillness he had learned in the circle. *It's dangerous, feeling this way. I might not like Keid, but what if I hurt him because of that?*

Suddenly worried, he swiveled around to look for Neva. He would catch her attention, let her know that he had decided to go back to the *Exile*. If she wanted to come with him, he would welcome the company. If she didn't...then it was her choice. None of his business.

There was no sign of either Neva or Keid on the dance floor.

Maybe they left. But that wasn't like Neva. She would have let him know that she was going, of that he was certain.

Unless...unless he forced her to leave with him?

Alarm flared, sending adrenaline shocking into his blood. Summoning Jasmine, he hurriedly paid for their meal with some of the money Drake had given him from the ship's payroll. Hoping that he had simply missed seeing Neva amidst the movement of the other dancers, he went to the dance floor himself. But there was no sign of Neva, nor any way of guessing where she had gone.

Telling himself not to panic, he left the bar, then stopped on the promenade outside, scanning the crowd for any flash of pale hair. There was none.

Neva was gone.

* * *

The dockhands took Neva and Keid to what appeared to be an abandoned section of the station. Someone—perhaps one of their captors—had either managed to covertly divert heat and air to the section, or else had bribed the station workers in charge of such things to do it for them. With a sinking feeling, Neva realized that there would be no one nearby to hear any cries for help...or any screams, for that matter.

The dockhands were a grim lot, and their surroundings matched their attitude. Neva didn't know what the function of the room had once been, but it seemed to have a lot of exposed pipes, all of which were slowly turning to rust. The walls and floor were stained and scratched, and the air had a chemical scent that made her sinuses burn. It was cold enough to make her shiver, and she wished that she had worn something heavier than a sleeveless shirt. None of the lights in the room seemed to work, so the only illumination came from flashlights held by three of the dockhands.

Keid had tried to talk to them on the walk here, but the attempt earned him a punch in the gut as soon as they were out of sight of any witnesses. Now he was silent, his beautiful face drawn with worry.

One of the dockhands had been carrying the sort of straps used to tie down cargo crates; now, she used the straps to secure the prisoners' hands to two of the pipes. Neva shivered as the chilly metal touched her skin, and she tried desperately to think what she could say to make these people let her go.

What's become of Rat? Is he sitting at the bar, thinking I left him without a word? She

wanted to believe that he might be looking for her, but it seemed more likely that he would think she had decided to go off with Keid. That thought made her feel even worse.

The leader, Parson, came over as soon as they were secured and positioned himself in front of them, his hands folded. "All right, Star Rider scum," he said. "Tell us what you did with our data tab, and we'll let you go."

Keid drew himself up and pretended to nonchalance. "I don't have it, Parson. I'm innocent."

"Why don't I believe you?" Parson gestured in the direction of one of his companions. "Perhaps Leigh here can help you remember what you did with it."

The woman smiled and cracked her knuckles threateningly.

Neva swallowed, feeling a tingle of fear. "By the Goddess, if you have it, tell him where it is," she hissed at Keid.

Parson nodded sagely. "Your woman's smarter than you are, friend. Better take her advice."

"I'm not his woman! I only met him five minutes before you came in."

"Bad luck for you, then. You ought to be more careful whom you dance with. Not that you'll have a chance to put that advice to use...unless this thieving Star Rider decides to cooperate."

Keid shrugged as well as he was able with his hands tied behind his back. "On my honor, I don't have your tab. Search me if you don't believe me."

"Then you hid it somewhere," Parson replied implacably.

Leigh drew closer, a knife in her scarred hands. "Let me make his face match the woman's," she suggested with a nasty smile. "Or...maybe the bitch knows something, too. Maybe I ought to give her a whole new set of scars, huh?"

Oh Goddess, no...

* * *

Rat stopped and leaned against a wall. He was at the edge of the marketplace, where the last kiosks and stores dwindled to empty, sealed spaces, so no one noticed when he slid slowly to the floor. Jasmine hopped from his shoulder to his lap, and he began to pet her determinedly, trying to use the rhythm to order his thoughts.

He'd asked everyone he came across whether they had seen a pale-haired woman with a scarred face. Most only shook their heads and hurried away, but a few vendors or shoppers had remembered her. They claimed to have seen her in the midst of a group of others, including a Star Rider. Some of them even remembered which direction she had gone in.

They took her. But who? Why? Where?

As his own stress grew, it became harder and harder to ignore the murmur of a thousand voices in his head. Glimpses, flashes, assaulted him as he walked, making it more difficult to concentrate, to stay focused. People began to turn away even as he approached them, and he realized they were reacting to him the way Marcus had to the madman earlier. *Don't talk; don't look. Stay away from the crazy person.*

Have to get control. Have to block it all out. Have to.

And then what? There was no one left to ask. No indication where Neva had gone. How was he ever going to find her now?

A thought entered his mind, so frightening it made his heart skip. *What if I don't block it*

all out? What if I open up...and listen for her?

It was an experiment he had tried on the *Exile*. Nowadays, Iluka left the com open to the bridge, so that he could stay informed during maneuvers. A sign of growing trust, he supposed. But before, during the ambush of the courier ship, when he'd been isolated from them, he'd had no way of knowing what was happening.

So...he had listened. He hadn't pushed, hadn't reached, hadn't demanded. But he had concentrated on the voices...just a little.

On a ship with a crew of six other people, he'd been able to listen without being overwhelmed. Doing the same on a station of thousands...was another thing altogether.

If I lose control...if I go into a seizure...I'm giving up all possibility of finding her.

What else am I going to do?

He could go back to the *Exile* and try to get help. Perhaps Iluka could be found, or Drake, or even Anusha or Marcus. *That will take time, though. What if they hurt Neva in the mean time? What if they kill her?*

He looked down in Jasmine's large eyes and felt her distress. **not like, fear, want (woman, pale, nice)**

"All right," he murmured to her. "Let's see what happens."

Hoping that no one came along and tried to take advantage of his distraction to rob him, he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. He tried to ignore the discomfort and pretend that he was back in the circle with Neva. A few deep breaths centered him...and then he cautiously, cautiously began to concentrate on the incessant whispers.

They were multitude, an unending babble, some louder than others from either proximity or emotion. It was like standing in the middle of a huge crowd, trying to sort a single voice from all the rest.

His only advantage was that Neva's "voice" was more familiar to him than any other, thanks to all the time they had spent together since coming aboard the *Exile*. Holding his memory of her fixed in his mind, he concentrated on finding it amidst all the others, even as the clamor rose in volume, threatening to push him over the edge...

(fear)

Rat grasped wildly at the whisper, too afraid of losing it again to worry about what might happen.

Goddess no, don't let her cut me, don't let her cut either of us, Keid tell them what they want to know (anger, distrust, dislike)

Rat's heart hammered in his chest. Neva was in danger. Terrified, he concentrated on her, trying desperately to get a fix on her location. *Where are you?*

(pain, taste of blood, confusion) they didn't touch me, why am I bleeding, where are you, Rat?

Where are you? he thought wildly. *Where?*

He caught a glimpse of a door, a corridor, a room. Then the sensation of **pain** spiked suddenly, and the horrible realization that he was hurting her came with it. With a gasp, he let his concentration break, focusing on the feel of the wall against his back, Jasmine's weight on his legs.

Goddess, don't let me have hurt her.

Pulling Jasmine into his arms, he lurched to his feet, looking wildly about. Neva had come this way—he knew it. All he had to do was find the door he had seen in her mind, and he would find her.

* * *

Pain spiked behind Neva's eyes, and she hissed involuntarily. The taste of blood filled her mouth, and she felt something warm and wet dripping over her lips and chin.

"What the—what's wrong with you?"

Neva blinked, trying to clear her vision. There were blind spots in it, like the onset of a migraine, but they faded after a few seconds.

What happened? What...?

Rat. He's looking for me—he must be.

The dockhand with the knife shifted from foot to foot. "I said what's wrong with you?" she demanded, but there was a trace of nervousness in her voice.

The sound gave Neva sudden inspiration. It wasn't difficult to summon a look of horror. "Oh no," she gasped.

Parson moved closer, pushing his cohort out of the way. "What? What is it?"

"We-we did salvage on a derelict ship," Neva stammered, grabbing the first story that came to mind. "Some kind of virus had killed the crew—but the doc said we'd be fine, that the filters would protect us!"

Parson frowned uncertainly. "You're saying that you're sick?"

Neva nodded, hoping she looked appropriately terrified. "Oh Goddess, I don't want to die! Take me to the hospital!"

"To hell with this!" said Leigh, shoving her knife in her belt and backing away.

"It's just a nosebleed," Parson snapped at her.

"And what if it isn't? I didn't sign up to die from some weird disease!"

Either Keid suspected that Neva was faking, or else had nerves enough to use her apparent malady to his advantage. "My brother died from Muarish Fever," he cried, leaning as far away from Neva as his bonds would let him. "It began like this! First bleeding from the nose, and then from everywhere else. Stars, get me away from her, I beg of you! She's contagious!"

"Screw this," said one of the dockhands, and a moment later four of the five were making for the exit.

Parson, however, wavered. "This is some kind of Star Rider trick," he said, although he didn't sound entirely certain. Pulling a small gun from his pocket, he pointed the muzzle at Keid. "Tell me what you did with my tab, or I'll vaporize your head."

Something white bounded across the room, teeth bared in a furious snarl. Startled, Parson flinched from it, then spun, his flashlight beam tracking wildly. But the creature had disappeared into the midst of the pipes.

Jasmine.

"What the hell is going on here?" Parson demanded, turning back toward Neva and Keid.

There came the sound of flesh on flesh, and the big man crumpled. His flashlight and gun fell from nerveless hands; the light rolled a few feet, sending crazy shadows spinning everywhere and illuminating Rat's face.

"Rat!" Neva's heart soared at the sight of him.

He picked up the flashlight and came over to her. A lopsided grin crossed his mouth. "Yeah."

Neva leaned over as far as she could so that he could get to the straps holding her to the pipe. "Thank the Goddess." Freed, she stepped away, rubbing circulation back into her hands while Rat untied Keid. Her foot brushed against Parson's outflung hand, but the man didn't so much as twitch. A quick check showed that he was breathing, but completely unresponsive. "What did you do to him?"

Rat shrugged, dropping Keid's bonds on the floor and moving away from the man. "I...I'm not sure. I saw him standing there, his back turned, and I just...acted."

Interesting. But it would have to wait for later, when they didn't have an audience. "Keid, do you want to explain what these people were looking for?"

"No. I don't think I do."

She turned, intending to point out that she had been kidnapped and thus deserved some sort of explanation, but the words died in her throat. Keid stood in front of her, Parson's gun in his hand. The bore was aimed directly between her eyes.

"Don't move, friend, or I'll shoot her," Keid advised Rat. "That goes the same for your pet, as well."

Anger rolled through Neva's veins like acid. "What do you want from us?"

"Just my tab. Check your topmost pants pocket, left hand side."

Startled, Neva slid her hand into the pocket and found something small and cold inside. "What the—you set me up!"

"Of course." Keid smiled charmingly. "I had hoped to get rid of the merchandise before Parson and his lot found me. When that failed, I thought that I might persuade them of my innocence—which, of course, required them *not* finding their tab in my possession."

"So you planted it on me."

He shrugged negligently. "You were an easy target, were you not? It was not hard to guess that a disfigured woman would be pathetically grateful for whatever attention I chose to pay. A few sweet words, an offer to dance, and you were right where I wanted you. If Parson hadn't come in at the wrong moment, everything would have worked out perfectly."

Neva felt her face heat with shame. *He's right. I was a fool.*

Keid extended his hand. "Now, give me the tab, and we'll go our separate ways. I will be generous, however—I am willing to give you a pity fuck, so long as the lights are off—"

Keid's whole body jerked suddenly, as if someone had grabbed his spinal cord and yanked. The whites of his eyes gleamed under fluttering lids, and blood sprayed out of his nose. A moment later, he collapsed bonelessly to the floor.

Neva leaned against the nearest wall, feeling as if her legs were about to give out from under her. Rat ran over to her, then stopped, looking helpless. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Did you mean to do that?"

He nodded. Concern filled his amber eyes, and he reached out and touched her very, very lightly on the cheek. "There's blood on your face."

"It's nothing."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I'm all right. Really." Somehow, she managed a shaky smile for him. "Thank you for finding me."

"Always."

Their gazes met and held unexpectedly. There was something about his oddly-colored eyes, she thought distractedly, that seemed to draw her in and refused to let go. He took a sip of breath, as if he meant to say something, but no words came out. Then he abruptly leaned

forward and brushed his lips awkwardly against hers.

As kisses went, it wasn't much, but nevertheless she felt her heart lurch in her chest. For a moment, her mind blanked; she didn't know if she should push him away or return the kiss with interest. Then Keid let out a low moan.

"We should get back to the ship," Neva said uncertainly.

"Yeah." Rat didn't say anything more, only gathered Jasmine and led the way out of the room and down the hall. As they stepped out of the door into the inhabited section of the station, however, a man in the uniform of the station police moved in front of them.

"Hey—you're not supposed to go there!" he snapped. "Can't you see the warning signs? You're coming with me."

* * *

Neva sighed as the guard opened the door to the holding cell. As far as she could tell, the motto of the station police was: we are impervious to logic. No arguments would convince them to let Rat and her go free. On the other hand, she suspected that their main motive was not so much to punish two trespassers as to extort bail money from their captain. Although the guards had taken any obvious weapons from them, the search hadn't been thorough, and they were being put into the cell together, along with Jasmine and all their other possessions. Minus some of their money, anyway.

The cell was small and dingy, and held only three other prisoners. Two of them seemed to be sleeping off a drunk on the floor, while the third sat on a bench with his head in his hands. As the door shut behind them, he looked up and let out a groan.

"Christ," Marcus said. "Not you two *again*."

Chapter 14: Closing the Snare

Neva stood in the open doorway to the *Exile's* rec room, watching as Marcus and Rat circled one another warily. The rec room was tiny, made even more so by the fact that most of it had been converted into the ship's main armory. Gun lockers and crates of weapons that Neva didn't even want to contemplate took up most of the space. What little was left over was normally dedicated to a small weight bench, a card table, and a vidset. Today, these had either been folded into the walls or stowed elsewhere, and the rec room had become an impromptu sparring ring.

Marcus, dressed in a tanktop that revealed the defined musculature of a fighter, held up his fists in a boxer's stance. Rat wore only a loose pair of sweatpants; if he'd ever possessed muscles like Marcus', they were long gone now. Still, Neva thought, he moved with a sort of grace as he circled with the other man, and he had the advantage of quickness.

Marcus lunged abruptly. Rat ducked out of the way—then brought one leg up in a sharp kick that connected solidly with Marcus' ribs.

Both men yelped and stumbled. Marcus recovered faster, or else was more prepared; a moment later, his fist connected with Rat's face, and the younger man went to the floor like a dropped sack of wet laundry.

"Are you all right?" Neva asked, hurrying forward, just in case Marcus decided to keep at it when Rat was down. Rat sat up and gingerly touched his lower lip; it was split and already swelling rapidly.

"Want to go another round?" Marcus asked nastily. Neva glanced up at him and saw his satisfied smile, as if knocking down Rat had somehow proven his own worth.

"I'm fine," Rat said, ignoring Marcus' taunt. "But...I don't think we should try that again."

Footsteps sounded in the hall outside; a moment later, Iluka appeared. They were still headed outbound from End of the Line, and the captain had spent most of her waking moments on the bridge. Her sharp gaze took in the scene, then snapped to Marcus' face. "Well?"

"He does fine against a practice dummy," Marcus said, as if Rat weren't there. "But put him up against a live opponent, and he's useless."

"He isn't useless," Neva snapped. "He got me free on End of the Line. I'd like to see you do as well."

"What about that, crazy man?" Iluka asked. "You want to tell me what the problem is?"

Rat didn't meet her eyes. "Parson had his back turned," he said, so quietly they could barely hear him. "He lost consciousness before the pain could even register."

Marcus stilled, and the smugness vanished from his face. "Are you poking around in my

mind? Because if you are—”

“Not like that.” Rat shook his head, still staring determinedly at the floor. “I don’t listen. I don’t. But when I touch someone...it makes the voices louder. Can’t ignore them anymore. I hurt you, it hurts me too.”

Iluka’s look became thoughtful. “So you can shoot someone from a distance, because you aren’t touching them.”

“Yes. It’s fainter...easier to ignore.”

“Huh.” Iluka transferred her attention to Neva. “Can you fix that?”

Neva bit down on her sudden surge of temper. “He’s human being, not a piece of equipment.”

“Didn’t say he was. You’ve fixed him up pretty good so far. What’s different about this?”

Neva sighed. She was so far out of her depth... yet Iluka refused to acknowledge it and took any sign of progress as vindication that she had been right to give Neva this assignment in the first place. “Because there’s only so far we can go. We’re primates, Captain. We’ve been programmed by a few million years of evolution to pay attention to touch. Infants who aren’t touched develop profound learning disabilities and other problems that can never be completely overcome. Massage can be used to relieve physical discomfort, not only because of direct stimulation of the muscles, but because it causes a chemical response within the brain itself.”

“So?”

“So if touch amplifies Rat’s disability, the response might be something happening on an instinctive level. It may not be something he can just shut off, no matter how much he might want to.”

Iluka’s mouth tightened slightly. “All right,” she said grudgingly.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Rat said to the floor.

“Hmph. Not your fault. I’m guessing the Zats weren’t considering what would be convenient for us when they started poking holes in your head. Go get a shower, and then meet me at the ‘suit locker. I’ve got a present for you.”

Iluka walked away without explanation. Neva and Rat traded a baffled look. As far as Neva knew, the only things they’d taken away from End of the Line were a single hold that was now strapped to the spine of the ship, and the data tab Keid had tried to plant on her.

“Better do what she says.” Rat picked himself up off the floor and left without another glance at Marcus. Neva followed him.

They went to his makeshift quarters in the laundry. Rat’s bare feet padded softly on the scuffed decking of the hall, and Neva saw goosebumps on his golden skin now that he wasn’t exerting himself anymore. Jasmine had been locked in the room, in case the fight upset her, and she began to chatter shrilly when Rat opened the door.

The drying unit dinged softly, signaling the end of a cycle. Rat sighed and opened it, then began to unload the clothing. From the look of the feminine underwear on top of the heap, Neva guessed it belonged to Anusha.

“Don’t let Iluka push you too far,” Neva said, leaning against the doorframe.

“I won’t.” Rat began to dutifully fold the clothes, a chore that had fallen to him since he bunked in the room.

Silence fell between them, but it felt awkward, at least to Neva. She hesitated, then cleared her throat. “Rat...about what happened on End of the Line...”

"Being kidnapped?"

"No."

"Having to wait for Iluka to bail us out of jail?"

"No," she started impatiently—then saw the small grin on his mouth. "You're teasing me."

"A little."

That relaxed her. If nothing else, they were still friends. "I care about you, Rat. You know I do. But it's...complicated."

His hands stilled in the act of folding a shirt. "I know."

"You're my patient, and I'm not sure how ethical it would be to...to be more than friends."

His glanced at her suddenly, and she felt as if his amber eyes looked straight through her pupils into her skull. "No. That isn't it. It's Devin."

Hearing someone else speak Devin's name was a shock; she felt as if the floor had slid sideways beneath her. "Yes. I suppose so. He's been dead for two years, though, and I miss him, but I think I've come to accept his death."

"You have." Rat's voice was quiet, soft. "It's your life you can't accept."

She could feel all the old guilt, like something rotting inside her. "I guess. I just...it doesn't seem fair that I can do things...enjoy myself...when he's dead. When everyone is dead. My mother and father, my brother...everyone I ever knew in my entire life. It doesn't seem fair that I'm alive and they aren't."

"It isn't. Is it meant to be?"

The question startled her. "What?"

"Is it meant to be fair?"

"I don't understand."

He sighed and went back to folding clothes. "Am I...like this...because I did something wrong? Is that what fair is? Did I do something bad, and now I'm being punished? Is it karma? The threefold law? And if it is, why didn't something even worse happen to the people who destroyed your planet? Or what did everyone else on Harvest do that was so bad that they all died and you and a few others didn't?"

"So what you're saying is that life isn't fair, and I shouldn't be upset because it isn't."

"No." He put the pile of clothing to the side and turned to her. "It's okay to be upset about it. But punishing yourself won't balance the scales. It won't bring justice. You just...have to forgive yourself. Somehow."

Neva leaned her head back against the wall, feeling the cold metal through the thin shield of her hair. "I know all of that, intellectually. But it isn't that easy to know it in my heart."

"Yeah."

"I just need time to think about things."

"I know. It's all right."

She opened her eyes and looked at him...really *looked* at him, as a stranger might. Although he had gained weight during his time on the *Exile*, he was slight of build, and would never have either Marcus' or Tarak's solid presence. His dreadlocks and goatee gave him a slightly scruffy appearance, but that only added to his quirky charm. His full lips and the texture of his hair hinted at a different ethnic background than did his almond-shaped eyes and high cheekbones, and she wondered what world had spawned him, or if he was the

child of spacers.

His faint smile was typical of the gentle, quiet man she knew. *But he shot three men on Gethsemane without flinching.* That, too, was part of the conundrum he represented.

"I like what I see," she said aloud.

"So do I."

Neva put her hand to the ridge of scar tissue on her cheek. "You don't have to say that."

Rat's mouth tightened slightly, and he reached out and gently pulled her hand away from her face. "Keid was wrong."

She felt herself flush a bit at the reminder. "No. The truth might not be pretty, but that doesn't make it any less the truth."

His fingers squeezed hers slightly, then let go. "I never knew you without the scars. To me...they're just a part of you, that's all. Nothing more or less." He turned to the laundry, then stopped and glanced back at her. "I wouldn't lie to you."

"I know. Thank you." She straightened and stepped out the door, letting it swish closed behind her.

* * *

Rat met Iluka at the 'suit locker. They 'suited up, and switched their helmet coms to a private frequency. The lift was already on their level; once they were inside, Iluka punched the button that would take them to the spine.

"I know I mentioned that End of the Line is a smuggler's heaven," Iluka said as they rode up towards the center of the ship. "One of the things you can get there are false holds."

So that's where we're going—a cold hold. "And things that you need a false hold to hide?" he guessed.

She grinned, a brief flash of white teeth in her dark face. The lines around her mouth were etched deep, as if she had spent a lifetime laughing. He remembered that the original crew of the *Exile* had been her kin, and he wondered how long it had taken her to laugh again after their deaths. She hadn't forgotten them; a few times during their voyage, he'd caught a flash of **grief** or a fragment of memory, jogged by the sight of some familiar thing. But if she hadn't forgotten, she had somehow come to terms with her loss and moved decisively on.

The lift stopped and the doors opened into the chill of the spine. Iluka soared confidently out into the zero-g corridor, and Rat followed. There was little light here, save for the low red glow that marked the hatches. All of them opened onto vacuum at the moment, except for a single one distinguished by a bright green light.

"Hatch code," Iluka said without preamble, and punched it in so that he could see. "Got that memorized?"

Rat nodded. "Aye, Captain. I have a good memory. Except for the amnesia."

Iluka let out a bark of laughter and punched the door open. They cycled through the hatch's airlock. The hold beyond contained, not cargo, but instead a latticework of what looked like gantries and umbilicals. In the center of it all was a dark, sleek form that took up most of the space.

"Is that... a fighter?" he asked, barely daring to guess.

"It is indeed. Let's go take a look at it."

Iluka led the way to the fighter's hatch; there was space inside the cockpit only for a single pilot, so she moved aside and gestured to the seat. "Hop in and let me know what you

think.”

Rat's hands trembled as he climbed inside. Knowledge boiled up out of that blank space in his brain, letting him adjust the seat and web in. Although the configuration of the fighter didn't feel exactly right, it was close enough that he knew he would be able to pilot it without much difficulty.

“The hold opens up and lets the fighter launch,” Iluka explained, watching him closely as he ran his gloved hands over the boards, calling up a preflight checklist.

Rat felt his spirits rising. Sitting at the controls of a fighter...it felt like coming home, somehow. But at the same time, it *was* a fighter, with all that implied. “What are we...am I...going to do with it?”

“We cracked the encryption on that data tab Neva brought us,” Iluka said. “Turns out that it has the route information for a regular Zat supply run. I don't know what the thief she got it from was going to use it for, but I know what we're going to do. We're going to ambush them and demand they drop their holds, or else we'll send their whole ship to hell. The problem is that we have to slow to match speed of the holds so we can get them attached to the *Exile*. That's where you come in—you sit out and keep an eye on the Zat supply ship, make sure they don't try anything sneaky while we load.”

“Is that all?”

“Hopefully. If they have a fighter escort, you might have to do some dog-fighting. Going by what you did with the *Hermes*, that shouldn't be a problem. Am I wrong?”

Feeling a tug of regret, he powered the boards back down. “No, Captain. You aren't.”

* * *

Mirra Hunter stood with her hands clasped behind her back and watched as Matheson and Aguila deposited their prisoner in a chair. The interrogation room on Outpost 1A, Sector 6—called End of the Line by the rebellious locals—was small and barren. The walls, floor, and ceiling had begun life coated in bright white paint; years of dirt and abuse had rendered them a neutral shade of gray. A single battered chair stood in the center of the room, now occupied by the prisoner. There had been another chair, but Mirra had ordered it removed. She preferred to stand during interrogations; it reinforced the disparity in power between herself and her subject.

Mirra studied the prisoner carefully. He was strikingly handsome, which was an unexpected bonus. At least she would have something pleasant to look at. Only the stars tattooed on his face marred his looks, irrefutable proof of his involvement in a forbidden organization. Reports suggested that he'd had a Project Zero encounter; if so, it had left no permanent mark on him.

Aguila handed her the tab with the datafile detailing his imprisonment. She glanced at them, then back at the prisoner. “The only name listed is ‘Keid.’ Is that your surname?”

Despite his desperate circumstances, the man tried to smile. “It is my only name, lovely lady.”

“How primitive.” She pretended to peruse the tab some more, although of course she had already read it in its entirety before she'd called for him. “According to this, you were arrested after being found in an unauthorized area.”

Keid looked aggrieved, the perfect portrait of a man unjustly accused. “I was set upon by brigands—”

"Then you'll be pleased to know that the Cooperative is cleaning up this station," she said smoothly. As soon as they had entered the system, it had been obvious that authority was not being properly exercised here. There had even been a Star Rider ship docked openly at the station, although it had turned tail and fled as soon as they had showed up on beacon.

Even now, squads of guards led by individual Blades were moving methodically through the station, seizing contraband, executing criminals, and restoring order to this benighted outpost. Keid was probably unaware of this, given that he had been cooling his heels in prison since well before their arrival.

"Your ship left without you, Star Rider," she said. "Did you know that?"

Keid paled. "They wouldn't."

"So you admit to being a Star Rider?"

He started to deny it, then stopped, no doubt wondering which answer would spare him. Not that the tattoos on his face would give much credibility to a lie.

"You are in a great deal of trouble," Mirra said, shaking her head in mock sadness. "You are the acknowledged member of a forbidden organization. Your shipmates ran when we entered the system, leaving you in jail. I'm told they didn't even try to post bail. I wonder what you did that made you such a liability that they didn't care to claim you."

"Are you charging me with something?" Keid asked. "If so, I demand access to legal counsel."

"Denied." Mirra moved closer, so that he had to crane his neck back to look up at her. "You have one chance, Keid. If you cooperate fully, some of the charges against you may be overlooked."

"What... what do you want?"

"Just for you to answer some questions. Simple questions, actually. Here's one to begin with. We learned that a ship came here with no holds. That's odd, don't you think? Honest trading ships never put into port without holds, unless they've suffered some mishap in space. This ship did not put in a request for repairs, or even file a report on lost cargo, so a mishap seems unlikely. Do you know the ship I'm speaking of?"

Keid shook his head.

Mirra took out a handful of printouts that had been made from the security cameras on Outpost 32-G, Sector 2. "Do any of these people look familiar to you?"

Keid's dark eyes narrowed as he inspected the pictures. "These two! These are the bandits who attacked me."

One of the faces he pointed to belonged to Xian Jackson. The other was a woman. "What names did they go by?"

"The bitch called herself Neva. He was Rat."

"Neva and...Rat?" For a moment, she wondered if there had not been some mistake. Xian had always been sensitive about his poverty-stricken origins, to the point that any insult or slight to his pride had been cause for retribution. Surely he wouldn't allow anyone to call him such a derogatory nickname?

"Yes," said Keid with a sneer. "Rat. It fit him well. The woman lured me to dance with her, then tricked me into a secluded area, where they attacked me without reason."

"You're lying," Mirra said. "How boring and predictable. Don't you realize how tiresome it is for me to issue the same threats over and over again? Please, try to have a little consideration for others. Do you know what the insignia on my uniform means?"

He shook his head silently, and she wondered if something of the danger was finally

starting to sink into his paltry brain.

"This is the insignia of the Obsidian Blades. We're soldiers, Keid. Only the very best can join our unit. Our orders come directly from Command. So believe me when I say that I have a certain amount of influence. Tell me the truth, and the charges against you will be dropped. Lie to me, and you will beg for death before I'm through. Do you understand?"

Oh, yes, he was beginning to understand. Finally. She could see it in the sweat beading his brow, in the hesitant way he nodded. "Y-yes."

"Good. Now. When the station guards found you, you were barely conscious and had evidence of a nosebleed. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Tell me exactly what happened to you. Even if it seems a bit fantastic."

His eyes widened slightly, as if he wondered how she knew. Hesitantly, he recounted the circumstances surrounding his loss of consciousness. When he was done, Mirra frowned slightly. "And you say the woman, Neva, had a nosebleed at one point?"

"Yes." Keid looked faintly desperate. "Is it a contagion? A disease, as she claimed?"

Mirra ignored his questions. *The symptoms are classic Project Zero. So why are they both still alive?*

"I have one last question for you. You said that there was a dispute over a data tab." She had the feeling that Keid had not been entirely truthful, casting events in such a way as to make him seem an innocent bystander. "Do you know what was on that tab? Don't be afraid to tell me the truth—I'm pursuing a band of criminals far more dangerous than you. I have no interest in prosecuting you for your involvement."

"I overheard them talking. They said it was the route information for a supply ship." Keid gave her the relevant coordinates—leave it to a Star Rider to have a memory for such minutiae.

Mirra stared down at the pictures in her hand. Xian's amber eyes seemed to stare back at her, enigmatic as ever. *So. He—and these pirates he's with—stole a courier ship, infiltrated an obscure Outpost at the edge of nowhere, and then left, blowing up two ships in the process and leaving said Outpost with a hole in its side. Next, they come here, buy a fighter and a false hold, and leave with a data tab giving coordinates and cargo manifest for a military supply ship.*

That ship was as good as lost, but that was inconsequential beside Mirra's bigger concerns. Xian had turned into a pirate captain, it seemed.

And he's had at least two recent encounters of a Project Zero nature, yet both targets are still alive.

The soldiers who had been with him on Station 12B, Sector 5 had died during his changeover, an annoying detail that nonetheless fit the pattern perfectly. But this latest data didn't make any sense at all.

Or does it? After changeover, nothing else fit the pattern with Xian, did it? He not only ran, but he managed to outwit the incompetent fools on Station 12B, Sector 5. For two years, he disappeared...and then suddenly reappears, leading a band of pirates.

None of those actions matched the experiences any of the other Project Zero inductees. Those who had survived were lucky to be coherent enough to drink their dinner through a straw. Xian could never have been that incapacitated; he would have been captured immediately.

Could he be...a success? After all this time, should I finally let myself hope again?

“So...you’re going to dismiss the charges?” Keid asked, prodding her out of her thoughts.

Mirra frowned at the interruption. God, did the Star Riders not teach their brats any manners at all? “Yes.” She signaled to Aguila.

The other Blade had been standing just behind the prisoner’s chair. At her signal, he calmly brought up his gun and emptied a single charge directly into Keid’s head.

The body slumped and fell to the floor. Mirra stepped over it as she headed out the door.

Chapter 15: Hound

The com on the laundry room wall crackled, waking Rat from a light doze. “Iluka Toora to Rat.”

He swung his legs over the side of the hammock and dropped to the floor. Earlier, he'd wedged open the door to let out some of the steam and heat that filled the little room whenever the washer ran. Someone had taken the opportunity to drop a duffle bag of dirty laundry just inside the room while he slept, and he had to step around it to reach the com. “Rat here.”

“We're half an hour away from drop. I want you in that fighter and ready to go when we come out. There probably won't be any trouble that early on, but I like to be prepared for any eventuality.”

“Aye, Captain.”

They had been in hyperspace for...he had lost track of the number of shifts, actually. When every shift was like the one before, time had the tendency to lose all meaning. Besides tending to his usual chores, he had spent most of his waking hours checking out the fighter Iluka had bought on End of the Line.

What she had used to pay for the fighter and the hold that concealed it, he didn't know. Information, most likely, or maybe favors. Iluka said it was an older model, trotted out of retirement for the war, and then mothballed again after the Zatvian victory.

He'd christened it the *Cuchulainn*, after a story Neva had told him, and spent hours running preliminary checks and diagnostics, making certain the craft was spaceworthy. A few of the procedures had simply come to him from the same blank spot in his brain that told him how to fly the fighter, how to put on a 'suit, how to walk and talk and interact with other people. The idea of relying on his patchwork knowledge scared him, though; he needed someone to help him who knew for certain what they were doing.

Oddly enough, that person had been Anusha. Ever since hearing the account of events at Gethsemane Station, the Star Rider had treated him with far more tolerance than she ever had before. Not only had she volunteered to help him check out the fighter from one end to the other, she had even been pleasant while doing so. The radical change had left him mystified, but too grateful to question her.

All of the preliminary tests they had run showed that the craft was in good shape, but until he could actually get it into space, he couldn't be certain that there weren't any problems just waiting to show up.

During their off hours in hyperspace, he and Neva had rigged up a small carrier for Jasmine that would keep her from being injured when he wasn't there to hold her. She had roamed out of the room while he slept; at his silent summons, she came bounding back from

the direction of the rec room.

When she realized what he wanted her to do, she was less than pleased. **don't like (trapped, alone)**

"I know, I know." He picked her up, cuddled her, and offered her a treat laced with tranquilizer. When she was sufficiently drowsy, he slipped her into the carrier and made sure the safety webs were secured.

After that, he had to hustle to get 'suited up before they hit drop. The com came back on while he was in the lift headed up to the spine. "Five minutes to drop," Tarak's voice said. "Take hold, take hold, take hold."

The lift stopped and the doors opened; Rat kicked off and soared down the gravity-less spine, hoping to make up for the lost time. When the ship transited back to normal space and braked, the corridor would turn into a hundred-meter shaft. Even though he was close to what would be the bottom if that happened, it was still enough of a fall to break bones.

He punched in the code and cycled through the airlock, shooting through the inner door into the false hold before it had even fully opened. At least the gantry gave him somewhere to take hold if he missed the rapidly-diminishing window of time before drop. As it was, he got the canopy open and settled into the *Cuchulainn's* lone seat with a few seconds to spare.

The familiar falling sensation hit, and he felt the safety web press gently against him. The instant it cleared, he plugged in O₂ and communication lines from his 'suit. The cockpit pressurized, but he didn't take his helmet off; if anything should go catastrophically wrong, the 'suit would be the only thing between him and vacuum.

"You all right, monkey man?" Iluka asked over com.

"Aye, Captain."

"I saw the hatch-open light—you cut it too damn close, hear me?"

"Sorry. I had trouble getting Jasmine settled."

Iluka swore at him. A moment later, Drake's voice broke in. "I'm switching the bridge com to open pickups, so you'll be able to hear everything."

"Thanks."

A babble of audible voices joined the ones in his head. "We've got beacon," Neva reported. "One ship is showing up—military transport the *Angel of Mercy*. Beacon isn't registering us at all, from what I can see."

"We've shut off our transponder," Drake said. "The beacon will keep us from having to use active scan. We'll be on top of the *Mercy* before they ever know we're here."

"Tarak, change course and bring us in on their tails," Iluka ordered.

"Aye, Captain. Take hold for braking and vector change. Take hold."

Rat felt the ship slow, the illusion of gravity briefly disrupting weightlessness. Then Tarak's voice came back on com, breaking through the normal chatter of operations.

"Priority—I'm getting an alarm from main thrusters. No, wait. It's gone."

Iluka didn't bother to hide her concern. "Check that."

A few minutes ticked by in silence. Rat let his attention go to the soft babble in his head, heard **worry** in more than one whisper. And with good reason—a thruster malfunction could spell major trouble for a ship. There were backups and redundancies in place, but even so, any failure that involved steering or braking was nothing to treat lightly.

"Nothing," Tarak said at last. "Diagnostics show everything in order. It must have been a ghost."

"A ghost?" Neva asked.

“One of those things that happens on any ship,” Drake answered. Rat was glad it wasn’t Anusha or Marcus. Even though Anusha’s attitude towards him had changed, she remained openly scornful towards Neva. “A mechanical error that fixes itself and never reoccurs. A connection gets loose and then firms back up on its own. A subatomic particle intersects with a sensor and causes a blip. You never know what exactly causes it.”

Rat finished his own diagnostic runs and settled back in his seat, eyes closed. The ship underwent its last maneuvers, then Iluka came back on com. “All right, Rat. I’m cutting you loose. It will take us a while to get within striking range of the *Mercy*, so here’s your chance to stretch your legs and see what you can get out of that fighter. Maintain radio silence, got me? We don’t want to let them know we’re out here.”

A curious surge of excitement started up behind his breastbone. “Aye, Captain,” he murmured, even as the false hold began to open like the blooming of a deadly flower.

Stars greeted him, bright points of light amidst the utter blackness. His heart leapt at the sight, a pure wash of joy unrelated to anything he could recall. Dimly, he heard the soft sigh as the umbilicals uncoupled, leaving the fighter under internal power.

Unleashed.

He fired thrusters gently, and the *Cuchulainn* slipped from its berth, gliding black and silent into space. This system had no sun; it was nothing but a mass point, without any satellites to keep it company in the lonely dark. There would be no gleam of reflected sunlight to betray their presence to the Zatvian ship even now making its way towards its next jump point, its crew never guessing that they were being stalked.

Rat guided the fighter farther from the *Exile*, although he stayed close enough that sensors could still detect the ship passively. At first, he concentrated on the fighter, getting the feel of how it moved, its quirks of handling. It was a good ship, he decided, although he had the feeling that it was not the most responsive he had ever flown. It wasn’t until he had been out for several minutes that he realized it was quiet.

There was no com chatter, of course—he had lost shielded communications when he had cut loose from the *Exile*. But the silence was deeper than that. For over two years, the clamor of voices had sounded relentlessly within his head, sometimes growing softer, sometimes louder, but never, ever falling completely silent.

Until now.

Goddess, he thought in wonder. By leaving the ship, he had gotten far enough away that the whispers could no longer reach him. There were no foreign emotions tugging at him, no strange images playing behind his eyes, no multi-layered murmurs of thoughts filtering into his damaged brain.

Nothing but...silence.

He felt as if a terrible weight had been lifted from him, or as if he had been confined in a small space and could finally stand straight again. Alone, with no one save for himself to hear, Rat laughed until tears slid down his face.

* * *

They stalked the transport, steadily closing the gap between ships, riding up on their prey without its knowledge as it swung around the mass point to make its course change.

They had finally crossed into range of its active scanners. Even after, it had still taken the Zats a while to realize someone else was there, without either transponder or scanners to

betray them. After all, one ship was only a tiny blip in the vastness around them, hard to sort out from all the other data. But it seemed that their movement had registered on the computers, and now the Zats were firing inquiries at them.

And running. The transport had begun a burn, but its holds were loaded down with supplies, and the additional mass took a lot to get moving.

Because their cover was blown, Drake opened a com link to Rat, even as the *Exile's* own active scanners powered up. Rat switched over to a scan of his own, hoping to make out the silhouettes of any weapons that the transport might have.

It feels like I was born to do this. Goddess, I wish I could remember who I used to be. Even though every move with the fighter felt utterly right, the blank place in his brain scared him. What vital bits of information might he have lost, that could make the difference between survival and death?

Com chatter flowed past in a constant torrent. Iluka ordered the transport to release its holds and move away. The transport captain refused. Threats were exchanged.

Through it all, he kept a close eye on his scanners. Something detached from the underbelly of the transport—something that wasn't a hold.

Iluka was right. They did have an escort.

"Fighter loose—looks like one—two—of them."

"Draw them off," Iluka ordered.

"No problem." He found himself grinning, although he wasn't certain why. The two fighters were moving rapidly away from the supply ship, hoping to hit the *Exile* while it was still out of firing range of the Zat vessel. His job was to keep them from doing that.

They aren't too close yet, though. So why don't we see if we can surprise them a bit.

Instead of taking up guard position between the two fighters and the *Exile*, he pointed the *Cuchulainn* straight at the *Angel of Mercy* and fired his engines up to full burn.

Acceleration pressed him back into the seat as he moved towards his target; he didn't ease up until the edges of his vision began to wash red. For a few moments, he thought he was going to pass unchallenged; then, his board lit up as the *Mercy's* targeting scanners tried to get a lock on him.

The *Cuchulainn* veered, vector change shoving him hard into the webbing. He thought that he caught a glimpse of a flash, just at the edge of visible light; his scanners traced fire from the ship. The lag time was far too great; he was gone long before it intersected with what would have been his position, had he been stupid enough to continue in a straight-ahead charge.

Scan showed him the two fighters had turned away from the *Exile* and were hurrying back to protect their ship from him. On impulse, he switched his com to an open signal. "*Cuchulainn* to Zatvian fighters. Power down your weapons, move away from your ship, and wait to resume escort once we've let it go. I won't hurt you, unless you try to shoot me or make hostile moves towards my ship."

Only one bothered to reply, and even then it was merely a string of obscenities. Rat asked himself if he had done what he could to avoid bloodshed, decided that he had, and let it go.

He flew loops around the *Mercy*, keeping his course erratic enough to avoid being hit by the sporadic fire from the transport, until the fighters drew close enough to lock on. Then he abruptly straightened out, burning fast and furious away from the ship. For now, the *Mercy* was the *Exile's* problem.

The mass point hulked nearby, huge in scanners but almost invisible otherwise, except as a dark space where there were no stars. He slid down its gravity well, letting it draw him in. The legs of his 'suit tightened automatically, preventing the blood from pooling in his extremities. A quick check of scan showed that the other two fighters were following him down the slope.

Confidence filled him, an emotion so alien to his normal state of mind that he wondered for a moment if he wasn't picking up someone else's thoughts after all. *It's flying the fighter. Whoever I used to be—I knew this. I was good at it. And some part of me still remembers that.*

So let's see if I'm as good as I think.

Rat slammed port thrusters into reverse, even as the starboard ones continued forward. The light mass of the fighter instantly slewed around 180 degrees. Port thrusters went back in sync with starboard as the ship finished its spin, both of them fighting against the gravity of the mass point. Rat felt the systems in his 'suit ease even as his vision began to red out...

A torrent of blistering fire from the *Cuchulainn* poured into the faces of the two Zatvian fighters. They tried to peel away to avoid the ship, which had gone from fleeing to coming back straight at them in the space of seconds. One was too slow; he saw its engines come apart as his guns sliced into them.

A warning claxon sounded, and he saw that the remaining fighter had almost hit him with its own guns. Then they were past each other, and he turned hard, coming around behind it. It was still trying to reorient, and he realized that he had been lucky after all. One of its thrusters had been clipped and was firing intermittently, putting the fighter into a fatal spin. Although he knew it was likely that the mass point would eventually doom the crippled fighter, he sighted and fired, reducing it to nothing more than a trail of blistered metal and ceramics that would orbit the mass until finally spiraling down the well.

Rat moved through a more leisurely vector change away from the mass, deciding that he had punished his body enough for the moment. Scan showed him that the *Mercy* had detached its holds—not the explosive dumping that the *Exile* had done when leaving Moldar Station, but rather the controlled uncoupling that would normally take place at dock, when skimmers would pick up the holds and move them away. Like most freighters, the *Exile* had a tiny robotic tug coupled to its underbelly, which would remotely pick up the holds and attach them to its own spine once they had matched speeds.

I guess I'm officially a pirate, now.

Com chimed. "*Cuchulainn*, report," said Iluka.

"All clear, Captain."

"Good boy. Take up position between the *Mercy* and us, and keep an eye on it in case its captain decides to do something dumb. Oh, and Rat?"

"Yes?"

"That was some damned good flying."

He felt himself grinning, an unfamiliar feeling of pride swelling in his chest. "Aye, Captain. Thank you."

* * *

"I felt like I could think clearly for the first time," Rat said later on. He lay on his back on the floor of Neva's cabin, staring up at the ceiling. The scent of sandalwood filled the air,

and the light reflected from the colored crystals Neva had secured at each quarter, sending flecks of amber and blue to dance on the walls.

She relaxed beside him, seated on one of the soft pillows. Her hazel eyes were fixed curiously on his face, so he looked away, feeling oddly exposed. "What did you think about?" she asked.

"Nothing. Everything." He shrugged self-consciously. "I was just so glad to be away from it all. I could relax, really relax, and not have to worry about anything."

"It must have been a relief."

"It was."

She was silent for a moment, but the whispers in his brain took on an edge of uncertainty. "You probably wished you didn't have to come back."

"In a way." He wondered if he had liked to be alone before the Zats had experimented on him, or if he had been at home in a crowd. If so, those days were gone forever. "Not really, though. I would miss the *Exile*. It's just nice to know that if it all becomes...too much...I can get a break, for a little while, anyway. I can just go away and think."

He heard Neva shift her weight. "I've been doing some thinking of my own."

"What about?"

She didn't say anything, only leaned over him. He closed his eyes as her hair brushed his face. The smell of sandalwood and warm skin enveloped him, and a moment later he felt the press of her lips on his. They were soft, and tasted faintly of coffee and mint.

tastes good, feels nice (affection, pleasure, guilt) has the most beautiful eyes

"I don't know where this is going," she whispered, her lips still so close he could feel her breath. "I'm not even sure what this means, or if there's any future for us, or anything. But I think I want to find out."

* * *

"They're gone, Colonel Hunter," Aguila said. "But the captain of the *Angel of Mercy* did get their out-bound vector recorded."

The Obsidian Blades had entered the system during Mirra's off shift, following the coordinates that the Star Rider Keid had given them. Everyone had been surprised to find that the *Mercy* was not only capable of hailing them, but was still intact except for its lost holds.

Mirra could not imagine why Xian hadn't blown the ship, leaving no witnesses. He *had* destroyed its two fighter escorts, and the records sent them by the *Mercy* suggested that he had been in the cockpit of the enemy fighter himself.

So why leave the *Mercy* behind to tell tales? It made no sense.

Aguila had brought the news to her private quarters. She gestured for him to sit, and offered him coffee. "So where does their outbound vector suggest they've gone?"

"Into nowhere. At least according to the official maps."

"But we know better."

Aguila's smile was bright in his dark face. "The maps made by some of the Star Riders we captured at the end of the war show a mass point. From there, they have only two choices."

He passed the report to her, and she read it carefully. Option one was a military installation, and she immediately ruled it out. Option two, however, was far more promising. A large, heavily-trafficked station visited by freighters throughout the sector. *The perfect*

place to sell a bit of illicit cargo.

Even better, it was possible to get there directly from the mass point they now orbited. Without the need to cover their tracks, the Blades could bypass the roundabout way Xian had been forced to take, and could easily beat him there.

"We have him," she said with a smile.

"Perhaps."

Aguila's uncertainty surprised her. "Tell me what's worrying you."

"Do you even have to ask? He's a Project Zero inductee, Mirra. You know what that means."

"I know." She stood up and crossed the cabin. A drawer slid out from the wall at her touch. Inside were all the records and other Project Zero paraphernalia that she had access to. "But I won't be completely helpless."

She held up a delicate net of wires that resembled a fancy hair clip. The lights gleamed off it, sparking here and there.

Aguila's scowl only deepened. "You don't know that will work."

"It worked in tests, didn't it? The subjects they put it on survived."

"With permanent brain damage, yes."

"Xian is different. It doesn't appear that he killed anyone after changeover. If unprotected people can live and work with him aboard his pirate ship, surely I can get near him wearing this."

Aguila didn't say anything further, but she could sense his disbelief. Well, so be it. It was true that she was taking a risk—she wouldn't waste time denying it.

In the drawer was a picture of Xian. As Mirra put away the net, she paused, staring for a moment at his enigmatic eyes. Very, very gently, she let her fingers brush over the face.

It was a risk, yes. But there was no doubt in her mind that he was worth it.

Chapter 16: Shattered

“Now remember, this isn't a friendly station,” Iluka said.

Marcus powered down his boards and sat back in his chair. “Are any of them?”

The *Exile* was in the final phase of docking at Prospero Station. After securing the cargo of the *Angel of Mercy*—mostly a healthy assortment of weapons, with a bit of food and heavy equipment thrown in for good measure—they had made their way to a mass point that hopefully remained off the Zats' charts, then back into Zativian-occupied space. Their transponder now claimed that they were the *Roll of the Dice*, an innocent freighter just finishing up a run from deep in Zat space.

“Less suspicious, that way,” Drake had told Neva when they first entered the system. “If the Zats knew we were coming in from the conquered territories, they'd be more likely to check for contraband. Thanks to the turn we did at the mass point, our vector should match up with our claim. No one will suspect a thing.”

A slight jolt and the return of rotation indicated that they had coupled with the station. Neva shut down her boards and slid her chair back. Iluka glanced in her direction and elaborated on her earlier warning. “Just keep in mind—everyone—that we're a respectable freighter crew who wouldn't dream of doing anything illegal. There's a Klegger in dock in the military section of the ring, and the station officers will be Zats, so there's a chance we'll run into them while aboard. I don't care if they insult you, your mother, and your ancestry all the way back to the Dreamtime—don't say or do anything to draw attention. Got it?”

Neva swallowed against a sudden dryness in her throat. “Isn't it dangerous, going aboard while they're here?”

“Of course it is. But we've got a ship to refuel and cargo to unload, and the damned Zats are everywhere these days, aren't they? Besides, with any luck we'll be able to catch some rumors let go by that Klegger crew, maybe get wind of their plans.” Iluka's lined face took on a scowl. “Leave that to more experienced crewmembers.”

Neva had no desire to get any closer to the Zats than the opposite side of the ring. “Aye, Captain.”

“As soon as we hit deck, I'm going to finalize some of the negotiations I started on the way in. I'm unloading as much of the legal goods as I can; the weapons will have to wait until we get back to Paradise. Tarak, refueling should start soon; if it doesn't, get on the com and raise some hell until they run us a line. Drake, you have contacts here—find them and see if they have anything useful for us. As for the rest of you, I've drawn up shopping lists of the supplies we need. Anusha and Marcus have one list. Neva, you and Rat get the other one. We're in dock for four shifts, but this is business, not pleasure. Everyone comes back here to sleep. All clear?”

A murmur of assent answered her. Leaving Tarak on the bridge, they headed towards the lift. It was already coming down from crew level; when the doors opened, they found Rat and Jasmine inside.

"We're going shopping," Neva said as she squeezed in beside him.

Iluka fished in one of her pockets, and drew out a small, handheld com unit. "Here," she said, passing it to Rat. "I picked this up on End of the Line. It's auto-set for the ship. If anything goes wrong, check in with Tarak and let him know. Code phrases only."

They went down the icy boarding tube at a fast clip, emerging onto the chaos of the docks. The clanks, whirrs, and groans of cargo loaders, conveyors, and trucks were deafening, echoing and reechoing in the cavernous space. Iluka led the way to the nearest lifts, where crews from other freighters waited impatiently for a car to take them up to the main levels.

Busy place, Neva thought, and gave Rat a worried glance. The corners of his mouth were tight, and he had hunched his shoulders a bit, as if expecting a blow, but otherwise seemed to be holding up well.

The lift disgorged them onto a crowded promenade. "Remember what I said," Iluka told them as they prepared to split up. "Keep your heads down. I want a nice, peaceful stay here."

Anusha, veteran of dozens of such expeditions, rolled her eyes behind the captain's back. She had covered up her tattoos with a thin layer of makeup that blended seamlessly with her real skin. Neva wished she could cover up her scars as easily, but the makeup would only hide the discoloration, not the ridged and puckered flesh.

Drake caught sight of Anusha's expression and grinned. "I think we can handle it, Iluka," he said. "You just see to that trading you're doing. Don't give away the ship, all right?"

Iluka started to scowl, realized that he was gently teasing, and changed it to a reluctant smile. "Impudence, and from my first mate, no less. Watch yourself, Drake Morgenstern."

They broke apart and headed in their separate directions. Neva turned to Rat, found him watching the others leave. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes." He gave her a smile, then shyly took her hand. His fingers were warm and strong, and she wondered if the contact helped keep the other voices at bay, even as it sharpened his awareness of her own.

"Yes," he said, then winced. "I'm sorry." His fingers loosened, as if he would draw away.

"It's all right." Neva tightened her grip, and after a moment he did as well. "Come on, let's get to work."

They followed the signs to the main mercantile area. Most of what was on their list consisted of goods for the crew: detergents for laundry and galley, cleaning supplies, tampons, shampoo, and soap.

After a couple hours, they were both loaded down with packages. Rat had taken the heavier items, transferring Jasmine to Neva. The little primate crouched on her shoulder, staring avidly at the crowds when she wasn't consumed with grooming either herself or Neva.

The scent of frying pastries came from a nearby kiosk, and Neva felt her stomach grumble. "What say we stop for lunch?"

Rat nodded. "All right. There's a lot to choose from—what do you want?"

"*Xian!*"

Startled, they both turned to look in the direction of the shout. A woman was shoving her way through the crowded marketplace, fighting against the general flow of traffic, and Neva wondered what her hurry could be. She was dressed in nondescript clothing: a simple shirt, jacket, and pants that could have belonged to any off-duty spacer. Blond hair, held back by an ornate wire clip, framed a fine, small-featured face. Her dark green eyes were wide in an expression of shock, as if she had seen a ghost.

"Xian!" she shouted again, but now Neva realized her eyes were locked on Rat's face. And then, with a glad cry, the woman broke free of the press and flung herself at him.

Rat jerked back with a startled yelp, nearly dropping his packages. The woman stopped without touching him, but her eyes fixed hungrily on his face. "Xian—oh my God, is it really you?"

Neva's heart skipped a beat. *She knows him.*

Rat shrank back, looking bewildered. "I—I don't...who are you?"

A mixture of doubt and pain seemed to pass over the woman's face. "Xian? Don't you recognize me? It's Mirra. W-we thought you were dead."

Hope surged in Neva's chest. "You know him? You know who he is?"

"Of course I do." The woman's eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion. "Who are you?"

"Neva Whitestone. Rat's—Xian's—crewmate." Neva hesitated, wondering what she dared say. "There was an accident—he lost his memory."

The woman put a hand to her mouth. "Oh. That explains why you never came to meet me. I thought something terrible had happened to you. God, Xian, I can't believe that you're here. That I've found you again."

Something about the woman's tone of voice sounded an alarm deep within Neva. She moved to put herself between them, then stopped, wondering at the impulse. "I'm sorry, but who are you?"

"Xian?" An expression of grief flickered across the woman's face when Rat failed to answer, but only stared blankly. "You...you don't remember me, do you?"

She knows something about what happened to him. "Who are you?" Neva asked again, more sharply than she had intended.

For the first time, the stranger tore her gaze away from Rat. "Sorry—I didn't mean to be rude." She smiled shakily, then hurriedly wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'm Mirra Hunter. Xian's fiancée."

* * *

Rat stared blankly at the strange woman, struggling to summon any memory, any emotion, connected to her. But there was nothing.

"M-my fiancée?" he stammered, although he didn't know how he had managed to form the words. "I don't...are you sure?"

It was a stupid question, but Mirra only nodded solemnly. He tried to get some sense of her thoughts amidst the cacophony that surrounded him. But there was nothing.

Too many voices—I can't sort her out.

He cast a desperate glance at Neva, hoping for what he didn't know. She was staring at him, a look of shock on her face.

**his fiancée (hurt/betrayal) **

"No," he said, not sure what he was denying, only that he didn't want to hurt her. *I*

didn't know, how could I know?

"We-we were just going to get lunch," Neva said, glancing at Mirra. "Maybe you should join us."

"Of course." Mirra gestured vaguely towards the outskirts of the marketplace. "There's a café nearby."

In a daze, Rat followed her, Neva trailing behind him. Everything seemed unreal. Was it possible that he would learn about himself, his past? It had been so long since he had given up on ever discovering the truth that the sudden return of hope made him feel disconnected, off-balance.

They sat down at a table, but no one made any move to order anything. Jasmine jumped from Neva's shoulder to his, and he cradled her close, hardly noticing.

"Here." Mirra pulled a slim, black tablet from inside her jacket. "I have some pictures with me...I've carried them ever since you disappeared. I never gave up hope that you'd come back to us, Xian. Never."

He didn't know what to say to that, so he looked at the image she displayed for him. It appeared to have been taken at a party of some kind, and showed a man and a woman in casual clothes. They were standing side-by-side; the woman had her hand on the man's arm.

The woman was unmistakably Mirra. She was smiling at the camera, as if she were enjoying herself.

The man...was golden-skinned and clean-shaven, his dark hair cut brutally short. The smile on his full lips was contemptuous and a little bored, as if he had other, more important places to be. His eyes were cold, expressionless as topazes.

None of it meant anything to Rat. There was no resonance, no faint thrill in his blood. The picture might have been of total strangers. "Is that me?"

Neva had leaned in to look over his shoulder. "Yes," she said, but her voice was nothing but a dry whisper.

Rat looked up and found Mirra watching him closely. "Who am I?"

"Where should I start? Your name is Xian Jackson. You have a mother, two sisters, and a brother. You left home and joined the military as soon as you were of age. At first you were made a private in the ordinary rank and file, but your aptitude tests caught someone's eye, and before long you were training to be a fighter pilot."

"I was good at it?" he guessed. *I would have to have been, wouldn't I? To know the things I know?*

"Good doesn't come close to it. You were the best pilot anyone had ever seen." Mirra's smile warmed a little, but it had a sad edge as well. "We met when you were assigned to my squadron."

"Oh." He didn't know what else to say. *I have a family. A home, somewhere. A mother. Siblings.*

A stranger who thought she was going to be my wife.

"The last time I saw you was during the final weeks of the war," Mirra went on. "We were on separate assignments, but you had some leave time coming. You were supposed to meet me. But you never came."

His first memories returned sharply to him. Standing alone in white a room, dressed in civilian clothing—*because I was going on leave*—surrounded by dead bodies. "The Zats must have caught me," he said numbly.

Mirra frowned. "I don't understand."

Rat swallowed hard and avoided her gaze. How was he going to tell her what had happened to him? *Should* he tell her?

I wish Iluka were here. I need her advice. But the captain would be going about her business as usual, unaware of the momentous event that had overtaken him.

"The Zatzvians," he said at last. "They caught me—did something to me. I think...they must have experimented on me. I lost all my memories, and my mind...it isn't right anymore."

Mirra looked faintly stricken. "But Xian...no one experimented on you. You volunteered."

He felt as if a pit had opened up beneath him. *All this time...I thought the Zats had done something to me...and it wasn't them at all?*

"V-volunteered?" he heard himself whisper, but the sound seemed distant, unreal. "I let someone do this to me? But why? Why would I do that?"

"God, Xian, no one expected it to turn out like this!" Mirra hesitated, glancing at Neva, then back at him. "I asked you—begged you—not to do it. Even though I believed in the project, I was afraid that something would go wrong. No one had ever tried...anything...like this before."

"They were trying to make telepaths?" Neva asked coldly.

Mirra looked startled, then nodded guardedly. "Yes. Xian, I didn't want you subjecting yourself to something that hadn't been tested. But you wouldn't listen. You know how competitive you are. Since the day I met you, you always wanted to be the best. The best pilot, the best soldier. You had to be first in everything. And so you had to be first in this."

Rat stared at her, not sure if he should feel bemused or horrified. There was nothing in her description of him that he recognized. "What...what happened?"

Mirra's expression grew grim. "At first, everyone thought the experiment had failed. That there hadn't been any effect. It wasn't until later...until the other volunteers began showing abnormalities...that anyone realized the results were nothing like they expected. But by that time, you had disappeared."

Goddess. He *had* brought this on himself, then. Just not in the way he'd always feared. "I was captured by the Zats. They had me on Moldar Station when the *abnormalities* started."

Mirra continued to frown at him in puzzlement. Then, slowly, she took pulled up another image on the tablet and held it out to him.

"You gave this to me," she said quietly. "You said that it had been taken the day your life began—the day you enlisted."

The same haughty young man from the earlier picture stared coolly back at Rat. Only this time, he wasn't dressed in civilian clothing...but instead in the drab colors of a Zatzvian uniform.

"The soldiers on Moldar weren't your captors, Xian," Mirra said, as he stared at the picture in coalescing horror. "They were your comrades. Your friends."

* * *

I'm Zatzvian.

No. Not possible. It can't be.

But it is.

Rat heard Neva's suppressed gasp. She started to reach for the picture, then jerked her hand back, as if she couldn't bear to touch it. All the color had drained from her face, so that the red of her scars stood out like brands. She said nothing.

But in his head, the voices screamed.

planet killers, murderers, monsters, soulless fiends, guilty guilty guilty how can he be one of them, he can't be one of them, Goddess, what I am going to do?

"No," he whispered, and put his hands over his ears, but no one moved to comfort or ground him. He tried to shunt the whispers aside, tried to ignore them, but he couldn't. They were too close to what he was thinking and feeling himself, and the resonance built and built in his head...

"I have to go," Neva said, standing up abruptly. The packages she had been carrying spilled to the floor, and she groped blindly for them.

"Neva—?"

"No." She was shaking her head even as she backed away. "I'm going back to the ship."

Then she turned and hurried away, disappearing into the crowd as if she fled from him.

She *was* fleeing from him. From what he was.

He understood. He wanted to run away as well. But there was nowhere he could go to escape himself.

* * *

Neva felt as if she had wandered into a nightmare. Nausea roiled in her gut, a physical reaction that befitted her mental state.

Rat—Xian—had fought on the side of the Zatvians. Her patient—her *friend*—was on the side of those who had destroyed her entire planet. Who had killed millions of innocents just to win a bloody war that they had started.

All this time, I thought he was a victim. I stood up for him, defended him from Marcus and Anusha, fought for him. I told them he couldn't help it, that he was an innocent whose life had been torn apart by the Zats. I felt sorry for him.

But it turns out he wasn't a victim, wasn't an innocent at all. He chose to be experimented on.

He was one of them.

I think...I think I loved him.

Clutching her packages tighter to her chest, she made her way blindly towards the only point of stability that remained in the universe. *I have to get back to the Exile. I have to tell them...*

What? What should I say? What can I say? That Rat's a Zatvian? That we've been betrayed?

Have we been betrayed?

She couldn't think, couldn't decide. She would tell Iluka, and from there it would be in the captain's hands.

A slight feeling of relief pervaded her chaotic thoughts when she stepped off the lift onto the docks. The *Exile's* berth was only a few dozen meters away, and it was everything she could do not to run, even though she knew in her heart that the ship wasn't truly a refuge from her thoughts.

As she walked towards the berth, however, Neva caught sight of a dark shape out of the

corner of her eye. Startled, she spun around and found herself facing a man. His ebony hair was drawn tightly back from his haughty face, and his hooded eyes were piercing as a falcon's stare.

The gun in his hand was the same matte black as his Zatvian uniform.

"Stay right there," he said in a calm voice, even as her heart stuttered in her chest. "You can't run—the dock is open, and it's too far to cover. I'd shoot you before you took three steps."

Neva froze, her mind going in a thousand directions, wondering what she could possibly do. *Did Rat betray us?* But no, it was far too quick for that—this man had been waiting here for her.

For me...or for all of us?

That woman—Mirra—it wasn't an accident that she found us in the market. We've been set up.

"Drop your packages," the Zat ordered, still speaking in that calm, quiet tone, as if they were two friends having a civil discussion.

After a long moment, she complied, letting their needed supplies fall to the scuffed decking. As soon as he saw that she had no weapons concealed beneath the packages, the Zat was on her, twisting her arms behind her. Neva tried to fight back, but she was no match for a trained soldier. In less time than it took to blink, he had manacles around her wrists and his gun pressed into her spine.

"No, no, don't struggle," he murmured. "Be a good girl, and maybe I won't blow a hole in you big enough to stick my arm through."

Somehow, she found her voice. "I haven't done anything. You have no right—"

"No, you are the one with no rights." He gave her a push that almost knocked her down. "I'm arresting you in the name of the citizens of the Zatvian Cooperative. Now, you have one of two choices. Comply and go with me quietly, or die here."

Neva twisted around to look at him and caught a glimpse of flat, black eyes. *He doesn't care,* she realized with a thrill of fear. *He could shoot me this instant, and feel no remorse, no regret. Nothing at all.*

"I'll go," she said.

* * *

"Xian?" asked Mirra, and Rat looked desperately at her, focusing on her. For some reason, he still heard no whispers that he could associate with her, and so he clung to that space of silence even as he feared hurting her by accident.

But she's a Zatvian. Like me.

A gasp of hysterical laughter escaped him; he put his hand over his mouth, trying to hold it in, because he didn't know what would happen if it got loose.

"I can see this is a shock to you," Mirra said cautiously.

"Understatement," he muttered. Jasmine was trying frantically to groom him, to comfort him. He closed his eyes and rocked her, trying to think of nothing.

"I don't understand. You seem surprised that you fought for the Cooperative."

Rat blinked dully at Mirra. He tried again to listen for her, to get some sense of what she expected of him, but there was nothing.

Why can't I hear her? The whispers had not altered their volume or intensity; her voice

was simply not among them. Was it some quirk of brain chemistry?

"Will you tell me where you've been for two years? What happened to you?" she asked when he didn't respond.

He struggled to find words that wouldn't ruin the *Exile's* cover story. "After...what happened to me...I was confused. I hired on the *Roll of the Dice* as an extra hand. To clean, do chores, whatever. They treated me well, even after they started to realize that I wasn't totally normal in my head."

"I see." There was a coolness to her tone that confused him. She sounded as if he had disappointed her in some way.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. I'm grateful that your friends on the freighter took care of you when you needed it. Only...I'm a bit worried that they've been lying to you."

"About what?"

"The Cooperative." Mirra's expression became grim. "Even though it's been over two years since we liberated the Protected Worlds, there are still some rogue elements who cling to the past for their own selfish reasons. They live to spread discontent, because they enjoy watching others suffer. They hate the fact that we've brought peace and prosperity."

Rat stared at her blankly for a moment. "W-what?" he managed at length. "But the Zats...we...brought war. We conquered...everyone, I guess."

Mirra sighed. "Oh, Xian...you *have* been listening to their propaganda. I don't blame you—you lost your memory, you didn't know any better. But listen to me. Why do you think we call ourselves the Cooperative? Because we *cooperate* with others; we don't conquer them! Crime, poverty, serious illnesses—these simply don't exist in the Cooperative anymore, because we've all learned to work together.

"The truth is that the people of the Protected Worlds lived in misery before we came. Tyrants ruled them, crushing their lives under the weight of fear. Destitution, violence, and disease were epidemic. When we came, the common people welcomed us with open arms, because they knew we had come to deliver them from oppression. Their lives are infinitely better than they were before the war."

Rat stared at her. Whatever he had expected...this had not been it. "But I was told that the Zatsvians shut down public works. Mental health institutions. Poverty assistance programs."

Mirra smiled tolerantly. "Of course we did. If there are no mentally troubled people, no poor, then what sense does it make to keep places like that open? They would have no one to care for!"

Rat remembered the man on End of the Line, staggering and screaming about aliens. *They must have missed him. And me.*

All the days he had starved on Moldar, desperate for food and shelter, came back to him with sudden force. He hadn't been the only person relegated to the shadows, either—if he had been, the Zats might have noticed him sooner, might have caught him before he could escape.

And the whole time...I was running from comrades. I was surrounded by friends, and I starved while I hid from them. He wasn't sure if it was ironic or horrifying.

"What about Harvest, then?" he asked, trying not to think of Neva, trying not to call out to her.

"A tragic accident." Mirra replied promptly. "The government of Harvest had invented a

Doomsday weapon. When they realized that their people were rebelling against their rule, demanding that they step aside so that the planet could join the Cooperative, they destroyed their own world rather than surrender their power.”

He tried desperately to hear Mirra's thoughts, to catch the illusive whisper that would tell him if she truly believed what she said. *Did I...did Xian...believe it? Was I duped into thinking I was doing the right thing by fighting for the Zats?*

Should I argue with her? Tell her that none of it's true? Would she even believe me?

“You've given me a lot to think about,” he lied at last.

Mirra leaned closer to him, her eyes gentle and sympathetic. “I know this is difficult for you. It is for me, too. Sitting here with you, knowing that you don't remember me, that I might as well be a stranger to you...it's hard, Xian.”

He looked away from her, not sure what she wanted from him. “I guess it would be. Can you tell me something?”

“Anything.”

“Why am I like this? What were the experiments for? Why did I volunteer? What happened to the other subjects?”

Mirra paled slightly, and he wondered if he really wanted to know. “I'm afraid the rest didn't fare as well as you.”

“Not as well?” It seemed impossible. “What happened?”

“Their minds were totally erased. Not only memories of their identities, but...everything. Language, skills, understanding of the world around them, all gone in an instant. Complete brain wipe.”

Horror settled over him as her words sank in. *By the God. I was...lucky.*

“There's more that I can't tell you here.” Mirra shifted towards him, so that they were almost touching. “Why don't you call your ship and tell them you'll be a few hours?”

Rat pulled out his com unit with a mixture of relief and trepidation. He could leave a message with the ship, use one of the codes that told them he was in trouble. *But will they want to help me, now that they know the truth? Will they take me back?*

He clicked on the com. “Rat to *Roll of the Dice*.”

Static. Silence.

Mirra frowned. “Try again.”

Bewildered, he did so. There was no reply.

Mirra took a com out of her own pocket and spoke quietly on it for a few minutes, her expression becoming more and more grave. When she was done, she put it away and turned to him. “I'm sorry, Xian. It seems that your friends didn't wait for you. The *Roll of the Dice* has been granted clearance to leave dock.”

* * *

The Zatvian soldier herded Neva down a narrow, bleak corridor somewhere towards the center of the station. The walls had been scrubbed to sterile, blinding whiteness; even the floor was white, as if no one had ever walked there before. An occasional sign, precisely placed, broke up the monotony. All of them bore dire warnings as to the fate of traitors.

“What am I being charged with?” Neva asked as they walked. Her voice shook slightly with fear, and she silently cursed herself for showing weakness.

“Illegal transportation of a biological hazard.”

It surprised her—she had been certain they were being charged with treason or worse. *Not that it matters—they could say we were littering on the docks, so long as it gave them an excuse to pull us in for questioning.*

How much do they know? Do they realize that we're pirates?

The Zat pulled her to a halt in front of a white door that blended into the wall. He pulled a key from his pocket and waved it in front of a small panel that lurked within a recess beside the door; a moment later, the door slid soundlessly open.

The room on the other side was the same blinding, maddening white as the corridor. A single Zat waited just inside, his black uniform stark against the sameness. Several figures stood against the wall across from him, and Neva's heart sank when she recognized the rest of the *Exile's* crew who had come aboard the station.

All of them were affixed to the wall with heavy manacles, their hands above their heads. Anusha sported a bruise on her cheek, and fingernails had roughly scraped through the makeup over her tattoos, peeling it away in strips. Marcus' lower lip was decorated with a scab, and some dried blood clung to his chin. Otherwise, they seemed unharmed.

That means Tarak and Rat are the only ones of us still free.

Except... Goddess... I left Rat with a Zatvian. They've got him, too.

But he's one of them.

The Zat who had brought Neva in shoved her against the wall, then jerked her arms above her head. There must have been a powerful magnet of some kind set into the wall, because the manacles around her wrists instantly adhered to it, resisting her attempts to pull them free.

The Zat turned away, as if she were of no more consequence to him. "Has Colonel Hunter decided what we're going to do with this lot?" he asked his companion.

"Negative, Captain Aguila." The guard touched an earbud half-hidden beneath his hair. "She's still with Colonel Jackson."

Colonel Jackson. Rat.

Drake had been shackled next to Neva. His long hair had come out of its ponytail, and he flicked the auburn strands out of his face with a toss of his head. "I demand to see counsel," he said loudly.

Aguila gave him a spare, cruel smile. "Save your demands for the Inquisitorial Agency."

The two Zats left the room, the door sliding closed behind them. Drake's mouth tightened for a moment; then, he twisted around to look at Neva. "Are you all right?"

She laughed, but it was a weak, sick sound. "We've been caught by the Zats. They're sending for the torturers as we speak. No, I'm not all right."

"It isn't over yet," Iluka said sharply. Neva wondered what possible hope she saw in the situation. "We don't know what they want—I was told we're being charged with illegal transport of a biohazard, which doesn't make a damned bit of sense."

The rest of the crew exchanged surprised looks. "That's odd," Drake murmured. "Isn't that the same trick they tried on us when we were leaving Moldar? They claimed we had to submit to search because we were carrying a biohazard."

"We were." Neva glanced up, saw everyone else staring at her. "Rat. Someone on Moldar must have suspected he got on board."

"We're almost certainly being listened to," Drake cautioned.

"It doesn't matter." The last of her energy seemed to drain away, and Neva slumped so that all her weight hung from her wrists. It hurt, but at the moment she almost welcomed the

pain. "They know about him, Drake. They know everything."

Haltingly, she told them the story of the seemingly-chance meeting with Mirra. When she had finished, Marcus cursed loudly.

"I knew it!" He jerked against his manacles, as if he could rip them free from the wall with his anger alone. "He was a spy from the start!"

"Don't be stupid," Anusha said wearily. "Do you truly believe that we're so important that the Zats would waste a telepath just to spy on us? That they would have him do some of the things he's done simply to maintain a cover?"

"Anusha is right," Iluka agreed. "He can't have been a plant—it doesn't make any damned sense. But we were set up. The Zats got me almost as soon as I left the rest of you, and that was a good while before this Mirra Hunter intercepted Neva and Rat. And they were jamming transmissions to and from the *Exile*—I couldn't get through to Tarak."

Anusha's brow creased. "Do you think he's all right?"

Iluka shook her head. "Don't know. Don't want to speculate, not with ears maybe listening in."

Drake shifted, trying unsuccessfully to find a comfortable position. "So Rat wasn't a spy then. My question is, now that they have him, will he go back to their side?"

Heaviness settled around Neva's heart. Every instinct denied the possibility, insisted that Rat couldn't, wouldn't, do such a thing.

I have to stop thinking like that. He's one of them.

Her mouth was dry, as if trying to keep her from speaking the damning words. "Yes," she managed hoarsely. "Mirra's his fiancée—his lover. Of course he'll tell her everything."

* * *

I can't believe they abandoned me so quickly. Without even a chance to defend myself. Without even a good-bye.

Rat closed his eyes, not wanting to look at the silent com in his hand. Blindly, he stuffed it back into the pocket of the same battered jacket he had worn since Moldar. *What am I going to do?*

"I'm sorry, Xian," Mirra said. "I can tell that you believed that these people were your friends. I know it must be hard to find out otherwise."

Jasmine pulled on his hair as she shifted her weight. **go soon (home/dark/safe/warm)?**

I wish we could. I wish we still had a home. He was back to where he had begun, he realized bleakly. Nothing but himself, Jasmine, and the clothes he wore.

His distress must have shown, because Mirra leaned forward and gave him a sympathetic look. "Don't worry, Xian. Come with me. Come back to the Cooperative—you can have your commission back. You can be a part of something again, something that won't fail you. The Cooperative will take care of you. *I'll take care of you.*"

Rat hesitated, uncertain where to go or what to do. There was no way he was going to join the Zatvian military, but he wasn't certain how to convey that to Mirra. If she truly believed the lies the Cooperative had fed her, she wouldn't understand his reluctance to accept aid from them. If she was worried enough, she might even try to call for help and force him to go back with her.

Only one way to find out. Maybe I can talk to her, find out where she stands, what she believes.

It isn't as if she's going to turn me over to the Inquisitors. We were engaged—she must have loved me. Maybe I can trust her, just a bit. And if I could get her to see the truth about the Cooperative, maybe she would help me.

Help me do what? What's left for me? What life do I have without the Exile?

"I don't know." He pressed his fingers into his eyes, so that light bloomed behind his lids. "I don't know, I don't know."

"Then come with me, and let me help you. You don't have to decide anything today."

"All right," he said at last, not knowing what else to do.

Mirra smiled brilliantly. "I'm so glad to have you back, Xian. Let's go."

She stood up, and he rose to follow her, steadying Jasmine against him with one hand. A slight frown crossed Mirra's face. "Are you bringing that creature with you?"

Her tone startled him. "Her name is Jasmine. She helps me," he said uncertainly. "She's friendly—you can pet her if you'd like."

Mirra made no move to touch the le-murr. Instead, she shrugged and gestured for him to follow her.

The episode left him uneasy. He remembered how Neva had held out her hand for Jasmine to smell that first day on the *Exile*, how she had asked about his companion. *Just because Mirra isn't comfortable with Jasmine doesn't mean anything. I must have loved her, once, so she couldn't be a bad person, could she?*

But what sort of person was I then? Would Xian Jackson have stolen Jasmine to keep her alive...or would he have used her for target practice?

Heart and mind in turmoil, Rat followed Mirra. They left the marketplace behind and took a transport across the station, then made their way down to the docks. As they drew closer and closer to the Klegger's berth, he felt his feet starting to drag, as if every step he took towards the warship was a step farther from the *Exile*.

But the *Exile* had probably already disembarked and left him behind. Alone. Abandoned.

The airlock leading to the boarding tube was closed and sealed. Mirra waved a passkey in front of the panel by the tube, and the lock opened. At the other end of the tube, she repeated the procedure, and they stepped on board the Klegger.

The lighting was dim—possibly the ship was in its off-shift. Even so, Rat could see that the decking looked new, and the paint on the walls was bright. The air was dry and smelled faintly of disinfectant. It was a far cry from the *Exile*, with its scuffed and scratched floor, its scent of spices and sweat, and he felt a sudden pang of homesickness.

"We'll go to my quarters and get you settled in," Mirra said as she led the way to a lift. "I don't want to overwhelm you right now, but there are others on board who will be happy to see you. Friends. You can get reacquainted with them next shift."

He nodded dully. He wasn't a prisoner, he reminded himself, then wondered why he felt like one if that were true.

Mirra's quarters contained no furniture except for a bed and a desk. The only decoration was an insignia painted on the wall, showing a highly-stylized black knife. Rat didn't recognize the symbol, but he guessed that it was something that had come with the room rather than anything meant to reflect Mirra's personality.

Anyone could live here. There's nothing of her at all.

Perhaps this wasn't her normal ship, her normal assignment. Or maybe she moved around too much to bother with adding personal touches to her surroundings. There was no reason to judge her just because he found the room off-putting.

Mirra shut the door behind them. "Here we are. There's a private bathroom where you can shave and cut your hair."

He hesitantly touched the dreadlocks hanging down around his shoulders. "My hair?"

"Of course. You don't want to go around looking like a scruffy dockhand, do you?"

"I...I hadn't really thought about it."

She cocked her head to the side, as if examining him from a new angle. "Appearances can command respect...or not. You told me that once, Xian."

I did? "Oh."

"Is there anything else you need? Anything I can get you?"

"No." He hesitated, then decided he'd better ask than risk a misunderstanding. "Am I...staying here with you?"

"Of course."

He glanced nervously at the single bed. What did she expect of him? They had been lovers once—did Mirra intend to pick up where they had left off? He didn't even know her, not anymore—how to explain to her that he had no intention of sleeping with her?

Mirra moved closer to him, until he could feel the heat of her body through the air that separated them, and it started to seem like he had guessed right about what she wanted from him. "I'm sorry about what happened to you, Xian," she murmured. "But don't worry—we'll make everything better. I promise." One hand came up, and she stroked his cheek tenderly.

And with the contact, her voice flooded into his head.

Rat gasped and jerked back; the moment contact was broken, her voice fell silent once again. But he had already heard enough.

She frowned, and he saw the glint of suspicion in her eyes. "Is everything all right?"

"No," he whispered—and hit her as hard as he could.

The blow was too unexpected for her to avoid. Pain flared in Rat's skull as his knuckles connected with her jaw, a blinding flash that vanished in an instant as her consciousness fled. Even as he staggered back, Mirra collapsed to the floor.

Breathing hard, Rat crouched over her fallen body. *Oh Goddess. I can't believe it. The rest of the crew didn't leave me—they were captured.*

I have to help them.

He lurched to his feet, then stopped, forcing himself to think. *Don't panic, not now. Grab what you need before you run, or you won't get anywhere.*

The key that Mirra had used to gain access to the ship was in her pocket. He tucked it into his jacket, then turned out the rest of her pockets. Her tablet was in one, and he took that as well, before ransacking the rest of the room.

The search didn't take long. Mirra carried little in the way of personal items, other than clothing. One of the drawers in the wall was locked, but a quick swipe of the key took care of that. Inside was a flat black box that contained a neatly-ordered collection of data tabs and a lone holo.

He picked up the holo with shaking hands. It showed him—Xian—and Mirra, dressed in black uniforms and kitted out for combat. In the background was a blasted landscape, full of burned buildings and shattered concrete. A heap of charred bodies had been carelessly piled to one side.

Both of them grinned at the camera, and Xian flashed an all-clear sign.

Rat flung the holo down as if it had burned him. Bile rose in his throat, and he turned blindly away. There was more to search, but he couldn't stand the thought of another nasty

surprise.

I have to get out of here.

Pausing only long enough to roughly bind Mirra's hands with the bed sheets, he let himself out of the room and locked it behind him, in case anyone else came to investigate. Although he knew someone was probably watching the boarding tube, he hoped that if he walked quickly and with confidence, he could get off the ship. If nothing else, any watchers would probably try to contact Mirra first to find out if he should be wandering around. With any luck, that would buy him a few more precious minutes.

Balancing Jasmine on his shoulder and trying to look as if he weren't terrified, Rat strode towards the lift.

* * *

The door of the holding cell opened, and Aguila stepped through, followed by a man in an Inquisitor's uniform. The Inquisitor was small but neat, with pale, dispassionate eyes that sent a chill through Neva's blood. He carried a brown case in one hand and a recorder in the other. With barely a glance at the prisoners, he went and attached the recorder to the wall in one corner, where it had a full view of the room. Aguila took up position beside the door, his dark eyes watchful.

"Interrogations of prisoners one through five, Station 4-G, Sector 6," the Inquisitor said, presumably for the benefit of the recorder. "Major Gary Julan, Internal Affairs and Inquisitorial Agency, Grade One, presiding. Captain Alejandro Aguila, Obsidian Blade Squadron, also present."

Julan placed his case on the floor and opened it up. Wires, electrodes, clamps, low-powered laser burners, and a variety of more arcane instruments filled the interior to bursting. He dawdled over the devices, picking up one, looking at it, and putting it back down, as if trying to select the best possible tool for the job.

Fear wrapped a cold hand around Neva's heart as she watched. *That's what he wants. It's psychological torture—showing us what he has, making us imagine what horrors might be in store.* Unfortunately, understanding of the technique didn't make it any less effective.

At last, Julan stood up; Neva didn't recognize the device in his hand but feared that she would become acquainted with its workings all too soon.

"Now," he said, studying the device like an artist looking for flaws, "I'm going to ask some questions. You're going to answer them. The only question is which of you gets to go first."

The door slid open and Rat stepped through.

Several things happened at once. Jasmine leapt from Rat's shoulder, making for Neva, a white flash against the white floor that distracted the Zats' attention for a precious instant. Aguila lunged towards Rat, reaching for his weapon even as he did so. The Inquisitor stumbled back from the unexpected intrusion, bringing him closer to the prisoners.

Letting all her weight hang from her wrists, Anusha pushed off from the wall and wrapped her legs around Julan's neck, jerking him back towards her. He cried out—then pressed the device in his hand to her leg. There came a sizzle, accompanied by the stink of burning cloth and skin. Anusha swore and tightened her grip, trying to choke him into letting go of the device.

Rat flung himself at Aguila. For a moment, they struggled for the Zat's gun, and Neva

felt her heart almost stop. It was an uneven battle; Aguila was fit and bulked with muscle, whereas Rat was far less conditioned. Slowly, Aguila began to force the gun up, toward Rat's face.

Rat's mouth twisted into a grimace as he fought for control of the weapon, but it was clear that he didn't have the strength to win. Aguila bared his teeth in a smile.

"I don't know what you're playing at, Colonel," he said, "but it's time to give up. Once, you could have taken the gun from me as if I were a child. Now look at you. You can't win this."

The grimace vanished from Rat's face, replaced by an odd expression of calm. His head snapped up, and he stared full into Aguila's eyes.

The Zat's body stiffened suddenly. Blood began to leak from his nose, then trickle from the corner of his mouth. The gun slipped free and hit the ground, but Rat continued to cling to his wrists, amber eyes boring into black.

Aguila collapsed, and Rat went down with him, pinning the Zat to the ground. Blood gushed suddenly from the Zat's ears, from the corners of his eyes, and his body began to convulse. Rat only stared grimly and held on.

Goddess and God...he's taking the Zat's mind apart. But this was no accidental, uncontrollable outburst of power. This was focused, deliberate.

Everything I taught him to do—how to concentrate, how to focus—this is what it's come to.

Aguila went utterly limp, then. A pool of scarlet blood spread out from his head, bright against the spotless white floor.

The Inquisitor's instrument of torture fell from his hand with a loud clatter.

Rat slumped on the body of the dead man, not seeming to realize that it was over, that his enemy was no more. Then, with a low moan, he sat back, his hands covering his face. Even across the room, Neva could see that he was shaking; his fingers curled inwards, as if he would rend his own skin with his nails.

Iluka swore, breaking the near-silence. "Damn it, don't you fall apart on us now, crazy man! You hear me? Rat!"

Her words seemed to break Rat from his stupor. He looked towards her, then wrapped his arms around himself, shivering. "C-Captain?"

"Get the key off that Zat and let us go. You understand me?"

Rat nodded and turned towards the dead Zat. He bit his lip as he fumbled the key out of Aguila's pocket, and a thin trickle of blood ran down into his goatee.

He didn't look at Neva as he unlocked her manacles, and she was glad for that. As she rubbed feeling back into her hands, he set the rest free. Drake immediately retrieved Aguila's gun from the floor, training it on the Inquisitor, who was still held by Anusha.

"Step away from the wall. Anusha, let him go. He knows what will happen if he doesn't do as he's told."

The Inquisitor blanched sharply, and cast a frightened look at Aguila's stiffening corpse. He put up no resistance as Drake searched him for weapons.

Neva went to Anusha's side, glad to have something to distract her. There was a burned patch in the navigator's baggy pants, and the calf underneath looked raw. "How badly hurt are you?"

Anusha took a few steps, wincing as she did so. "It will heal."

"I should look at it."

"There's no time," Iluka said. She strode over to the Inquisitor and fixed him with a dark stare. "You're our ticket off this station. So you do what I say, or else I'm going to have my crewman rip your brain apart, just like he did with your boy there. Got it?"

Neva glanced reflexively at Aguila. The Zat's face was a mask of blood, but beneath it his features were still frozen in an expression of sheer terror. Feeling sickened, she turned away, and inadvertently met Rat's gaze.

He looked wretched, and for a moment she thought she saw pleading in his eyes. But she had no sympathy left to give him.

"How much time do we have, monkey man?" Iluka demanded.

Rat jumped, then dropped his gaze to the floor. "I-I don't know. M-Mirra took me back to her ship. I knocked her out, tied her up, and left. Nobody tried to stop me. I didn't kill her, though."

"We can't count on having much time before the alarm is raised," Marcus said. Neva half expected him to reprimand Rat for not killing Mirra, but it seemed even he didn't have the stomach for it.

Iluka headed for the door. "Then we'd better move."

Another Zat lay in the hall outside, although he appeared to be unconscious rather than dead. Marcus grabbed him by his ankles and dragged him into the interrogation room, where he confiscated the guard's gun. Drake tore the recorder from the wall and tucked it into his coat before leaving the room. Locking the door behind them, they started down the corridor, retracing the same route Aguila had used earlier.

"Is there surveillance on this hallway?" Iluka asked the Inquisitor in a low voice.

"It's deactivated. The Blades don't like anyone watching their work."

"You better hope that's true."

Julan paled. "It is. I swear. He'd know if I lied, wouldn't he?"

Iluka cast a glance toward Rat, but he was busy looking at the floor. Jasmine had climbed onto his shoulder once again, but her fur looked fluffed, and Neva wondered if she reflected Rat's silent turmoil.

Iluka took the first side-corridor they came from, passing through a door marked *AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY*. It let them into what looked like a series of service corridors. A man dressed in the baggy jumpsuit of a maintenance worker stared at their procession, then wisely moved out of the way, flattening himself against the wall and closing his eyes.

Maybe he hopes no one can question him about something he didn't see. Neva wondered if he did it out of dislike for the Zats, or simply out of the desire to avoid becoming entangled in any business outside his own.

A lift took them down to the docks. "Who have they got on our ship?" Iluka asked.

"Station personnel," Julian said. He seemed to have calmed a bit, which worried Neva. If he felt more confident, would he try to escape or trick them? "They're guarding the berth. It was decided to leave your ship until after the primary target had been secured."

"Rat."

"If you mean Colonel Jackson, then yes. The Blades would have been wasted on guard duty, so they were held in reserve, in case an assault on the ship was called for."

Neva frowned. "Blades?"

"Zat elite troops," Anusha spat. "The ones with black on black uniforms."

A humorless smile touched Julian's mouth. "The Obsidian Blades are not merely elite."

They are *the* elite, the best of the best. The ship docked on this station has a great many of them aboard. You have no chance of escape.”

Anusha's eyes narrowed. “We've done well enough so far.”

“Only because you had Colonel Jackson with you.” The tight smile flashed over his face again. “Colonel Hunter will not be pleased with your defection, Jackson. I wonder—what can this bunch of shabby pirates possibly have to offer that you've thrown your lot in with them?”

“Shut up,” Iluka warned.

“Or perhaps there was damage to your brain? The doctors won't be gentle when they dissect it, not now that you've decided to become a traitor.”

“Shut him up!”

Drake jammed the gun he had taken from Aguila into Julan's kidney. “One more word, and I'll paint this lift with your guts.”

“You can't afford to, though, can you? You still need me to get you past the guards. But it won't help. Your ship is locked down. Station offices are the only ones who can release the docking clamps. You should surrender now.”

Iluka turned towards him with a predatory grin. “We've already left a hole in the side of one Zat station. Why do you think we'll do any different here?”

The Inquisitor fell silent at that, although Neva suspected that it wouldn't last. The lift doors slid open, disgorging them onto the crowded docks.

So many people, she thought, staring at the workers and freighter crews. *We can't do what we did on Gethsemane—we'll kill hundreds of innocents. We can't.*

Can we?

They slowed as they approached the *Exile's* berth. “Put on a good performance, or ‘Colonel Jackson’ here will poke a few holes in your mind,” Iluka warned the Inquisitor in a low voice.

A small contingent of soldiers stood near the *Exile's* boarding tube. They were all dressed in body armor, but they had lifted their visors and were chatting with each other. Clearly, their presence was mainly meant as a formality to keep Tarak from doing anything unnoticed. *No one knows we've escaped yet*, Neva guessed. *They think we're all still under lock and key, so they aren't worried about us trying to get back on the ship.*

A man in a sergeant's uniform nervously stepped into their path as they approached. His attention, like that of the other Zats, was locked on the Inquisitor. The rest of them might as well not even have been there. “Sorry, sir, but this is a restricted area,” he said uncertainly.

Julan cleared his throat. “Stand aside, soldier. I have business on board.”

It wasn't the most convincing performance, but fear of the Inquisitors was such that the Zats wavered. The sergeant glanced at the rest of his squad, but no one moved to back him up. “Sir, we're under strict orders from Captain Aguila not to let anyone aboard.”

“I've just come from Captain Aguila's company,” Julan replied, but his voice shook just a little.

The sergeant frowned slightly. “I'll just put in a call to station offices, sir, and—”

The blast from Drake's gun caught the unlucky sergeant in the face. Even as the Zat spun and fell, hands grabbed Neva's arms, shoving her towards the boarding tube. “Run!” Marcus shouted in her ear.

She ran. Behind her, she heard the other soldiers yelling; a moment later, a shot scorched the decking near her feet. The airlock was just in front of them; it opened as Iluka reached it,

and they all pounded up the boarding tube without pause.

The inner lock was already open by the time they reached it. Even as the tube began to shake under the running feet of the pursuing soldiers, the crew piled inside, and Iluka slammed the lock shut.

Com crackled. "Captain, what's going on?" Tarak asked. "The Zats showed up not long ago, put a stop to our cargo transfers, and told me to leave the ship and surrender. I haven't been able to reach anyone on com."

"Explanations later," Iluka snapped as she led the way down the spine. "Did we get refueled before the Zats closed in?"

"Aye, Captain."

"There's some luck, anyway." Iluka stopped at the lift and turned to their prisoner. "You, behave, or we'll put a hole in your head, got it?"

Julan had gone pale, and Neva guessed that whatever confidence he'd gained during their walk had been vaporized along with the sergeant's head. Iluka pursed her lips in a grim smile. "Good. Rat!"

Rat had been at the back of their group, hanging back. Now he looked up reluctantly. "Captain?"

"Scramble the *Cuchulainn*. You're going to blow the clamps holding us to dock. Then you're going to blow anything that comes near us."

Rat didn't reply, only looked deeply uncertain. He opened his mouth, as if he wanted to protest, but Iluka cut him off.

"Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it. We need you to get off this gods-forsaken station. You want to fall apart, you do it later, hear me? For now, you get into that fighter and do your damned job. *Now!*"

Rat nodded, grabbed Jasmine, and thrust her unceremoniously at Neva. The le-murr squealed a protest, but he was already off and running down the spine, towards the false hold that housed the fighter.

They all crammed onto the lift. "Stow that animal and get to the bridge, two minutes tops," Iluka ordered. Neva nodded and bailed out the moment the lift opened on crew level.

A few minutes later, just as she stepped out onto the bridge, a faint shudder ran through the ship. "Fighter away," Anusha reported.

Neva went to her boards and slid into her familiar chair. Scan showed a swarm of activity, and she wondered how they would possibly get away from the station without killing any of the freighters, miners, and passenger ships that crowded the system.

"Station is ordering us to surrender," Drake reported.

"Tell them that we'll start shooting if they launch anything," Iluka warned. "Put our hostage on the com—maybe he can talk some sense into them."

Julan was secured in an observer seat near the lift, his arms and legs crudely bound with tie-downs and a safety web pulled snugly over him. "It won't help," he warned.

"Give it a try anyway."

He shrugged. When Drake signaled to him, he said, "This is Major Gary Julan, Internal Affairs and Inquisitorial Agency, Grade One. I have been advised to tell you that I am a hostage aboard the freighter *Roll of the Dice*. Do not take aggressive actions towards this ship. I repeat, I am a hostage."

Drake pressed the bud into his ear, frowning slightly. "They're responding. They say they don't negotiate with hostage takers."

"I told you."

"Too bad for you, then," Iluka said brusquely. "Drake, get the *Cuchulainn* on the horn and find out what's taking so damned long!"

At that moment, the ship shuddered again, and a red flare lit up Neva's boards.

"There go the clamps," Tarak said.

"Then get us the hell out of here."

"Leaving dock now."

One of the dots on Neva's board began to blink a warning red. "The Klegger's preparing to leave dock!"

Iluka swore and punched her own com button. "Rat! Get your ass over there!"

"Advise the Klegger to stay put," Drake said at the same time into the link he had with station offices, "or our fighter will start shooting, and I can't guarantee the safety of the station if that happens."

The green dot that represented the fighter peeled away from the vicinity of the *Exile*, moving up and over the station. A spattering of fire showed, blazing yellow. Neva's heart lurched. "The station is shooting!"

"Marcus, return fire," Iluka said grimly.

Both the rapidly-retreating *Exile* and the charging *Cuchulainn* returned fire. The station's weapons ceased their barrage, whether because they had been hit, or for some other reason, Neva didn't know. "The Klegger hasn't powered down, but it's still in dock," she reported.

Julan snorted. "That's because they know Colonel Jackson will put a hole through them before they can move. Even they are afraid of his skill as a pilot."

"Or they aren't ready to write off their telepath just yet," Iluka said. "That's it, isn't it? He represents too much time and effort to just shoot him."

The shifts of the *Exile* reorienting ceased. "Beginning burn," Tarak said.

"Get Rat on com and tell him to get back here," Iluka told Drake. "Let him hang off our bow as long as he wants to make sure the Zats stay on good behavior. How long to jump if we don't drop all our cargo?"

Anusha ran the numbers. "If we push it, we can do it in four shifts."

"And if we blow the holds?"

"Two shifts."

"Captain, if we go back to Paradise again without any holds, that's the end for us," Marcus said urgently. "We're out of favors, out of credit."

"And if we don't blow them, we risk the Zats getting some of their ships in close enough to shoot us out of the sky," Tarak pointed out.

"Damn it." Iluka stared at the ceiling blindly for a moment, then shook her head. "May my mothers forgive me. Dump everything but the *Cuchulainn*'s hold."

The crew was utterly silent as Tarak keyed in the codes to dump their cargo yet again. The holds showed red in scan, deadly projectiles streaking away across the lanes that would kill any ship not be able to get out of the way in time.

"For a group of pirates, you aren't very good at this, are you?" Julian asked into the silence.

Iluka powered her chair around so that she was facing their prisoner. Neva glanced at her, and the look in the captain's eyes sent a bleak shiver through her.

"Good enough for folk who used to be honest, before the Zats forced them into a life

they didn't want," Iluka said, deceptively calm. "Now, you're going to tell us what you know. You seem familiar with Rat's—Colonel Jackson's—predicament."

Julan shrugged. "Only in passing. The project was classified—I wasn't cleared high enough to know any details. What I do know is mostly rumor."

"Then give me the rumors."

"Why should I?"

Iluka reached under her boards and pulled out a gun. "This is why."

Julan swallowed and nodded. "All right. Talk has it that the Obsidian Blades were involved in something known only as Project Zero. Some of them were experimented on. They all lost their minds—became drooling idiots who could kill with only a look. Or perhaps 'could' is the wrong word. They kill *everyone* who comes in contact with them. They can't help it. But for some reason, Command hasn't put them down yet." Julan sat back in his chair. "Although clearly none of that applies to Colonel Jackson, so maybe the rumors were wrong, as they so often are."

"That's all you can give us?" Iluka asked. "Not helpful. Not helpful at all."

"Then I'll give you some advice. Surrender. Or put me in an escape pod with Colonel Jackson and let us both go. Maybe the Obsidian Blades will be satisfied." Julan leaned forward once again, and an odd smile touched his face. "Because they won't let you get away with this, you know. They want him back, and they will hunt you to the ends of the universe if that's what it takes. Surrender, or else they will kill everyone on this ship. They'll torture you until you beg to die. They'll—"

"I'd shut up if I were you."

Tarak stiffened suddenly. "Priority! I've got an alarm on the thrusters."

Iluka spun towards him. "Report."

"It's the same ghost as before, Captain." He shook his head in frustration. "Gone again. Something must be loose."

"Damn it, we can't afford to guess on this."

Julan snorted. "So now your ship is falling apart? How can you possibly expect to escape? Surrender—"

Neva jumped at the sound of the shot. Julan's body slumped back in the chair, blood and brains oozing down his face.

"Throw him out the airlock between burns," Iluka ordered. She turned back to her boards, stowing the gun in its hiding place, as if nothing had happened.

* * *

The *Exile* headed outbound, racing towards the edge of the system and jump. Beacon reported that the Klegger had undocked, but the laws of physics were against the Zatvian ship, and it had no real hope of catching the *Exile*.

Rat walked down the corridor on crew level, in the brief inertial lull before the final burn that would take them up to jump speed. He had remained in the fighter for over a shift, half-afraid to return to the ship. Afraid of what might await him.

The door of the galley opened ahead of him, and he saw Neva step out, holding a cup that smelled of coffee. He quickened his step to catch up with her. "Neva?"

She stopped and turned to face him. Dark circles showed under her eyes, like bruises against her pale face.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She didn't meet his eyes, but instead stared at the mug in her hands. "I couldn't sleep. Haven't slept since we left station. But I have to go on shift, so..." She trailed off and gestured vaguely with her coffee.

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

Neva shook her head and took a step backward, away from him. "I can't do this."

The response confused him. "What?"

"I can't do this. I can't forget what you are, Xian." It seemed for a moment that she might say something further, but instead she simply shook her head again, turned, and walked away, leaving him standing alone in the chilly corridor.

Chapter17:
Alone

I knew it all along

Rat walked down the corridor, past the closed doors of the crews' quarters. The ship was silent except for the murmur of air through the vents, the soft hiss of pumps behind the walls, the occasional creak or groan as some part of the hull expanded or contracted. But in his head, the clamor was deafening.

took that Blade's mind apart—killed him

Rat passed a door.

a shame he turned out to be a Zat, waste of a good pilot

Another door.

was he one of the soldiers who took my sight?

Another.

planet killer

He wanted to close his eyes. He wanted to sleep. But the voices followed him down into his dreams: accusing, pointing, angry, horrified. So instead he walked, down a hall that circled back on itself, bringing him back to where he began, over and over. Just like his thoughts.

I'm a murderer. He remembered the holo in Mirra's drawer, the keepsake from whatever massacre they had participated in. Remembered how small some of the burned and piled bodies had looked. *No. I'm a monster.*

There was no escape. Nowhere he could go to get away from the nagging whispers. Nowhere he could go to get away from himself.

And so he kept walking.

* * *

Drake entered Iluka's cabin at her brusque "Come in." The captain sat at her table, her eyes scanning the lines of a reader, her mouth set in a slight frown of concentration. Her t-shirt was wrinkled, as if she had slept in it, and Drake wondered if she'd even taken the time for a shower. A cup of coffee that had gone cold hours ago waited at her elbow, along with an untouched sandwich.

"You need to eat," he said, sitting down across from her.

"You need to nag less."

"Just looking out for the ship, Captain."

"Heh." She powered down the reader and stretched. Cartilage popped audibly in her spine, and she winced. "I'm getting too damned old for all this shit, Drake."

"Aren't we all?" He leaned back in his chair and studied her, wondering where he should begin the conversation. "We've got problems, Captain." Now that was an understatement. "Everything we've stolen or traded for is gone. If we hit Paradise a second time with no holds, no one is going to give us any credit. We've already called in just about every favor we've got."

She pursed her lips. "I know."

He knew that look, so he let it drop. On to problem two. "We were set up on Prospero Station. The Zats knew we were coming."

"I know that, too. Got any ideas as to how?"

Drake hesitated, then nodded. "We've got a traitor. Maybe more than one. Somehow, the Zats knew Rat was on board this ship, even before we came into station."

Iluka ran her fingers lightly along the edge of the desk, hesitating over scratches and scars that had probably been there when she was girl. "Here's another possibility. The Zats picked up our trail on Gethsemane. All of us who went there were exposed to cameras—someone might have spotted Rat then."

"That I can believe. And I can believe that they followed *Devi's Challenge* out on the same vector. What I can't figure is how they could have known where we went from there."

Iluka didn't meet his gaze. "Been thinking the same thing myself."

He should have known that she would have pursed the trail of logic ahead of him. "Either they have some new way of tracking us, we did something to give away our route...or someone tipped them off."

Iluka looked up and finally met his gaze. "I don't like any of those possibilities, Drake. Not a damned one of them. But if I had to bet, it would be on the one I like the least."

"A traitor."

"Yes. But how we're to find out who it is...I don't have a clue, not yet, anyway. They could have been on any of those ships: the *Grendel*, the *Red Cloud*..."

"The *Exile*."

"Rat wouldn't have betrayed us and then risked his life to save us. You saw him kill that Zat in the interrogation room."

The memory sent a shiver down Drake's spine. He'd seen a lot of men die, enough to know that there was no good way to go, but there was something horrifying about what Rat had done, as if he hadn't just killed the Zat, but destroyed him. "I did. I'm not saying Rat would betray us."

Iluka sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Another question, then—did the Zats know he was on *this* ship, or did they just know he was heading their way? Because if they knew we were coming in as the *Roll of the Dice*, then the only possibility is that someone on board right this moment tipped them off. If they only knew we were en route and just put a constant watch on the docks until they finally spotted him...then it might be someone else."

"Too bad we can't ask that Inquisitor."

Iluka scowled at him. "We aren't set up to keep prisoners, Drake. We couldn't risk him getting loose and causing trouble, maybe killing us all or leading the Zats straight to us."

"He might have known things we could use. That's all I'm saying."

"And would you be the one to torture them out of him, Drake Morgenstern?"

Drake was silent for a long moment, thinking. Then he shook his head. "No."

"I thought about turning him over to Rat, but you saw the condition our boy was in." Iluka's scowl deepened momentarily. "It might have broken him, and then what good would

he be to us in the long run?"

Drake had always known that Iluka was a hard woman. A good captain, but she'd been out in the dark a long time now, and some shifts he worried that her natural practicality was starting to take on a ruthless edge. "Captain...Iluka. I didn't like what I saw in that interrogation room. What Rat did to that Zat guard, Aguila...it wasn't pretty. To be honest, it was damned scary. That was way past losing control during a seizure and accidentally knocking some people out. He deliberately killed someone with nothing but his thoughts, and took the man's mind apart while he was at it."

She arched a single brow at him. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it isn't a power to be used lightly. I'm saying that I don't rest easy, having seen it. I'm saying...be careful with this, Iluka. Promise me, as your friend as well as your first mate, that you'll think long and hard before you even consider ordering Rat to do that to anyone else."

"'He who fights monsters,' Drake?"

"Something like that."

She didn't answer, but at least she looked thoughtful. At the moment, that was enough. On to the next problem. "Speaking of our telepath, did you find anything interesting?"

As soon as they had entered hyperspace, Iluka had sequestered herself in her cabin with all of the data tabs that Rat had stolen off the Zatvian ship. "I managed to get through the encryption, thanks to some of the cracks Monk sold us," she said. "There's information here, all right...but not enough. Not everything I want."

"What do we have?"

"A few personnel files on our boy." Iluka pulled up the reader again and sorted idly through the data. "Seems he's from some Zatvian world, named in typical Zat fashion. Colony 89-G, Planet 17, Sector 1."

"Never heard of it."

"Neither have I. I tried to poke around and find out more information, but we've got nothing in our databanks." Iluka shrugged again. "Probably doesn't matter. Joined the military when he was eighteen, scored through the roof on every hand-eye coordination test they gave him. Smart, too, so they fast-tracked him right into the Obsidian Blades. List of missions longer than my arm. List of reprimands, too."

"What for?"

"Fighting, mostly."

Drake frowned. "That doesn't sound like Rat."

"No, it doesn't." Iluka sighed and rubbed at her eyes tiredly, then shoved her gray dreads out of her face. "There isn't a lot to go by, but it seems that Xian Jackson had a touchy temper coupled with some serious ambition. Neither of which describes our boy at all."

Drake propped his chin on a fist, watching Iluka through half-lidded eyes. "And what are we going to do with him now?"

Iluka returned his stare. "The same as I was going to do to begin with. Use him."

"He was Zatvian."

"So were the guns in the weapons locker."

"He's a man, not a gun."

"Enough with the lectures, Drake." She stood up slowly, tying her dreads back from her face absently as she did so. "There's more, but I want to say it in front of the whole crew. Get them together in the galley ASAP. In the meantime, I'm going to take a shower."

“Aye, Captain.”

* * *

Neva felt dread pooling in her belly as she walked to the galley. Drake had called an all-crew meeting...which meant that she had no choice but to come out of her cabin and face the others. To face Rat.

Not Rat. Xian.

She took a seat at one end of the table, near the rest of the crew. Everyone had come in except for Iluka and Rat.

“Coffee?” Drake asked from where he stood at the counter, pouring himself a cup.

Neva shook her head.

Drake frowned as he took his seat. “Have you been eating?”

From somewhere, she managed to dredge up a pallid smile. “I’m the medic here, remember? I’m the one who’s supposed to ask those questions.” *So leave me alone.*

Drake looked as if he would pursue the matter further, but before he could say anything else, the door opened and Iluka strode in. Behind her came Rat.

He hesitated when he entered, his slight body swaying where he stood. His face looked thinner, as if he hadn’t eaten in days, and shadows circled his eyes like bruises. He risked a single glance at the rest of the table...then moved into the corner away from the door, sinking down into a crouch, his arms wrapped around his knees.

Neva swallowed hard against the sudden constriction in her throat. A part of her wanted to go to him, to do something, anything, to help him. But another part of her wanted to stand up and scream.

How could you do those things? How could you be a Zatvian? How could you take part in massacres, in murder, in torture? What’s wrong with you, and why didn’t I see it earlier?

Rat seemed to huddle deeper into himself. Neva forced her gaze away, and turned her attention on Iluka, as if that would somehow make him disappear.

Iluka hadn’t taken her seat; instead, she paced back and forth, a short path between table and wall. Her long dreads were still damp from washing; they swayed gently from side to side as she walked. “So. I’ve taken a peek at the files Rat managed to swipe. They don’t answer all the questions I would like, but they tell us a little more about what the Zats have been up to.

“It seems that the Obsidian Blades—or at least some of them—were involved in something called Project Zero. Someone must have had an interest in ancient history. According to the files, the project was named in honor of a god from a group called the Maya, who lived on Earth.”

Anusha had been sitting with her chair tilted back, her feet braced against the edge of the table. Now she dropped her feet and leaned forward. “Earth? Never heard of it.”

“Ancient history,” Drake said. “Earth was the origin world—the place humans evolved.”

Memory hit Neva unexpectedly. She could all but hear the soft sound of chimes, smell the scent of warm grass, feel the sunlight on her skin. Jordan was clinging to her hand, his face sticky with honey from a pastry. She remembered the priestess lifting her hands to the sky. “*This day we honor our grandmother, Terra, Gaia, the Earth that birthed and sheltered our ancestors...*”

“We remembered,” Neva said softly, fighting against the sudden constriction of her

throat that the memory had evoked. "On Harvest." She shook her head, trying to turn her thoughts to the practical. "That's where standard measurements of time come from. Every local planet has its own day and year, but to communicate effectively with people from other systems, there has to be a standard measure of time, a standard date everyone can agree on and understand. That comes from Earth."

Anusha shrugged. "Star Riders don't set foot on planets," she said, with a little sneer.

"It doesn't matter," Iluka said impatiently. "Earth's a darkworld now, anyway, or so they say—it's way the hell on the other side of the Zatvian Cooperative, so it isn't like any of us are going to be seeing it. The point I want to make is that this Mayan God of Zero was a death god, so there's some seriously bad connotations using it for the project name.

"The details on Project Zero are sketchy—either Hunter wasn't cleared highly enough to have them, or she didn't want to risk Rat seeing anything really sensitive, and had the rest of it hidden away. However, at least a part of the project involved an attempt to create telepaths."

Marcus stirred restlessly. "We already knew that."

"Shut up, Marcus," Drake said.

"The Zats recruited six volunteers," Iluka went on, ignoring their exchange. "There's a lot of technical gobbledygook that will mean more to our medic than to me, but the upshot is that they were trying to alter the volunteers' brain chemistry in specific ways. They failed."

Tarak frowned. The white of his scarred corneas seemed to glow in the dim light of the room. "Clearly they didn't."

"Oh no. They failed. At first, they didn't seem to be getting any results at all, and eventually that part of the Project was terminated. The six volunteers went back to active duty. And then one day—the same day, as far as I can determine—they all went crazy and killed everyone around them."

The crew was silent. Neva glanced up, and realized that they were all pointedly *not* looking at Rat.

"Five of the six were recovered immediately," Iluka went on. "It wasn't hard, because mentally they had been reduced to infants. According to the notes, they experienced complete brain wipe. Total amnesia. No language skills, no potty training, not even the ability to use a fork to eat.

"But what was even worse was that every time one of them experienced an intense emotion—including pleasure—they killed everyone who happened to be standing near them."

"Damn," Marcus swore softly.

"Exactly," Iluka agreed.

"That's what happened to the *New Beginning*, then?" Tarak guessed. "One of them was on board, and when another ship approached, they got scared or mad and just...killed everyone?"

"That's just the thing," Iluka said. "All five are accounted for. They're all locked away in labs, kept in separate locations, heavily sedated. None of them have ever even been in the same system as Edith's Point or the *New Beginning*."

"Then what—"

"I don't know. And nothing in here tells me. None of these files even suggest what the point of the project was to start with."

"*That* ought to be obvious," Marcus said with a snort. "You said Project Zero was named

after a death god. They were trying to create super soldiers, telepaths who could kill with just their brains.”

“Maybe,” Iluka allowed. “Maybe not. The military applications seem obvious, so why aren’t they even mentioned in these reports? And don’t forget about the *New Beginning*. What happened to it? Is someone else out there making telepaths and turning them loose against the Zats? But if so, why attack a slave ship instead of a warship?”

“Who would it even be?” Drake asked, spreading his hands apart in a gesture of confusion. “There are resistance movements here and there, but where would they get the type of funding and resources needed for something like that? And if they could get that type of funding, why not just use it to buy weapons and blow the Zats to hell the old fashioned way?”

“Why is it that every answer just means another dozen questions?” Tarak asked wryly.

“Nature of the universe,” Drake replied with a faint grin. “So. Any theories?”

Not surprisingly, there were none. Iluka nodded. “All right. That’s all I have, then. Neva, I want you to take a look at the medical aspects of the files, see if there’s anything I’ve missed. Crew dismissed.”

Neva stood up quickly. She didn’t want to go through the files, but it wasn’t in her nature to put off an unpleasant task. Never looking in Rat’s direction, she ducked out the door and headed back to her cabin.

* * *

Rat sat silent and alone, hunched on the floor in the corner of the galley. The rest of the crew had left without speaking to him, but he could feel their distrust and anger all the way to his bones.

What can I do? Misery seeped through him like cold water, a constant poison that he couldn’t escape. That he no longer had a place on the *Exile* seemed painfully clear. But where else could he go?

Neva. She had barely looked at him, and he hadn’t dared look too long at her. The sight of her ragged hair and pale, scarred face made him ache inside. But the taste/sound/sight of her rage excoriated his very soul.

She feels betrayed. Did I betray her? I didn’t mean to. I wouldn’t have, I swear, I wouldn’t have.

But he had, before he ever met her, by being Zatvian. Nothing he could do could change that. Goddess, he couldn’t even *remember* it—how could he possibly atone for it?

A mixture of helplessness and grief swamped him. Closing his eyes, he stayed crouched in the darkness of the galley, unable even to move.

* * *

Neva lay on her stomach on her bunk, staring blearily at her tablet. Her eyes ached and her head throbbed, and she wondered if she shouldn’t just shut down the tablet and rest. But sleep had been hard to come by recently, and she knew that the questions her reading had raised would only keep going around and around in her head even after she closed her eyes.

There were too many things in the Project Zero files that made no sense. The scientific data, in particular, contained odd gaps that raised far more questions than answers.

Such as, where did they come up with the knowledge to make telepaths in the first place?

What had been done to the test subjects was far beyond any medical science that Neva had ever seen or heard of. To have achieved enough understanding to make the changes they did, there would first have had to have been years—decades—of experimentation and research. The very concept that telepathy was possible in the first place would have been the subject of intensive, long-term research just to lay the groundwork.

So why is there no sign of it?

As far as Neva could tell, the science behind Project Zero simply...came out of nowhere. Even the team of neurologists and biochemists who had worked on the project had been gathered from disparate labs around the Cooperative.

Why use an all-new team, instead of whomever it was that came up with the ideas behind the project in the first place? Someone must have done the initial research—so where were they during all of this?

And as for the other half of the project, the volunteers themselves, why use elite soldiers in an experiment? Why not use grunts, or even prisoners of war? Why risk your best and brightest?

Unless there were prior human trials that aren't recorded here. But if that were the case, wouldn't the Zats have known that their procedure wouldn't work? That it would create deadly, unstable telepaths with all the mental capacity of a newborn infant?

None of this makes sense.

Up until now, she had avoided looking into the personnel files that accompanied each of the six test subjects. Although she doubted the answers to her questions would be found there, it was impossible to discount the possibility that there might be some clue hidden within them. A previous assignment at another lab, perhaps—something, anything, that might shed light on the history of the project.

A quick scan of the first three revealed nothing of interest. When she reached the fourth, however, her heart gave an involuntary jolt. SUBJECT FOUR: JACKSON, XIAN said the header. It was followed with more identifying information: serial number, short DNA sequence, retinal pattern, and picture.

The man who stared back at her from the image seemed more like Rat's brother, or even a stranger, than the man she had known. It wasn't just his short-cut hair, or his shaved chin, that gave the impression. More than anything, it was his expression, the way he held himself, the cold look in his eyes.

The personal information included was sparse. Mirra Hunter was listed under next of kin, her relationship given as fiancée, even though siblings and a mother were mentioned under known relatives. Apparently he had felt closer to her than to any of his blood relations, although what that meant, Neva couldn't guess.

Other than that...there was nothing but planet of origin and date of birth. No school records, no medical list of childhood diseases, nothing to indicate a life before leaving home and entering the military. Like Project Zero, Xian Jackson seemed to have come out of nowhere.

Underneath that was his psychological profile. Neva started to scroll past it—then stopped, her attention arrested by what even a casual glance revealed.

According to the psychiatrist who had evaluated him, Xian Jackson was highly competitive, ambitious, and intensely focused on his goals. But his lack of empathy for others bordered on pathological, and he displayed poor impulse control, particularly with

aggression. As a solider, it meant that he was ruthless and effective, but had to be kept on a short leash when away from the battlefield.

That can't be right.

Neva had heard that some sociopaths were extremely good at manipulating others. Could it be possible that Xian was one of those? Could he be so good at playing her, using the emotions he sensed from her, that she had believed him to be the exact opposite of what he truly was?

Unbidden, she remembered her first day on board, remembered the frightened, filthy man crouched in a corridor, begging them not to shoot Jasmine. Could anyone, no matter how brilliant a manipulator, carry out such a charade under such conditions?

Slowly, she thumbed through the other images accompanying the file. Some were medical or military records, depicting Xian standing straight and proud. Everything about the way he held himself was subtly wrong, even when the picture was of a more casual nature. A short clip depicting all the volunteers together demonstrated a different gait than she was used to seeing. Even his body language was different.

She skipped to the section showing brain scans made before and during treatment. None of them showed anything useful, and she remembered that the researchers had not found any signs that any substantial alterations were occurring. What cascade of microscopic changes had been going on in the wet tangle of neurons, slowly building towards a sudden and catastrophic shift that would alter everything?

At the very end, there were five scans taken after “changeover,” which she assumed meant the moment their telepathy had become active. All of them showed bewildering abnormalities.

Neva pulled up the information the nanobots had recorded on Rat during their sojourn on Paradise. The abnormalities matched.

Whatever the Zats did to cause his telepathy, it completely rewired his brain.

Is Xian Jackson still there at all? Some part must be, mustn't it? He can still fly a fighter, still talk, still put on a 'suit.

What else might be there, lurking inside, waiting to come out? He blew a hole in the side of a station. He shot three men without flinching. What else might he do?

Does it matter? He was a Zatvian. How can I forget that? How can I forgive that?

An alarm suddenly blared from the com, making Neva jump. “Alert, alert, alert,” Tarak said, voice crackling over the old speaker. “We have a problem. Diagnostics are showing catastrophic failure of thruster control.”

No.

Neva scrambled to her feet and ran into the hall, on her way to the lift. A moment later, Drake, Marcus, and Iluka joined her.

“What the hell is going on?” Iluka demanded as they stepped out onto the bridge.

Tarak didn't turn away from his boards; his hands danced a graceful pattern, filtering and sending information. “It's the ghost, Captain—the same failure alarm we've had three times already. Only this time, it's not going away.”

“Then switch over to the damned backups. It isn't like we need thrusters in hyperspace—backups will do for entry into Paradise.”

“That's just it.” Tarak's voice was grim. “The backup systems are offline, too.”

“That's not possible,” Marcus said. “The main controls and the backups are on separate systems—are you telling me that they all just happened to go bad at the same time?”

“I’m not telling you anything of the sort,” Tarak snapped back.

There was a moment of silence. Then Iluka took a deep breath and said the word that no one else seemed able to utter.

“Sabotage.”

Chapter18: Atonement

“Sabotage?” Marcus exclaimed. “You can’t seriously believe that.”

Neva stared at him, wondering if he had lost his grip on sanity. “Why not?” she asked bitterly. “Goddess, everything else has gone wrong on this trip!”

“That’s enough, Neva,” Iluka cut in. She strode across the bridge and leaned over Tarak’s shoulder, checking his boards. “Could the Zats have done something while you were under guard at dock?”

“No.” Tarak was adamant. “I set all the outside sensors to sound an alert if they detected any nearby movement, just in case the Zats tried to cut through the hull to board. If anyone had gotten near us, I would have known.”

Anusha spun her chair around to face them. The dim light of the bridge left most of her face in shadow, except for the faint gleam of her eyes. “The ghost has been there for a while. This wasn’t something that just happened at dock. Whoever did this, they wanted to make it look like an accident—or at least cover their tracks.”

Iluka stepped back and cast a dark look over the gathered crew. “The question is who did it. And when.”

“It couldn’t have been one of us,” Marcus said, folding his arms defensively over his chest. “No one would be stupid enough to sabotage a ship they’re stuck on.”

Memory slipped suddenly into place, and Neva felt a cold chill touch her. “But you weren’t going to be on board, were you?”

Marcus’ blue eyes fixed on her face, startled...then angry. “What do you mean by that?”

“I overheard your conversation with Iluka on the way back from Gethsemane, on board *Devi’s Challenge*. She said that if everyone knew you had been the one to give us away on Gethsemane, they would assume you’d done it on purpose. They would call you a collaborator.” Neva could feel her heart pounding with a mixture of rage and fear. “You *did* give us away deliberately, didn’t you? You wanted the Zats to catch us! You never intended to come back to the *Exile* at all!”

“Stand down, Whitestone!” Iluka ordered. “Wild accusations aren’t going to get us anywhere.”

Marcus was still staring at Neva, though. All the color had drained from his face; he looked like a man on his deathbed. “That’s a filthy lie! Why the hell would I do something like that?”

“You tell us!” Anusha jumped out of her chair and stalked closer to Marcus, her hand hovering near that gun at her hip. “*Are* you a collaborator, Marcus? Were you?”

“I heard rumors,” Tarak murmured from the sidelines. “But I thought they were just

talk.”

Anusha pulled her gun and pointed it at Marcus' head. “I think you'd better start explaining.”

“Damn it, stand down!” Iluka shouted. “Everyone sit down and shut up!”

“You want an explanation?” Marcus demanded. “Fine. Once upon a time, there was a man who lived with his daughter. They were very happy, until one day the Zats came and took over their fucking planet!”

Anusha's aim wavered slightly. “Go on.”

Marcus took a deep breath, and some of his anger seemed to give way to cold grief. “I'd done my stint in the military, but it was a long time ago, when I was young. Service was compulsory on New Breyers. Soon as I did my time, I got out and married. Had a child.

“I didn't go back into the soldier business when the Zats came, because by that time the marriage was long over. Genevieve—my daughter—was only twelve. She needed me. So when the government surrendered and the Zats took over, I kept my head down and my nose clean.

“And then one day the Zats came into my classroom after hours. I taught high school—ancient literature, if it matters. They started to talk about Genevieve. They told me that she had ‘potential,’ whatever the hell they meant by that. They said she qualified for something called the Youth Advantage Program. They had taken her away so that she could develop her potential to the fullest. Then they said that my actions would determine how comfortable she was while she was gone. If I cooperated with them...things would be fine. She'd come home soon. She'd be safe and happy until then. If I didn't cooperate...they didn't say, explicitly, but then they didn't have to, did they?”

He fell silent, his eyes looking into some space beyond them. Neva stared at him, trying to imagine him as a teacher, a father. An ordinary person, someone who had once been happy. “What happened?” she asked softly, even though she knew the answer couldn't be good.

Marcus' mouth twisted into an expression of self-loathing. “I was dumb enough to believe them. I was too naïve to realize that if they had plans for her, nothing I did would make any difference either way. So I cooperated. Collaborated, if you prefer to call it that. Told them the names of anyone talking about resistance. Sold out men and women I'd taught beside for years, because it was a choice between them and Genevieve. She was only...she was just a little girl.”

Anusha lowered her gun, looking stricken. “What did they want with your daughter?”

Marcus shook his head, and Neva saw the shine of tears in his eyes. “I don't know. I never saw her again. I tried—I kept asking my Zat contacts when I would get to see her. They wouldn't tell me, of course. Then finally a bunch of grunts grabbed me on the street one day and beat me up. They laughed at me when I told them to stop, that I was helping them. And then...somehow...I knew. Maybe it was the look in their eyes, or just the way they thought it was so damned funny. Whatever they'd done with Genevieve...they weren't bringing her back. The only way I'd ever see her again was if they were defeated and she was set free. So I went home, got an old rifle, and shot all the bastards I could find. Ran off and joined the resistance that night. Except they didn't want me, because they suspected what I'd been. So I left the planet to find a place to stand and fight. And here I am.

“So if you want to shoot me, go ahead. I did it. I collaborated with the Zats to save my baby girl. Go on. Shoot me.”

All of Anusha's rage had evaporated. She looked at the gun, as if surprised to find herself still holding it, then shoved it back into its holster. "Sorry."

Neva bit her lip. "I'm sorry, too, Marcus. I didn't...I shouldn't have accused you."

"We're all under stress," Iluka said. "But like Marcus says, it doesn't make any damned sense to sabotage a ship you're on, not when there are easier ways of selling us out. None of us did this."

"Who did, then?" Anusha asked.

"A lot of people had access to the ship when it was being repaired," Drake said uneasily. "Crew from the *Grendel* and the *Red Cloud* both worked on the *Exile* to repair the damage to our engines. Any of them could have done something, then rigged things to fail later, when they were light years away from us. If we die, no one will know what happened to us. No one will suspect a thing."

Neva felt a surge of alarm. "Is it that serious?"

"Serious?" Anusha cast her a look of disbelief. "We're going to come out of hyperspace into a system with no way to brake—and no way to steer. What do you think?"

"Best case, everyone gets out of our way and we manage to abandon ship," Iluka said grimly. "Worst case, we slam into another ship, a rock, the damned station itself. We'll be doing a good fraction of *c*—there won't be enough of us left for a DNA scan. So we need to figure out what, exactly, is wrong and how we're going to fix it. Tarak, Anusha, get started on that. Marcus, you help them." She paused and swept them all with a quelling glare. "And I hear anymore backtalk from any of you, and I'll send you for a spacewalk without a 'suit, hear me? When I tell you to stand down, you damn well better do it."

"Aye, Captain," Neva murmured, echoed a moment later by Anusha. *I let myself get caught up in the moment, in the paranoia. I accused one of my own crewmates of trying to kill us all. What's wrong with me?*

But she knew the answer to that. If Rat could turn out to be a Zatvian, why couldn't Marcus? Why couldn't any of them? If she had misjudged one person so badly, how could she trust her judgment with anyone?

Without an immediate assignment, she went back to her cabin, where she would at least be out of the way of those who had work to do. The abandoned tablet caught her eye, and she sank down on the bed, staring at the last schematic she had been studying when the alarm had interrupted her.

Xian Jackson had been a borderline sociopath, who cared only for his own ambition. His rapid rise from grunt to Obsidian Blade was a testament to the single-minded way in which he had pursued his goals. It was possible—likely, even—that his engagement to Mirra Hunter had been intended to fulfill that ambition. If he truly cared about anyone or anything save for himself, it didn't show up in his psychological profile.

Rat wasn't exactly the poster boy for mental health, but he was no sociopath. He had taken care of Jasmine even when he had nothing for himself. He had left Moldar Station for the *Exile* precisely because he was afraid of hurting others. Nothing he had ever done had made her think that he had even the potential to be the cold, calculating individual that Xian Jackson had been.

Neuro had never been her specialty, but in the months since taking on the problem of Rat, she had done enough reading on it to know that the forces that shaped a person were subtle and many. Genetics played a part, but so did a thousand other factors: exposure to hormones in the womb, childhood experiences, endocrine disruptors, even chemical balances

later in life. Trauma to the brain could result in puzzling and disturbing alterations to personality at any time.

At what point did a person begin and end? How many changes had to be made to the brain, the neurons, the chemistry, until the person who had been was no more? Where did you draw the line?

The books couldn't tell her that. The question was philosophic, not scientific. It was the sort of thing she might have discussed with her friends back on Harvest, unwinding from a long day over a glass of wine, arguing about the meaning of life and being. In the abstract, it would have been an interesting puzzle. In reality...it was bitterly difficult.

* * *

"The news could be worse," Anusha said. She, Tarak, and Marcus had called the rest of the crew back to the galley to tell them what they had found. The Star Rider looked tired; there were dark circles under her eyes, and she swayed a little where she stood.

Neva, Iluka, and Drake sat on the other side of the table from the team who had been tracking down the damage done by the unknown saboteur. Although the summons had included the entire crew, Rat hadn't yet shown up. No one suggested finding him.

"The news could be a hell of a lot better, too," Marcus grumbled.

"One thing at a time," Iluka said. "Anusha, what's the situation?"

Anusha went to the display on the wall and called up schematics of the ship. "The good news is that only one part needs replacing," she said. The part in question turned bloody red, like a wound on the ship. "Since the saboteur didn't want to make things too obvious, he concentrated most of his effort here, on the actuator. He—or she—weakened it just enough that it wouldn't fail immediately, so that it would pass the diagnostic tests we did after engines were repaired. Under ordinary circumstances, the backups would have taken over for it, but they've been so fried that I don't think we're getting them back without a major overhaul.

"The other good news is that the repair itself is simple. Just replace the actuator, and we're done. We even have the part. The bad news is that it will take a spacewalk to do the fix."

Neva studied the schematic, but the answer to her question didn't appear, so she voiced it aloud. "I don't understand. We have the 'suits. Why not just go out and fix it?"

"Because we're in hyperspace," Drake replied, cutting off any scathing reply Anusha might have made. "The physics are complicated, but in practice what it means is that the ship is surrounded by a small bubble of normal space. Breach that bubble, and your molecules will be scattered from here to infinity. Radiation exposure from the Savvies is another problem. The 'suits will protect against some of it, but we don't have the heavy-duty shielding needed for long-term exposure. Anyone who goes outside the hull will be taking a serious risk."

Neva glanced at the grim faces around her. "Could we wait until we reenter normal space?"

"We could," Iluka allowed. "Providing we're willing to bet that there won't be any nearby traffic for us to hit. If we come out of hyperspace out of control, this ship will be nothing but a missile pointed straight at Paradise."

There came a moment of silence. Then Anusha sighed tiredly. "I'll do it."

"Anusha—" Tarak begin, but his sister waved him to silence.

"I'm the logical choice," she said. "I have the mechanical knowledge to do the fix, and I'm experienced doing repairs while in a 'suit. No one else can say that."

Iluka considered Anusha for a moment, as if weighing some unknown factor in her mind. Then she nodded. "All right. But you need sleep first. Have Neva give you something if you can't rest on your own. You're not doing this unless I'm sure you're alert and on top of things. Neva, you get ready to start radiation therapy as soon as Anusha gets back."

Neva nodded. "The less exposure time, the less damage there will be, so it will be best to do the repair as quickly as possible."

Anusha rolled her eyes. "So much for my plans to take a vacation outside the hull. Give me some credit, grounder."

"All right," Iluka said, rising to her feet. "Let's all try to get some rest. We'll reconvene in six hours."

* * *

Rat huddled between a pair of exposed pipes, deep in shadow. No one noticed him when the galley door opened and the crew walked out. As soon as they were gone, he relaxed marginally and closed his eyes.

Exhaustion dragged at him, but he refused to give in to it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept, or the last meal he'd eaten. But the hunger and thirst seemed far away and insignificant, just another part of the misery that filled him like the formless buzz of static.

He hadn't dared intrude on the crew and hear the whispers turn to anger, to hate, to distrust. But he'd listened carefully to every word they had spoken aloud, muted as it was through the galley door.

The ship was in trouble and had to be fixed. Anusha had volunteered to go. For a moment, he remembered how she had helped him get the *Cuchulainn* into shape, their 'suited forms moving among the gantries, mostly talking about the work at hand but sometimes about other things. In another universe, where he wasn't a Zatvian, perhaps time would have made them friends.

She's our navigator—the ship can't afford to lose her. But neither could they risk anyone else. Each and every member of the crew had a vital function to fulfill.

Except one.

There was only one person on board who was entirely expendable. One whom nobody would miss. One whom they would even be glad to get rid of...

He waited a while, until the ship had settled into silence, the crew gone to rest before the arduous task before them. Then he left his hiding place and slunk down the corridor, where he took the lift down to the bridge. It wasn't difficult to access the notes Tarak and Anusha had made; why would they hide the information, after all? He read though their log carefully, forcing his tired brain to comprehend, until he was certain he understood what part was needed and what the repair entailed.

It took him longer to find the replacement actuator itself; storage space on the *Exile* was at a premium, and the various hardware and spare parts were crammed into a bewildering jumble of crates. But he found it at last.

Jasmine sensed something was wrong as soon as he opened the door. She whimpered and tried to groom him; he cuddled her close for a long time, breathing in the scent of her fur.

She didn't care who he had been or what he had done; she loved him without reservation.

Neva will take care of her, he told himself. It didn't make saying goodbye any easier, though, and there were tears in his eyes when he put her down and hurriedly closed the door to the washroom between them.

I should have left a note, he thought, staring blankly at the closed door, hearing Jasmine scratching on the other side to be let out. He looked around, but nothing to write with miraculously appeared. After a moment of thought, he took out a small knife and sliced his index finger.

When he was done, he put on his 'suit, making sure that the actuator was tucked securely in a pocket. If he screwed up and lost it, then the ship was doomed. He might have failed Neva by turning out to be a Zat, but he swore he wouldn't fail her this time. He would get at least one thing right before the end.

He wished, suddenly, that he could have seen her again. But what good would that have done? She hated him.

It was one thing they had in common.

* * *

After staring at his ceiling for a couple of hours, Drake decided that enough was enough. Nothing short of a sedative was going to make him sleep now, with so much hanging on the outcome of Anusha's planned spacewalk. Every possible worry had come to visit him the moment he had laid down.

There was nothing practical for him to do, but restlessness wouldn't let him be still. After stopping at the galley for a cup of coffee, he headed up to the bridge. If nothing else, he could run diagnostic checks on everything else, just to make sure that their saboteur hadn't decided to hit more than one system.

As he settled into his chair, a light came on. Frowning, he switched over to the operations board—then swore furiously. Punching up the allship com, he said, "Alert, alert, alert! We've got an airlock open. Alert, alert, alert!"

* * *

Rat cycled through the airlock nearest the portion of the ship where the actuator was located. Although he had expected to find nothing but blackness on the other side, to his surprise a nacreous glow illuminated the dark bulk of the ship. Startled, he glanced out, away from the ship.

Colors from every portion of the spectrum swam in bewildering, fractal patterns beyond the tiny bubble of normal space surrounding the *Exile*. The display was dizzying, and he looked away quickly, focusing on the hull.

He'd attached four magnetic pads to the hands and knees of his 'suit. The pads adhered to the skin of the ship, so that no accidental movement on his part would send him flying off and into nothingness. Moving slowly, cautiously, he crawled along the hull like an insect moving over the face of a giant.

It was hard to get his bearings, even with a schematic of the ship displayed in one corner of his 'suit's visor. The route that had seemed so simple on board turned out to be a hellishly difficult crawl over surfaces that no one had ever expected to navigate in such a way. Under

normal conditions, anyone making repairs would simply fly a skimmer over to whatever part of the ship they needed to access.

At one point, he found a loose bit of cable dangling from a port, no doubt an umbilical or sensor of some kind that they had torn free from the station during their hasty departure. On impulse, he twisted it free from its socket and threw it aside; it spun away, until it found the edge of the bubble a few meters out from the ship. There came a flash, almost lost in the sensory confusion of the hyperspace boundary...then nothing.

It didn't look like it would hurt, or if it did it would only be for an instant, too short a time for a disintegrating brain to process. That was good. It wouldn't be so hard, knowing that.

But first things first. Pulling his exhausted mind back to the task at hand, Rat resumed his crawl.

* * *

What now? Neva wondered as Drake's warning came over the com. She had been working in the infirmary, brushing up on the protocols for treatment of radiation exposure. Fortunately, centuries of working the dangerous environment of space meant that treatment had advanced to the point where it was relatively simple to administer, so long as exposure hadn't reached toxic levels.

Iluka's voice crackled over the com. "Drake, report."

"One of the airlocks cycled. The open light came on and caught my eye—but now it's closed again."

"Damn it! I told Anusha to wait!"

Com crackled again. "I'm here, Captain," said Anusha.

There came a brief moment of silence. Then: "Everyone, report in. Now."

"Tarak here."

"Marcus here."

Neva touched the com pad. "Neva here."

Silence.

"Rat?" Iluka asked. "Speak up if you're there, crazy man."

Nothing.

Sudden fear sent a chill up Neva's spine. She ran out of the infirmary, headed for the laundry that doubled as Rat's cabin.

Even from the corridor outside, she could hear Jasmine's shrieks. She ran for the door, intended to let the le-murr out—then froze, staring in mounting horror.

Someone had written on the door in a liquid that had dried a dark, rusty shade of brown. The faint scent of blood hung on the air, confirming Neva's guess as to what had been used to leave the message.

Please take care of Jasmine, had been scrawled first, higher up. Then, underneath in larger print: *I'm sorry*.

"No," Neva said, even as Marcus jogged up behind her. "Goddess, no!"

Turning, she ran for the bridge.

* * *

There, Rat thought when he caught sight of the access panel. The crawl had been long and difficult, but now it was done with. Just one more task, and everything would be complete.

As he pulled out a wrench to undo the bolts holding the panel in place, however, his helmet com unexpectedly let out a burst of static. A moment later, Iluka's voice came over it.

"Rat! Damn it, are you out there?"

It startled him badly, and he almost fumbled the wrench, barely catching it in time to keep it from drifting off into oblivion. He hadn't expected anyone to wake up and discover what he was doing until long after he had finished. For a moment, he thought about not answering, but she was his captain, and he supposed she deserved an answer.

"I'm fixing the actuator," he said, in case they thought he'd just decided to take a spacewalk for the hell of it.

Iluka let out a blistering string of curses. "No one authorized that! What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm fixing the actuator," he repeated patiently. As he spoke, he freed the first bolt and stuck it to a magnetic pad on his 'suit, so he wouldn't lose it.

"And what made you take it into your damned head that you ought to be doing that?"

She was mad, he could tell. Really mad. It made him glad that he was too far away to hear her thoughts. "I can do it, Captain. I can. And this way, you don't have to risk Anusha. You don't have to risk anybody that matters."

She cursed him again, even more virulently. While she was doing that, he finished removing the bolts and popped open the access panel. Fortunately, the actuator lay just behind it, so there would be no need to dig through the ship's guts. It came out in two pieces; the sabotage had been crude but effective. With a shake of his head, he tossed the fragments away from him, where they vanished in a blaze of light.

He seated the new part carefully, conscious of how much depended on his ability to do it correctly. "Test it," he said over the com.

A few moments later, Tarak's voice came to him. "It's good."

Despite his weariness, Rat felt a smile touch his lips. He'd done something right after all. He put the hatch back into place, then bolted it securely. "All done," he reported.

"Good," said Iluka. "Now get back in here right now."

He closed his eyes and lay against the hull for a moment. *I could sleep here.*

Not yet. Just a few more minutes, and I'll rest.

"No, Captain," he whispered.

"What? What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I'm not coming back."

Silence. Then: "I know I did not hear that."

"I'm not coming back." Grief constricted his throat, all the things he had pushed aside in order to concentrate now flooding back. "It's better this way. You know it is."

"I don't know any damned thing like that. Get your ass in here, you hear me? Now!"

"Rat." Drake's voice cut in, calm and collected. "Don't do this. You aren't thinking straight. Just come back inside and we'll discuss things, all right?"

"No, Drake. There's nothing to discuss." A sob took him unexpectedly, and he blinked back tears. "I'm Zatvian. Evil. You all know it. You all thought it. I deserve this. I do. And...and I'm not angry about it, I'm not. It's going to be okay. Just a flash, then nothing. You won't have to worry about me any more."

“Rat—”

His hand trembling, Rat fumbled at the controls on the outside of his helmet, until he found the switch that controlled the com's volume and turned it down to a level he could ignore. Alone in the near-silence, he closed his eyes.

* * *

Neva stood on the bridge, only a few steps from the lift, where she had stopped when she heard Rat's voice over the com. She pressed her hand to her mouth, as if to keep in a cry, and found that she was shaking. For a moment, a sense of helplessness threatened to overwhelm her. Everything she had ever cared about had been ripped from her already, and now she was to stand by while Rat died as well?

No. I don't have to stand by. I'm not giving up this easily.

“I'm going after him,” she said aloud.

Everyone looked at her, as if they had forgotten her presence. “No,” Iluka said. “I'm not losing any more of my crew.”

“Someone has to do it! We can't just sit here and listen while he dies!”

“If anyone goes, it ought to be someone used to wearing a 'suit,’” Drake pointed out. “This isn't a spacewalk for beginners, Neva.”

“Send anyone else after him, and he might bolt. At least I know how to talk to him.”

“If something happens to you, we lose not only our fighter pilot, but our medic as well.”

Neva pressed her lips together. “If you don't let me go, I'm getting off at Paradise and not coming back.”

Iluka had been silent, listening to their back-and-forth. Now, though, her dark eyes caught Neva's gaze, as if seeking to read her determination there. After a long moment, she nodded once. “Go. Anusha, help get her 'suited up.’”

Neva didn't give Iluka the chance to change her mind, but instead ran for the lift. To her credit, Anusha followed on her heels. The two women were silent on the ride up to the locker where the 'suits were stored on crew level.

Neva felt awkward and clumsy in the 'suit. As she struggled to pull it on and make the proper adjustments, Anusha kept up a steady stream of advice. “Keep at least two magnetic pads in contact with the hull at all times. Go slow and careful—if you rush, you'll break free.”

Neva's courage almost failed her when the airlock opened to let her out onto the hull. The kaleidoscopic hues of hyperspace were disorienting, and she realized with a little chill that it was almost impossible to tell where their little bubble of normality ended. Her eyes played tricks; one moment, the boundary of hyperspace seemed far away, the next almost touching her face.

There's enough room to maneuver. There has to be—Rat got through, after all.

What if he's already dead? He hasn't said anything over com for a while—what if it isn't that he's ignoring us, but that he's already gone?

All ye Gods and Goddesses, I beg of you, lend me the strength to do this.

Somehow, she clambered out of the airlock and onto the hull. Once there, the true size of the ship came to her. Although the *Exile* was just a speck next to some of the mega freighters, it was enormous when compared to one small human.

“I'm outside,” she reported over com. “Rat, if you can hear me, please wait. Please. I

have to talk to you.”

Moving awkwardly, she began to crawl, keeping her head down and her eyes focused on the hull beneath her. Its surface was scratched and pitted where particles of dust or small rocks had collided with the ship, turning it from smooth, undifferentiated metal into a uniquely textured pattern.

Refusing to look up or out helped with her vertigo, but at the same time made it harder to get her bearings. Before long, she wasn't entirely certain that she was still headed toward the access panel where Rat had been. There was nothing to do, though, but keep going and hope that she would come across him.

Goddess, guide me.

It seemed as if she had been crawling for half of eternity when she came to an obstacle. A series of antennae jutted off the ship, forming what looked like an impenetrable forest. What the various sized and shaped antennae were for, she couldn't guess—sensors, perhaps, or something to do with the hyperspace bubble around them, or maybe even just communications. Some of them were covered in hazard warnings, whereas others were mysteriously blank, whether safe or simply unmarked she didn't know.

She looked up and down the array, hoping to find easy access through or around it, but the antennae seemed to form an endless line. Even if there was a route around them, could she spare the time to take it?

If I stand up, I could squeeze through them.

That went against all Anusha's advice, though, and invited unknown hazards if some of those unmarked antennae were live.

Every second I waste here is too long. Rat could be dead by now. He hasn't answered me—he might not even still be there. But what if he's trying to steel himself for the final plunge—what if I can still save him, but this array makes me miss the chance?

I have to risk it.

Holding her breath, she cautiously reached out one hand and touched the nearest antenna. Nothing happened. The magnetic pad across her palm didn't want to adhere to it, though, and she wondered if it were made from carbon fiber or some more obscure material.

Moving cautiously, Neva gradually levered herself to her feet, until none of her magnetic pads were in contact with the hull. Clinging to the antennae, she carefully began to ease herself between them. At first it seemed the she would pass through without incident—then the bulky 'suit caught on something.

As the snag twisted her around, she found herself pitching towards the hull. Instinctively, she flung out a hand to catch herself. The magnetic pad on her palm tried to grip, but wasn't strong enough, and Neva bounced off the hull.

For an instant, the universe went into a spin. She grabbed wildly at the antennae, but they were too far away. There was nothing to catch her—she would spin out from the ship until she met the deadly edge of the bubble—

A hand closed around her left wrist, jerking her back towards the hull. Her knees slammed into it, hard enough to bruise even through the 'suit, but the magnetic pads were able to reassert their grip. Shaking with reaction, she flattened both palms against the ship, clinging to safety while her heart raced and adrenaline flooded her veins.

The hand let go of her wrist. Turning her head, she saw her rescuer.

Rat.

Hyperspace sent weird reflections across his visor, but there was fear in his voice. “What

are you doing?"

"I came to get you."

He shook his head. "No. No, no, no. Go back."

"Not without you."

"No!" There was desperation in his voice, and he began to move away from her.

"Rat, please!" *Goddess, what can I say to him?* "Talk to me. At least tell me why you're doing this! Don't you at least owe me that?"

She could hear his ragged breathing over the com. "You know why."

"No, I don't! Tell me. Please, Rat."

"You do know. I see it—hear it—every time you look at me, every time you're in the same room with me. Y-you all hate me now. You should hate me."

Pain lanced through her chest, but it was for him, not for her. "I don't hate you."

"You hate me because I was a Zat."

"Damn you, that isn't so!" She clenched her hands into fists, desperate to say something, anything, to make him understand. "I was upset when I found out the truth. And that was selfish of me, because the truth hurt you, too, and I made it worse. I'm sorry for that, I swear I am. But try to understand—the Zats had destroyed everything I ever knew, everyone I ever cared about, and when I found out that you had been a Zat yourself, then of course I was confused."

He had turned his face away from her, towards the hull, as if unable to bear to look at her. "Because you'd given sympathy to a Zat."

"Because I'm in love with you! Goddess, what kind of telepath are you that you haven't figured that out yet?"

It startled him into looking at her. She stared into his amber eyes, willing him to understand, to feel, to know. And Goddess, yes, it was a tangle, pain and grief and guilt jumbled together, but underneath all of it was love. If she had ignored it herself, in favor of nursing sorrow, because by now sorrow was so familiar that it was almost comforting, then how could she have expected him to understand?

"You don't know," he said, so softly that the pickups almost dropped his words altogether. "You don't know what I might have done. I don't know, either. But it seems...it seems as if I've probably done terrible things."

"Xian Jackson did them, Rat. And he's dead."

"You don't know that." His voice shook. "You can't be sure."

She saw it then, his fear that maybe he did bear responsibility for whatever atrocities Xian Jackson had committed, his terror that the capacity for such things might still live inside him. And at that moment, any lingering doubts she might have had evaporated. She stretched her hand out to him, and saw that it was perfectly steady.

"Then I forgive you," she said simply.

He stared at her hand for a moment, and she saw the tears suddenly well up in his eyes. Then, with a muffled sob, he grabbed her hand, clinging to it with all his strength.

She didn't know how they made it back to the safety of the airlock and then to the lift. When the doors opened onto the warmth and oxygen of the crew level, they both tumbled out. Rat collapsed into a heap, all of his strength and will gone. Neva yanked off her helmet and threw it aside, then did the same to his. Wrapping her arms around him, she buried her face in his hair, and they clung weeping together as the rest of the crew gathered silently around them.

Chapter19: Trial

The patient is still resting. A sedative was given to him shortly after admittance into the infirmary.

Neva paused as she typed up her report for Iluka, wondering if she should mention that she had slipped the injection into the IV line without telling Rat. Deciding against it, she continued—

Patient was found to be suffering from dehydration compounded by lack of recent nourishment. The patient also displayed symptoms of sleep deprivation. It is my opinion that the combination of these factors, as well as the stressful situation brought on by conflict with other members of the crew, contributed to the impaired judgment demonstrated by the patient and should be taken into consideration when evaluating his actions.

Neva wrapped her arms around herself and reread the last few lines. *In other words, he wasn't drinking, eating, or sleeping, which would have been bad enough for a normal person. With an unstable telepath, it was a recipe for disaster.*

She glanced over her shoulder, in the direction of the diagnostic bed, where Rat still lay sleeping. The sedative would have worn off hours ago, but exhaustion had kept him from so much as turning in his sleep.

He looked better, she thought; at least the dark circles were gone from around his eyes. *If I had been doing my job, he wouldn't have gotten to that point, though. The health of the entire crew is my responsibility, and I ignored him, even when I knew he was suffering, until it was almost too late.*

But I won't again. She had learned, she thought—hoped, perhaps.

Preliminary results indicate that therapies for the radiation exposure suffered both by the patient and the ship's medic have been successful. The patient should be ready to resume normal duties upon discharge from the infirmary.

Neva read through the summary again, then sent it to Iluka. Knowing the captain, she would read it immediately, then call for Rat. Which meant that it would be best to get him up, awake, and with a little food in him before having to face Iluka.

She took a container of soup from the warmer where it had been waiting and crossed the room to the bed. Rat's brows were drawn slightly together, as if something troubled him, and on impulse she reached out and smoothed the line between them. His golden skin made hers look pale, colorless. *How long has it been since any of us have felt the warmth of sunlight?*

She had not imagined that she would ever want to set foot on a planet again. But her chest ached suddenly with the desire to feel the wind on her face, to smell air that hadn't

been filtered a thousand times. If only they were on their way to a planet instead of Paradise.

And after Paradise, then where will we go? Another station of steel and ceramic, and another, and another. Will I ever stand on a living world again?

Rat blinked sleepily, struggling to focus on her. He started to rub his eyes, but the IV lines trailing from his left arm fouled the movement. He stared at them a moment, seeming faintly puzzled, as if he could not imagine what they were or how they had gotten there. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Does it matter?"

A slight smile, there and gone, like the flash of a dying star. "I guess not. Where's Jasmine?"

"Playing in the laundry. She kept wanting to swing on the IV lines, so I had to put her somewhere else." Neva set aside the soup, then took his arm and deftly slipped the needles out, sealing the tiny holes with skin patches in the same movement. "That should do it for now. How are you feeling? Are you hungry?"

"Better. And yes." He sat up slowly, as if expecting pain.

"I've got some lunch, if you'd like. It's the soup, I'm afraid."

"The powdered stuff?"

"With the weird chunks. Yeah."

"My favorite," he said with an exaggerated grimace of distaste. But he tucked into the soup with gusto; whatever its consistency and odd taste, at least it was hot and nutritious.

When half the soup was gone, he paused, swirling the spoon in the broth and watching the patterns it made. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have put you in danger. I didn't...I wasn't thinking straight."

"I know." She leaned over and kissed him softly on the cheek. "Don't worry about it."

He turned his face towards hers, found her lips with his own. His mouth tasted like the overly-salted soup, but she found that she didn't care. After a space of time that could have been seconds or minutes, she felt him put the soup aside, a moment before his arms slid around her, drawing her close.

Then the com crackled to life. They both jumped, and Neva cast a wild glance at it, for a moment wondering if there was a video feed she didn't know about.

"Iluka Toora to ship's crew. All hands report to the galley. All hands to the galley."

Silently cursing the timing, Neva drew back. She had thought that Iluka would send for Rat...but for everyone? *Something else must be happening—something important.* "What do you think that's about?"

Rat's mouth quirked into a frown. "I don't know. But she didn't sound happy. I don't think it would be a good idea to be late."

* * *

When the door to the galley opened, Neva saw that they were the last of the crew to arrive, despite their resolve to hurry. But Rat had wanted to retrieve Jasmine; the little primate had been clingy, needing reassurance, and that had taken more time. As soon as she saw the gathering, though, Neva wished they had delayed a few minutes longer so that she could change into something other than the loose t-shirt and sweats she had been wearing for comfort.

Iluka was in full formal dress, as Neva hadn't seen since the Captains' Council on

Paradise. The brilliant red of her coat contrasted beautifully with Iluka's mahogany skin, and a hat with a fancy feather rode atop her gray dreadlocks. She looked the very picture of authority.

Drake had dressed formally for the occasion as well, although he had foregone the hat. Tarak and Anusha both wore flowing caftans that Neva had never seen before, their bright hues for more cheerful than the somber mood of the gathering. Only Marcus didn't look any different from his everyday self. He sat with his arms crossed, his chair tilted back, as if deliberately ignoring the formality everyone else displayed.

Iluka sat at the head of the table; Drake, Marcus, and Tarak were arrayed on one side, with Anusha alone on the other. When Neva and Rat entered, Iluka gestured to the seats beside the navigator. "Sit."

Neva wished that she dared exchange a glance with Rat, but decided not to be so obvious. It seemed that everyone else knew what they were there for, and she didn't want to draw Anusha's scorn upon herself again.

As soon as they were seated, Iluka rose to her feet, her hands clasped behind her and a scowl on her face. "For those of you who don't know, this is a ship trial."

Neva's mouth went dry. "Trial? Of whom?"

"Of me, first." Iluka's mouth twitched into a wry smile that quickly disappeared. "We've had some hard times lately, I'll admit it, and maybe that's why I've got crew disobeying me. So first thing I've got to ask is whether you still want me as captain of this ship."

"Of course," Drake said instantly. His hazel eyes were troubled as he looked up at Iluka. "You haven't steered us wrong, yet."

"Thank you, Drake. Anyone else have something to say? Want to put it to a vote?"

There came a general shaking of heads. "No need for that," Anusha said in subdued tones unlike her usual self.

"All right, then." Iluka shifted her weight. "Then that brings us to the rest of our business. Neva Whitestone, ship's medic."

Neva started; she hadn't expected her name to come up. "C-captain?"

Iluka's dark eyes seemed to pin her in place. "You falsely accused Marcus Werner of sabotaging this ship, based on a conversation you overheard and didn't half understand."

Neva felt blood rush to her face. "I'm sorry, Captain. I was wrong."

"You signed ship's articles when you came on board." Iluka produced a tablet and displayed Neva's signature, as if she might have forgotten. "One of the rules you agreed to abide by is that, if you have a problem with another member of this crew, you settle it stationside or planetside. One you set foot on this ship, you put aside your issues and work together."

Neva started to deny that there had been anything personal in the accusation, then stopped and forced herself to think. Marcus had never made any attempt to hide his hostility towards Rat; had that led her to accuse him quicker than she might have otherwise? "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Forget it," Marcus said unexpectedly. "No grudge held."

Iluka nodded in his direction. "All right, then. No punishment for you, Whitestone—but next time, think about what you're saying before you start your mouth moving."

"Yes, Captain," she murmured, deeply embarrassed.

"Anusha Star Rider, Cat's Eye clan, ship's navigator."

Anusha stiffened. "Captain."

"After Whitestone started throwing around accusations, you took it into your head to point a gun. You then violated a direct order by not standing down." Iluka displayed her tablet again. "You know the rules. In times of peace, you get a vote, you get to backtalk all you want. But in an emergency—and I think having the damn ship sabotaged qualifies as an emergency—my word is law."

Anusha bowed her head. "Aye, Captain."

"There are plenty of other captains who would have shot you on the spot for disobeying. Maybe I ought to be that way? Maybe you think I'm too soft?"

"No, Captain!"

"We were all under a lot of stress," Neva offered, hoping that she wasn't crossing some unseen boundary but unable to remain silent.

Iluka's gaze was hard. "We're always under stress, Whitestone. We're fighting a war everyone else thinks is already lost. If we can't hold it together in the bad times, we might as well all get off at Paradise and leave the *Exile* mothballed."

No one could argue with that. Iluka leaned her hip against her chair and folded her arms across her chest. "I should leave you on the next uninhabited rock we come across," she said to Anusha.

"I ask for leniency," Drake said, before Tarak could voice a protest. "Circumstances were unusual, Captain. Give Anusha one more chance."

Iluka didn't seem surprised by the request, and Neva realized that she and Drake must have planned this before the meeting even began. "All right. I'm feeling generous today. As of now, Anusha, you're juniormost on the ship. You get all the chores except galley duty, in addition to your duties as navigator. But you defy me again, and you'll wish I had dumped you on some forsaken rock."

Anusha nodded quickly, obviously relieved. "Aye, Captain. Thank you."

Iluka snorted. "Thank me after you've finished scrubbing out the chemical toilets."

By now, Neva could guess what was coming next, and so wasn't surprised when Iluka turned to Rat. "Which brings us to our last bit of business. Rat, fighter pilot. Ship's telepath."

"Resident crazy," Marcus murmured.

Iluka shot him a quelling glare. "Stow it, Marcus."

"Sorry, Captain."

She shook her head, then pursed her lips and glanced at Rat from beneath the brim of her hat. "Where do I even start? You deliberately endangered this ship and this crew by carrying out a repair that you had no authorization to do, and you did it while in a condition that could easily have led to a botched job or worse. Then you refused a direct order when I told you to come back inside."

Rat hunched his shoulders slightly and ducked his head. "I'm sorry, Captain."

"I seem to recall that the last time we were on Paradise, we had a little vote to determine whether to keep you or not. You promised me then that you would take orders no matter what."

Rat winced. "I'm sorry."

"I think I said what I would do if you disobeyed, didn't I?"

"You said that if I put so much as a fingernail out of line, you'd shove me out the airlock." He hesitated, then looked up at her. "But I was on the other side of the lock already. Why didn't you leave me there?"

Quietly as it was spoken, it was still a challenge, and Neva was surprised that he had

made it. Iluka seemed taken aback as well. Then she snorted. "You were wearing a damned expensive 'suit, boy. Think I wanted to let you take it to the other side of beyond with you?"

Neva bristled at the cold statement. But before she could say anything, Rat put a hand on hers, beneath the table, where no one could see. Startled, she glanced at him, saw the smallest of smiles playing at the corner of his mouth. "No, Captain" he said. "Of course not."

"I'll allow that there were extenuating circumstances," Iluka added, seeming mollified. "Anyone else want to put in their share?"

Neva started to speak up, but Tarak beat her to it. "It was a good repair," said the pilot, his sightless eyes seeming to stare at a point just to the right of Rat.

"Damn good repair," Anusha added.

Marcus made a noise that might have been either agreement or disagreement. Drake sat back in his chair and seemed to study Rat for a moment. "It would be a waste to get rid of our only fighter pilot, given that there were extenuating circumstances."

Iluka studied the gathering for a moment. "Neva, are you going to say anything to surprise us, or can I assume that you're for keeping him?"

"You've read my report."

"That I have. So, Rat, it seems the crew is for keeping you. And I'll admit that maybe you weren't in your right mind at the time. So all I'm giving you is galley duty and a warning. I don't want a repeat performance, got it?"

Rat straightened slightly. "Don't worry, Captain. I won't do it again."

"See that you don't. One more thing." This time, Iluka looked directly at Neva. "I don't involve myself in crew relationships. What you do on your down time is your business. But don't let it affect the ship."

Neva felt her face heat. *I suppose this is what I get for announcing over an open com that I'm in love with the ship's resident unstable telepath.* "I understand, Captain."

"All right, then. Crew dismissed."

Neva didn't waste time beating a retreat, Rat on her heels. Once they were alone in the corridor, she took his hand. "Sorry about the galley duty."

"It doesn't matter." He hesitated, then cast her a puzzled look. "So...you accused Marcus of sabotaging the ship?"

* * *

Drake remained behind while the rest of the crew filed out of the galley. Once they were gone and the door slid shut, he canted his gaze around to Iluka. "That went well."

"Maybe. Think I got through to them?"

"I think so. I think you handled it well, if that counts."

She took off her hat and tossed it wearily onto the table. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. But I'm thinking that's not the only reason you stayed behind."

"We're in trouble."

"Don't try to soften the blow, Drake. Give it to me straight."

He grinned slightly, as she had no doubt intended, but his mirth was short-lived. "Unless you've found something worth selling in those files that Rat stole from Hunter, we don't have any cargo. Nothing to trade or sell."

"At least we were able to refuel on Prospero Station, before the Zats caught us."

"That's good, but it isn't enough. Thanks to our saboteur, we're going to have to get

some of our back-up systems repaired. We're short on supplies. Hell, we don't even have enough to cover our docking fees, let alone anything else."

Iluka's face was closed, giving nothing away. "I know."

"And you have a plan?"

She didn't answer him right away. Instead she went to a cabinet and rummaged inside, before pulling out a bottle of rum. "Paradise's finest," she said as she poured a couple of glasses. "Brewed in the best bathtubs on the station. If we're lucky, it won't make us blind."

The alcohol burned his throat; he drank it down quickly to avoid the foul taste. "You've done everything you could, Iluka."

"Have I? I've got crew at odds with each other, disobeying my orders and acting crazy. I've had to dump cargo twice in recent memory. Seems like everything I've done has gone wrong lately. Maybe I'm getting old, losing my edge."

"That's ridiculous." He didn't like seeing this side of her. "Thanks to you, we know more about what the Zats are up to than we have in a long time."

"Maybe. But maybe a smart captain would look to her ship first, and everything else second. Maybe she wouldn't have taken a lunatic telepath on board."

"Or a drunken first mate, or a gunner accused of being a collaborator, or a blind pilot." Drake set aside his empty glass, then leaned across the table and took her hands in his own. Her fingers were rough from a lifetime of hard work. "You see potential where no one else does, Iluka. If you can't make this work, no one can. I truly believe that."

She met his gaze, her dark eyes quizzical. "Do you?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

She tightened her grip for a moment, then let go of his hands and sat back. "You're a crazy bastard, Drake Morgenstern."

"I aim to please."

She smiled, but it had a bitter edge. "I just hope you still have as much faith in me after we set foot on Paradise."

* * *

The next shift after the trial, Rat began his galley duty. Deciding that he might as well make an effort and cook something other than the instant meals they had in plenty, he rooted through cold storage until he came up with a mixture of noodles, onions, and vegetables that seemed as if they would be palatable together. Add a few spices, and soon he found himself standing over a hot skillet, stirring steadily to make certain nothing stuck.

Like so many other things, he didn't remember where he'd learned to cook. Somehow he doubted that it had been part of his Zats military training. *Maybe my mother taught me.*

After the trial, Neva had given him the files that he had stolen from Mirra, some of which pertained to him. He had studied what little information they contained about his family, wishing that there was some way to find out more. *I wonder if that woman...my mother...Xian's mother...worries about him? What would she think if she could see me? Would she see her son, or a stranger?*

There had been no record of another parent. Neva said that probably meant that his mother had chosen to have a baby using genetic material from an anonymous donor. The donor would have been male, since he was; two women could only make girls.

Other possible reasons that the father might not be on record occurred to him, but he had

not brought them up to her. What would have been the point, after all?

The galley door slid open, and Rat heard Tarak's distinctive gait. On the ship, he was familiar enough with his surroundings not to need his cane, but the blind pilot still proceeded with a slower, more measured, walk than his sighted crewmates. He made his way to the table, feeling along the backs of the chairs to find an unoccupied one. "Smells good."

Rat glanced over his shoulder, saw that Tarak had found a seat between his sister and Neva. Marcus sat across from them; if the gunner held a grudge from their quarrel, he didn't show it. Indeed, the whispers were quieter than they had been in a long time. It was almost peaceful.

"I meant what I said earlier," Tarak said, once he had settled. "Good job on that repair, Rat."

"Too bad he had to screw it up at the end by living," Marcus added.

Almost peaceful.

Rat turned his attention back to his cooking, only half-listening as Anusha cursed Marcus in several languages, none of which he knew. Marcus was afraid, he decided. Afraid of what had happened to his daughter, afraid that none of his efforts would make any difference. Afraid that she was already dead.

Or worse.

Iluka had ordered Rat to bring her dinner to her cabin, so he did, after serving the rest of the crew in the galley. He found her still behind her desk, staring at lists of numbers, as if trying to make them add up to something favorable by her will alone. **fear** whispered from her.

got to pay off debts, docking fees, get food, supplies, how in hell am I going to make it all work?

He set the tray on her desk, then waited quietly for her to notice him. When she did, she switched off the tablet that she had been pouring over and rubbed her eyes. "You cook that?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Smells good." She tilted her head to one side, watching him. "Was there something else you wanted?"

"I need to talk to you." He swallowed convulsively, telling himself that he had to do this, that no one else could do it for him. "It's about what happened on the station."

She picked up her chopsticks and started to eat. "Talk."

"The guard that I...that I killed." The memories seethed behind his eyes, and more than anything he wanted to run away from them. But he couldn't. "Aguila. I didn't...catch much from him. That isn't how it works."

Iluka's eyes were steady, unsympathetic. "How does it work?"

He drew a deep breath for calm, telling himself to just list facts, pretend it didn't have anything to do with him. "I concentrated on the whispers—on his voice. His thoughts. And then I shouted back as loud as I could."

She seemed to consider that a moment. "I see. But you said you did get something."

"Aye, Captain. In the moments before I shouted back. When we were fighting over the gun." Rat swallowed again, struggling to keep his voice steady. The thoughts from Aguila had been a many and fast: disappointment in how far Xian had fallen, anger that Mirra's plans had gone awry, and fear of what Rat might do to him. But tangled within them all had been something else.

"I think...I'm not certain, but I think Aguila had hoped they would be able to use me.

I'm not sure why they tried to make telepaths, but whatever their purpose, Aguila had been elated that I might be able to carry it out after all. It was like he thought I was their last chance for something. But when I came in and attacked him, he realized that wasn't going to happen. And the prospect terrified him."

Iluka paused, her chopsticks halfway to her mouth. "Why? What was he afraid of?"

Rat shook his head helplessly, feeling the familiar frustration that so often accompanied any attempt to use his disability. "I don't know. There wasn't time to listen more carefully, to try to figure it out. But Aguila was deeply afraid of something. I think...I think Project Zero was created because of that fear."

"Not because the Zats wanted super soldiers?"

"No." He looked down at his hands. "I'm sorry, Captain. I wish I could have been more helpful. But I thought you might like to know."

"You thought right." Iluka leaned back in her chair, her dinner seemingly forgotten. "Funny. I would have assumed that the idea of the Zats being scared of something would have been more comforting than it is."

"I don't know what they're afraid of. Or if it's a threat to us, too."

"Bet on it." Iluka sighed tiredly. "My list of things that don't make me happy is getting longer by the hour."

"I'm sorry, Captain."

"Stop apologizing as if everything in the universe is your damned fault." She glanced briefly at the clock displayed on her desk, counting down the time until they reached real space again. "Go off-duty for a while. Rest. Get your head together. I want you ready with the *Cuchulainn* when we drop into Paradise system, just in case."

"Yes, Captain."

It seemed to him for a moment that she wanted to say something else. Whispers rose up around him, a soft, uncertain murmur.

good man, bad karma, just let me keep hold of what I've got

"Was there something else, Captain?" he asked.

Iluka blinked, then shook her head. "No. Nothing else. Dismissed."

He nodded and left quietly. But on the long walk back to the galley, he wondered what dark things Iluka had been contemplating during the long hours of their hyperspace transit.

* * *

Neva and Rat stood side-by-side within the circle she had cast in her quarters. The scent of rosemary drifted from the small oil warmer sitting by a stone altar. The simple, square altar had belonged to Agnes, who had brought this small piece of Harvest into space with her. Until now, Neva had not used it, but it seemed both useful and appropriate for this ritual.

Two cords had been tied to the altar; Neva and Rat each held the free end of one. At Neva's gesture, Rat tightened his cord, raising a small knife and setting it lightly against the rope, not pressing down enough yet to part so much as a single strand.

"Say what's in your heart," she had told him, before they had begun. "Don't be afraid of embarrassing yourself."

Rat swallowed hard, once, then began. "I'm not sure who Xian Jackson was, not entirely," he said at last. "But I'm not him. I can't live my life worried about him, about what he might have done. Worried that I'm going to turn into him one day. So I'm cutting my ties

to him, to his past, so I can move forward and maybe find out who Rat is instead.”

He took a deep breath and sliced through the cord with a single, swift motion. The far end fell limply to the floor. “Goodbye, Xian. You don’t have any power over me.”

Rat glanced at her then, as if asking for her approval. She gave it in her smile, in her thoughts. *I’m proud of you.*

Now it was her turn. Neva accepted the knife from Rat, then turned her attention to the cord in her hand. A feeling of determination filled her, surprising her; she had expected to be more hesitant. *Maybe I’m more prepared to move forward than I thought.*

“This cord represents the chains of the past that have held me back,” she said aloud. “I’ll never forget Harvest, or my family, or any of what the Zatvians took away. But I’ve held onto my grief and anger until they’ve strangled me, until they’ve made me blind to the present. So I’m letting go of the anger, of the guilt. From this day forth, I will honor the dead, but I will open my heart to the living.”

The knife sliced cleanly through the cord, and Neva felt as if a chain around her soul had been loosened. She met Rat’s eyes, and a sudden sense of joy at the possibilities of life pierced her. Even in the shadow of the Zatvians, there was happiness to be found, no matter how small.

“So mote it be,” Rat said, and smiled.

Part II: Mind Games

Chapter 20: Homecomings

Rat picked up Jasmine, letting her clamber onto his shoulder and sort through his dreadlocks. *Going off the ship*, he thought to her, and pictured the docks of Paradise.

(excitement/fear) bad men She remembered what had happened here the last time, when they had been attacked. When he'd had a seizure.

I haven't had a seizure since then, though. It's different now. I'm different.

The lift approached, crew coming up from the bridge, and he waited uneasily. Iluka had been on the com constantly since they had entered the system, sending messages that no one ever replied to. He wondered whom she was so desperate to contact and why they didn't want to talk to her.

The lift doors opened for him, and he smelled sweat and spices and the heat of bodies packed into a small space. The whispers leapt to greet him along with the scent: **fear/nervousness/worry** from Iluka and Neva, and **anticipation** from Anusha and Drake. There were three Star Rider ships in port, which explained Anusha's eagerness to disembark. He didn't know what lay behind Drake's emotion.

He stepped into the lift, Neva and Anusha shuffling over to make room for him. Neva gave him a wan smile; she looked pale and more than a little worried. "Are you going through with it, then?" he asked her, keeping his voice low, although no doubt Anusha and Marcus could hear every word they spoke, even with a loud conversation going on between Iluka, Drake, and Tarak.

"I have to. Gretchen is the only other person I know from Harvest. She knew my aunt, and she tried to be kind to me, only to have me yell at her and then storm out of her store. I need to apologize for my behavior, if nothing else." She smiled wistfully. "And it would be nice to have someone to reminisce with. If she forgives me."

"I'll meet you later, if you want, then."

"I don't want to abandon you—"

"You aren't. I'll be fine." But the whispers said she was concerned, so he gave her hand a squeeze. "I looked after myself for two years on Muldar Station. I think I can manage a few hours here. This is something private, between you and Gretchen."

"All right." The lift let them out into the spine, and they walked to the airlock at the end. The boarding tube was cold and bounced under their feet, making conversation impossible until they reached the dock. "Meet me at *Sinclair's* in two hours, then?"

"Okay." He pulled her closer and kissed her softly, caught **(pleasure/affection/comfort)** from the brief contact. Then she pulled away and left, as if afraid she would lose her nerve if she lingered any longer.

Iluka had already headed off, her stride determined and her back ramrod straight, and Rat felt sorry for whomever it was she was going to confront—the person who hadn't been answering her messages, perhaps. Drake had also disappeared, while Marcus and Tarak moved

off on a trajectory together, talking about something in low voices. Anusha, however, had lingered.

"I thought Tarak would have gone with you to see your clan," Rat said to her.

She hooked her thumbs through her belt and shrugged. "Tarak is mad at them. When he lost his sight...well. You'll notice we ended up on a *dache* ship instead of a Star Rider one."

"*Dache*?"

"Someone who isn't a Star Rider. Not as bad as a grounder, though." Anusha grinned.

"Like me."

"More or less. Come with me."

The invitation startled him so much that he had to replay the words in his head to make sure he had really understood. "Go with you? To meet the other Star Riders?"

"Yes."

It puzzled him, but at the same time an overture of friendship from Anusha was unusual enough that he couldn't turn it down. "All right."

Jasmine looped her tail loosely around his neck, her big eyes taking in the sights of the dock as they walked, her moist nose working constantly. Rat sniffed, too, but smelled only the omnipresent spills of oil and lubricant. Dockworkers shifted cargo and operated loaders, shouting at each other and cursing their equipment. The airlock of another ship opened as they strolled past, and a cluster of hard-looking men and women emerged, laughing and joking amongst themselves. Anusha cast them a disdainful glance.

They walked long enough that Rat began to wonder if he should have suggested they hire a cab; his legs were getting tired from the unfamiliar exercise, and his shoulder ached a little from Jasmine's weight. But then he became aware of a new smell interlacing the familiar scents of the dock: that of spices and cooking food. Music began to infiltrate the bangs and grinds of the loaders, although distance and echoes distorted it badly.

A smile started on Anusha's face. "Almost there," she said. "There are three clans in dock right now—Cat's Eye, Horsehead, and Eagle. Tarak and I were born into Cat's Eye."

"Oh," he said politely, when it seemed Anusha wanted some answer.

"You don't have to be born into the clans to be a Star Rider, you know. Sometimes we adopt outsiders, if it seems like they have what it takes to be one of us."

"Which is?"

"An independent spirit," Anusha said proudly. "The willingness to dedicate your life to wandering the universe, always exploring, never standing still. We go where no one else dares; we map new mass points; we see things no one else has ever seen. And of course it helps if you have skills that we need, or that we respect."

"Oh," he said again. Anusha seemed satisfied with that response, because she didn't elaborate.

The Star Rider ships had all docked next to each other. Rat had expected that they would go onto one of the ships, no doubt that owned by the Cat's Eye clan, but as they approached he realized his mistake. The Star Riders had taken over the docks outside their berths, transforming the section into a festival area. Men and women in bright clothes sat on folding chairs and cargo crates: laughing, singing, boasting, and conversing. Shrieking children chased each other around deactivated loaders, gantries, and umbilicals. Stoves had been brought out of the ships and set up on the open dock, and were now cooking any number of dishes that seemed to be handed out freely to anyone who wandered up. A group of musicians played their instruments beside an airlock, and a young man in a long, billowing skirt danced to their beat.

"Anusha!" shouted a woman, who broke away from socializing with one of the near groups and ran towards them. Her white-blond hair was tied back with multicolored scarves knotted into the locks; it contrasted startlingly with her brown skin and dark eyes. Like the rest of the adults, she had a pattern of stars tattooed on one cheek. She gave Anusha a hug, then stepped back with a smile. "This must be Rat."

It surprised him; he'd assumed that Anusha's invitation had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. "Um, yes."

"I'm Danika. Anusha tells us that you are a great pilot."

"I—"

"No modesty," Anusha cut in. "That's the grounder way, Rat. Here you tell what you did without downplaying it. Be proud of your accomplishments!"

He wasn't sure what he'd accomplished, other than screwing things up time and again, but before he could say anything, Danika was gesturing for him to follow her into the crowd. Within a few moments, he found himself seated in the midst of a group that seemed to include several elders, and a bewildering number of people were trying to press food and drink into his hands.

"I can't drink alcohol," he said, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to his protests.

One of the elders leaned over and fixed a critical eye on him. The man wore a loose caftan, much like that Anusha had worn to her trial, and his long gray dreads were reminiscent of Iluka's. "Rat, is it?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"Yes. This is Jasmine." He touched the little primate for comfort.

"I am Arcturus, of the Cat's Eye Clan. Anusha's grandfather, and Elder on the ship *Light Dancer*."

Rat remembered what Anusha had said, that they had to take passage on the *Exile* because of some dispute over Tarak's lost sight. Had the Star Riders given up on one of their own pilots because he had been unfortunate enough to be blinded by the Zats?

Anusha's grandfather, he said. No mention of Tarak.

Arcturus seemed to expect some reply, so Rat nodded. "Nice to meet you," he said, although he wasn't entirely certain that it was.

The elder smiled, bringing up a network of wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. "Anusha has said much about you, in her missives to us. She speaks highly of your skills as a pilot. And she says you completed a repair in hyperspace."

Rat shifted uncomfortably. "Yes."

"Well, then." Arcturus raised his voice slightly, and Rat realized that everyone around them had been surreptitiously listening in, as if waiting for a verdict. "You are welcome among us."

* * *

Neva uncertainly pushed aside the curtain that hung in the doorway of *The Rowan Tree*, feeling trepidation pool in her gut like cold water. The smell of incense gusted out, painfully familiar, and for a moment she wondered whether or not this was such a good idea. During her last visit to the shop, she had been unforgivably rude to Gretchen, the proprietor. She would have felt that she had to make amends, even if Gretchen hadn't been from Harvest.

But she is. She's one of the few who remember Harvest, except for me. A little to her surprise, Neva found that the thought held comfort now, instead of simply invoking the blaze of pain that any reminder of her dead homeworld had once brought.

The shop was filled with racks of clothing, with a small display of jewelry to one side. As

Neva stepped inside, she saw a figure rise from a chair towards the back of the shop. A moment later, the dim light revealed Gretchen's dark hair and pale skin, although she was thinner and more careworn than the last time Neva had seen her. Gretchen started to smile, no doubt intending to greet her as a potential customer—then stopped, her eyes taking in the scars across Neva's face. "Neva Whitestone?"

"Merry meet."

With a cry of delight, Gretchen sailed across the room to take Neva's hands. "My dear child, I'm so glad to see you again!"

"And I'm glad to see you," Neva said fervently. "I'm sorry about last time—I was rude to you for no reason."

"You were still in great pain," Gretchen said sympathetically. Giving Neva's hands a last squeeze, she let go and stepped away. "May I offer you some tea?"

Neva smiled, relieved at the friendly greeting. "That would be wonderful."

Gretchen led her to a small room behind the shop that seemed to serve as a combination kitchen and living area. As she bustled about, Neva sank into a chair set on one side of a round table. "Did you know Aunt Agnes well?"

"Well enough to know she'd be glad to see you looking better," Gretchen said as she took down a tea canister and began to measure its contents into a pot. "How are things with you, child? Are you still aboard the *Exile*?"

"I am." Neva glanced through the open door to the shop without. "And you? You have some beautiful things here."

"Thank you." Gretchen sighed as she waited impatiently for the water to boil. "It's been slow, to be honest. Times are getting leaner for us all."

It surprised Neva; somehow, she'd thought of Paradise as existing apart from the rest of the universe. "The Zats?"

"Who else? They've been cracking down, it's said—caught more than one pirate ship and sent its crew to the Summerland. Fewer goods are coming into Paradise, while in the meantime prices are going up. My practical clothes have been selling well enough, but no one seems to want anything nicer these days, except some of the ladies and gents from the brothels. And for them, those *are* working clothes."

Gretchen poured the tea into two cups, then set one down in front of Neva. They chatted for a while, speaking no words of import, and Neva felt herself relaxing. When Gretchen asked her to stay for dinner, however, Neva shook her head. "I can't. I'm supposed to meet a crewmate at *Sinclair's* soon."

She must have given away something with her tone, because Gretchen tipped her head to the side and smiled slyly. "Ah. A special friend, perhaps?"

Neva grinned back. "Yes."

"And you're going in that?"

Neva automatically glanced down at her clothes. She wore her normal gear: a loose-fitting shirt, baggy pants covered with pockets, and utilitarian boots. "I always dress like this."

Gretchen gave her a reproving look, stood up, and pulled Neva into the store. "Pick out something nice for yourself. A gift from me."

"I can't—"

"Then consider it a gift in memory of Agnes' friendship," Gretchen said, her tone indicating that she wasn't going to take no for an answer. "Here—this blue would match your eyes, or this lavender would be lovely with your complexion..."

Before she knew what had happened, Neva found herself shoved into the small changing room, her arms laden with dresses, tops, skirts, and an embarrassing amount of skimpy lingerie. *Goddess*, she thought ruefully. *Gretchen should have been in charge of the army. The Zats wouldn't have dared argued with her.*

She put down the clothes in a chair, uncertainly picking up a bit of string that she thought was supposed to pass for underwear. What in the universe would Rat think if she showed up wearing something like that? Would he think she was trying to seduce him?

And why shouldn't I? He had done nothing to indicate that he hoped to move their relationship to another level...but then again, they had been stuck on a ship in close quarters with other people, which tended to make things awkward. Nor had circumstances been anything near ideal in other ways.

But here, on station, they could get away from the rest of the crew for a while. The possibilities made her heart beat faster.

Making up her mind, she quickly stripped off her shirt. Her reflection in the full-length mirror caught her eye, and she hesitated, her hand halfway to a flimsy top whose lavender color appealed to her. No sunlight had touched her in over two and a half years, and her pasty skin made her look almost sickly. The scars stood out starkly against her pallor: lines of ridged, knotted skin that branded her as something broken. Flawed.

The largest remaining scar was across her chest, sending a thin runner down onto one breast, and she felt a sudden touch of shame. What would Rat think when he saw that? Would he be repulsed? Keid's hateful words came back to her, and she felt a rush of humiliation.

Neva stared in the mirror, trying to see past the lines of scars marring her face. There was no indication that most of the bones beneath had been regrown from her own cells, that the teeth had come from surgically implanted buds. If only she had been able to wait long enough for the last procedures to take away the relatively superficial scars as well.

She thought suddenly of Mirra Hunter, who had been perfect and scar-free, not to mention quite pretty.

And a Zat who would have had us all tortured and killed. Now I'm just being stupid.

Putting down the purple top, she found another, one with an open back but which covered her front from neck to waist. *Stupid, yes. But still vain enough to make the best of what I've got.*

* * *

Rat grinned as he watched a pair of Star Riders dance. The food was good, everyone had been nice to him, and he had even been able to dismiss the whispers to mere background noise that he could ignore. It occurred to him that he liked these people, at least the ones he'd met—they were loud, and boisterous, and seemed to hold nothing back. He envied their ability to live for the minute, without worrying too much about either past or future.

"Enjoying yourself?" asked Arcturus, who was still seated beside him.

Rat nodded as he fed a small piece of fruit to Jasmine. "Yes. Thank you for your hospitality."

Arcturus laughed. "No need to thank us. We're going to be family, after all."

Rat had been in the midst of swallowing a bit of fried pastry, and started to choke. The elder pounded him helpfully on the back. "I'm sorry," he said, when he could breathe again. "Family?"

"Of course! You've been accepted—but then, did you doubt that you would be? A pilot like

you doesn't come along just every day, you know."

Rat stared at him for a moment—then stood up abruptly. "Excuse me. I have to find Anusha."

The *Exile's* navigator was standing at the edge of the gathering, chatting animatedly with some of the musicians in a language that Rat didn't recognize. When she saw Rat heading towards them, however, she broke off and met him part way. "So, what do you think?" she asked.

"Arcturus said we're going to be family," he said without preamble.

"Oh." Some of the happiness vanished from her face.

damn granfers, say anything that comes into their heads, not the way I wanted to break it to him

"Break what to me?"

She jerked back, and the look in her eyes hardened. "Don't do that."

"Sorry. But you practically shouted it at me. Now tell me the real reason you brought me here."

Anusha scowled slightly, then shrugged, suddenly seeming unable to look directly at him. "The Star Riders have been decimated by the Zatvians. Our numbers were never great to begin with, but now...there aren't a hell of a lot of us left."

"I understand, but what does that have to do with me?"

"We need new blood. You're a great pilot—you've got phenomenal reflexes, amazing hand-eye coordination...things that we know have a genetic component and can be inherited."

Rat hesitated, not certain that he understood what she meant. "Are you...I'm sorry, but are you asking me to join the Star Riders?"

"No. Or, rather, you can, if you'd like." Anusha seemed suddenly nervous. "You can join on your own, but you'll have to be formally adopted and serve on one of the clan ships for a while. So that they can get to know you."

"I can't leave the *Exile*."

"I know. The other option would be to marry into the clans."

He had to have misunderstood. "Marry?"

She shrugged. "I'm not interested in anything permanent, but you've got qualities we need. I'll agree to a handfasting, if that's your preference."

"I'm in a relationship already!" Rat clutched at his dreadlocks, wondering if he might have missed something, or if perhaps his malfunctioning brain had finally gone completely mad.

"Of course." Anusha seemed relieved at that. "Then you probably won't be joining us yourself. A genetic donation it is, then."

"A what?"

"A genetic donation. To be distributed to whatever woman likes your good qualities enough to want to pass them on to a child," Anusha said, as if there was nothing even marginally personal in the request.

"I...no!"

"Why not?" Now she did look at him, but with puzzlement. "We can make it as pleasant as you want. There are a few people here who'd be happy to help out, together or separately."

"I'm in a relationship!"

"Then if you'd rather go it alone—"

"No!" Rat stepped back, thrusting his hands out between them, as if to ward Anusha. "Are you insane? I'm not having children with any of these people! I don't even know them!"

“You’d be absolved of all responsibility for any offspring, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He tried to remember if he’d had any alcohol after all, because clearly one of them was hallucinating. “Anusha. No.”

“But why?” **what the hell is wrong with him (anger/desperation/annoyance)** “We need something you have, and we’re willing to negotiate to get it. Why won’t you help us?”

“I can’t. It’s just...it would be too...weird,” he finished. It sounded stupid, but it was true; the thought that he would have unknown children running loose in the universe unsettled him for reasons that none of Anusha’s logic could combat. “You don’t even know what the Zats did to me! What if it results in some sort of birth defects?”

“We would screen for that. And it doesn’t seem likely that anything the Zats did to your brain would have an effect on your reproductive cells.”

Rat pressed his fingers into his temples, feeling a headache coming on. Jasmine moved out of the way by climbing on top of his head and sitting there. “No. This is crazy.”

“But—”

“I have to go meet Neva.” He pulled Jasmine off his head, turned, and walked away hurriedly. He was half afraid that Anusha might try to chase after him, but thankfully he heard no following footsteps. Even so, he didn’t slow down until he was well away from the Star Rider encampment.

* * *

Rat walked or rode the lifts all the way to *Sinclair’s*, in part to give himself time to think and in part to save the money that hiring a transport would have cost. Like the rest of the crew, his funds were perilously low, and he didn’t know what Neva had in mind for their stay on station. Nor was he certain how long they were remaining on Paradise; Iluka had been vague as to her plans for getting the ship repaired.

Paradise had been built more haphazardly than any other station Rat could remember, and as a result he found himself at *Sinclair’s* a bit later than he had intended. The smell of spilled alcohol and frying food greeted him as he entered, accompanied by the flashing of multicolored lights from the dance floor.

The bar was far more subdued than it had been during their last visit. The dance floor was deserted, and only a few of the booths in the back looked to be occupied. The bar stools were about two-thirds filled, and most of their occupants seemed lost in their own private musings, uninterested in conversation with anyone else. A group of men and women dressed in a motley assortment of clothes and jewelry sat at one of the booths, laughing and drinking; they, at least, seemed to be having a good time.

Maybe this is off-shift for the station?

As he scanned the room anxiously, he caught sight of Tarak sitting at the bar. The pilot was deep in conversation with another man, though, so Rat moved past without interrupting them. Finally, a flash of pale hair at the opposite end of the bar caught his attention. He started towards it, then stopped, thinking he must have made a mistake. The hair looked like Neva’s from behind, but the woman was wearing a shirt that left her entire back bare, except for where it fastened around her neck and lower back.

She glanced up, then, and he saw the familiar scars and hazel eyes. Catching sight of him, she smiled and waved, spinning around her bar stool so to reveal an long expanse of bare leg

between the tops of her sturdy boots and the edge of a skirt.

Oh my.

His mouth went dry, and he swallowed hard. He knew that it was impolite to stare, but couldn't seem to help himself; her legs drew his attention like a magnet.

Jasmine deserted him, happily bounding off his shoulder and up to Neva's lap. Neva laughed and petted her, to Jasmine's pleasure. Rat made his feet work again and came over to them. "You l-look great."

Brilliant. Smooth. Very suave.

Shut up.

Both pleasure and uncertainty lurked in her eyes when she looked up at him. "Thank you."

"Really, you look beautiful. I'm sorry I was late."

"I was starting to think I was going to have to try and pick up a new date."

"I don't think you'd have any trouble doing that," he said with another glance at her legs. "Thanks for waiting. I didn't mean to be late, but I had a long walk."

"Stop apologizing. It's all right." Neva scooped up a carryall that Rat assumed had her normal clothes in it, then stood up. "Let's find a booth."

They did so, sitting on the same side of the booth together. A surly waitress took their orders, bringing Neva something sweet and alcoholic and Rat a glass of water. "How did things go with Gretchen?" Rat asked when she was gone.

Neva swung her legs onto the bench, so that they lay across Rat's lap, and leaned back against the wall. "Good. Better than I hoped. She found out that I was meeting someone and gave me the clothes." She smiled wryly. "I take it you like them?"

hope I didn't overdo it, been so long since I tried to look nice, don't look like I used to, ugly scars (shame) what if I look stupid

"You'd look beautiful in rags," he said honestly. He rested one hand on her crossed ankles, then ran the other lightly up and down the stretch of bare skin between her boots and her knees. The touch relaxed her, as he'd hoped it would.

"So." She took a sip of her drink, then set it aside. "You said you had a long walk. Where did you go?"

"To the Star Rider berths. Anusha wants to have my baby."

Neva started to laugh, then stopped. "You're serious." **jealousy**

"She thinks I have good genes," he said, startled by her reaction but trying not to show it. "Technically, she just wants to add them to the Star Rider gene pool. I've had a very strange shift."

"What did you tell her?"

"No, of course. And that I'm already in a relationship." It suddenly occurred to him how much he was assuming. "I am, aren't I?"

She looked at him for a long moment—then scooted across the bench so that she could slide her arms around his neck. "Yes. You are."

He laid his hand against her face, running his thumb across the familiar texture of the scars on her left cheek, then bent to kiss her. She shifted until she was sitting in his lap, and he twined his arms around her, acutely aware of the soft skin of her legs, the delicate wispy fabric of her skirt. Heat thrummed in his veins; in a synesthetic blur he tasted her desire on her lips, *felt* it like a drumbeat in his brain. He was losing himself, dissolving into mist...

"Hey! You're one of Captain Toora's Rejects, aren't you?"

Neva gasped and jerked back. For a moment, Rat reeled, disoriented, unsure what thoughts

were hers and which his or even whether it mattered or not. Then the other whispers rose in him, full of hostility, and he snapped back to himself as if doused in icy water.

For once, though, the angry words weren't aimed at him. Tarak stood near the counter where he had been sitting; an unshaven young man with short-cropped hair blocked his path. Although most of the bar's customers seemed to have little interest in the confrontation, the rowdy men and women in the booth had stopped celebrating and were staring fixedly at Tarak.

"Please stand aside," Tarak said quietly.

The unshaven man ignored the request. "Yeah—yeah, you're the blind pilot, aren't you?" With a sudden motion, he knocked the white stick from Tarak's hands. "How're you going to fly now, huh, reject?"

Tarak's fist lashed out and caught the man on the jaw. Taken utterly by surprise, he fell back heavily into the other customers sitting nearby, knocking drinks from their hands. Another man, whom Rat assumed was a friend of the first, lunged from his seat behind Tarak.

Almost without thinking, Rat slid out from under Neva and hurled himself at the second assailant. He hit the man in the back, sending him to the floor, but pain flashed along his own nerves at the contact, and he almost went down himself. Then Neva was there, grabbing his arm to steady him. Jasmine scrambled up onto his shoulder, shrieking and baring her teeth fearsomely.

The second man rolled over, glaring at them. "Who the hell are you?"

"A couple more of Toora's Rejects," Neva said coldly. She walked past him, almost stepping on one of his hands, which he hurriedly jerked out of her way. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

"Gladly," Tarak murmured. Rat found his stick underneath a table and handed it to him. Keeping a wary eye on the rest of the bar's customers, the three of them walked out.

"Sorry about that," Tarak said once they were well away from *Sinclair's*. "I hope I didn't interrupt any plans."

Neva slipped her hand around Rat's elbow. "The timing could have been better," she said dryly. "But it's hardly your fault."

"You don't have to walk back with me."

"I'd feel better if you didn't go alone, after that." Neva glanced up at Rat, and he nodded confirmation, trying to pretend that there wasn't fear singing along every nerve ending.

What happened? He remembered the dizzying sensation of losing himself in her feelings and thoughts, as if there was no difference between them, as if nothing else mattered. It had been so intoxicating that he hadn't even *thought*, hadn't spared an instant's worry, just let it happen.

And if the drunken idiot hadn't confronted Tarak and interrupted them? What might have happened then?

The memory of blood on Neva's face came to him like a knife in the gut. Twice now he had hurt her without meaning to. Would he have done it a third?

"What did that man mean?" Neva asked Tarak, oblivious to Rat's worry. "'Toora's Rejects?'"

Tarak sighed, and his mouth tightened slightly. "What do you think? The *Exile* doesn't exactly have the crew other captains would kill for. At least, Drake, Marcus, and I couldn't have found berths anywhere else. You heard what the man said. A blind pilot."

"A medic with a broken body," Neva said with a wry smile.

"A stowaway with a broken mind," Rat added grimly. "But the captain didn't seem to have trouble rounding up ships to go with us the last time she was here."

“That’s because she had something solid. A tangible goal to offer them.” Tarak shook his head slowly. “I’d hoped that they would change their minds after that. But it sounds like some people still think she’s crazy.”

* * *

They had just emerged from the lift onto the docks when they caught sight of Iluka, striding ahead of them. “Captain!” Neva called, and Iluka stopped, waiting for them. As they drew nearer, Rat saw that Iluka’s expression was stormy. The whispers grew loud, impossible to ignore no matter how much he tried to banish them to background noise.

damn him damn him damn him, no gods-forsaken help at all, self-righteous, hidebound (rage)

Rat hung back, glad that he wasn’t the focus of her anger. Neva cast a look of concern at him.

“The captain’s upset about something,” he murmured to her as they approached the *Exile’s* berth. “Something didn’t go her way, but I don’t know what. Just that she’s really mad at someone.”

Neva was prevented from answering him when Tarak stumbled over a loose cable snaking across the dock. Swearing softly, she hurried to the pilot’s side. Busy watching her, Rat didn’t realize that anyone else was even near him, until he heard the soft whine of a charging weapon and felt something hard press his dreadlocks against the back of his head.

Startled, he froze. Four tough-looking men and women had emerged from concealment all around the *Exile’s* berth, their guns at the ready. “Hands in the air, where we can see them,” suggested a large, bald man who was the only one without a weapon.

Iluka had stopped near the airlock. Now she turned slowly on her heel, her face stony. “Bernard Bellicose,” she said flatly.

“Stationmaster Bellicose,” the man said, as if reminding her. “I gave you a few hours grace, Iluka, because we go back a ways. But time’s up. You owe me docking fees for this ship here.”

“I need more time,” Iluka said. “One shift, Bernard, that’s all I’m asking for.”

The stationmaster sighed and shook his head. “This is the second time you’ve put in here without holds, Iluka. Your credit’s run out. I don’t like doing this, but I’ve got no choice. I’m impounding your ship. Unless you can pay up in full, the *Exile* is mine.”

Chapter 21: All Measures Required

Neva held herself very still, her heart pounding. To her right stood a sturdy woman who looked as if she could bench-press a cargo freighter without breaking a sweat; the highly-polished gun in her hand was aimed directly at Neva's head.

Please, Goddess, don't let them start shooting. There was no way anyone could miss at that range, and she wondered if Rat was under similar threat, but didn't dare turn around to look for him.

"All right," Iluka said, in the calm tone that people used when talking to unfriendly animals or dangerous lunatics. "We're all friends here, right? We can discuss this like civilized people. No need to go pointing guns at everyone."

"Just a precaution," said the man who seemed to be the group's leader. Stationmaster Bellicose, he'd called himself, and he looked tough enough to be in control of a pirates' haven like Paradise. "We wouldn't want anyone getting any ideas about trying to make a run for it."

"Then I'm asking you to at least stop threatening my medic. I think it's clear enough she isn't armed—where the hell would she be hiding a weapon in that getup? Take the gun away from her head, just as a show of good faith, and we'll all stand here nice and calm. Nice and calm, and not doing anything crazy, hear me?"

The woman guarding Neva looked puzzled, and for a moment Neva was as well. Then understanding came, like a dash of cold water, and she felt herself starting to shiver. *Rat.* She risked a glance over her shoulder and saw that his amber eyes were fixed on her guard, his nostrils flared, and his mouth set in a tight line that boded ill.

Bellicose turned and gave Neva a leisurely once-over, not knowing that every second he delayed increased the likelihood that something very bad was going to happen to the inside of his bone-breaker's skull. "All right. Stand down, Juanita, but don't take your eyes off the bit."

"Yeah, Bernard."

Some of the tension seemed to ease from the air as Juanita slipped her gun back into its holster. "Thank you," Iluka said. "Now, let's talk sensibly, like civilized people."

"There's nothing to discuss." Bernard shrugged. "Business is business. Call the rest of your crew back; once they're here, you've got ten minutes to clear whatever you can off the ship. All crewmembers will be escorted, of course, to make sure no one tries a bit of sabotage. After that, the ship goes up for sale, as is, no questions asked. *If* you can pay off the docking fees by the end of two shifts, and no one's bought it already, then it's yours again."

Neva felt her heart sink at his words. Although she had known they were in trouble after having to dump cargo twice in recent memory, she hadn't realized how close ruin actually lay. The *Exile* was the only home they had. What would happen to them if they lost it?

If we can pay off the fees in time, we can still save the ship, she told herself. But she didn't

know how likely that might be.

Iluka used her com to call the rest of the crew back. When it became apparent that none of them were going to try a violent attack, Bernard signaled for the rest of the guards to relax, although they didn't put their weapons away. Rat hurried over to Neva, Jasmine huddled on his shoulder and trying to hide under his hair.

"Are you all right?" he asked immediately, giving Juanita a dark look.

"I'm fine." Neva took his hand, hoping to reassure him through the contact.

Juanita watched their exchange curiously with eyes that were so brown they bordered on black. She wore multi-layered shawls and skirts, their fiery reds and oranges bringing out a glow in her bronze skin. Her long, ebony hair was twisted up into a series of knots, topped by a small, black hat. A bandolier covered in blaster charges and flash grenades hung jauntily from shoulder to hip, and Neva wondered how many weapons she might have hidden under her flowing clothes.

"Nice monkey," Juanita said, with a nod at Jasmine.

"Uh, thanks."

Juanita nodded again, then took out a cigar and lit it. Rat looked utterly scandalized, and Neva remembered that spacers tended to have a horror of anything that might clog filters. Either those on Paradise didn't care, or Juanita was enough of a grounder not to have lost the habit.

Marcus and Drake arrived together, followed shortly by Anusha. From their grim expressions, Iluka must have filled them in over com. Iluka had a murmured conversation with Drake that made the guards shift nervously; then, she turned to the rest of the crew. "Grab whatever you can, people," she said shortly. "Especially anything you can sell. Drake, Rat, strip the weapons lockers of everything you can carry. Neva, your job is to clean out the infirmary."

"All right, then," Bernard said. "Ten minutes."

They hit the airlock at a run, their guards intermingled among them and ready for trouble. Neva didn't look at anyone else while they waited on the lift; her only thought was that this might be the last time she set foot on the ship.

The captain won't let that happen. She won't.

As ordered, she went straight to the infirmary, Juanita dogging her steps. Snatching a duffel meant to carry supplies for any off-ship emergencies, Neva began hurriedly throwing everything portable into it. Her skirt rode high on her thighs as she knelt to pull various medicines from a low cabinet, making her feel oddly vulnerable, and she wished that she'd had time to change.

"That's a pretty outfit," Juanita said. "Nice colors. So, you're the medic here?"

"Yes."

"I know some people who could use a doctor. The pay would be good."

Neva cast her a startled glance, then remembered that time was running out, and went back to packing. "The Zats came before I could finish my degree," she said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

"How close were you to graduating?"

"A few months."

Juanita shrugged. "What were they going to teach you in a few months that would make that big a difference?" she asked philosophically. "You think about it, let me know if you're interested."

* * *

The crew formed a somber gathering on the dock. All their possessions—the ones they had been able to take, anyway—lay around them, hastily stuffed in crates and duffel bags. The whispers in Rat's head had taken on a despairing tone, and when Bernard set a lock on the boarding tube, he could almost taste Iluka's bitter anger.

"What now?" Neva asked quietly. **nowhere else to go (home/belonging) only thing I have left what if it's gone now**

Iluka tore her eyes away from the airlocks and turned to the crew. "We make some money and get our ship back," she said. "Anything anyone has to sell, I'm asking you to do so."

"We need food and sleep first," Drake said. "The arms dealer I know won't talk to us for a few hours—it's off-shift for him. It's off-shift for us, too, and we're not going to be in any shape to bargain well if we're too tired to think."

Iluka pursed her lips, and Rat knew she wasn't happy about the delay. "All right," she said at last. "Let's get this stuff off the docks."

Dinner consisted of noodles from a dockside kiosk, cheap and tasteless, but filling enough to keep them going for a while. Marcus knew of a tube hotel that was inexpensive but relatively safe, and so led the way down the docks.

The hotel consisted of nothing more than desk with a bored attendant, a locker room, a row of cubicle showers, and a long hallway packed on either side with two layers of sleeping tubes. A neatly printed sign listed all the things that weren't allowed: wearing shoes inside the tubes was first, followed by firing weapons and lighting the bedding on fire. The hall smelled of old sweat and unwashed laundry; an unconscious man lay half-in, half-out of one of the lower tubes, snoring blissfully and reeking of cheap alcohol.

"Goddess," muttered Neva, looking taken aback.

Jasmine, however, liked the narrow, cramped space, which she interpreted as secure and safe from predators. Rat let her go in first, then crawled after. The tube was barely tall enough to sit upright in, and just long enough that he would have a few inches of space between his feet and the door. As soon as the door swung shut behind them, a fan clicked into motion and the interior lights came on.

The accommodations consisted of nothing but a small pillow, a thin mattress that covered the entire bottom of the tube, a mirror, and a vidscreen, which advised that wide variety of shows were available for an extra fee. A closer reading of the titles suggested that most were pornographic.

Rat stretched out and turned out the light, then adjusted the vent so that cool air blew directly into his face. He remembered Neva's dismay at the bare-minimum nature of the tubes, and hoped that she would be all right. He'd made sure to claim the tube above hers, just in case, and for a moment he was tempted to try and sort her voice out from the quiet murmur in his head.

Don't intrude, he told himself sternly. She would expect him to behave honorably, not spy on her thoughts when there was no need outside his own curiosity. But the thought of her so close made him ache, and he wanted...

I want not to be such a damned freak, for starters.

Had he made a terrible mistake, the day—it seemed forever ago—on End of the Line, when he'd first kissed her? He'd only worried about himself, worried that she wouldn't be interested in a crazy freak. He'd never considered that if a miracle occurred and she did have feelings for him other than friendship, that it might not be safe for her.

Instead, he should have been thinking things through—should have thought about it long

before, from the first second he'd realized he was attracted to her. He knew, just from general discussions about Harvest and its customs, that Neva's people regarded sex as a healthy, natural part of a relationship. It followed that she would expect them to become physically closer at some point, but he had tried not to think about it, hiding from the obvious question of what might happen when one partner was a dangerous telepath who had trouble keeping control even under normal circumstances.

He remembered that moment of passion in the bar, the sense of *her*, raw feeling and emotion that drew him in, intoxicated him utterly, to the point where he had no clear idea what thought, what sensation, belonged to whom. There had been no control in that, none at all, and if he were to be honest with himself, he didn't know if he was capable of control under the circumstances. The alternative was too seductive.

Goddess. I should get as far away from her as possible. I should break things off. I should... I should talk to her, said a more honest part of himself.

How? What do I say? Where do I begin?

Now was not the time for such a discussion. Later, when they had the ship back, when things weren't so crazy, then he would do it. Just not now.

Rat rolled over uneasily, trying to ignore the part of him that insisted he was being a coward.

* * *

Feeling almost more tired than before her few hours of sleep, Neva sat and sipped a cup of coffee at the table of a small restaurant, which seemed mainly to cater to those who rented the tubes. A number of fellow diners appeared to be nursing hangovers, and she wondered if they were more-or-less permanent inhabitants of the station, or pirate crews enjoying a few precious shifts off their ships.

At least they have ships.

Iluka and Drake approached, bearing cups of coffee of their own, as well as trays of food. Iluka looked as if she hadn't slept at all, and the frown lines around her mouth and eyes seemed deeper than before. "—would barely deign to grant me an audience," the captain was saying, her voice full of anger and bitterness. "Said I had no right coming to him for help, since I'd chosen to turn my back on the old ways." Her mouth pressed into a thin line. "I lost my temper, then."

"Not you," Drake said, deadpan. Iluka cast him a scathing glare.

They plunked their trays down at Neva's table and tucked in with gusto. The smell of *uji* drifting from their trays made her equal parts hungry and queasy. After a while, the rest of the crew came straggling from the direction of the showers or the counter.

"All right," Iluka said, when everyone was seated. "Time to get down to business. We need money, and we need it fast. We've got the weapons to sell, but the word is the market isn't good, so that probably won't be enough. I'm open to suggestions."

"I've heard tell of high-stakes poker games," Tarak said. "Rat's a telepath—we could get him in on one and he'd be bound to win."

Rat blinked. He looked almost as tired and worn as Iluka, and dark circles bruised the golden skin beneath his eyes. "I don't think I know how to play poker."

"You're a fighter pilot," Marcus snapped. "Of course you know."

Rat shrugged. "Then it's gone now."

"He's got a terrible poker face anyway," Anusha said dismissively. "It doesn't do any good to know what everyone else is holding, if everyone else knows what *he* has, does it?"

“What about the Star Riders? Can you borrow anything from them?” Iluka asked.

Anusha’s mouth twisted bitterly. “They aren’t any better off than we are, or not by much. I can try, though.”

“Every bit helps,” Iluka said. “Anything we can beg, borrow, or steal, any favors we can call in, now’s the time.”

Neva had been swirling honey through her coffee; apparently, someone on Paradise had the forethought to install beehives in the main hydroponics bay, and the honey had been surprisingly cheap. “I might have a lead,” she said quietly. She told them about the guard’s offer. “It will mean using our own supplies, but at least we’ll get paid for it.”

Iluka nodded shortly. “All right. We’ll worry about how we’re going to restock later. Go ahead, call this Juanita, and get started.”

“I’ll need an assistant. Rat’s helped me before.”

“All right, then, the both of you. Get moving.”

Juanita had given Neva her com code the shift before, and after a quick call agreed to meet them near the tube hotel. Rat offered to carry most of the gear Neva had managed to get off the *Exile*, so she took Jasmine from him.

Juanita was once again dressed in her brightly-colored skirts and shawls, with the same black hat perched atop her glossy hair, although today the cigar was absent. “There is a space you can use, off the marketplace,” she informed them when she arrived. “The last owner died, and Bernard hasn’t been able to rent it out again yet. Business is not so good for most of us, these days.” She shook her head sadly.

“You said you knew some people who need a medic,” Neva prompted.

“Follow.” Juanita started off, and they fell in with her. “I do. Sex workers union. Lucky for you, they’re the only ones making any kind of good trade or money these days, yes?”

Well, that was hardly a surprise. “So what do they need? Vaccinations? Antivirals?”

“Check ups, mostly.” Juanita waved her hand vaguely. “They had a doctor before, of course. That is part of the deal—regular checkups, contraceptives, medicine, that sort of thing, yes? But he started drinking, and then someone put a knife in between his ribs over a game of cards.”

“Oh,” said Neva, suddenly glad that Tarak’s poker game idea been vetoed.

“That will take you half the shift, I’m thinking. You can have the space all shift, no charge.”

“That’s gracious of you.”

“Not as if it’s making us any money sitting empty,” Juanita said philosophically. “And Mehadi—she is the union head—is my roommate. Personal favor.”

The space Juanita offered them consisted of a small suite of two rooms, one of which turned out to be an extremely cramped restroom. What the suite’s original purpose had been, Neva couldn’t guess, although she was grateful for the built-in shelving that at least meant she didn’t have to spread her supplies out on a blanket on the floor.

“Your friend understands that this is bare-bones, right?” she asked as she laid her things out and absently stuffed some extra syringes in one of the pockets of her baggy pants. “I’ve only got the absolute basics, and most of my diagnostic stuff is back on the ship.”

Juanita shrugged. “Better than nothing.”

Mehadi turned out to be a small woman who exuded friendly confidence. Gold bangles decorated her wrists and ankles, and she wore a sari that reminded Neva of the color of the ocean just after sunrise. Because there was no room to spare inside the temporary exam room, the workers who had come to see her had to line up in the corridor outside.

Her first patient was a strikingly handsome man, who laughed and joked with her the entire

time, although she suspected that it was mainly to hide his nervousness around needles. She took a blood sample, which she passed off to Rat, who put it in the scanner while she did the rest of the physical check. Not for the first time, she was glad that one of the healers she had trained with had insisted that she acquire basic observational skills rather than simply relying on machines to tell her what was wrong. In the absence of such equipment, her own senses were the only tools she had.

She and Rat fell into a routine that was seldom interrupted. For the most part, he remained quiet, handing her things when she needed them, running the simpler blood tests, and bringing her the results. No one was seriously ill, thank the Goddess, although she treated a few minor infections and adjusted the medication doses for some of those with chronic problems.

Because the economy of Paradise was largely based on trade, a pile of goods grew steadily at the back of the room, shoved out of the way by Rat so that they still had space to work. Whenever Neva took the time to glance at the pile in between patients, she felt her spirits lift—perhaps they *would* be able to save the *Exile* after all, especially if the rest of the crew had done their parts.

When the last of the workers were gone, Mehadi came back and thanked Neva. “If you need a permanent position, we could fund you better than this,” she added, glancing at the tiny space. “It would be a private practice, so you’d have plenty of free time, most likely.”

“Thanks,” Neva said, forcing a smile. “But I already have a berth on a ship.”

Whether Mehadi knew the truth of their predicament or not, Neva didn’t know. The small woman only nodded and said, “The offer still stands.”

Once Mehadi was gone, Neva sighed and leaned against a counter to ease her aching back. *Not the kind of conditions I ever imagined myself working in*, she thought wryly. She had always assumed that she would end up in a comfortable community somewhere on Harvest, sharing a joint practice with Devin that would include more equipment than an antiquated blood scanner and a handheld unit for identifying bacteria and viruses.

“Excuse me,” said a quiet voice from the doorway.

A woman stood there, holding the hand of a child. Both were thin, and had the sickly look of people who had lost a lot of weight in a short period of time. Their mismatched clothing was worn and patched, and grime showed in the creases of their skin. “I’m sorry,” the woman said, her voice barely above a whisper, as if she feared punishment for speaking too loudly. “But I heard there is a medic here? Not for me—my son, he can’t stop coughing. I-I can pay.”

It didn’t take any special training to see that the child with her was very sick. “Bring him in,” Neva began, but to her surprise Rat touched her arm lightly.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked softly.

Because there was really nowhere for privacy, Rat drew her to the back of the room and leaned against her to whisper. His breath stirred the small hairs around her ear and made her shiver. “I wasn’t trying to listen, I swear, but it’s always harder to ignore the whispers when I’m tired. I caught from the mother that they don’t have anything to spare. She’s scared, because if she pays you, she won’t have anything to get food with later on.”

“I see.” Neva gave his hand a quick squeeze, then returned to the woman, who was hovering anxiously about her son. The short walk from the doorway to the room’s only chair seemed to have taken most of his strength, and he was coughing painfully into an old rag.

Neva pulled on a simple mask, to protect herself if the boy’s illness turned out to be airborne, and squatted down by him. “So, what’s your name?” she asked encouragingly.

His eyes looked huge in his thin face. “George.”

“Hi, George. My name’s Neva. I’m going to listen to you breathe, okay? I’m sorry, this is going to feel pretty cold...”

In this case, the Goddess showed her merciful side. Although the infection was far more advanced than Neva would have liked, and could easily be fatal if left to run its course, the treatment itself was not complicated. The mother listened raptly while Neva explained that a simple injection of antibiotics would take care of the problem, then glanced at her son and asked, “Will this be...expensive?”

“There’s no charge.”

“Oh!” She looked down at the child again, but this time a tremulous smile bloomed, as if she feared to let herself hope too much. “Thank you, healer. Thank you.”

When they ushered the small family to the door, Neva saw that a long line stretched outside. Apparently, word had spread among the station inhabitants. For an instant, dismay touched her, and she wondered fleetingly how many of these people had any sort of valuables at all, and what Iluka would say if Neva started handing out the ship’s supplies to those who couldn’t pay. Then she shook her head and stepped back inside.

“Next.”

* * *

Once, Neva had worked a brief stint at an emergency room while an intern. The caseload had ranged from over-anxious parents whose children had only minor colds, to the victim of a bar fight with glass in his scalp. At the time, she had thought the pace hectic, and had been happy to leave as soon as her stint ended.

Looking back, she could have laughed at her own naïveté. The emergency care facility on Harvest had been sedate and predictable compared to this. The line of people waiting for help seemed endless, and she had only herself and one barely-trained assistant to see to them. Their complaints ranged from respiratory illnesses that were so ubiquitous she began to suspect that parts of the station filtration systems needed serious work, to nutritional deficiencies, to minor wounds that had become horribly infected thanks to lack of sanitation, to outright traumas. When she began to get low on some supplies, she sent Rat on a brief trip to the market, using some of what they had earned earlier to restock anything he could find.

Rat screened all the patients for her, either nodding if they could afford to pay or shaking his head if they couldn’t. A few of the latter insisted on paying anyway, unwilling to accept assistance even if it meant they had to go hungry. A few of them elicited murmured comments from Rat: a young man whose bruises had come from a beating administered by his father rather than a fall as he claimed, an elderly woman who had chronic stomach pains but had only sought treatment for a burn on her arm, a little girl worried about her even sicker brother at home. Rat flat-out refused entry to one man, who finally gave up and left only when Rat threatened to physically throw him out of line. When Neva asked what was wrong, Rat only shook his head, the look on his face closed.

The presence of so many families on the station surprised her, although on reflection perhaps it shouldn’t have. Some of the pirates had spouses and children who lived here, while others were simply refugees from the war who had found their way to Paradise by one route or another, then discovered themselves stranded without recourse. While some of them had established shops in the market, or found reliable work in station maintenance, others had lost everything to the Zats and never regained any of it. Still more were feeling the effects of the

Zatvian crackdown that Gretchen had mentioned; Neva met a number of dockworkers who had lost their jobs because there was no longer enough cargo to unload.

One thing happened which gave her pause on a personal level. The line had finally dwindled to almost nothing, when two men appeared. The flesh of the back of one was horribly lacerated and abraded, to the point where there was no skin left.

Rat hurried to help carry the injured man inside and lay him down on a clean blanket. Swearing silently, Neva dropped to her knees and began to spray a wound disinfectant on his back. "What happened?"

The other man hovered nearby, looking terribly worried. "The captain flogged him, healer."

Horror touched Neva, followed by a flash of cold anger. "Someone did this to him deliberately?"

"Aye. James—that's my brother, there—talked back to Captain Ionas."

"Your captain did this because your brother disagreed with him?"

"Aye. He don't take to insubordination well."

Her hands shaking with fury, Neva turned her attention back to her patient. The wounds were terrible and extensive, and it took a long time until they had all been properly cleaned. Even though she concentrated on her work, other, darker thoughts continued to intrude throughout the procedure. She remembered how frightened she had been, that long-ago day on Moldar Station when she had met Drake. The *Exile* had been an unknown quantity then, and she had worried about the motives of the strangers she was being asked to voyage with.

This could have been me so easily, she thought as her patient groaned despite the pain patches she'd slapped on his arm. *Or Rat, if he'd stowed away on the wrong ship*. Somehow, that thought was even worse.

After doing everything she could for the injured pirate, Neva sent the men on their way with strict instructions not to do anything to disrupt the protective layers until the skin had grown back. *At least they were able to pay us something*, she thought blearily, as the grateful brother passed some coins to Rat. Sparing a look at their takings for the day, she realized that they had spent a good deal of their earnings resupplying the impromptu clinic.

But what else was I going to do? Tell those people that I was sorry they were sick, suffering, maybe dying, but that I wasn't willing to treat them, when I had the means to do so?

Exhaustion clutched at her, and she realized that she hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast. But even getting to her feet, let alone going in search of sustenance, seemed a monumental task.

Rat shut the door, then leaned his shoulder against it, watching her with an odd look on his face, as if he had never seen her before.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, even though she didn't think she could do anything at the moment even if it wasn't.

The intense expression dissolved suddenly, and he smiled in a way that made him look oddly young. "I love you."

She found herself grinning despite everything. "Love you, too."

"You did a lot of good today. With this." He came and sat down by her on the floor. "You care about things. People."

Up close, the whites of his eyes were bloodshot, and the dark circles under them were more pronounced. It suddenly occurred to her how hard the shift must have been for him. After all, she had only seen the suffering second-hand, whereas he had been directly exposed through his ability.

"I'm proud of you," she said, leaning her head against his shoulder. "You did really well today. I can't imagine what you must have experienced, but I couldn't have done half of it without you. I know it was selfish of me to have you screen the patients, and I'm sorry if it upset you."

"You didn't ask me to do it."

"I let you do it, then."

He grinned. "And how were you going to stop me?"

"Stop asking these hard questions." She snuggled in closer to his side, wanting nothing more than to sleep. "I suppose we'd better get this stuff back to Iluka."

"I called her on the com—they're on the way."

"Oh. Good. Wake me up when they get here."

She drifted then, only to be awakened by the sound of voices. Opening her eyes, she saw the rest of the crew examining the remaining pile of goods. "With everything else we have, that should cover it, though we won't have anything to spare," Iluka was saying.

Neva's heart leapt. "There's still enough to save the *Exile*, then?"

Marcus cast her a sharp look. "*Still?* What do you mean by that?"

Cursing silently, Neva explained what she had done. Marcus' look grew more and more stormy, as did Anusha and Tarak's.

"You gave away our things, things we needed, for people you don't even know!" Anusha exploded at last.

Neva's temper, already frayed to nothing by her exhaustion, snapped. "I should have expected a sentiment like that from a woman trying to steal my boyfriend!"

"I don't want him," Anusha said shortly.

"That's true," Rat offered. "She's only interested in my genes—"

"None of which has anything to do with this!"

"Neva did the right thing," Iluka said sharply. "So the rest of you just settle down. And Neva, this is not the damned time to be airing your personal grievances."

"But... Captain... we need those supplies," Marcus said tentatively after a moment of silence. He looked as if Iluka had betrayed them all.

"I know. But we'll get more, somehow. Our immediate need wasn't as great." Iluka shook her head angrily. "This is why I'm a damned poor pirate captain, I suppose."

"That isn't true," Drake said.

"Doesn't matter. Let's get this stuff to Bernard."

They gathered everything together, then began to troop tiredly towards the stationmaster's office. The trip passed as a blur to Neva; she could only think about falling back into her own bed aboard the *Exile*. At the moment, even one of the tube hotels would have seemed luxurious.

Juanita wasn't on duty, but some of Bernard's other guards passed them through to his office. "There," Iluka said, dropping a bag of money on his desk with one hand and gesturing to their trade goods with the other. "Docking fees, paid up in full."

Bernard leaned back in his chair, looking at the moneybag with an air of regret before pushing it away. "Sorry, Iluka, but the *Exile* has already been sold."

There came a moment of stunned silence. *No, it can't be true*, Neva thought wildly. *I must have misheard...*

Iluka's eyes narrowed. "You sold my ship?" she asked, her voice dangerously soft.

Bernard must have read something in her face that worried him, because his hand suddenly moved to rest on the gun strapped to his side. "You understood the terms, Iluka. You could pay

up, but only if I hadn't sold that junker off first. An interested buyer came in almost as soon as I'd put her on the market. He was still in transit; the deal was done before he even put into dock. You're too late."

Goddess. What are we going to do?

"I see." Iluka's voice hadn't lost that feral edge, and Drake cast her an uneasy look, maybe wondering if he was going to have to pull her off Bernard. "And what's the name of the bastard who bought my ship?"

"That would be me," said a voice from the doorway.

He was tall, with long black hair that hung down his back, an eagle feather fixed into it. There was a faint smile on his handsome face, lighting his dark eyes. For a moment, Neva only stared blankly; then recognition clicked into place.

"You're Joshua," she blurted. "Captain of the *Red Cloud*."

"That I am." His gaze shifted past her. "Iluka."

"Ten Bears," Iluka said flatly. "What kind of game are you playing at, buying my damned ship out from under me?"

Joshua's smile didn't waver. "Well, Iluka. Let's just say that I have a proposition for you."

Chapter 22: Shadows

"I expect that your crew will want to stow all of this on board," Joshua said, gesturing casually to the pile of barter that had been meant to get the *Exile* at least temporarily out of debt. "In the meantime, Iluka, you and I have some things to discuss. Come to the *Red Cloud* and—"

"No."

Rat glanced uneasily between the two captains. The whispers rose up all around him, **anger/mistrust/fear/hurt** drowning out everything else. Iluka's face was set in a hard line, no sign of warmth at all towards a man who had been her friend the last time they had parted. But that had been before he'd bought the *Exile* out from under them.

Before they'd known someone had sabotaged the ship, and that Joshua and his crew were among the only possible suspects.

Joshua tipped his head slightly to one side, the only sign he gave that he was surprised. "Very well. I'll accompany you back to the *Exile*."

Iluka didn't back down. "I'll meet you in one hour in a rented room. I'll let you know the location a few minutes beforehand. You're coming alone."

Although his face remained impassive, wariness appeared in Joshua's eyes. Maybe he asked himself what Iluka might be up to, what she might be capable of if she was angry enough. "We bought the *Exile* before anyone else could. As a favor to you."

"Keep your damned favors. One hour." Iluka grabbed the nearest carryall, slung it over her shoulder, and brushed past Joshua without so much as looking at him. Drake started snatching up their barter as well, and Rat realized that Iluka was ready to walk off and leave them all if they dallied, so he scrambled to follow suit.

The crew was subdued as they rode the lifts down towards the docks. The air hummed with questions that no one dared voice, not with Iluka glaring at the lift's control panel as if she contemplated shooting it. The guard was gone from the airlock when they reached the *Exile's* berth, and as they walked up the boarding tube, Iluka finally broke her silence. The cold made her breath plume like smoke in the sullen glow of the amber boarding lights. "Stow anything we need to keep. Anything we don't, secure it until it's sold. Just in case."

Just in case we have to leave dock in a hurry, Rat interpreted that to mean. He didn't understand everything that was happening, the currents of mistrust and double-dealing, only that Iluka seemed to think Joshua was up to something. He wondered if he ought to ask what, if she would give him more or less leniency than anyone else on the grounds that he was half-crazy anyway.

They entered the spine and stopped to wait for the lift to come up. "Shall I get that room rented?" Drake asked.

Iluka nodded once, sharply. "Do it. I don't care where, so long as it's private. Not that

Joshua won't be wired the teeth, damn his hide."

"I'll come with you."

"I'm taking Rat."

Drake hesitated, as if trying to formulate what he wanted to say without touching off Iluka's temper. The lift doors opened and they all piled out, but no one dispersed, wanting to hear the rest of the conversation. There was a weapons locker near the lift, and Iluka went straight to it and keyed it open.

"That may not be such an advantage," Drake finally said to her back. "Joshua knows that Rat can read minds."

"It isn't like that," Rat reminded softly, not wanting anyone to expect something he couldn't give. But they ignored him.

Iluka turned and gave Drake a hard look. There was something wild in her coffee-colored eyes, something bitter and angry. "Then Joshua will know he can't hide it if he betrayed us, if he knew about that bit of sabotage done to our boat. So I guess he'll either shoot us both if he's guilty, or he'll sit down and listen if he's innocent."

Neva had been half-slumped against the wall in her exhaustion, but at that she straightened up sharply. "Captain! You can't go in there and get both of you killed for nothing!"

"I don't mean to get us killed." Iluka pulled out a handgun and checked the charge on it. "I mean to shoot first." Satisfied, she tossed the gun to Rat, who caught it reflexively. "I'm hoping it doesn't come to that. But if it does, I'm not going to lay down and die."

"Let me come with you, as backup," Drake argued.

Iluka's going to get herself killed, what will I do I already lost Rachel, don't want to go through that again, ought to trust her, smartest woman I've ever known but she's not thinking straight

"No." Iluka checked the charge on a second gun before thrusting it through her belt. "If the worst happens, you get this damned ship out of here as fast as you can go. Hear me?"

"Iluka—"

Fire flashed in her eyes. She was shorter than her first mate by a good foot, but the look she leveled on him would have stopped a freighter in its tracks. "Drake Morgenstern, you listen to me. I'm counting on you to keep my ship and my crew safe. I was hoping to go into this meeting without worrying about you lot—without a distraction that means I'm not going to have my whole mind on keeping the two of us alive. You going to tell me that you won't do that for me?"

If the Zats had made Iluka a telepath and somehow managed to keep her brain together, she could have owned the universe. As it was, she already seemed to know just what to say that would make Drake listen to her. For a moment, captain and first mate just stared at each other. Then Drake's shoulders slumped.

"All right. I'll do it."

Iluka clapped him on the arm. "Get me that room. Rat, I want you back out here in half an hour and ready to go, understand me, crazy man?"

"Aye, Captain."

Iluka strode off. One by one, everyone else drifted away as well, until only Rat and Neva were left. "We'd better get this stuff to the infirmary," she said dully. Rat glanced at her in concern, saw the dark circles under her eyes.

"I'll get it. You should sleep." He made as if to take a carryall from her, but she tugged it away.

"No." She looked at him, then, and desperation bloomed in her hazel eyes.

I hate this, what if something happens to him, if Iluka gets him killed

He didn't know what to say to reassure her, because any assurances would just be lies. "Iluka's not stupid," he said at last, not adding that there was an edge that even the smartest person could come to, a line where they couldn't take any more, and past that there was no telling what they might do.

Iluka had seen her planet conquered, her relatives killed, had seen her allies betray her by surrendering to the Zats and forcing her to turn pirate. But for some reason, today was the day where she had reached her breaking point. And he didn't know what she might do, simply because Iluka herself didn't know, either.

Worrying Neva wouldn't help anything, though, so he kept his mouth shut and lugged the carryalls to the infirmary after her. She stuffed them unceremoniously into a locker. "We'll sort it out later, after you get back," she said, as if the unfinished job was a talisman that would bring him home safely.

He could sense how tired she was, and on impulse he picked her up, one arm around her shoulders, the other hooked below her knees. She let out a startled exclamation and grabbed at his shoulders. "What are you doing?"

"You need to lie down and rest."

"Put me down before you strain something."

He tightened his grip slightly and ignored her protests, carrying her out of the infirmary and down the hall to her room. When he laid her carefully down on the bed, however, she linked her arms around his neck and tugged him down.

"Don't go."

"I have to meet the captain in a quarter hour," he reminded her.

"I know. Just hold me, please. For a little while."

Even though a part of him worried this was a bad idea, he nodded and lay down by her, fitting his body against hers. Her hair was soft against his face, and smelled of sweat and disinfectant from the clinic. Even through their layers of clothing, he could feel the heat of her skin, and he closed his eyes against the sudden ache that seemed to race along every nerve.

Why can't anything ever be simple?

She fell asleep almost immediately, but he stayed for as long as he dared, until he knew he risked being late. Then he kissed her softly and slid out of bed. *Stay with her*, he told Jasmine, who was investigating the storage compartments built into the wall. Then he hurried out, not allowing himself to look back.

He made it to the lift scant seconds before Iluka. The whispers took on sharp edges, things that might cut if he got too close, so he kept his silence.

"Got your gun?" she asked as they stepped onto the lift. "Good. You know what I expect from you?"

"Aye, Captain."

She didn't say anything else for a while, not until they had left the ship, crossed the docks, and caught a tram to the room Drake had booked for them. "I tried to head off an ambush, not telling Joshua where we were meeting until the last minute," she said at last. "But I won't rule out that there won't be one anyway. Joshua's wired, and the minute he says a code phrase or sends a distress signal, half his crew will come down on our heads."

"Do you really think he betrayed us?" Rat asked.

**don't want to believe it, but I can't risk it, too much already gone (anger/disappointment) can't rely on anybody, can't trust anybody or we'll all get killed, but Joshua was a friend I*

*thought (beer)**

“Don’t know,” Iluka said aloud. “That’s for you to find out, isn’t it?”

The captain of the *Red Cloud* was waiting for them within a complex that rented rooms by the hour and asked no questions. From the look of the few other people going in and out, Rat guessed that the rooms were most often used for those making illicit business deals.

When he saw them, Joshua folded his arms across his chest. “Iluka.” His eyes strayed to Rat, but he made no comment, as if he’d expected something of the sort.

“Ten Bears.” Iluka went to the counter where a bored-looking attendant sat and retrieved the keycard for the room. She led the way, while Rat brought up the rear, bracketing Joshua between them. Rat doubted that a warship captain would miss such an obvious arrangement, but Joshua said nothing. Which meant that he was either very confident in his own forces, or meant the display as a show of trust.

Goddess, let it be the latter.

The room was small, little more than a closet with a table and a few chairs. A decrepit coffee dispenser dripped sadly in one corner, adding a brown stain to the gray-green hue of the floor and walls. Iluka took a seat with her back to the wall and her face to the door, and nodded for Rat to do the same. Joshua settled into one of the metal chairs nearest the door, his blue shirt and the bright beads in his hair adding an incongruous splash of color to the depressing room. Linking his hands in front of him, as if to show that he held no weapons, he regarded Iluka with an unblinking stare. “All right, Iluka. I’m here. Now why don’t you tell me what this is all about?”

Iluka didn’t flinch from his stare, only pulled her gun from her belt and laid it on the table in front of her. “Someone sabotaged the *Exile*.”

Joshua was a disciplined warrior; if he felt either surprise or dismay, the whispers said nothing of it. “And you think I had something to do with it?”

“Three crews had access to the *Exile* after it was damaged. Mine. Gavin Ionas’. And yours.”

“And you think I would do such a thing?”

“Fact is, Joshua, I don’t know what you’d do, do I?” Iluka leaned forward slightly, her expression hard. “You’re a warship captain, and I know you didn’t get there by talking nice, did you? Harini Chandrashekar seems to think I shouldn’t trust you—says that you’d let us all die if it was convenient for you to keep secrets from us. And like I fool I told you that my boy here got his head rewired, that he’s some kind of telepath. So maybe you started asking yourself what he might have overheard when he was on your ship, talking with Michael Shot With an Arrow or Daniel Long River. What he might have picked out of *your* head on the dock the day you met him. Maybe you decided that the easiest way to make sure that secret things stay secret would be to see to it that we all got lost on the backside of beyond.”

Rat felt cold. *I never thought of that. Not even once.*

For a long moment, the two captains simply stared at one another. “Do you know what I think, Iluka Toora?” Joshua asked at last. “I think you’ve spent too long out in the dark. I think you’ve been living out in nothing, cut loose from everyone and everything you ever knew, for so long that you don’t even know who *you* are anymore, let alone me.”

Iluka’s eyes flashed, and the whispers took on an edge of **rage**. “I heard enough lecturing from Mandu when I went to him for help. All he could talk about was how I’m not traditional enough for him, how I’ve abandoned the old ways, how I let outsiders crew my boat. I hear the same from you, and I might just start shooting.”

“I don’t think so,” Joshua said, although Rat suspected the words were meant more for unseen listeners than for Iluka. “That isn’t what I’m talking about. I don’t care what beliefs you

practice, what rituals you perform, or who you let on your ship. I'm talking about Iluka Toora. Iluka Toora, who perhaps used to know who she was and where she stood, before all of this began. Iluka Toora, who doesn't dare use her own name in any port except this one, who lost her relations who used to be her crew, who perhaps can't let anyone else get too close because she doesn't want to hurt again, or because she thinks it's a sign of strength to do everything alone.

"You've lost your center, lost the place where you used to stand, and you haven't found a new one. You're alone in the dark, and everything around you is in shadow. It is said that all horses look the same in the night, and your night has gone on so long that you can no longer tell friend from enemy."

Iluka's mouth tightened. "Don't you dare try to turn this around onto me, Ten Bears. This conversation isn't about me—it's about whether you decided to kill us all on the off chance that this man knows something he shouldn't."

"Then I will tell you about myself instead." Joshua laid his hands flat on the table. "If I came to my crew and said, I've decided to kill everyone on board the *Exile*—our friends, our allies—do you think they would follow me any longer?"

"I don't see your crew as the mutinous type."

"I'm not talking about mutiny. That is the *oyate unma* way. It isn't our way. I lead because the other warriors on board have respect for me. Because I have brought them success, but also because I have honor. A man who would kill allies, who have not shown themselves to be treacherous, is not a man of honor, and he is not a man others will follow." Joshua stood up abruptly, holding his arms out to either side. "If you can look me in the eye and still believe that I am behind this act, then shoot me now."

Although Joshua's face gave nothing away, Rat could hear the whispers, louder now and full of passion. **(anger/offense/sorrow) surely none of my crew but it's the oldest trick of conquerors to use our own people against us**

"He didn't do it, Captain," Rat said, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. "If anyone on the *Red Cloud* was involved, he didn't know about it."

Iluka accepted this information without a flicker of emotion. "And you bought my ship to do me a favor."

Joshua shrugged. "Someone else could have bought it. It seemed safer to secure it."

"And this proposition you were talking about?"

"I've been following up on some things, Iluka. The things that you brought to my attention; the information that you carried back from Gethsemane."

"And you wanted to secure my help along with my ship."

A flicker of a smile crossed his bronze face. "If you wish to see it that way. Or you can look at it like this: now that I own your ship, at least for now, I can arrange for certain upgrades to be made without having to appeal to any other authority."

Iluka stiffened. "You're in contact with your government."

"Perhaps."

She gave him a piercing look, but he didn't drop his eyes. After a moment, she sat back and sighed. "Sit down, Ten Bears, and tell me what crazy scheme you've cooked up this time."

* * *

Drake's relief over Iluka's safe return was short-lived. She and Rat simply walked in off the docks, not even bothering to call ahead, as if no one had been chewing their nails, scared that one

or both of them had gotten their fool heads blown off. Indeed, when he'd offered congratulations on her safe return, Iluka had barked at him to get on the com and round up the rest of the crew for a meeting.

"Joshua's clean," Iluka said, when everyone else had found their seats. She paced the length of the galley, as if she couldn't bear to be still. "Whether or not the same can be said for everyone on his crew, I don't pretend to know. That's his problem now."

"And what about him owning the *Exile*?" Marcus demanded. "What in hell is that all about?"

"It's about Joshua wanting us to owe him a favor, and about him being tricky when it comes to keeping the books. I think he's still got the idea that someday he's going to have to account to his government."

"And let's pray that's the case," Drake said wryly.

Iluka nodded. "Agreed. But that's neither here nor there. Seems that Joshua's been a busy boy since we parted. Been poking around all over the place, trying to follow up on our information that the Zats are moving whole populations here and there, making them slaves and sending them to mining hells like Gethsemane, where they'll wear out fast but be cheaper to replace than machines." Iluka paused grimly. "He thinks that some of them might be going to Waga Chun. His home planet."

Marcus swore. Neva's reaction was slightly more reasoned. "That doesn't bode well for the original inhabitants either, does it?"

"No. And so Joshua's taken it into his head that he wants to make a run there. Only he figures that his chances would be better if he had some others to watch his back and distract the Zats. Which is where we come in."

"I'm not going to get killed over a bunch of grounders!" Anusha exclaimed.

Marcus shook his head. "Damn it, Iluka, Waga Chun isn't the only world where things are going as wrong as they can go. Why should we risk ourselves to help his people, when our own might be suffering just as much?"

Neva looked up. She was pale from fatigue, and shadows still darkened the delicate skin below her eyes, but her mouth was set in an expression of determination. "I don't know, Marcus. Maybe because it's the right thing to do?"

Marcus looked faintly offended. "Says who?"

"Curse it!" Neva slammed her fist into the table, startling everyone. "That's how this mess started in the first place, isn't it? The Zats took over a few star systems, all the while swearing up and down that they were just securing their own borders, that they didn't mean to do anything more to anyone else. And it made everyone sleep better to believe them and look the other way, so they did. Except that the Zats didn't stop there, did they?"

"If someone had stood up and said no to the Zats at the beginning, had taken some responsibility for something outside themselves, then maybe we wouldn't be sitting here today. But instead we told ourselves that those systems were full of people who didn't look like us, didn't talk like us, maybe didn't think like us, and so what happened to them didn't have any bearing on our lives. And the indifference that we sowed proved a bitter harvest to reap, didn't it?"

"It's nothing that hasn't happened a thousand times before," Drake said quietly. "We never learn, do we? Never. We just keep making the same damned mistakes over and over, generation after generation. You ought to know some history, Marcus, if you taught ancient literature. Am I wrong?"

Marcus grimaced, but it was obvious he couldn't argue. "No."

"None of this makes a bit of difference," Iluka said bluntly. "Like it or not, Joshua owns this ship now. Going with him is the price he's asking to give it back to us. We'll be getting something out of this, too—better engines, for one thing, or so he says. I image we might even get the *Cuchulainn* souped up a bit while we're at it." She sighed and straightened, wiping her gray dreads back from her face. "We've got a bit of down time before we have to move, so if anyone wants to think about leaving, you've got from now until they're done fixing up the ship. For now, everyone go off-shift. You need your rest, and you deserve it."

The crew left, murmuring amongst themselves, until only Drake and Iluka remained in the galley. "Something's bothering you," he said when the door closed and they were alone.

She paused, one hand resting on the back of a chair, her eyes on nothing. But he noticed her fingers digging into the foam padding, hard enough that she might have bruises later on. "Joshua said some fool things, that's all. Nothing to worry about."

"Tell me."

For a moment, he thought that she might. Then she shook her head sharply. "It's nothing."

"Iluka, I'm your first mate, but I'm also your friend. I can tell something is worrying you. Don't push me away."

Her head snapped around, as if he'd said something terrible, gray dreads half-obscuring her expression. "Don't overstep your bounds, Morgenstern."

"Iluka—"

"No." She turned and walked out the door. Feeling bereft, he stared at the empty room for a long time, until the motion sensors decided that no one was there and shut the lights off, leaving him in darkness.

* * *

"I'm glad you're all right," Neva said as they walked back to her quarters from the meeting. Rat's hand was warm in hers, and she squeezed his fingers, felt him squeeze back.

"Joshua and Iluka didn't get to be where they are by being stupid," he pointed out.

"But everyone makes mistakes."

A faint sigh escaped him, as if she had inadvertently accused him of the same. "Yeah," he agreed, subdued.

"Is something wrong?"

"No."

He wasn't being entirely truthful with her, she decided. There was something preying on his mind, and she wondered if it had anything to do with the meeting with Joshua, or if there was some other concern that she wasn't aware of.

Perhaps if she could just get him to relax a little, he would open up. Or at least not worry quite so much.

The door to her quarters opened, and Rat stopped on the threshold, looking suddenly unsure. It was sweet, Neva decided, and part of what she liked about him, that quiet manner that didn't presume the universe revolved around him.

"Come in," she said with a smile and a gentle tug on his hand.

He did so, although he still looked uncertain. So she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him, first softly, then with more passion. She could hear the ragged edge of his breathing, feel his desperation in the way he pulled her against him.

And then, suddenly, her arms were empty and he was backing away toward the door, which opened silently behind him. Startled, she took an automatic step after him. “Rat? What’s wrong?”

There was something in his amber eyes that might have been grief. “I’m sorry, Neva. I’m sorry.” For a moment, she thought he might say something further—then he looked away and shook his head. “I’m sorry. It isn’t you; it’s me.”

The door shut behind him, leaving her alone.

Chapter 23: Needles

Rat wandered the docks aimlessly, with no destination or plan except to put distance between himself and the *Exile*. He would have preferred to leave his thoughts behind as well, but no amount of walking could do that. Even so, he kept going, one foot in front of the other, seeing little of his surroundings through the shadows in his head.

Neva. He hadn't meant to hurt her, but had somehow managed to do just that. *Should have done things differently. Should have done everything differently, maybe*. He should have stayed away from the start, when he had sensed her goodness, the generosity of her spirit, even beneath the crushing burden of loss that she carried.

But Neva's compassion had drawn her to him. She wasn't able to turn away from someone in pain, and so she had been kind to him, looked after him. And like a fool he'd let her, forgetting that it wasn't safe. *He wasn't safe*.

Unlawful transport of a biohazard—that was the charge the Zats had arrested the crew on, back on Prospero. The same that they'd used on Muldar, when they finally spotted him on some security camera and realized that he was not only still alive, but also in the process of escaping. It hadn't been some trumped-up charge, just the plain truth.

Biohazard. That summed him up, in just one word. How had he forgotten that?

I didn't forget—I just didn't want to remember. After deliberately killing the Zativian, Aguila, using nothing but his own mind...he hadn't wanted to remember. It had been too intimate, privy to a man's last agonized thoughts, wanting to stop but forcing himself to go on tearing Aguila apart, until there was nothing left at all.

Goddess. He pressed his fingers to his eyes. What had he been thinking? How could he have even contemplated friendship with anyone else after that, knowing what he was capable of? Knowing how dangerous he was?

His surroundings dully impinged on his awareness, and he realized that if he kept going around the docking ring, he'd end up where he'd started, at the *Exile's* berth. He imagined Neva's hurt look when he went back on board and shivered with self-loathing. *Not ready for that. Not yet*.

Bereft of anything else to do, he took a lift up to the open market. The first time he'd been there, the place had been crowded. Noisy. Boisterous. Now, though, it was comparatively subdued, with only a few shoppers wandering among the kiosks. Rat drifted between the stalls and shops, looking at the bright lights and garish displays, listening to vendors hawking their wares. He felt utterly disconnected from the rest of humanity, even though he couldn't escape the incessant murmur in his head. *Maybe this is how it feels to be a ghost. Able to see, to hear, but never touch*.

One shop caught his eye. It was built into the walls enclosing the market, denoting a store

of a more permanent nature than the kiosks and tables. Bright artwork was prominently displayed, both within and without; the drawings ranged from surreal to gaudy to beautiful. The front wall of the store was glass, and as he peered inside, he realized that it was a tattoo shop.

On impulse, he pushed open the door and went in. The shop was tiny and cramped; a couple of rough-looking pirates sat in chairs, talking to their friend who was under the needle. The artist bent over his back was a woman, her dark eyes lined in kohl, black lipstick startling against her white skin. One side of her head was shaved; the other sported ebony hair twisted into a thick braid. *Pretty.*

"Got a customer, Annie," one the loiterers said.

She didn't bother to look up from her work. "Can I help you?"

He had some money, his share of what they had initially been going to use to pay the docking fees. Enough, maybe, for what had come into his mind. "Yeah. I'd like to get a tattoo. I know what I want."

"Been drinking?" Annie pointed at a sign that hung on one wall, which promised bad things to anyone who came in drunk.

"I don't drink."

"High?"

Rat smiled ruefully. "I don't take drugs."

The man under the needle laughed. "Well, hell, what do you do for fun? Sex?"

"Not doing that, either."

They laughed at him, but not cruelly, probably thinking he was joking with them. He didn't mind.

Annie told him to have a seat and wait, so he did, keeping to himself but listening to the conversation that flowed around him. It started with complaints about shortages and general imprecations against the Zats, but then one of the pirates got a grim look in his eye. "I heard the *Morrigan* is overdue."

Annie's mouth tightened; apparently she had some connection to the ship. "Ships don't come to Paradise on a set schedule, Mac. You know that."

"Even so, if they had plans to come in within six months relative—"

"And if an opportunity came up, then what are they supposed to do?" she cut in. "Not take it? If they jumped far enough out of their way to grab a Zat ship, or chase a rumor about unprotected supplies waiting at some depot, it could be months before they get back. No sense worrying when there's no need."

Rat wished he could ignore the whispers that said she *was* scared, no matter what she claimed. Damn scared, and hating the uncertainty of it all, because it could be as innocent as a simple delay, or as bad as being caught by the Zats and the ship and everyone on it dead.

"There's been too many ships gone missing lately," said the man under the needle. "*Fly Right*, and *Ship in the Night*, and *Jade Dragon*."

"*Seventh Chrysanthemum*," added the one named Mac.

"And no one else making a profit," the other said morosely. Which brought them back around to the start.

The Exile could have been on that list of vanished ships. Almost was. Rat pulled his jacket tighter around his shoulders, shivering from more than the cool, dry air of the station. *In our case, it was sabotage. Did the others just have back luck? Run into the Zats? Finally get caught with papers that didn't stand up to a close inspection?*

Mirra knew to find us on Prospero Station. She and the other Obsidian Blades had been

waiting there like spiders in the center of a web. They had *known* that he was on a ship headed that direction.

How? Even if she had followed the outbound vector of *Devi's Challenge* when they had left Gethsemane Station, how would they have known where to go after? Had someone tipped the Blades off?

If there is a spy, a traitor, among the pirates, someone working with the Zats...that might explain why so many ships have been caught lately. The collaborator was either tipping off the Zats, or—dark thought—ambushing the other ships himself. Coming up under the guise of a friend, blowing them open to space, then making off with the cargo.

“We lost our holds again,” he said, as if commiserating with the rest. “Two runs and we haven’t got anything to show for it.”

“That’s bad luck,” Mac agreed. “What ship?”

“The *Exile*.”

No one said it, but the whispers told him clearly enough. Toora’s Rejects. It wasn’t a label he could argue with, not when it came to himself, anyway.

“Is anyone getting around the Zats and turning a profit these days?” he asked, as if he didn’t know what they were thinking.

“Not us.” Mac leaned back in his chair grumpily. “I heard the *Grendel* is making out pretty well, though.”

The *Grendel*. The ship responsible for damaging the *Exile*. One of the two who had worked to fix her after, too. *And unless there’s something going on aboard his ship that Joshua doesn’t know about, the most likely to have been the saboteurs.*

“There you go,” Annie said, wiping away the last of the blood from the man she worked on. He stood up, and Rat caught a glimpse of a brightly-colored flower of some kind, which sprouted a multi-headed dragon from its center.

Rat waited while Annie finished up with the pirates. As they clomped out the door, she started to wipe down the chair with disinfectant. “So tell me what you’re looking for.”

He did so, although he didn’t say why he wanted such a thing. She didn’t ask, only said, “That’s a painful place for a man to get ink done, you know. Not much padding there.”

He shrugged. So it would hurt. Why should this be any different than anything else in his life?

“All right.” She pulled fresh equipment from the small autoclave mounted on the wall and started to prep the tattoo machine. “Take your shirt off and hop in the chair, then.”

* * *

Neva wandered out of her quarters, tired and depressed. She’d gotten some sleep, though not enough—not with Rat’s words going around and around in her head. How he’d gone from “I love you” to breaking up with her in less than a shift, she didn’t know, couldn’t imagine.

We didn’t even have time to exchange more than a few words in those hours. What could I have done, have said, to make him change his mind?

Nothing. Not a damned thing. Anger swirled together with rejection. If she saw him, she didn’t know if she’d scream at him, throw something, or cry. Maybe all three.

Rat had been in such a hurry to get away from her that he’d left Jasmine behind, which made her angry in a different way. Well, she decided as she balanced the little primate on her shoulder, he’d have to come to her if he wanted his pet back. No way was she going looking for him. And

if he didn't have the courage to face her, then she'd be perfectly happy to keep Jasmine permanently.

The smell of brewing coffee drew her to the galley, and she found Marcus there, making his breakfast. They were down to the worst of their prepackaged supplies, emergency rations meant to nourish the body without doing a thing for the soul. She grabbed a bag out of the cabinet and squeezed it to release the chemicals in the packaging that would heat it automatically. After waiting the recommended number of seconds, she tore it open and sucked out the thick, gluey paste.

Goddess. If I was actually in a desperate survival situation and had to depend on these things, the taste alone would make me pray for death. Why can't they just add a little flavoring?

Marcus sipped his coffee, watching her over the brim. "Where's your boy-toy?"

Neva couldn't shrug without throwing Jasmine from her shoulder, so she ignored the question altogether, sitting down to finish her cheerless meal and hoping Marcus would leave her alone.

Of course her hopes were immediately dashed. "That's a good bedside manner you've got there. Friendly. Talkative."

"Leave me alone."

"Oh, that's a lot better."

Neva shot him a dark look. "Isn't it funny how eager some people are to antagonize someone who might be sticking a scalpel in them someday?"

Marcus snorted. "You're too goody-goody to get revenge that way."

"It's called ethics. You should look it up in a dictionary."

To her surprise, Marcus grinned slightly as he took another sip from his steaming mug. "Well, well. The kitten's got claws after all. I'm guessing the Zats don't put much store in doctors with ethics, though. Not that any government does."

Neva frowned, wondering what that was supposed to mean. "Some of the Zatvian doctors must have some compassion. The ones that treat their wounded, at least."

"Not the ones working on Project Zero, though."

Feeling as if she had lost the direction of the conversation, Neva said, "No. I suppose not."

"What other things are they doing? You read the files that your crazy boyfriend stole, the ones that talk about how they dug out his sense with a dull spoon. Those files mention any other secret projects? Experimenting with prisoners, maybe?"

Neva slowly put her cup down onto the table. "Are you asking what might have happened to your daughter?"

Marcus' face stilled, as if afraid he'd already given too much away. "Maybe."

"There's nothing I can tell you. Nothing at all outside of the Project Zero information. Whatever else the Zats are doing, Hunter either doesn't know or didn't have the files with her. My bet would be on the first scenario. You said that no government likes ethical doctors. Governments don't like to cooperate, either, even within the same power structure. No one was going to tell the Obsidian Blades anything more than they needed to know about Project Zero, let alone give them secret files about something they weren't directly involved in."

Marcus' blue eyes remained fixed on his coffee cup. He turned it around and around, studying it from every angle, as if he might find the answers to his questions written on it. "I see."

There are others who have worse problems than me. She'd only been dumped without explanation, and here her crewmate was wondering what sort of horrors might have befallen his

only child. "I'm sorry. Even if the files did contain anything more, though, there's no knowing for certain that Genevieve has been involved in any sort of...of projects. They can't be experimenting on every prisoner."

His mouth tightened, although he still didn't look at her. "They picked her out for a reason, one that didn't have anything to do with me. I just don't know why, whether it was for her age, or because she was good at gymnastics, or because she had light hair. But there was a reason. And that means they had some use for her."

Neva didn't know what to say to him. Any attempt at comfort would be rebuffed—and, really, what comfort could there be? Marcus was trapped in a hell of not knowing. Not knowing where his daughter was, or what might be happening to her, or even if she was still alive at all. Was she somewhere waiting to be rescued, wondering when her father would finally come for her? Or had death brought an end to all fear and pain?

The galley door slid open, and Iluka came in, saving Neva from the need to reply. The captain had tied her dreadlocks back from her face, and looked to be in a better mood with a little sleep. "Where's Rat?"

Neva fed Jasmine a bit of her breakfast. "I don't know. Sleeping, I suppose."

She thought that she'd been careful to keep any emotion out of her voice, but Iluka gave her a sharp glance before going to the com and punching it on. "Rat? Answer me, crazy man. I got a job for you."

Nothing. Iluka swore and punched through again. "Drake. Patch me through to Rat's pocket com."

"Aye, Captain."

Again, there was no answer. Iluka cursed him a second time, then extended the curse to the ancestors who had spawned him. "Was he acting strange at all?"

"As opposed to when?" Marcus muttered.

Worry touched Neva's heart. *Was I right about what happened in my quarters? Or is there something else going on with him?*

"It's not you; it's me," he had said. She had assumed that he meant it in the standard way, that he was cutting off their relationship with some stupid platitude meant to make him feel better.

"I don't know," she said cautiously. "He was...abrupt, I suppose, with me. We didn't discuss it. Maybe I should have forced the issue."

Iluka glowered at the com, as if it had personally failed her by not contacting Rat. "Need a damned psych-doc to keep tabs on that boy. No telling what crazy idea he's gotten in his head now. I put out the call for maintenance workers to repair the ship—Joshua agreed to use neutral station workers, because no way in hell am I going to let anyone from his crew near my ship until I've got proof they weren't involved in the sabotage. But there's always bribes to worry about."

"You wanted Rat to clear the workers for you?"

"Damn lot of good it does now." Iluka shook her head angrily. "We'll make due with remote cameras to keep an eye on them, I guess, and hope nobody slips anything past us."

"He might show up any time."

"Might. But I can't wait until the idea floats through his crazy head." Iluka went and poured herself some coffee, then turned back to them. "Got a job for you, Marcus."

Marcus arched a brow and leaned back in his chair. "Captain?"

"The *Grendel* is in port. I don't trust Gavin Ionas as far as I can throw this ship, and if

Joshua and his crew are clear, that leaves someone on the *Grendel* as our saboteur. Go on station and gather any rumors you can. Talk to some of their crew if you can without raising suspicion.”

“I could hint that I’m not happy with things on the *Exile* and pretend I’m looking for other work.”

“Good idea.”

Neva wondered if Marcus’ history as a collaborator had anything to do with Iluka’s choice of assignment. If someone on the *Grendel* had betrayed them, would they see Marcus as someone they could potentially recruit as a spy?

“Should I go look for Rat?” Neva asked.

Iluka shook her head. “No. Stay here for now. I’m not easy with having too many of us wandering around the docks, especially not when someone has tried to get rid of us once already.”

* * *

At first, Rat worried that the close contact with the tattoo artist would disrupt his control, give him a too-personal glimpse into her thoughts. He caught flashes here and there as she smeared disinfectant over his chest and shaved off the sparse hair on the left side. But once she touched needle to skin, she slipped into a mental state that reminded him a bit of when he sat in the cockpit of the *Cuchulainn*, her focus narrowed down to the interaction of skin and machine and ink.

The pain distracted him, too. He thought it wouldn’t have been as bad on someone with more bulk, but there wasn’t much separating skin from bone on his chest, and it felt as if Annie was slicing a knife across his ribs. But he just gritted his teeth and tried to regulate his breathing, concentrating on that instead of the glittering sting of the needle.

“There you go,” Annie said, after what seemed like forever but was probably only two or three hours. “Take a look in the mirror.”

The black ink stood out starkly against his golden skin. A dark brand, just slightly to the left of center on his chest, unmistakable in its warning.

Biohazard.

Annie covered the symbol with a light bandage, all the while instructing him on aftercare. As he pulled his shirt and jacket back on, his hand brushed the com buried deep in one pocket of the jacket, and he felt it vibrate against his fingers. Someone had been trying to reach him.

Neva, maybe, wanting answers that he couldn’t avoid giving forever. Dreading the reception waiting for him back at the ship, he settled up with Annie, thanked her, and walked out of the store.

And found a gun pointing at his stomach.

The four pirates surrounding him seemed familiar; after a moment, he placed them as having been at *Sinclair’s* the day Tarak had been harassed. Holding his hands out from his sides, he said, “I haven’t got anything of value. Take the jacket if you want it, but that’s all I have.”

The nearest pirate gave him a nasty smile. The man had a rather wicked-looking knife; its tip traced the air over Rat’s belly, as if its owner contemplated where to start cutting. “We aren’t interested in your jacket.”

“I am,” objected another.

“Shut up, the both of you.” The only woman in the group seemed to be its leader; her iron-gray hair was pulled back tightly from her face. “We’ve got to get him out of sight before

someone notices.”

Two of the men grabbed Rat's arms. He started to struggle, but the woman waved the gun threateningly, and he subsided, heart pounding. The fourth pirate stepped up and slapped something against the side of Rat's neck.

Within seconds, he felt his consciousness starting to haze. As his body relaxed despite everything he could do, the men to either side hauled his arms up around their necks. Anyone who noticed them would see nothing more sinister than men supporting a drunken comrade. He tried to struggle, but nothing seemed to be working right, and his arms and legs stayed mostly limp.

A sedative patch, he thought dimly. Not strong enough to completely knock him out, but more than enough to fog his mind, keep him docile.

No. Got to fight. But everything felt distant, hazy, too remote to bother with.

The whispers rose up, amplified by the touch of his two guards. **hope this works Captain Ionas will have our skins if it doesn't Justine better keep a tight leash on Sergei before he fucks this up (skitter of light on knife blade, blood, laughter)**

The other—Sergei—was more focused, his thoughts startlingly clean and clear compared to the normal confusion of memories and feelings. **this is going to be good, things have been too damned boring, just sitting here at dock, not allowed to do anything that might draw too much attention, time to have a little fun**

Somehow, they were in a room, although Rat didn't know how they'd gotten there. There was a desk and a plain bed, nothing more than a foam slab—a hotel, perhaps, one bare step above the tubes. His captors let go of him, and he fell limply onto the mattress, knowing that he ought to try to escape, but wanting only to sink down through it into nothingness.

Then cold fingers closed on his chin, forcing his head up. At the same time, someone else tugged on his arms, his legs, and he dimly realized that he was being bound. A spike of fear penetrated the haze around his mind, and he forced his eyelids open.

Sergei stared back at him. Dark thoughts sliced Rat, murmuring a seductive song of ruthlessness, of the freedom of not caring about anything but his own pleasure. **take what I want, do what I want, and what I want now is to have some fun (knife/hurt/scream)**

Rat whimpered, tried to pull away. He felt naked, exposed, battered, unable to grasp at the threads of control.

“Wake him up, Doc,” Justine said.

The fourth man pressed another patch onto Rat's neck. His thoughts were clinical, almost like Neva with a patient, except without compassion to leaven the curiosity. “This will bring him around to a useful state of consciousness,” the man said. Rat felt his own lips move in time with the words and shut his eyes desperately.

No. Hold on just hold on don't lose it they're giving you something else just ride it out and wake the hell up and please don't paint the walls with blood oh Goddess help me.

Justine's voice, clearer and sharper than it had been: “Heh. Look at him closing his eyes, hoping we'll go away if he can't see us.”

“Scared of the boogey man,” Sergei said, and laughed.

Rat felt the doctor's fingers on his wrist, hot against his skin. “This will make him easier to question.” There came a cold sting, and Rat opened his eyes, staring in horror as a needle slipped expertly into the vein.

“Truth serum?” Justine asked.

“There is no such thing.” The doctor depressed the plunger, and Rat felt a slight burning

sensation as the liquid entered his blood. "But this compound makes the subject highly susceptible to suggestion. Ask him to give you all his worldly possessions, and he'll do it happily. Ask him for information, and he will do the same—willingly, so he is far more likely to give you the truth rather than a lie."

Rat felt his heart speeding wildly with fear. "Don't do this," he whispered, even though it was far too late, the stuff was already in his blood, circulating up towards his brain.

His brain, with its screwed-up chemistry, that might not react at all the way it was meant to.

"Aw, since you asked so nicely," someone said, and all the pirates laughed.

He was starting to feel strange. Very strange. The whispers were getting louder, each one like a blow, until he wasn't certain anymore where they started and he ended, which thoughts were his and which someone else's, or even if it mattered anymore...

"I'm tired of waiting—let's get to work," Sergei said impatiently. He grabbed Rat's jaw again, forcing his head around so that their eyes met. "Now, you're going to be a good boy and tell us all about how it is your ship is still in one piece, and what it is you know about us." The knife blade flipped open again, millimeters from Rat's eye. "Or I'm going to carve my name on your face."

Sergei's eyes were dark, dark wells. Rat felt himself falling into them, but it didn't matter...nothing mattered, except that here was his chance to let loose, to show his power over the insignificant creature tied to the bed. And if the worm tried to resist, despite what the doc had done, well, nobody stood up to Sergei for long. What Sergei wanted, he took...

Sergei stiffened, the weapon falling from nerveless fingers, digging a shallow cut in Rat's face before hitting the floor. Blood splattered from his nose, his eyes, his mouth, his ears, and a hoarse, animal sound came out of his throat. Somehow, he managed to straighten and stagger back a step before collapsing.

Shouts of shock and horror broke out, and the other three pirates scrambled wildly away from their dying comrade. Justine spun and palmed open the door, trying to get out.

The low thump of gunfire sounded, and Justine went down, a gaping hole in her chest. The first shot was followed by two more quick pops, and within seconds the bodies of the other two pirates hit the floor. The smell of scorched flesh filled the small room, mingling with the scent of drying blood.

"Damn it," Marcus snarled, stepping over Justine's body as he came in the room. The gun in his hand swung to cover the corners, then dropped to the floor. "Iuka wanted us to be subtle, but you just had to get yourself grabbed and blow everything, didn't you?"

He tugged on the bonds fastened to the corners of the bed, then swore. "Hold still." Picking up the knife off the floor, he brought it down in a few precise swings, freeing Rat. "Come on—we need to get out of here before someone comes to investigate."

"So we do," Rat agreed—and came up off the bed in a single, fast move. His fist caught Marcus on the jaw, snapping the other man's head back. There was a brief flash of pain—then Marcus crumpled limply to the floor.

Rat smiled coldly down at his unconscious crewmate. "Thanks, Marcus. I owe you one." He bent down and picked up what had been Sergei's knife from Marcus' limp hand, turning it over and over, admiring the glitter of light on the blade.

He wanted it. And what he wanted, he took.

For a moment, he considered tying Marcus up where he had been, waking him up, and getting a little payback for all the times Marcus had dared get in his way. *No one gets in my way. No one. I'll carve my name in his face.*

But no—there had been gunfire, and someone was bound to come and investigate eventually. Getting caught and locked up somewhere wasn't in his plans. Rat snicked the knife closed and tucked it into his pocket, his hand gripping it so that he could draw it at any moment.

This was getting boring. Time to have some fun.

Grinning toothily, Rat stepped over the bodies and left the room.

Chapter 24:
Mind Games
(Part 1)

Rat leaned against the corroded door, “listening” to the flow of thoughts coming from inside. The room was located in a disreputable part of Paradise, a haunt of down-on-their-luck thieves, or pirates who had lost their ships. The crew on the other side of the door fit the latter description, which meant they were perfect for his purposes.

He grinned to himself. Whatever the doc from the *Grendel* had given him, he felt *great*. Everything was so damned clear. He had an objective, and the steps he needed to achieve it seemed to have been laid right out in front of him. Starting here.

The security pad on the room was a joke, but one of the whispers from inside had already given him the code, so he punched it in. The door whisked open, and he stepped through.

The room was what he had expected from the surroundings outside: small, smelly, and dingy. The only furniture was a table and some battered chairs, all of which were currently occupied by the pirate crew, who had left off debating their next move and were now aiming an impressive number of guns at Rat’s head.

“What the—who the hell are you?” bellowed one. The captain—or ex-captain, seeing as they had lost their ship due to a combination of gambling debts and angry creditors.

Rat grinned at the room in general, despite the guns. He wasn’t worried—not at all. Nothing was going to get in his way, certainly not this fool from the shallow end of the gene pool.

“Don’t you remember me?” he asked in an aggrieved tone. “What about the medical clinic—that ringing any bells, or is the echo in your skull too loud? You were going to rob us so you could pay your bills, but I wouldn’t let you in.” He clicked his tongue and shook his head sadly. “Now *there’s* a plan. Commit a few petty crimes to cover debts so big your grandkids are going to be paying them off. That’s thinking big, there. No wonder you ended up with no ship.”

“What the hell?” The captain stared at him blankly. Whatever he’d expected, being berated by a stranger apparently hadn’t been it. “How do you know—who sent you? Bernard?”

“Nobody sent me. I go where I want.” Rat idly pulled out his knife and started to pare his nails, ignoring the sudden tension that the sight of the weapon produced. “It just so happens that I need a bunch of cutthroat lowlifes to crew a ship for me. And you need a ship. I think we should talk.”

Even if Rat hadn’t been a telepath, he could have read the thoughts etched on the captain’s face. The guy wasn’t going to be winning any acting awards, that was for certain. “Well. Maybe we should talk, then, stranger.”

Rat snorted. “I’m not talking to *you*. You’re the idiot who lost your own ship. Do you think I’m stupid enough to invite you on mine, just so you can kill me and then lose another boat?”

Deliberately turning away from the captain, he scanned over the crew. “What about it, boys

and girls? Come with me, and I can get you a ship. Not just any ship, but one that's getting a nice, pretty retrofit as we speak."

"Now see here—" the captain began.

"Shut up," said one of the pirates, a scarred man with only one ear. "I want to hear what he's got to say."

A murmur of agreement sounded, both audible and in Rat's head. Rat grinned, knowing he had them eating out of his hand. And really, what kind of a telepath would he be if he didn't?

"Why us?" asked a woman suspiciously.

Rat sighed, as if it should have been obvious. "Because you're available, and because you'll do whatever it takes to get ahead, even if your captain's too stupid to get you there. Mostly, because I want to get the hell out of Loserville, here, and back into space where there's some profit to be had. This station's dying, in case you hadn't noticed. How much longer do you think Paradise is going to last? The action is out *there*, ladies and gentlemen—out where there are fat merchant ships plodding around, just waiting for somebody to come in and take them.

"Now, you can stay here with your captain and rot along with Paradise, or you can come in with me and get very, very rich. Your choice."

"My crew are loyal," the captain growled. He started to say something else—an order to shoot Rat, most likely—but his words were obliterated by the low thump of gunfire. His eyes widened, as if he were genuinely surprised; then, he slumped slowly to the floor.

Rat met the gaze of the man who had shot the captain and grinned wickedly. "Smart. Very smart."

"What's your ship?" the man asked.

"The *Exile*."

The pirates exchanged glances. Rat surmised they weren't the smartest bunch, which was fine by him. It made them that much easier to predict.

"But the *Exile* already has a crew," said the woman uncertainly.

"You let me take care of that. Show up on the docks at 0800, and you'll be able to just walk on board. The retrofit and repairs will be done by then, and we'll get the hell out of this system before anyone is the wiser. Then we'll see about making us all some money so we can retire somewhere nice and comfortable." He paused and gave them all a hard look. "Oh, and if anyone so much as thinks about mutiny, you will regret it."

The gun was out of his pocket and aimed before anyone else could react. The one-eared man fell back into the wall and slid to the floor, a neat hole burned through his forehead.

The rest stared at him, open-mouthed in shock. "But...you just shot the first mate!" the woman said at last.

"He was thinking about mutiny." Rat pocketed the gun. "And you just got a promotion. Have this bunch on the docks at 0800 sharp."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

* * *

Neva sat in the infirmary, her legs drawn up and her feet tucked under her. Her tablet was held loosely in one hand, but she had barely glanced at it, except to read the same sentence over three times in a row. For once, studying a medical text had failed to distract her. Worries ran around and around in her head: the breakup with Rat, the danger that Marcus might be in, the danger to them all from the unknown saboteur, and the risk of having strangers repair the ship.

With a sigh, she forced her mind back to the words in front of her yet again, determined to accomplish something. Even as she did so, the infirmary door slid open, breaking her concentration. Throwing the tablet down in disgust, she dropped her feet to the floor and swiveled her chair around.

Rat stood in the doorway, his shoulder braced against the frame, and his hands stuffed into his pockets. His amber eyes regarded her with a direct look that wouldn't have been strange from anyone else, but which bordered on unnerving from him.

Neva swallowed, feeling awkward. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"Probably not."

...*Okay.* She rose to her feet, wanting to be on the same level as him. "Rat. We need to talk."

"About what?"

Neva restrained the sudden urge to pound his head against the wall. "About what happened earlier. You just...walked out. What am I supposed to think?"

"Oh, that," he said, as if the matter was so insignificant it had slipped his mind. "Look, babe, you're nice and all that. Don't get me wrong. But you're just too damned whiny."

It stunned her, to the point where she could barely form words. "W-what?"

"You know. You're always going on about something. Your ethics, or me, or your stupid planet getting blown up. It's enough to drive someone crazy."

I can't believe he feels that way. She bit her lip against the sudden ache in her chest. *I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry.* "All right. Fine. If that's the w-way you feel."

Is he right? Do I complain too much? Everything's been so hard...

But it's been hard for all of us, hasn't it?

Neva made herself lift her chin, determined not to look weak. Not after his accusation. "I'm sorry. I won't trouble you with my 'whining' again."

He pushed himself off the door, although he didn't take his hands out of his pockets. "Yeah, I know. Actually, I didn't think you'd still be here."

She didn't want to talk to him—she wanted him to go away, to leave her alone, so that she could scream or throw things or cry in peace. "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't Iluka tell you?" he asked, surprised. "Huh. Maybe she was waiting for the new doc to get here."

Neva froze, feeling as if the floor had dropped out from beneath her. "What doctor?"

"The one from the *Red Cloud*. Not Shot With an Arrow—some other guy who worked under him. Iluka demanded him as part of the deal she cut with Joshua."

And didn't tell me? Why wouldn't she have told me?

"And what is he supposed to do?" she asked guardedly.

Rat shrugged. "All the things you were supposed to do, I guess. Face it, Neva—Iluka got a bum deal with you. Your aunt told her about how you got hurt defending Harvest, and everyone figured that they were getting someone who could fire a gun and take orders. But you can't fight worth a damn. No wonder your lot lost the war." He shook his head sadly. "And that crap you pulled with the clinic, ignoring what Iluka told you to do, giving stuff away...well. You might have been able to get away with that if you were a *real* doctor. But as it is...as soon as Iluka saw the opportunity replace you, she did it. This new guy has served on a warship—hell, yeah, he's not going to flinch from a fight. And at least he managed to get all the way through school."

Every word felt like a cut across her heart. Neva took a deep, shaky breath, asking herself if she could possibly have misunderstood, if there wasn't some other explanation. "But...you said...at the clinic...I thought you agreed with what I did."

Rat rolled his eyes. "I was still hoping to get in your pants, then. Don't be so naïve, Neva. But I reconsidered Anusha's offer. She's pushy as hell, but at least you don't hear her moaning on and on about how sad her life is."

Unable to remain in the same room a moment longer, Neva shoved her way past him. She would talk to Iluka—

"Yeah, that's it," Rat called after her. "Go whine to the captain. It'll confirm that she's making the right decision."

Neva balled her hands into fists, half hating him. *No. He isn't worth it. None of them are. The backstabbers deserve each other.*

Holding her head high, even though she was blinking against tears, she walked to the lift. She had come on board the ship with nothing, and she was leaving the same way. Gretchen would take her in, she felt sure. And there were people here, on Paradise, who needed her. Even if no one on the *Exile* did.

* * *

Rat watched Neva disappear into the lift with a smile. He let go of the knife that he'd been holding in his pocket the entire time, just in case he'd needed to use it on her.

But I didn't. Much easier to get her to leave the ship voluntarily, than have to kill her and hide the body somewhere, risking discovery. Not to mention that if anyone on the *Red Cloud* had a hint that there was trouble on board the *Exile*, they'd probably storm the ship to protect their investment, and all of his plans would go straight to hell. Which meant not getting caught until it was too late for anyone to stop him.

Now that Neva was out of the way, there was no one to notice if he raided the infirmary stores. Humming softly to himself, he ducked back inside and rummaged through the cabinets until he found the tranq patches. If things should go wrong, it would be a lot quieter to knock someone out than try to kill them. Not that anything would go wrong.

This is going to be so easy. And it would be good practice, too. As soon as he got out of here and back into civilized space, he was going to put his talents to real use. There was no limit to where he could go, who he could con, what he could extort.

Everyone had tiny little fears hidden down inside themselves, some of which were irrational, and some of which weren't. And after being stuck on the same ship for far too long with his crewmates, he knew what every last one of them most desired or feared. Why it hadn't occurred to him to exploit those desires and fears before, he didn't know—but that wasn't important, anyway.

What was important was that things were finally looking up for him. He was going to get what he wanted. And he was going to have fun doing it.

* * *

When Rat stepped off the lift onto the bridge, he was surprised to see Tarak's reflection in the com station screens. Most of the boards were powered down in dock, except for communications and what was needed to monitor the flow of air and other things through the umbilicals that linked ship and station.

"Where's Drake?" Rat asked as he crossed the bridge to stand behind Tarak.

The pilot half-turned his head; his blind eyes shone eerily in his dark face. "He went off shift

for a while. I'm babysitting the com—not that anyone's talking right now.”

Rat quickly adjusted his plans. First priority now that he had the tranqs was to get rid of whoever was sitting com, just in case someone found Marcus and tried to alert the *Exile*. He had expected that to be Drake, but he could remove Tarak just as easily.

More easily. He could just overpower Tarak...maybe. Blind didn't equal weak, and he could either move fast and take the chance of a fight, or spend a few extra minutes and do things the easy way.

And have a little fun while I'm at it.

It wasn't hard to decide what tack he should take with the pilot. The poor bastard was practically trapped on this damned ship, after all. Except for here, at Paradise, he couldn't get off in port, because his obvious blindness would raise far too many questions. A scar here and there might not be attended to, but no one would go long without getting new eyes. Not without good reason, anyway—such as being hunted by the Zats, for example.

So here was Tarak, stuck on the ship, with nobody but his sister to keep him company. His sister, who ran off to hobnob with other Star Riders the first chance she got.

Oh yeah, this was going to be a piece of cake.

“I guess Anusha is where all the action is.” Rat dropped into the chair next to Tarak and powered it around. “She's overseeing the repairs, right?”

“Yes.” Although there was only a trace of bitterness in Tarak's voice, the whispers were an acid mix of **(resentment, anger, frustration, jealousy, hurt)**.

“Guess that would be hard for you to do,” Rat said with a grin. No sense in not twisting the knife, after all.

Tarak's mouth thinned. “I suppose.” His long fingers ran lightly over the edge of the boards, as if seeking something, then stilled.

Perfect. Rat injected sympathy into his voice, trying for just the right mix of commiseration and indignation. “You know, when Anusha told me that you weren't on speaking terms with the rest of your clan...I didn't think it was fair to you at all. They won't even give you a chance.”

He reached out and carefully laid his hand on Tarak's. Tarak flinched slightly, startled at the contact, but didn't pull away.

so alone for so long

“Maybe I'm the one who won't give them a chance,” Tarak said with a wry smile, but the emotional current that Rat could all but taste gave the lie to the lightness of his words. “Anusha said that you didn't take her up on her offer. Surely it wasn't because you were angry on my behalf.”

no don't be stupid but if someone would care just someone oh stars

Rat shifted forward in his seat, making sure that he did it loudly enough that Tarak couldn't help but hear. Very slowly, he ran his thumb in a light circle over the back of Tarak's hand, feeling the smooth warmth of the skin.

“That was one reason,” he whispered.

Tarak swallowed visibly, but he still hadn't pulled his hand away. “I...I thought it was because you were with Neva.”

Here was where he had to tread carefully. He was a hunter, and his quarry was torn between bolting and staying in range. “Neva? Not exactly. We're friends...well, she wanted to be more. I thought maybe, to please her...I mean, I owe her a lot. She's helped me. But it didn't work out. I couldn't pretend.”

“Oh.” Quiet, so quiet, that little exhalation, but Rat could have laughed aloud at the sound,

because it meant that he had won.

Tarak was silent for a moment, struggling for some excuse. "I just realized," he said uncertainly, "that I don't know what you look like. That is, I've never touched your face to get a sense of your features."

that sounded so stupid, stars, I'm such an idiot

Rat wrapped his fingers around Tarak's hand and gently brought it to his face, then let go. Tarak's fingers lingered on his cheek for a moment; then, the pilot lifted his other hand as well. Rat closed his eyes, feeling the soft, gentle exploration of fingers on his skin, shaping his cheekbones, his brows, his eyelids. When they reached his lips, he parted them and delicately, delicately nipped at the tip of one finger.

Tarak moaned. For a moment, he seemed utterly frozen. Then he slid his hands into Rat's hair, twining through the dreadlocks, and pulled him closer. Rat went willingly. As Tarak's lips met his, he slid his arms around the pilot, the fingers of his right hand finding the patch of bare skin between the line of the jaw and the vulnerable throat, where the pulse fluttered.

The tranq patch took effect almost instantly. Tarak went slack, then slumped forward into Rat's arms.

"Sorry, tiger," Rat murmured into his ear. "But I'm on a schedule here. And since I don't know how much your sister jacked the boards to fit your setup, I need to keep you around, just in case."

He managed to get Tarak over his shoulder, and carried him to the lift and up to crew level. Neva wasn't coming back, so no one would have reason to poke around in her quarters. Rat dumped Tarak's unconscious body on the bed, then dragged the safety webbing into place. According to the packaging, the tranq should keep the pilot out of action for at least several hours.

"Three down," Rat told his insensible captive, "and three to go."

Chapter 25:
Mind Games
(Part II)

Neva strode through the marketplace towards Gretchen's shop without really seeing her surroundings. Her hands were clenched into fists so hard that the nails bit into her palms, and she concentrated on the pain, using it to distract her from deeper wounds.

Betrayed. Rat and Iluka both had used her, then stabbed her in the back when they decided that they had better prospects. Drake, too; he would have been in on any personnel changes. And yet none of them had seen fit to give her any warning, to talk to her, to try to make things right...

All that time I spent helping Rat, searching for some way to get his disability under control, and this is how he repays me. Goddess, was it all just an act, from the very beginning?

Nothing made sense anymore. She had thought that she knew him, would have bet her very life that he was the gentle, caring man she had believed him to be. How had he suddenly turned into a stranger?

And he had been a stranger, there in the infirmary, she realized. It had been more like talking to Xian Jackson, or what she had imagined him to be, than Rat.

The thought sent a chill through her, but she dismissed it. That was impossible. The slate—Rat's brain—had been wiped clean.

And besides, what of Iluka's betrayal? If the captain had been dissatisfied with Neva's performance, shouldn't she have at least had the courtesy of telling Neva about it? How could she be so callous?

Neva wrapped her arms around herself, warding off a chill that came from within rather than from without. Her emotions were in too much turmoil to think carefully about any of it. Right now, the only thing she could do was go to Gretchen and beg the other woman to take her in, at least for a little while. *I can set up a clinic here. There's need for a medic on this station—real need.*

"Medic! Whitestone!" called an urgent voice.

Startled, Neva stopped in her tracks. She had been so wrapped up in her own hurt that she'd barely noticed her surroundings—not the smartest of things to do, she acknowledged angrily. She had passed through most of the market, and was only a few yards from the entrance to Gretchen's shop.

A man made his way towards her, weaving through the kiosks and blankets spread with wares, but it took her a moment to place him. It was the pirate from the *Grendel*, whose brother she had treated after their captain flogged him.

Concern for a patient cut through all other distractions. "What is it?" she asked as he approached. "Is your brother all right?"

The pirate nodded. "James is fine, thanks. We've been following your instructions real

careful, and he's healing up faster than I would have believed." He hesitated, then moved closer, dropping his voice as he did so. "It's in part because of what you did for him that I'm here, medic. I kind of feel like I owe you something."

"What do you want?"

He looked around uneasily, as if afraid they might be overheard. "I've come to warn you. Some of my crewmates have grabbed one of your lot."

Cold filled her. *Marcus*. "Do you know where they've taken him?"

The man nodded and gave her an address that meant nothing to her. "They took him there for questioning. You can't tell anyone I told you, understand? If you do, Captain Ionas will kill me."

Having seen what Gavin Ionas would do to a crewmember who simply disagreed with him, Neva could well imagine what fate would befall anyone who gave away ship secrets. "I won't. You have my oath on it. Thank you for the warning."

The man nodded and hurried away, as if he feared to linger near her. Neva reached for her pocket com, before realizing that she had left it aboard the *Exile*, along with the rest of her possessions. Swearing softly, she hurried into *The Rowan Tree*.

Gretchen approached with a warm smile. "Neva! Good to see you again! How did your date go?"

"I'm swearing off relationships." Neva grimaced. "But that doesn't matter right now. This is urgent—I need to contact the *Exile*."

"Of course." Gretchen led her quickly back through the door, into her living quarters. Thanking her, Neva punched in the code.

"Neva Whitestone to the *Exile*," she said, wondering what she dared say over open com.

When no answer came, she repeated the hail. Again, no one responded.

Are they ignoring the call because it's coming from me?

Anger slithered through her veins. "Curse you, answer me! This is important! There might be trouble!"

"Maybe the com isn't manned right now," Gretchen said uncertainly from the doorway.

Neva shook her head and cut the connection. "Then they would have put it on auto. The captain must have told them to ignore any communications from me."

Gretchen's dark brows drew together in concern. "Why would she do that?"

Neva tamped down on the anger burning in her veins. "It doesn't matter. An...ex-crewmate is in trouble. Do you have a station directory? I need to find an address."

* * *

Rat swore silently. Everything had been going smoothly, so of course Drake and Iluka had to screw things up for him by deciding to take a walk.

That was why Tarak had been manning the com instead of Drake. The captain and first mate had left the ship, on what business Rat had no idea. Nor could he determine when they'd be coming back.

That put a kink into his plans. It was not fun. It did not make him happy.

He'd gone back to the bridge to see if he could figure out how to put an alarm on the airlock, so that a tone would sound over allship if someone opened it. That would at least give him warning if they came back at an inconvenient moment. But he didn't know the codes, and hadn't thought to pick them out of Tarak's brain before he put the pilot to sleep.

Damn it. He was going to mess Iluka and Drake up for this. They'd be sorry when he was done with them.

He left the bridge and went back up to crew level. Anusha was at the station near the emergency hatch into the spine, overseeing the repairs being made to the ship via remote pickups. He tucked himself away in alcove that served as an emergency take-hold and listened to the thumps and clangs that echoed throughout the ship, as the crews settled the new engines into place. Joshua Ten Bears had been better than his word, it seemed; the new Savvies were top-of-the-line stuff. They were also hooking on more false holds to cover gun batteries, not to mention replacing all the thrusters and whatever controls had been fried during the sabotage.

How convenient—not only was Rat going to be stealing a ship, he was going to be stealing a ship that could leave an ordinary freighter far down the gravity well. The thought of all that work going on for his benefit made him grin.

He'd timed things well; the work was almost done. In less than an hour, the sounds of repair fell silent. Not much longer after that, he heard Anusha sign off. Her footsteps tapped in the corridor, drawing closer; when he judged that she was almost on him, he stepped out of the alcove and into her path.

"Hello, Anusha," he said.

* * *

Neva walked slowly down a dimly-lit corridor, wondering if she were doing something monumentally stupid. The address had taken her to a section where rooms were rented by the hour; unlike the tube hotel, however, these seemed to cater to the more unsavory aspects of station life. Goddess only knew what was going on behind the closed doors, because what was going on in front of them was bad enough. Men and women stumbled down the hall, or else slouched in the doorways, reeking of cheap alcohol and urine. Some of them stared vacantly into space, holding conversations with people who weren't there. Others eyed her as she walked past, as if considering whether or not to rob her—or worse.

Gretchen had insisted that Neva take the gun she kept under the counter to deter robbers. Now Neva rested her hand on it, wondering whether or not she would be forced to use it even before she found the room where Marcus was being held. As to how she was going to rescue him from an unknown number of pirates...she didn't know. It seemed far more likely that she might end up a captive herself.

But I can't just abandon him. And if those back-stabbers on the Exile won't answer my calls, then there's no one else to help.

A tall figure suddenly stepped out of the shadows. Neva yelped and started to bring up the gun, but a strong hand closed around her wrist, forcing the barrel down.

"You got to be quicker than that," Juanita advised.

Neva's heart, which seemed to have relocated to the back of her throat, slowed back to normal. "Juanita! I'm sorry—I didn't know it was you."

Juanita's brown face retained its usual placid expression. "This is not a good place for you, medic. People see you here, they think maybe you'd make a fun plaything. You understand?"

It occurred to Neva that Juanita was a station official—of a sort, anyway—and potentially the help she'd been wishing for only moments ago. "I don't want to be here, but I didn't have any choice. I think one of my crewmates is in trouble." Briefly, she explained what the pirate had told her.

Juanita pulled out a cigar and lit it thoughtfully. "I see. I'm here because the desk clerk called Bernard, said there was gunfire two, maybe three, hours ago."

"Three hours ago!" Neva's heart sank. "Why did it take him so long to report it?"

Juanita snorted. "I see you haven't been here long. Gunfire isn't so strange. Usually, though, someone bribes the clerk not to tell anybody, yes? Clerk waits, no bribe, so he calls us."

Goddess. "Marcus might be mixed up in all this. Will you help me?"

Juanita nodded, causing the small balls hanging from her hat to sway. "Let's go."

When they reached the correct room number, Juanita simply walked up to the door and pounded on it, ignoring the com pad beside it. "Station security! You open up now!"

Not surprisingly, the door didn't open. Juanita sighed, clamped her cigar tightly between her teeth, and hefted her rifle in one hand. With the other, she punched a code into the pad. The code must have been some kind of override, because the door opened without hesitation.

Neva had positioned herself to one side, expecting a barrage of gunfire to pour out from within. When nothing happened, she glanced across the open door to Juanita. The larger woman signaled for her to stay put, then cautiously peeked around the door.

"All clear," she said grimly.

Neva could smell the blood and burnt flesh even in the hall. Mentally steeling herself for the sight of whatever might be left of Marcus, she followed Juanita inside.

Three strangers lay scattered around the small room, all of whom appeared to have been shot. A fourth lay beside the utilitarian bed, his dark eyes wide with horror, and his face masked by blood that formed a chillingly familiar pattern.

Neva froze. *It can't be. It doesn't make sense.*

Juanita stepped over the bodies, then bent down by something hidden by the bed. A moment later, a low groan sounded.

Her heart speeding, Neva hurried across the room. Marcus lay there, a large bruise darkening his face. Even as she watched, he stirred and moaned faintly.

"Marcus!" Relief flooded through her, and she bent down by him, feeling his pulse. It was strong and steady, and a moment later, his blue eyes fluttered open.

"Marcus? Are you all right?" she asked.

He stared at her blankly, as if trying to recall where he was and why she would be there. Then his gray brows snapped together in a frown. "I'm going to kill that freak!"

The declaration started Neva. "What do you mean?"

Marcus struggled to get up, then winced. While Juanita watched them curiously, Neva helped him into a sitting position. "I mean your damned boyfriend," he said flatly. "I come here to rescue him, and the bastard cold-cocks me. Should have left him to rot."

Neva frowned, wondering if the blow had left Marcus addled. "I saw Rat, not all that long ago. He didn't say anything about being captured. When I found out that something had happened to one of us, I thought it had to be you, since the captain sent you to chat up the *Grendel's* crew. Are you sure Rat was here?"

"Of course I am! I'm not the one with a fucking hole in my brain." Marcus shook his head in disgust, then winced again. "I was snooping around, checking out any hangouts where I thought the *Grendel's* crew might be, when what do I see but a bunch of them hustling your crazy boyfriend off? He was stumbling like they'd slipped him something, so I figured he wasn't going of his own volition, and followed along. I lost them when they got here, and had to give the God damned desk clerk every bit of cash I had on me to get him to cough up the room number. I was in the hall trying to figure out what to do, when the door flew open, and those three are

scrambling to get the hell out. I finished them off, then came in to find that freak tied down on the bed.” He nodded in the direction of the bed, and Neva noticed for the first time that there were severed cargo straps in each corner. “I cut him loose, and what does he do? Knocks me out and leaves me here!”

Juanita arched an eyebrow. “You’re talking about that skinny little man, right? He knocked you out? You’re not very tough, are you?”

While Marcus glared at Juanita, Neva sat slowly back. None of this made any sense. If Rat had indeed been here, as Marcus claimed, why had he apparently returned to the ship and not mentioned any of it? Why would he have attacked Marcus and then abandoned him?

Why would he have said such hurtful things to me?

“What did they do to him?” she asked urgently.

Marcus shrugged. “Well, I doubt they tied him to the bed because they thought he was so damned good looking. At a guess, they wanted to interrogate him.”

Neva scrambled up and began to search, looking for what she didn’t know. Marcus had significantly not mentioned the fourth dead pirate, and although Juanita hadn’t asked yet, Neva doubted she had missed the omission. Marcus hadn’t shot the man, which meant that Rat had almost certainly killed him.

Did he do it to save himself? Was it an accident? Did it do something to him, push him over some edge none of us knew was even there, and that’s why he’s behaving so oddly?

But there was another possibility. Marcus had said that they were interrogating Rat, and she had no reason to doubt it. Yet she had seen no injuries on Rat earlier, at least nothing serious enough to make her think he had been tortured. Therefore, it seemed likely that the pirates had tried a different technique.

She found the vial and syringe on the floor by the bed, where they had no doubt been dropped when the shooting started. The syringe was empty now, but there was still liquid in the hub, meaning it had been used. As for the vial...

Neva sank down on the edge of the bed as she read the label.

“What is it?” Marcus managed to clamber to his feet and stood swaying over her, squinting at the vial.

“A psychotropic drug,” Neva said softly. “I came across references to it when I was doing research, trying to find a way to help Rat with his...problem. In small doses, it’s used to as a treatment for some types of psychological problems. In large doses, it causes the subject to become highly susceptible to suggestion. Or at least, that’s its action in normal people.” *Ones who haven’t had their brain chemistry altered by Zatvian scientists.*

“And Rat?” Marcus asked.

“I don’t know. But...it’s possible...if the part about making him susceptible to suggestion held true, and he was being surrounded by a bunch of sadistic bastards at the same time...” She didn’t dare finish the sentence, not in front of Juanita, but looking at Marcus she knew he had reached the same conclusion. *If he was open to any suggestion, unable to defend himself from their thoughts, could they have inadvertently altered his behavior? Made him...like themselves?*

“Your friend,” Juanita said slowly, “he’s loco? Crazy?”

“Yes,” Marcus said emphatically.

“Rat has certain...problems,” Neva explained carefully. “He’s in treatment, but if his captors drugged him, it might make him...behave oddly.”

Juanita’s dark eyes gave nothing away, but Neva had the feeling she was judging them. “This man is dangerous? Unstable?”

"No. It's nothing we can't deal with," Neva said quickly. Goddess, if the station got involved in this any further, there would be even more questions that she didn't want to answer.

Juanita stared at her for what seemed like a long time, the smoke from her cigar drifting slowly towards the ceiling. "I'll tell Bernard this is ship business, not station business," she said at last. She tossed the stub of her cigar casually down on the floor and ground it out with the heel of one black boot. "Don't make me sorry."

"We can handle this," Marcus snapped, and Neva had the feeling he hadn't forgiven Juanita for her comment about his toughness, or lack thereof.

She nodded, then carefully stepped over the bodies on her way out. "You clear out of here soon. I'll send maintenance to get rid of these."

Neva suppressed a shiver at the casual dismissal of the carnage all around. Although it meant they wouldn't have to answer a bunch of awkward questions, it also brought home just how cheap life could be on Paradise. *At least so long as it's "ship business," it would seem.*

"Well, then," Marcus said once Juanita was gone. "Let's get back to the ship and fill Iluka in."

Neva hesitated, wondering if she dared ask. But she couldn't go back to the ship, not without knowing the truth. "Marcus...be honest with me. Has the captain—or anyone—said anything about r-replacing me? As ship's medic?"

Marcus frowned. "What? No."

"It's just that...after he came back...Rat said some things to me. He said that Iluka was replacing me with someone from the *Red Cloud*, because she wasn't happy with my performance, in more ways than one."

Unease crept into Marcus' eyes. "Iluka wouldn't do something like that behind your back. She'd tell you straight to your face. You know that."

Neva swallowed hard. "I suppose. But there have been times I've worried about...things."

"And your crazy boyfriend knows that, doesn't he? But why...even if the drugs have messed with his head, why would he tell you something like that?" Marcus scowled at nothing, scratching thoughtfully at the stubble on his chin. "What did you do when he told you?"

"I was hurt, of course. So I...sort of walked off the ship." The look on Marcus' face alarmed her. "Why?"

"He knew what you were going to do. He wanted you off that ship. The question is, what the hell is he up to?"

"I don't...are you sure?"

Marcus snorted. "If you're right about the drugs, he's a telepath with no conscience and probably a nice streak of sadism thrown in, just for good measure. Damn right he knew just what to say to make you do what he wanted. So he knocks me out, and gets you off the ship. My question is, what the hell else has he been up to in the meantime?"

Cold touched Neva. "I tried to call the ship earlier, but I couldn't get through. No one answered."

"Not even the autos?"

"Nothing."

"Shit." Marcus checked the charge on his gun. "We'd better get over there. I don't like the sound of this."

Neva grabbed his wrist, alarmed by the gun. "You can't hurt him! He isn't in his right mind!"

"That's just the problem, isn't it? He hasn't *got* a right mind."

“But—”

“He might be crazy, but he’s still got all that Zatvian military training floating around somewhere in his synapses. If you think I’m going to stand there and let him shoot me, you’re loonier than he is.”

“He could have killed me, but he didn’t,” Neva protested.

Marcus hesitated, then sighed. “Fine. If we have any other options, we’ll use them. But if it’s a choice of me—or you—or him, then I’m putting him down. Now come on.”

* * *

Anusha jumped when Rat stepped into her path. “Damn it! You scared me.” She eyed him uncertainly. “Were you waiting for me?”

Rat pasted a look of anxious concern on his face. “I was. Something’s wrong.”

She jumped straight to the conclusion he’d predicted. “Tarak?”

Rat nodded, hoping he looked appropriately miserable. “He said his eyes were hurting, and then he just...collapsed. He woke up even before I managed to get him to the infirmary, but he insisted that I not interrupt you while you were watching the workers. He said your job was too important, that he was fine. So I left him with Neva and came down here to wait.”

“Damn Tarak,” Anusha muttered, but he could taste her **fear**. “That’s just like him. How long?”

“Not long. He’s probably still in the infirmary.”

Anusha nodded and strode past him. Grinning at her back, Rat followed.

When the door to the infirmary opened, Anusha automatically stepped through—then stopped. The room was deserted, of course...except for the morgue unit that Rat had dragged out of storage.

“What—” Anusha started to say.

Rat pulled out the short length of pipe he’d concealed in his jacket, and brought it down on the back of her head. The blow was off, but still enough to send her to the floor, stunned. Not giving her a moment to recover, Rat grabbed her under the arms, wincing as her pain filled his head, and heaved her into the morgue unit.

The unit was meant to transport a single corpse and keep it preserved; the last time they had used it had been for one of the bodies taken from the *New Beginning*. He stuffed Anusha into it, then slammed down the lid and locked it. He had manually turned off the refrigeration function earlier—he didn’t want to kill her, after all.

Or at least, not that quickly.

All those times she had voted against him, when she had looked at him like he was nothing, before she’d found out that he had some piloting skills...he owed her some payback for that. No nice tranq patch to keep her quiet, oh no. Not when there were better ways.

He sat down on top of the unit and waited. Not long after, he sensed her returning consciousness—and her growing terror. Her fists slammed desperately into the lid of the unit, but there was no chance of escape, so he just laughed.

“You’re a bitch, Anusha,” he said cheerfully. “Your brother will be better off without you. Do you really think he appreciates you treating him like he’s a cripple, bossing him around all the time? Don’t you know he’d be glad to be rid of you?” He tapped the lid, to make sure he had her attention. “Why don’t you think about that for a while? I’ll come and get you later. Or maybe I won’t. Maybe I’ll just leave you alone in the dark forever.”

He could hear her muffled screams as the door to the infirmary shut behind him.

* * *

Neva didn't know what she expected to find when they boarded the ship. Everything seemed peaceful and quiet in the spine, but that meant nothing. "We should go to the infirmary first, and try to find some sedatives," she murmured to Marcus. "That will give us more options."

Marcus nodded. His blue eyes were hard, focused, but she didn't think she saw anger there. Maybe he wouldn't shoot Rat on sight, after all.

The lift worked, and they both froze, listening intently. It didn't come up to them, thankfully. *Rat? Or someone else?*

When the lift fell silent, Marcus punched the call button. "Let's get moving."

They rode down to crew level. Everything was silent and still there, as well. *No one moving around at all. There ought to be someone else here.*

I don't like this.

Neva palmed open the door to the infirmary—and felt her heart jolt into her mouth. A morgue unit lay in the center of the floor, its black shell gleaming ominously against the industrial gray floor. Marcus swore behind her.

Goddess, no, don't let someone be dead. Her hands shaking, she fell to her knees by the unit, unlocked it, and flung it open.

Anusha lay within, her dark eyes wide with terror. To Neva's overwhelming relief, her chest rose and fell rapidly with ragged breathing. For a moment, the navigator blinked in the dim light—then lunged up and out of the unit.

Neva grabbed her arm, steadying her as she scrambled free and collapsed to the floor. Anusha was shaking hard, and Neva remembered something Rat had said a long time ago, about the navigator being afraid of dark, confined spaces. Grabbing Anusha's shoulder, she forced the other woman to look at her. "Anusha! It's all right. It's okay. You're okay."

"What happened?" Marcus demanded from the doorway.

Anusha swallowed convulsively. "Rat," she whispered. "He...he..."

"He's been drugged," Neva said, tightening her grip on Anusha's shoulder. "He isn't responsible for his own actions."

Anusha only shook her head, whether disagreeing or not, Neva didn't know. "He said there was something wrong with Tarak. I came here to see—and he attacked me. Locked me...in there."

"There's a lot of that going around," Marcus muttered. "Who else is on board?"

Anusha drew a shaky breath. "Tarak. Iluka and Drake left earlier."

"Wonderful," Marcus growled. "Rat might as well have control of the damned ship, then."

"Stay here," Neva told Anusha. "Lock the door from the inside and don't let Rat in if he comes back."

"No worries," Anusha said fervently, rubbing at the back of her head.

Neva went to one of the cabinets and opened it, intending to pull out some tranq patches in hopes of getting a chance to use them on Rat. But the storage space was empty. "Looks like Rat got here ahead of us."

Marcus grimaced. "Great. Anything you can use as a backup?"

"Yes." Neva unlocked another drawer and drew out a vial, which she then used to fill a syringe. "I can inject this into the muscle—I'm guessing he won't be sitting still for me to do it

IV—but it will take longer to have an effect.”

“Wonderful. It would be a lot easier to just shoot him.”

Neva leveled a glare at him. “Look at it this way—he hasn’t killed any of us.”

“Yet. And that’s probably just because he doesn’t want to give away that he’s up to something too soon.”

“Marcus—”

“All right. We’ll try it your way. If we end up with our brains scrambled, though, just remember that it’s your fault.”

“Fine.” Neva shoved past him on the way to the door. “Come on. Let’s see if we can find him before he finds us.”

* * *

At Neva’s insistence, they checked on Jasmine first. The le-murr was locked in the laundry, clearly bored. Uncertain how the drugged Rat would react to the little primate—or vice versa—Neva left her secured. Muttering with impatience, Marcus half dragged her to the lift. As it clattered and groaned its way down, Neva silently cursed the racket they were making. If Rat was on the bridge, he would hear them coming long before they actually got there.

Assuming that he wouldn’t “hear” us coming just from our thoughts. Is it even possible to surprise a telepath?

On the open docks, with a thousand other minds to obscure theirs...maybe. But they weren’t on the docks.

The lift doors opened, and Marcus stepped out, swinging his gun around in a threatening arc. After a moment, however, his shoulders relaxed. “Nothing. If he was here, he must have gone somewhere else while we were in the infirmary.”

“Do you think he knows we’re on board?”

“Bet on it.” Marcus’ mouth thinned. “We’re going to have to search. Damn the luck. He could be hiding anywhere—in the spine, in the captain’s quarters, in the air ducts for all we know.”

“If he’s trying to take over the ship, he won’t just let us wander around, though. He’ll find us, right?”

“That’s what worries me.” Marcus shook his head and went to the lift. “Let’s be methodical about this. He isn’t on the bridge. Maintenance is next level, so we’ll check there. Not to mention I don’t like the thought of him mucking around with life support.”

Neva swallowed against a surge of dread. “Surely he wouldn’t sabotage something critical.”

“Not on the level he’s on...but the air flow is handled separately for each level. The idea is that if something goes drastically wrong on one, the others will remain habitable. But it also means that someone who knew what they were doing could turn off the air supply to parts of the ship, or even poison it.”

“Does Rat know how to do that?”

“No idea.” Marcus firmed his grip on his gun. “And I really don’t want to find out.”

The lift doors opened onto an empty corridor. Neva had only visited this level of the ship once, when getting the grand tour shortly after boarding. The guts of the ship were here, including the main controls for recycling, air filtration, water reclamation, and temperature. She had no experience or knowledge of any of these things, and so had stayed away.

Rat had been here many times, she remembered, cleaning the various filters and performing

other minor tasks. Whether that meant he knew enough to manipulate the controls to his advantage...she couldn't begin to guess.

A dull thump sounded from one end of the corridor.

Marcus brought up his gun, but nothing moved. The lighting was dim, masking the walls, with their exposed pipes and valves, in shadow. A slender man could easily hide himself within the maze of darkness and metal.

"Stay here," Marcus said in a low voice.

Neva pulled the loaded syringe out of her pocket and took off the safety cap. "You need me to go with you."

"I said stay here. I'll yell when I've got him pinned."

Neva started to argue, but Marcus moved off, his heavy boots slipping over the scuffed decking in near-silence. She bit her lip, uncertain whether she ought to follow him or not. He'd ordered her to stay behind, but was it because he truly thought she'd be in the way, or because he intended to shoot Rat on the spot, no matter what he'd said before?

An arm wrapped around her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides, while another snaked around her neck, choking off her startled cry. The syringe was knocked from her fingers; it went spinning off across the decking until it was lost in shadow.

"Can't take a hint, can you?" Rat whispered in her ear.

She fought wildly, but she had forgotten how strong he was, and he held her easily. The arm pressing into her larynx tightened, cutting off her air supply.

"Don't struggle, pretty one, or I'll crush your throat," Rat snarled softly. "You and your little friends have cost me a damn sight of trouble, and I'm running out of patience."

She went limp, and the arm eased up slightly. "Yell, and I'll kill you before that muscle-brained idiot can come to your rescue," he warned. She could feel his breath on her cheek, the tickle of his goatee against her skin.

"Don't do this," she whispered. "Rat, this isn't you! You've been drugged."

"I know. And I feel *great*. If you'd given me some of this stuff, maybe I wouldn't have dumped you on this forsaken hellhole. Now, be a good little girl and cooperate, and maybe I'll change my mind and take you with me."

Neva swallowed convulsively, acutely aware of the pressure against her throat. "You can't hurt me without hurting yourself," she reminded him desperately.

"You know what?" he asked. "You're right."

Without any warning, he shoved her away from him, straight at one of the exposed pipes. The top of her skull connected with the hard metal, and she fell to the floor.

* * *

Rat pulled his gun free from his pocket. The sound of Neva's head smacking into the wall would have been loud enough to alert Marcus to the fact that he'd been chasing a false lead, nothing more than a loose filter banging back and forth.

Neva lay motionless on the floor, and Rat spared a brief flash of regret. A shame he'd have to throw her out the airlock with that bitch Anusha. Too bad he hadn't at least screwed her when he had the chance.

As he could have predicted, Marcus came charging down the hall, gun drawn. Rat gave him a grin and pointed his own gun in Neva's direction. "Drop it, or I'll shoot her," he said.

Marcus hesitated. Sweat beaded along his brow, sticking his gray hair to his forehead. The

whispers were loud, shouting at Rat of **anger** and **betrayal** to the exclusion of all else. For a moment, Rat wondered if he hadn't made a fatal error, if Marcus might kill him even if it cost Neva her life.

Then, Marcus slowly loosened his grip on the gun and let it fall to the floor.

"Good boy," Rat said, aiming his gun at Marcus now. "You should have stayed where I left you. I thought the damn station security would at least be competent enough to arrest you if they found you there. Instead, you came back on board. For someone who used to be a teacher, you aren't very bright, are you?"

Marcus ground his teeth together but made no verbal reply. Instead, he locked his blue eyes on Rat, challenging him to shoot.

"I'm not going to make it that easy on you," Rat said, over the clamor of Marcus' rage in his head. "Now, you're going to pick up Neva and—"

Pain flared in his left calf—a sharp prick, followed instantly by a cold, heavy ache. Startled, he staggered forward, then twisted around. Neva crouched in the corridor behind him, an empty syringe clutched in her hand.

She drugged me!

"Stupid bitch—" he started. Then he caught a glimpse of Marcus' fist, a bare instant before it smashed into the side of his head.

* * *

Neva stepped out of the infirmary, into the hall where Tarak, Anusha, and Marcus all waited. "Is it just me," Marcus was saying, "or is anyone else bothered by the fact that he was twenty times more competent after he turned evil?"

"But what did he want?" asked Tarak.

Marcus shrugged. "To take over the ship and get out of here, apparently. A bunch of pirates turned up on the dock outside half an hour ago—our replacements, I'd guess."

"What did you do?"

"I told them I'd shoot them all if they didn't get the hell out of here." Marcus shook his head, bemused. "I still can't believe that shambles not only tricked all of us, but got an entire crew to agree to go along with him."

"Speaking of which," Anusha said, catching Neva's eye, "what's the diagnosis? When he wakes up, will he still be trying to take over the ship?"

"I don't think so." Neva leaned tiredly against the wall. "The drug levels in his blood are starting to decline. By the time he sleeps off the sedative, he should be back to normal. If the aftereffects are like those of a normal person, he won't even remember anything he said or did under its influence."

"What do we do, then?" asked Tarak, his blind eyes staring at nothing.

"Easy." Marcus shoved his hands in his pockets. "We forget any of this happened."

Anusha glared at him. "Forget it? He—"

"Tricked all four of us into handing the ship over to him. Do *you* want to explain that to the captain?" Marcus rubbed his jaw where Rat had hit him. "The ship is still in one piece, and no one was seriously hurt. I say we tell Iluka that some crew from the *Grendel* caught him, drugged him, and that Neva and I rescued him. As for the rest of it...let's never speak of it again."

"Agreed," Tarak said fervently.

Anusha frowned petulantly for a moment...then sighed. "Agreed."

Neva thought of the hurtful things that Rat had said to her, things that he had picked out of her own head and twisted to his purpose. *I let myself be controlled by my insecurities. That's a valuable lesson, one I don't want to forget.*

No one else seemed to be thinking along those lines, though. Probably Marcus and Anusha were embarrassed that Rat had managed to overpower them. As for Tarak, Goddess only knew; he had said only that Rat had snuck up on him and slapped a tranq patch on him before he could react. Neva had the feeling that wasn't the whole story.

"All right," she agreed. "None of this ever happened."

* * *

Neva carefully carried a cup of tea from the galley to the infirmary. Rat lay on the diagnostic bed, one arm flung across his face, as if to shield his eyes from even the low lighting of the room. "How are you feeling?" she asked as the door slid shut behind her.

He dropped his arm and sat up, all his movements slow. "Not so good. My head hurts."

"Here. This will help." She passed the tea to him, then fished a pain patch out of the drawer and applied it to his neck. After a few moments, the pinched expression eased from his face.

As she had predicted, he had awakened with no memories past initially being grabbed by members of the *Grendel's* crew. She didn't know whether or not he believed the fabricated story Marcus had presented, or if he had caught any thoughts from them that gave the lie to the tale. But Rat had always said that mind reading was a tricky business, and if the crew was as determined to put the incident behind them as they claimed, then he might never know.

Rat drank down half his tea, then sat with the cup cradled loosely between his fingers, staring into the depths of the drink as if he would read his fortune in the leaves. Neva sat down in a chair facing him, then leaned forward. "I saw the tattoo when I examined you," she said quietly. "Will you tell me about it?"

He sighed and pulled up his shirt, exposing the fresh ink that formed the triple crescent of a biohazard symbol across the left side of his chest. "It's what I am, Neva. I'm a hazard to everyone." He closed his eyes. "Especially to the ones I love."

The rest of the crew would probably agree with that at the moment, she thought wryly. "Does this have anything to do with what you said before you left the ship? You said, 'It isn't you; it's me.' What did you mean?"

"I meant what I said." He opened his eyes again, met her gaze briefly, then looked away. "The problem *is* me. Unless you have some reason to worry about whether or not you're going to give your lover a brain aneurism."

"Is that what's wrong?"

"Yes." He bowed his head, so that his dreads hid his face from her. "I don't know what might happen if we...become more intimate. I'm afraid of hurting you without even meaning to. I don't know what will happen if I lose control. *When* I lose control."

"And so instead of telling me your fears, you just...broke up with me and ran off?" she demanded, frustrated. "Why would you do that? Don't you know I care about you, that I want you to share your troubles with me?"

"I did it because...it would be hard enough, even if things were different. If we had all the time in the universe to get it right. But we don't, Neva. We might all die tomorrow. I might never be any more normal than I am today, right now. With the future so uncertain...I can't expect you to wait on me, to pass up on any opportunities that you might have to be happy. I can't ask you

to do that.”

“That’s right,” she agreed softly. “You can’t. Because that’s not how it works. You can’t *ask* someone to love you, Rat, like it’s some kind of favor.” She reached out carefully and laid her hand just to the side of the healing tattoo. His skin was warm, and she could feel his heartbeat through her fingertips. “It’s a gift, freely given.”

He stared at her, as if he had never seen her before. “But...I don’t know how long...or even if...”

“We’ll work through this somehow. Together. You’re worth all the time that it takes. Do you understand what I’m saying? You’re worth it, as you are right now, today.”

“And if we all die tomorrow?” he asked, his voice slightly hoarse.

“Then I’ll die in love with you.”

His mouth tasted like the tea he had drunk. She put her arms around him, felt him gather her close, and they held one another long after the kiss was done.

Chapter 26: The Widening Gyre

The com crackled from Neva's bedside. "Iluka Toora to Rat."

Rat blinked his eyes sleepily. He and Neva had spent most of the off-shift talking quietly, cuddled up together, fully-clothed, on top of her blankets. They had talked about his fear of inadvertently harming her, discussed the possibility of taking things slowly, one step at a time. And—with his encouragement—she had talked about her relationship with Devin.

Neva had been reluctant to speak of the dead man, not so much because of her own grief, but because she had been worried that Rat would be jealous. Which made no sense to him; he couldn't imagine why he ought to be jealous of any prior relationship, especially when the man in question had been dead for years.

Eventually, talk had turned into comfortable silence. Rat had fallen asleep with his head and back propped against the wall, with Neva's arms around his waist and her head on his chest, well away from the still-raw tattoo. Now he realized that the awkward position had left him with a crick in his neck and a sore back.

Neva mumbled something incoherent into his shirt. Sighing, Rat reached over and punched the com. "Rat here."

"I hear you had a run-in with some pirates from the *Grendel*. You ready to come back on duty?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Then get your skinny ass on the docks in fifteen minutes, got it?"

"Aye, Captain."

Rat cut the com and looked down at the woman curled against him, only to find Neva watching him.

don't want to get up, wish we could stay like this forever, Goddess he has such pretty eyes (love)

He kissed her softly. "Sorry I have to go, sweetheart," he said wistfully.

"It's all right." She sat up, combing her fingers through her short hair. It had been long in the old picture she had shown him, of herself and Devin on some beach, her original face more like that of a sister than the woman he knew. "What do you think Iluka wants?"

Rat shrugged. "No idea." He rolled out of bed and shook his dreadlocks back from his face, wishing that he had time for a shower. Jasmine launched herself from the chair, where she had been sleeping, to his shoulder. **stay here** he told her, picturing Jasmine and Neva together.

By the time Rat made his way onto the docks, Iluka and Marcus were already waiting there. Marcus had a rifle strapped to his back, as well as an assortment of firearms at his belt and what looked like concussion grenades hanging from a bandolier. Iluka was also heavily-armed.

"Got your gun?" Iluka asked when he walked up.

(anticipation/worry/anger)

“Yes. What’s going on?” he asked warily.

A transport with a covered bed was making its way slowly down the docks towards them. As it drew near, Iluka signaled, and it rolled to a stop. She and Marcus jogged to the back of the conveyance. Someone inside flung open a flap at the rear, and they both climbed inside. Now even more worried, Rat followed them.

It was dim inside the transport’s bed. Instead of cargo, he saw a group of about a dozen men and women sitting on the floor. The sight startled him, because all of them had smeared some sort of black paint across their features, so that the whites of their eyes seemed to gleam in the dark.

“Hello, friend,” said a familiar voice—Nathan Crow Wing, who had gone to Gethsemane with them. These people must all be *Red Cloud* crew, then.

The transport started forward again, the unexpected motion almost causing Rat to fall. He sat down quickly, beside Iluka and Marcus. “Where are we going?” he asked, hoping that someone would give him an answer even if Iluka didn’t.

Iluka flashed him a humorless grin that he could barely make out in the dimness. “We’re going to take the *Grendel*.”

Cold went through him. This must have been what Iluka and Drake were up to, during their extended absence from the *Exile* the previous shift. Making plans for this with Joshua. “We’re taking over the ship?” he asked, not certain that he had understood correctly.

“That’s right. We were suspicious of them before, but when they grabbed you...that clenched it. They’ve got to be the ones behind the sabotage of the *Exile*.”

“But won’t the stationmaster object to us just...taking over another ship?”

“It’s my job to worry about that. Now quit asking so damned many questions and let me think.”

Rat subsided, but the questions burned inside of him. Whatever edge Iluka had found herself pushed to...she still walked it. He wondered if Drake had tried to talk her out of this course of action, or if he agreed with Iluka that this was a brutal necessity.

Goddess. If Neva had known that Iluka was calling him to go into a firefight with the *Grendel*’s crew...

Just as well that she didn’t. In case either of them were tempted to say something they’d regret later. Which maybe was why Iluka hadn’t mentioned exactly why she wanted him on the docks in the first place.

After what seemed like a long drive in the rocking, cramped conveyance, the truck came to a halt. “The *Grendel*’s berth is in sight,” one woman murmured, and Rat realized that she was wearing a small headset that was half-hidden beneath her dark hair. “Jamming commencing.”

“Jamming?” Rat asked Nathan, who sat near him.

“And old trick,” Nathan replied in a low voice. “We jam their dockside cameras and audio pickups, make it look like some kind of local failure. When they come out to see if they can fix the problem, we’ll grab whoever gets sent out and make him open the locks for us. Then we rush the ship in force.”

He made it sound easy, but Rat could hear the slight tension in the whispers. The men and women from the *Red Cloud* were seasoned soldiers, but they didn’t take the coming battle lightly.

“They’re sending someone out. A man, alone,” reported the woman with the headset.

The transport rocked slightly as someone climbed out of the cab. Rat could feel the tension

heightening, and wished that he could see what was happening outside. Iluka drew her gun and held it ready. "When the signal comes, these boys and girls are going to move damned fast," she told him. "You stay with me, got it? Don't go shooting, unless I start—we want to take at least some of them alive."

"Aye, Captain," he said. He felt a nervous fluttering in his belly, and wished he could remember something, anything, of his combat experience as a Zat soldier.

Then, suddenly, there were bodies in motion, racing for the back of the transport. Marcus and Iluka went with them, and Rat scrambled after. Nathan Crow Wing bumped into him, and gave him a grin, seeming positively cheerful about the situation. Pulling his gun out of his pocket, Rat concentrated on following Iluka, whose gray dreads stood out amidst the shining black hair of the soldiers around her.

They had parked as close to the berth as possible without raising suspicion, and so there was only a short run across the docks. Rat caught a glimpse of Joshua and another man herding the unfortunate member of the *Grendel's* crew who had been sent out to check the equipment. Then the world narrowed into the jostle of bodies in the boarding tube, which swung and bounced wildly under so many feet.

From somewhere ahead, there came the sound of gunfire. "*Hoka-hey!*" someone shouted, and the soldiers around Rat took up the cry.

He caught up with Iluka in the spine of the ship, near the lift. Someone in the bridge had frozen the lift, but the invaders had simply forced the doors apart and begun to climb down the shaft with a variety of grapples. A bright flash showed from the shaft as someone opened fire from below; the crew from the *Red Cloud* returned it with interest.

The whispers were loud, excitement and fear and determination commingled into a single shriek. Rat stumbled over a melted spot in the decking, his head reeling, barely able to breathe. Iluka's callused hand gripped the collar of his jacket, hauling him out of the way.

"On your feet," she said, no pity at all in her dark eyes. "I need you in one piece, damn you!"

Rat nodded and forced himself to stand straight, his heart pounding. At least it looked as if they weren't going to end up in the thick of the fighting. Although he was confident when he was alone in the cockpit of the *Cuchulainn*, here on the ground, in the middle of so many minds, he felt off-balance and confused.

"The shaft is secured!" someone shouted, and then Joshua was there. He was covered in sweat, and blood showed against the black paint on his face. "We've gotten in everywhere but the bridge. That's where Gavin Ionas will be holed up."

"Then let's go dig him out," Iluka said grimly.

The lift had stopped at the bottom of the shaft, blocking the doors to the bridge. They used the grapples already in place to slide down, then clambered through the emergency escape into the lift. Several soldiers from the *Red Cloud* were already there, positioned to either side of the doors. Joshua dropped down to join them, then nodded.

They forced the doors apart. As soon as there was a crack, gunfire slammed into the doors from the other side. Rat shoved Iluka protectively behind him, and was rewarded by having her curse him in three languages. One the men from the *Red Cloud* was hit in the arm; he fell back, and his comrades pressed through in front of him, returning fire.

"We surrender! For God's sake, stop shooting!" someone shouted from the bridge.

Joshua barked an order in a language Rat didn't understand. Half of the soldiers in the lift bailed out, disappearing into the haze of smoke that was starting to drift into the lift. A few

moments later, one of them yelled back.

"All clear," Joshua translated.

"Let's go, then." Iluka pushed Rat out of the way and strode onto the bridge like she owned it. Rat followed her.

The smell of burning insulation and flesh was strong, and smoke still hung in the air, even though flame-suppressive foam had already put out the fire that had started in the nav board. It made him nervous; even if Xian Jackson had been born a grounder, he'd spent enough time in space that Rat's nerves were twitchy to hazards like smoke and foam, which could clog filters and kill a crew.

"Full bridge crew," Iluka remarked. "You planning on going someplace, Gavin?"

Gavin Ionas sat at the captain's station, flanked by two soldiers with their guns trained on him. He was a muscular, hard-bitten man, his arms wreathed in tattooed bands. Untidy, gray-streaked bangs half-hid the menacing glare of his green eyes. "What the hell is this all about?" he snarled. "What do you mean, taking my ship? I fought beside you—fixed your gods-damned ship, Toora—"

"Fixed it so we would find ourselves without brakes or control," Iluka replied. "Give up the innocent act, Gavin. You sabotaged the *Exile*—for all I know, you had your pilot come in close enough to damage us on purpose. Then, when we didn't die like we were supposed to, you had some of your goons grab my boy here, trying to find out just what we knew. That was a bad mistake, Gavin. Bad mistake."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What about letting the Zats know what direction we were headed, so they could follow us from Gethsemane? You know about that, Gavin?"

He only glared at her, grinding his teeth in silence.

"That's what I thought." Iluka glanced at Joshua. "Any chance we can get some private time with Captain Ionas here?"

Joshua issued a soft command, and his soldiers began herding the rest of the bridge crew out, back to the lift. They had gotten it working again, and it groaned away, leaving behind only Joshua, Iluka, Marcus, Rat, Gavin, and one other man.

"You remember Daniel Long River," Joshua said, probably for Rat's benefit. "He wished to stay and...observe."

Observe what? But Rat was starting to think that he knew precisely why Iluka had brought him along on this little venture.

"What now?" Gavin asked. "You going to torture me or something? I'm telling you, I don't know anything!"

Iluka stepped away from him and gestured Rat to come closer. Gavin stared at him suspiciously, his face a mask of bravado, but his thoughts whispering of **(fear)**. "This your bully boy, then? I would have expected the other one to be the muscle."

"He's going to find out just how many of us you've betrayed to the Zats," Iluka said grimly, but the words were directed at Rat. "How deep the treachery runs. If there are any other ships involved in stabbing us in the back."

Rat swallowed convulsively. Everything in him rebelled at the thought of carrying out Iluka's order. *I can't do this. Not cold. I did it to Aguila on Prospero, but that was different, that was in the heat of the moment. But this...*

"Captain," he started, turning towards her.

There was no pity in her eyes, none at all. "After all the trouble you've given us, the next

words out of your mouth better be 'Yes, Ma'am.'"

Rat licked lips that had suddenly gone dry, knowing that she wouldn't back down. "Aye, Captain."

"That'll do, too."

His heart pounding, Rat turned slowly back to Gavin. Those bright green eyes stared back at him, a thin veneer of anger over fear. "I'm innocent, damn you. Innocent!"

"None of us are," Rat whispered. "Not anymore."

He concentrated on the murmurs in his head, isolating Gavin's voice and sharpening his focus on it, turning all the things Neva had taught him inside-out so that he could listen to one whisper to the exclusion of all else.

what are they going to do to me I don't want to die don't want to be tortured (memory of a bloody whip, of screams, of slicing skin free with a knife and laughing) don't want to hurt (fear)

"You tortured other people and liked it," Rat heard himself saying. "But you're afraid to have it done to you in turn? Coward."

"What about the Zats?" Iluka was saying somewhere far away. "The sabotage?"

how did they survive, should have worked perfectly, worked before, did the crew fuck it up (worthless shits) damn Iluka (rage, hate) won't lie down and die even when she's lost (useless)

Not enough, Rat thought—thought at Gavin. The Zats, what about them?

Gavin's body stiffened, but Rat was only peripherally aware of it. His universe had shrunk to a pair of green eyes. The veins in the whites seemed to bulge, then spread, delicate network of spreading hemorrhage.

secret communications, Zat officer, money, tell us where they are and we'll leave you alone, opportunity of a lifetime, steal from other pirates and not have to worry about getting caught, going to retire fat and happy somewhere (white beaches, ocean, salty breeze, taste of alcohol and fruit)

You told them I was coming, after Gethsemane—told them I was coming to Prospero?

don't know what Iluka's talking about, told them where the Exile was going, I'd already taken care of that damned boat with the sabotage hadn't I (confusion) doesn't matter anyway the Zats will take care of everything soon enough overdue any time now

Cold. Green eyes disappearing in pools of blood. Not enough. *Zats will take care of everything?*

(pain) (image of Zat warships surrounding Paradise) (pain) (fire) (Grendel flying away) (pain) (image of a woman, warm and comforting) I can't I can't I can't my head I

(whiteout)

Gavin's body convulsed violently, then arched, every muscle in a tetanic contraction...then slumped limply into his chair. Blood dripped gently from his face, running down his neck and soaking into the edge of his shirt. His voice was gone, an empty space where there used to be sound, and for a moment Rat felt as if a part of him had been sucked into that terrible silence.

A hand touched Rat's shoulder, and he turned slowly, feeling dissociated from himself and everything around him. Daniel Long River stood there, looking at him quietly, his thoughts calm and smooth, like a lake reflecting the sky. Tranquil.

"Well?" Iluka demanded impatiently.

"There are rituals to be observed, when a man has a vision," Daniel said to Rat, ignoring Iluka. "Or kills. To bring him back into the world, into the community. Grounded."

"Stop babbling nonsense, Long River." Iluka pushed Daniel out of the way. **(impatient) hidebound like Mandu, put more stock in form and ceremony than people's lives (anger)**

"It isn't nonsense," Daniel said implacably. "Your crewman is distressed, Captain, and with good reason."

"It's all right," Rat made himself say, even though it wasn't. *He* wasn't. "They're coming."

"Try to make some sense," Iluka ordered, and he could all but taste her temper, riding a fine edge. "Who's coming, and where?"

"The Zats." Rat swallowed hard against sudden queasiness. "They're coming here. To Paradise. Captain Ionas gave the station coordinates to them."

Joshua straightened sharply. "Are you certain?"

"Yes." Rat nodded, then stopped when the room tried to spin.

Iluka grabbed his arm, and he found himself staring into her dark eyes, the way he'd stared into green ones just minutes before. He closed his eyes, but she shook him once, hard, making him look at her again. "When?"

damn it, what we've all been afraid of all along, someone selling the lot of us out, please let us get off this station alive, how are we going to defend it

"I don't know," Rat said. "G-Gavin thought that they were overdue. They're coming."

"You're sure? This wasn't some fantasy, some daydream of his?"

"I think so."

"Damn you, this is too important to guess about! *Are you sure?*"

Rat jerked away, feeling hunted, angry, off-balance. Voices clamored in his skull, but there was still that hollow place where Gavin had been, as if someone had punched a hole in reality. "Yes!"

If Iluka noticed his distress, she didn't show it. "Damn it. We've got to get the word out." She shot a glance at Joshua. "I'll get on the horn to Bernard, if you'll clean up here."

Joshua nodded. "Do you need us to patch you through?"

"No." Iluka took out her pocket com and displayed it.

"Nathan Crow Wing will give you a ride back to your ship."

"Appreciated. Rat, Marcus, with me."

Nathan was already waiting for them in the transport. They climbed into the back; even before the transport was in motion, Iluka was on her com.

"Got a problem, Drake," she said. "No, I'm all right. But it looks like Gavin sold us all out to the Zats. They're supposed to be on their way to Paradise now. Yeah. Get a hold of Control and tell them I want to talk to Bernard."

They rode in silence for a while, with Iluka getting more and more impatient. "Well, tell them if they don't get him, I'll come drag him out of bed myself!" she shouted in response to something Drake told her. "Damn them, this is an emergency!"

More silence. The transport was full of Iluka's temper. Rat ducked his head, huddling in on himself, raw as if something had scraped him out from the inside.

The transport came to an abrupt halt, almost flinging him to the floor. Nathan banged on the wall separating them, signaling that they'd made it to their destination. Iluka and Marcus scrambled out; by the time Rat followed them, they were already disappearing up the boarding tube.

He caught up with them when they were forced to wait on the lift. The moment it let them out onto the bridge, Iluka strode to the com station where Drake sat and punched a button. "All hands on deck," she said over all-ship. "We've got a situation."

"I've got the stationmaster for you, Captain," Drake reported a few seconds later.

"About damned time," Iluka muttered. "Put him on the speakers."

"Aye, Captain."

Bernard's voice boomed out, making Rat jump. "Toora! What's the meaning of this?"

"Sorry for waking you, Bernard, but we've got a situation."

"Damned right we do. I've got a complaint registered against you and Joshua Ten Bears, claiming you attacked another vessel, with loss of life and property."

no!

Startled, Rat glanced over his shoulder and saw that the lift had disgorged Neva, Tarak, and Anusha. Neva's eyes were wide, her face pale, and she cast Iluka a sharp look, before coming to stand by him.

"Are you all right?" she asked in a low voice.

"None of us were hurt," he said, which wasn't quite a lie. Maybe she heard something more than he intended, because she slipped an arm around him, and he leaned into her, grateful for the comfort of touch.

Iluka's mouth had flattened into a tight line, and she was glaring at the com as if she wanted to pummel the man on the other side. "And you should be glad we did it, Bernard. Gavin Ionas was working with the Zats. He's sold us out, and they'll be coming down on our heads before too long."

The whispers increased in volume, a murmur of shock and fear that vibrated along Rat's nerves. Neva tightened her hold on him slightly. **no, not this, not now (worry, image of a gun emplacement, the sound of sirens)**

Bernard was silent for a moment, as if mulling over her words. "And I suppose you have some proof of that?" he asked at last.

"Proof? What the hell do you want, Bernard, signed orders from Zativian Command? The *Exile* was sabotaged—I'll transmit the damned logs to you if you want to verify—and those that did it were either on the *Grendel* or the *Red Cloud*. You know as well as I that an awful lot of ships have been disappearing lately—"

"Ships disappear all the time," Bernard cut in. "And who's to say you weren't behind it, you and Ten Bears? You're the ones who have attacked a friendly ship at dock. Damn it, Iluka, if you had any kind of evidence, you should have called a Captains' Council. Instead, you decided to go renegade and storm the *Grendel*. That doesn't speak well to your motives, or make me think I ought to trust you."

Iluka's hands curled into fists. "We didn't have direct evidence," she said at last. "Which was why we had to take the *Grendel*. But I have it from Gavin himself that the Zats are on their way. There's no time for a Captains' Council—we need to evacuate Paradise, or figure out how to defend it if need be."

"Give me a link to Ionas. I want to hear this from him myself."

Iluka's dark skin took on an almost grayish hue. "He's...dead."

The silence from the com was protracted. "Well," Bernard said at last, "that is convenient for you, isn't it?"

"Damn it, Bernard—"

"I'm calling a Captains' Council, Iluka. If you and Ten Bears have any evidence to present, you'd best have it ready."

"There's no time—"

"Then make time!" Bernard roared, so loud that the speakers rattled. "You're on my dock, and you follow my rules, and that includes not attacking other ships while they're here! You will present yourself and any evidence at the time and place I tell you, and I won't hear any more guff

from you, or I'll impound your ship right this instant! Bellicose out!"

The com went dead. Iluka let out a furious curse and slammed her fist into the console, so hard that Rat was afraid she'd broken something. "Iluka!" Drake shouted, startled by the move. He grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her away from the boards. "Calm down! This isn't going to solve anything."

She held herself motionless, as if Drake's intervention had taken something out of her. Then she shook her head. "You're right. You can let go of me."

Neva took a step towards the captain, but Iluka waved her off. "I'm fine. Just a scrape."

"If the Zats are coming, we have to warn the Star Riders," Anusha said.

Iluka passed her hand over her face; Rat saw blood on her knuckles, glistening against her dark skin. "Agreed. Our information says that the Zats are overdue. We don't have time to wait on Bernard—we need to get the word out ourselves."

"Won't we risk causing a panic?" Drake asked.

"Maybe. Have any better ideas?"

"We could start with telling the other captains and letting them handle things from their end. Bernard won't like it, but that's his problem. The station is going to have to be evacuated, so make sure the ships that have the space are prepared to take on refugees if needed."

Iluka nodded. "Makes sense."

"Captain." Neva had lost what little color she had, so that the scars on her face stood out in sharp relief. "My friend here—Gretchen. She owns a shop. She's the only other person from Harvest that I know. I'd like to take her with us."

Iluka leveled a steady look at Neva. "We don't have much space, medic. We aren't outfitted to take on many more people than we've got now."

"Just one." Neva bit her lip. "Please, Captain. We can't just leave her."

"All right. Go fetch her, help bring her stuff back. But if she doesn't want to come, you get yourself straight back here, understand me? We might have to leave fast."

"Aye, Captain."

"Neva shouldn't go alone," Rat said hurriedly.

"Fine. Go with her. If she wastes time trying to get this woman to come, throw her over your shoulder and drag her back."

Rat nodded. Neva went to the lift, and he trotted after her, relieved to get off the ship and away from Iluka's hard eyes, even if just for a little while. Anusha and Tarak followed on their heels, off to send warnings of their own, and Rat wondered with a sudden frisson if perhaps it wasn't already too late.

* * *

After Neva, Rat, and Anusha had left, Marcus and Tarak went to get some sleep, in case rest ended up being in short supply soon. And so it was that Drake found himself alone with Iluka.

"Start making those calls," she ordered, as she headed for the lift.

"And when the other captains ask how you got the information about the Zats, what do you want me to tell them?" he asked quietly.

She froze, halfway to the lift, then turned slowly. The dim lighting reduced her to a silhouette, caught the occasional gleam from her silver hair. "How do you think I got it, Drake? I asked Ionas to sit down and have tea with me, and he volunteered it out of his good nature."

"Don't play games with me, Iluka," he said, wishing he could see her face more clearly.

"How did Gavin Ionas die?"

"I'm not the one playing games, Drake Morgenstern. You know damned well how we got that intel. And if you know that, then you know how he died."

So. She'd done what he'd feared. "You had Rat do that to him in cold blood, didn't you? Get into his thoughts, see what he knew...and turn his brain into mush in the process."

Iluka let out an impatient hiss. "Didn't you hear what I said, Drake? The Zats are coming to kill us all! Maybe Rat just saved thousands of lives right there, have you thought of that? Because of what he did—what I ordered him to do, if that's your problem—Paradise at least has a chance. You going to tell me I did wrong?"

"There might have been another way, Iluka. You had Rat pick something out of the stationmaster's brain on Gethsemane without killing him."

Iluka took a step towards him, then stopped. "This is damned well different, and you know it. That was the best we could do on Gethsemane, surrounded by Zats and likely to get ourselves killed if we tried anything more. And what did that get us? Nothing but vague information about the Zats running slave ships. Nothing concrete, nothing we could grab onto with both hands and *use*. And so when I had the chance to get better intel, you're damned right I did. The life of this station, the life of *this crew*, was on the line, and I wasn't about to let some traitor like Gavin Ionas get in the way."

"And what about the cost to this crew, Iluka? What about the cost to Rat? He looked hard-used just now."

"We were in a firefight. Of course he did."

"Was that it? I'd have thought Ten Bears' people would have taken care of that part of it."

Her mouth thinned, telling him he'd guessed right. "What are you getting at, Drake? Are you saying I'm abusing him?"

"Yes."

Surprise flashed through her eyes, and he realized that she hadn't thought he would answer so bluntly. "Maybe you ought to ask yourself what you're doing to him, Iluka," he went on. "And while you're at it, ask what you're doing to yourself."

She drew away from him, back into shadow. "I thought that you would have understood, Drake. But since you don't, I'll spell it out for you. We're on the jagged edge out here, and one little push is all it will take for us to fall off. This crew. This station. Every damn ship that's sitting at this port, and a bunch that aren't. This is a war—a war that everyone else says we've already lost. And if we're going to survive this, if we're going to fight another day and maybe do some good, then we've got to be ready to do whatever it takes to see things through. We haven't got time for the niceties. So, much as I'd like to hold Rat's hand and tell him it's all okay, and I'm going to give him a free ride on this ship and he won't have use his nasty little talent, I can't. Understand me? If I have to use him, I'm going to."

"And if he breaks?"

"Then he breaks."

And there it was, cold and hard and the absolute truth. "Iluka—"

"Ancestors know, I'm fond of the boy, Drake. I am. I don't want him to snap; I'd prefer he didn't, truth be told. But I can't let that get in the way of what needs to be done. Not if we want to see tomorrow."

Drake stared into her dark eyes, wondering if he had just lost her. If she'd lost herself. "Can't you hear yourself, Captain? If we're willing to do anything, destroy anyone, throw away everything in us that's decent and good just because it's inconvenient...then how does that make

us any different from the Zats?"

"The difference is that we're sitting nose to dock, while the Zats are going to be coming out of hyperspace at our backs," she said, pointing at the com. "So you get on the horn this instant and you do as you're told. Or you get the hell off this ship."

Before he could argue, she turned away from him and marched to the lift. When the doors closed behind her, he realized that she hadn't even turned to look back.

* * *

"Hex it," Neva muttered as she strode through the spine. She took her pocket com out, glared at it, then stuffed it back in her pants, all the time moving at a near-run.

Rat trotted after her, out through the spine and down the boarding tube. They'd stopped just long enough to check on Jasmine and see that she was fed and secure, in case the ship had to pull out unexpectedly. She hadn't been happy about that, had wanted to go with them, but Rat couldn't look after her and try to get Gretchen and her things back to the *Exile* at the same time, so they'd left her discontent and thoroughly put-out.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" he asked, jogging a little to keep up with Neva.

They hit the docks. The place seemed a bit more active than it had earlier, and he wondered if some new ships had put in all at once. A transport whizzed past, going far over the posted limit, and Rat put a hand to Neva's arm, worried that she'd get run over in her distraction.

"I never got Gretchen's code. I should have, earlier, when..." she hesitated suddenly. "When I visited her. But I don't have it."

"There ought to be a way of finding it out," he said reasonably, taking out his own com. "Most stations have a designated code for information."

"Oh. I didn't know that." She cast him a chagrined smile. "Too much of a grounder, still."

"You're learning." He hit the code, and was rewarded with an error message. "I can't get through."

Neva muttered a curse. He tried again, got the same result. "Channels must be busy—or else something's gotten hosed in the system. They're probably fixing it now."

He did his best to sound optimistic, and he must have succeeded, because Neva only nodded. "All right. Let's flag down a cab."

A large number of cabs passed them, but they were all occupied, or else had their working lights turned off. Unlike most stations, Paradise didn't have much in the way of mass transportation, perhaps due to its haphazard construction, or perhaps due to some maverick spirit loose in the original builders. "Let's walk," Neva said at last in frustration, and they started off at a quick pace.

Although all of Neva's concentration seemed to be on the urgency of getting to her friend, Rat felt a different kind of unease building in himself the farther they went from the *Exile*. The sudden demand for cabs, the number of transports rushing up and down the docks, sometimes in flagrant disregard of all laws of traffic, his repeated inability to get through to station information...

Then he saw a ship whose display said it was in countdown to depart...even though cargo still sat on the dock.

It's leaked. Someone—Bernard, the people in his offices, one of the captains Drake had called—had let the news that the Zats were on the way loose into the population. What they were seeing now was just the first stirrings—hasty departures, people scrambling to get back to ships

or relatives, calls into the station offices demanding answers. But as word filtered through the station, with no apparent plan for defense forthcoming from the stationmaster, panic would accrete to panic.

"We've got to hurry," he said.

Neva cast him an annoyed look. "I know that!"

"I'm sorry—I wasn't—things are more serious than you realize." He put a hand to her shoulder protectively, and found himself resisting the urge to turn around and drag her to safety with him. "Word's gotten out. There'll be riots."

For a moment, Neva was silent, working through what he was saying. Then her eyes widened. "Goddess, protect us. Come on."

They broke into a run for the lifts.

* * *

Drake swore silently. He had started to make calls to every captain he could reach...only to find that before long there were so many incoming calls that every light on his board was flashing angrily for his attention. Most of them wanted details that he didn't have or couldn't give—like *when* and *how many* and *who told you*. When he explained that he couldn't answer any of those questions, they became angry, roundly abusing him in every language that humanity spoke among the stars, including a few that he had never heard before.

Then, suddenly, the blinking lights went out all at once. After a moment of darkness, one began to flash, and Drake felt his heart sink. Only one power on this station could override the communications like that.

Bernard began yelling the moment Drake opened the channel. "What the hell do you think you're doing, causing a panic like this? I've had it with you lot—your ship is impounded right now, and I'm sending people to get you off if you don't come quietly!"

Drake knew only one way to respond. "I'm sorry," he said, striving to sound placid, "but I'll have to refer your query to my captain."

"Query my ass! You're all under arrest, starting this second. Come out peacefully, or I swear I'll..."

Inexplicably, Bernard fell silent. Drake wondered if God had decided to take pity and given the stationmaster a good case of laryngitis. When the stationmaster didn't speak for several seconds, Drake prompted him. "Stationmaster Bellicose? I'm going to have to refer your query to my captain."

When Bernard's voice came over the com, it sounded more as if a ghost whispered into Drake's ear, hoarse and faint. "The beacon...that can't be...it can't be."

Alarm slammed through Drake. He lunged across the boards, punching scan to life. It powered up slowly, sluggishly, its display at first only darkness, then faint outlines, then finally solidity.

The station was a bright point, overlain by the amber and green signatures of the docked ships. Other amber points moved slowly in the lanes, nominally friendly ships coming and going, just like they always did. At the very edge of the system, however, there had appeared a single signature that glowed fiery red.

Another point of red appeared behind it, then another.

And another.

The Zatvians had arrived at Paradise.

Chapter 27: Decompression

When Neva and Rat reached Paradise's main market, they found it in chaos. Although there were a few curious shoppers, and some vendors still trying to make sales, for the most part the merchants were frantically breaking down their kiosks and packing up their wares.

"It looks like you were right—word *has* gotten out," Neva said grimly. "People are starting to panic."

Rat's golden skin had taken on a sallow hue, which could have been from fatigue and could have been from stress. Probably both. Even so, he managed to give her hand a reassuring squeeze. "Maybe Gretchen has heard, then. Maybe she'll be packed and ready to leave when we get there."

A siren blared, the sound almost painfully loud as it echoed and re-echoed in the cavernous market. Both of them jumped and covered their ears against the shrill alarm.

The siren fell silent, and for a moment there was no sound or movement at all, as if a spell had been cast over the market, turning everyone into a statue. Then Bernard's voice boomed out over the speakers, disembodied as some gigantic ghost, or a god shouting down at his followers.

"Condition red. All civilians return to your quarters for immediate lockdown. All non-essential personnel, return to quarters and await further instructions. All communications and defense personnel, report to your posts immediately. Stationmaster Bellicose out."

A single heartbeat of silence, before the wail of the sirens began again. Neva saw slack mouths, wide eyes, the shimmer of fear dancing from face to face as the impact of Bernard's words sank in.

"The Zats are here," Rat whispered.

The market erupted into motion, and if Neva had thought the situation to be chaotic beforehand, now it was sheer madness. Some of the vendors simply ran, abandoning their half-packed wares. Shouts and cries of dismay filled the air, people calling for lovers, kin, children, friends. Everyone was in desperate motion, frantic to get to whatever haven they perceived as safe. A running body collided with Neva, almost knocking her off her feet. Rat grabbed the runner by the back of the jacket and flung him away with a snarled oath.

Goddess! "We've got to get Gretchen!" Neva shouted over the din. She turned to Rat, saw that the color had drained from his face, leaving it a sickly yellow. His eyes darted wildly, not seeming to focus on anything for long.

She locked a hand around his wrist, forcing him to look at her. "Let it go through you!" she said—shouted, really, to be heard over the noise, even though they stood side-by-side. "It isn't yours—just let it pass by, like water in a river!"

He nodded, and though she didn't know whether it had worked or whether he would collapse at any second, there was nothing to be done for it. Still clinging to his wrist, she started

in the direction of *The Rowan Tree*, pulling him behind her.

They weren't far from the shop, but it seemed as if half the station were between them and their destination. "The Zats are coming!" someone screamed hysterically. "They're going to kill us all!"

The memory of those last moments on Mabon seized Neva's heart unexpectedly. She remembered the sirens, far too similar to the klaxons even now making her ears ring, the surge of terror as the display showed dozens of Zatvian ships coming down on them, far too many to target. Devin had shouted something to her, his last words, but she hadn't been able to hear him clearly over the pounding of her own heart.

"No!" Rat yanked back suddenly, almost pulling her off her feet.

Goddess, we have to get to Gretchen, have to find a clear space away from this madness! She started to tug on him, to drag him if need be, when the low thump of gunfire sounded nearby. She saw someone go down, the victim of an argument, maybe. Screams broke out, and there was a general stampede away from the shooting. Bodies slammed into her, and her hold on Rat's arm broke.

"Rat!" she shouted, reaching for him. Then her legs were knocked out from under her, and she hit the deck beneath the trampling feet.

* * *

"Damn it!" Iluka muttered, glaring at the com. "Why in hell did I let them off this boat?"

"You didn't know the Zats would get here so fast," Drake pointed out reasonably, even as he attempted to reach Neva and Rat again. As before, neither of them answered.

"Are we going to leave them?" Anusha asked hopefully.

"You just get the ship ready to move when I say so," Iluka snapped. "Drake, get me Joshua."

He did so, patching through to allship, where everyone could hear. "We need to pull out," Joshua said. "The *Red Cloud* is in countdown."

Iluka's lips thinned. "I've got crew still on the station, Ten Bears. The second they're on board, I'll be on your heels, but for now I'm holding."

"Understood."

Another signal beeped for attention. "It's an open transmission from Bernard," Drake reported.

"Put him on speakers."

"—any ship that can take on passengers, prepare to do so," Bernard was saying. His normal loud tones were so subdued that Drake could hardly believe it was the same man. "The rest of you...I'm calling on all ships able to do so to take up the defense of this station."

"The *Red Cloud* stands ready," Joshua replied on the same frequency.

Another familiar voice sounded. "This is Harini Chandrashekar. *Devi's Challenge* is ready to fight."

"Skyla Cameron, captain of the *Apocalypse*. We're in undock already—we'll keep them busy until all you slowpokes get a move on."

"Damn fool," Iluka muttered, but Drake could hear the admiration in her voice. The *Apocalypse* was a small ship, and she might be fast enough to keep from being blown out of the sky. Emphasis on the *might*.

"There's a crowd gathering on the dock," Marcus reported from where he was keeping an eye on the outside cameras. "Some of them are old folks and children, but the rest look like they

could be trouble. Captain, the longer we sit here, the longer some fool has to take it into his head to rush the ship, just to get the hell off the station.”

“We’re not leaving,” Iluka said grimly.

“Rat and Neva might not even be able to get back to the ship with that crowd out there,” Marcus argued.

“Then I guess you better get a gun and head for the airlock so that you can keep it clear for them.”

Marcus looked surprised for a moment. Then, muttering darkly under his breath, he got up and headed for the lift.

* * *

I’m going to die, Neva thought, even as a booted foot kicked her in the side. She tried to protect herself, tried to get up, but there were too many bodies, too many feet. *Trampled to death. Not the way I thought it would end.*

Hands seized the back of her shirt and hauled her bodily off the floor. The world spun wildly, and she heard a grunt and some cursing. Startled, she found herself set down upright, in a clear space that had somehow formed in the middle of the stampede.

“Neva!” Rat flung his arms around her, pulling her close. “Are you all right?”

Shaking, she nodded. Her body ached where a dozen feet had stepped on her, and her lower lip was split where she had been kicked in the face. She suspected that she would be in real pain once the adrenaline wore off, but at the moment she could only feel relief. “I—what happened?”

Rat looked past her, and she turned around, only to find herself facing a broad female chest, swathed in a brightly-colored shawl and several bandoliers of ammo. Startled, she looked up, and discovered Juanita staring back at her.

“Every time I see you, you’re in trouble,” Juanita remarked mildly. She stood with her feet braced, like a great rock in the midst of a river. Everyone else seemed to just bounce off her sturdy frame.

“Thank you,” Neva said shakily. “I thought I was in real trouble.”

“Bernard sent me here for crowd control.” Juanita shook her head. “No controlling this crowd, though. You ought to get back to your ship.”

“We came to get my friend—she owns *The Rowan Tree*. We’ll get her, and then head back to the *Exile*.”

Juanita glanced in the direction of the shop, then back. “You aren’t going to make it through that craziness. If your friend’s smart, she’s already cleared out, anyway. You go back to your ship now.”

“But...” Neva hesitated, uncertain what to do. *I can’t abandon Gretchen to die here. I can’t. We have to take her with us.*

But what if she’s already gone? I don’t know how to find her if she isn’t at the shop.

She’s the only other person from Harvest that I know. My last link...

Rat’s hands closed gently on her arms. “Neva, Juanita’s right. We’ve got to get back to the ship. If Paradise is to survive, then every ship that can fight needs to join in, and that includes the *Exile*.”

She stared into his amber eyes and saw shadows there. Sweat beaded along his forehead, and she realized that every moment she hesitated pushed him that much farther towards the tipping point in his mind. *And he’s right.*

"All right," she said, feeling like a traitor even as she did so.

"Hunh. He doesn't seem to be crazy," Juanita said, looking curiously at Rat.

Rat blinked, surprised. "What?"

"Never mind," Neva said hastily. "We've got to get back. If we can."

"Come on. I'll help you," Juanita said. "You stick close to me, all right?"

"I thought Bernard had sent you to control the crowd here."

Juanita shrugged. "What am I going to do here, one woman, alone? This is too big. But I can get you back to your berth. Follow me."

She started off, her muscular body seeming to plow a path through the crowd, like an asteroid through a dust cloud. Neva and Rat hurried in her wake.

* * *

Drake listened to the buzz of voices over the com, his eyes glued to the scan along with those of everyone else. The Zats had entered the system in tight formation, but had almost immediately broken apart, so that they could come at the station from as many different angles as possible. They had done only the most minimal braking, ensuring that they came in hard and fast.

On the corner of the scan, the lagtime clock burned angrily, counting down the moments until the Zats were in range to fire on Paradise. The numbers were getting smaller far too fast.

God, protect us just long enough for us to get undocked and in position to fight. That's all I ask—just to have the chance to make a difference.

The *Red Cloud*, *Devi's Challenge*, and a few other ships had left dock and were maneuvering into position. Much farther up the gravity well, the *Apocalypse* had already engaged the first Zat fighters. A great deal of the chatter on the com now consisted of Captain Cameron cursing the Zats.

"Three fighters with one shot!" she shouted, and indeed, a triad of the Zat fighters flying in formation disappeared from scan. Whether that shot had been one of luck or skill, he didn't know, but if the *Apocalypse* kept it up, the Zat warships were bound to take notice. It would draw them off Paradise for a while, which was what Cameron no doubt intended. It would also make the *Apocalypse* a target.

Keep moving, stay ahead of them, he thought. *And: How much longer can we afford to wait?*

* * *

There was no going down the lifts—there was no even getting near the lifts. Juanita swore mildly and instead led them to the emergency access. There were a few other people using the ladders to move between levels, but for the most part their climb was unobstructed.

It was a long climb. Neva's arms grew more and more tired, until her muscles were practically trembling. A large bruise was forming on one shoulder, adding to her misery. Knowing that she had no choice, she gritted her teeth and focused on the rungs in front of her, on putting one foot below the other, on keeping a grip on the rungs with her hands lest she slip. She didn't know if a fall would carry away Juanita, who was climbing below her, or if the larger woman could catch her, but she didn't want to find out.

Rat followed her down; a quick glance up showed her the soles of his boots. She wished that she knew if he was better now that they were out of the crowds, or whether the weight of panic

still threatened to sweep his mind away. But there was no way to ask, not with Juanita there.

Juanita, whose words had already made him suspicious about things that she hadn't told him.

She cleared that thought from her mind quickly, concentrated on the rungs again. On climbing. On safe things, that didn't include the fact that her boyfriend didn't recall turning into an evil sadist.

Curse it.

By the time they reached the level of the docks, Neva's entire body seemed to be a mass of protesting muscles. As she stepped away from the ladder, a muscle in her back spasmed, and she gritted her teeth. Rat hopped down lightly by her and put a hand to her arm, concern in his amber eyes despite the fact that he looked about to drop himself.

What a pair we are. "Are you going to be all right?" she asked him, tipping her head towards the door leading out onto the docks. Even through the wall, she could hear the sounds of voices, and feared that they were about to step out into the middle of a full-blown riot.

He pressed his full lips together, as if holding back some sound. "I don't know," he said at last, barely above a whisper.

Juanita opened the door, letting in the cacophony. Shouts and cries for help echoed and re-echoed in the enormous space, reflected by a thousand ganties and girders. At the moment, the crowds seemed to be tending in a single direction, which happened to be in the direction of the *Exile*. Motioning to Neva and Rat, Juanita stepped out and joined the flow.

Bodies jostled them from all sides. A young man ran past, weaving between slower people. In front of a darkened board that showed a recent undock, a woman crouched, weeping inconsolably. A little further on, a lone child screamed for his mother, blood trickling down from a cut on one side of his face.

"There's your berth," Juanita said, her greater height giving her the advantage. The motion of the crowd had slowed, people pooling like water, and Neva cast about for some way to get through.

"Let us on!" someone was shouting from further ahead. "Damn you, you have to save us! You can't leave us here!"

Other took up the shouts. Suddenly worried, Neva fished the com from her pants and clicked through to the *Exile*.

Drake answered at once. "Neva? Where are you? Is Rat with you?"

"We're on the docks, and yes." She cast a glance at Rat, saw that he was standing with his head down, his arms wrapped around his thin body. "He's not doing so well in the crowd."

"We've got a problem," Drake said. "Marcus is down at the airlock with a gun, and so far that's kept the crowd back. But if we try to let you on...they'll rush the ship."

Neva swore and relayed the information to her companions.

Juanita frowned, rocking back and forth on her heels. "He's right. No way to get through without shooting."

"We can't just shoot into an unarmed crowd!" Neva exclaimed, scandalized.

"Shoot above their heads?" Juanita suggested, although she looked a bit doubtful.

"Someone could get hurt."

"A lot of people have already been hurt, I'm thinking." Juanita shook her head slowly. "Maybe you have to say goodbye to your ship, hope they can hold off the Zats without you."

"Tell Marcus to get back from the boarding tube," Rat said abruptly. His voice was hoarse, and when he raised his head, Neva saw a bleak look in his eyes.

Neva hesitated, wanting to question, to argue. But something in the way he held himself, as if he might fly apart, warned her not to waste the time. "Drake. Get Marcus back from the dock. Now."

"You, too," Rat mumbled, swaying a little on his feet. "You and Juanita. Get back, please."

Neva grabbed Juanita's arm. "Come on."

Juanita didn't move. "What's going on?" she asked, tipping her head to one side and eyeing Rat warily.

Rat dredged up a smile; it looked ghastly. "I'm going to clear us a path," he said, then turned and began to work his way in the direction of the *Exile*, lithe body sliding between any gap in the crowd he could find.

Juanita let herself be dragged away from the berth, to a clear space near the opposite wall. Her heart pounding, Neva scrambled on top of an abandoned loader, using the height to look over the heads of the crowd for Rat. *Goddess, let him be all right.*

It took her a minute to locate him in the heaving sea of humanity. Then she caught a glimpse of his dark hair and brown jacket. He stood in the midst of the thickest part of the crowd clustered in front of the boarding tube, where people were hysterically demanding passage even if the ship didn't have the room or the resources. As if he felt her gaze on him, he turned and looked in her direction, but the distance was too great to see his eyes.

Then he turned away, bowing his head. She could see the tension in his shoulders, in his stance. His hands curled into fists...

Rat's head snapped back, arms stretching out to either side, fingers open and reaching, as though flinging something away from him...

Bodies collapsed around him in concentric circles, as if he were the epicenter of a bomb blast, the shock wave traveling through the crowd and sending them to the floor. But this explosion was silent, with only the soft thud of flesh against the decking, the occasional louder clang as a gun or bit of baggage fell from a hand gone suddenly slack.

For a moment after, there was absolute quiet, broken only by the sounds of more distant disturbances. A ten-meter radius around Rat was suddenly clear, the floor littered with unconscious bodies, their faces masked in blood. In the center, Rat stood alone, his face turned up to the overhead lights, the gleam of tears on his cheeks.

The screaming started when those beyond his reach realized what had happened—or, at least, that *something* had happened. What remained of the crowd scattered, desperate to get away from whatever had taken so many of them out without warning.

The path to the *Exile* was clear.

"God of Thunder," Juanita murmured in awe. "What is he?"

"A man in pain." Neva walked away from her, then broke into a trot, then a run.

Some of those Rat had felled had started to move—those farthest from him, for the most part. Neva stepped over them carefully, until she had reached his side. "It's all right," she said, and touched his hand.

He blinked, seeming to come back to himself. She saw his eyes sweep the unconscious bodies around him, and he shivered violently. "They'll be fine," Neva said, even though she didn't know that for certain. His fingers were ice-cold, and closed over hers with desperate strength.

"Neat trick," Juanita said as she wandered up.

The lock at the end of the boarding tube opened, revealing Marcus. "Come on—we don't have all day!" he barked. "They're already getting reorganized."

Gunfire spattered somewhere farther down the docks, and Neva felt her heart contract. Juanita sighed and hefted her own weapon. "Guess it's up to me," she said glumly.

"No—you can't!" Neva blurted, grabbing Juanita's arm. "You're going to get killed if you go down there!"

"Nowhere else to go."

"We wouldn't have made it back without you—come with us," Neva said, even though she didn't know what Iluka would think of that.

Juanita gave her a hard look with her dark eyes...then slowly transferred her gaze to Rat. "What are you?"

He blinked back at her. "I'm a fighter pilot."

"He's a freak," Marcus snapped, casting a nervous look in the direction of the shots. "Anyone who's coming better be in the damned airlock in five seconds, or we're leaving without you."

An unexpected shot slammed into the decking perilously close to Juanita's feet. She jumped back with a curse. Marcus was already disappearing up the boarding tube, and with a final look at the dock, Juanita followed, herding Neva and Rat in front of her.

"Bernard's going to kill me for running off like this," she muttered as they cycled through the airlock. "Fire me, probably, or assign me to station maintenance, make me clean the waste chutes with my tongue."

The com clicked on. "About damned time," Iluka snapped. "Rat, 'suit up and get to the *Cuchulainn*. We're moving."

The com clicked off decisively. Rat sighed and shoved his hands back through his untidy hair. Stress and lack of sleep had painted circles under his eyes, like the shadows of old bruises, and Neva felt her heart skip a beat at the thought of him trying to dogfight in his current condition. As they headed for the lift, she touched his arm lightly. "Be careful."

"I will." There was desperation in his eyes, as if there were a thousand things that he wanted to say. But they had run out of time.

Rat bailed out of the lift one level down, headed for the 'suit locker at a dead run. The rest continued on to the bridge. When they stepped off, Neva found Anusha, Tarak, and Drake bent over their boards. Iluka, however, turned to face them.

"That isn't Gretchen," she observed.

"We didn't make it to her," Neva said quietly. *Goddess, protect her. And forgive me.* "Juanita was the only reason we made it back ourselves. There was shooting on the docks, Captain—the boarding tube was the only place for her to take refuge."

"Fine." Iluka's dark eyes fixed on Juanita. "Strap yourself into the observation seat, then. Keep quiet and stay put, unless I tell you otherwise. Got it?"

Perhaps Juanita was already used to dealing with brusque orders in the course of working for Bernard. "Yes," she said with a shrug, and went to the observer seat.

"Whitestone! Don't stand gawking! Get to scan!"

Silently cursing herself, Neva hurried to her post.

* * *

Rat felt something inside him relax as the hold bloomed open and the *Cuchulainn* leapt into space.

What had happened on the dock had happened in front of a hundred pairs of eyes, at least. It

was the first time he had ever used his abilities in public, on purpose, and he felt naked, violated in some subtle way. So soon after what he had done to Gavin...

Unclean.

But here, now, there was silence—blessed silence, too far from other minds to be subjected to their fear, their desperation. Here, Iluka couldn't tell him to rip out a mind by the roots, and desperation couldn't drive him to take the risk that he might be doing serious damage to panicked innocents like those on the docks. He could scream and scream, and it wouldn't hurt anyone.

Of course, he was launching in order to go out and kill people anyway, some of whom might even have been former friends or comrades, back when he was a Zat. The universe's sense of irony, it seemed, was safely intact.

As soon as he cleared the obstruction formed by the ship and the station, he turned the *Cuchulainn's* nose away from Paradise and in the direction of the advancing Zatvian assault. The beacon, augmented by the *Exile's* active scan, fed him the time-lagged details of what had become a desperate fight.

A few ships had managed to launch already and moved to intercept the Zats. Others...had done the opposite, sprinting for whatever safe haven they imagined might exist out in the long black.

Those who had been in the forefront of the makeshift defense had taken the full brunt of the Kleggers leading the Zat fleet. Several were already moving off at vectors that told him they'd lost all navigation ability—maybe lost everything and everyone aboard, if the hull had been sufficiently breached. Incredibly, the *Apocalypse* was still in the fight, its captain canny enough to use her tiny ship's light mass to stay one step ahead of the Zat fire. But it was a losing game, unless support showed up soon.

The *Red Cloud* had already moved out, releasing clouds of fighters as it went, like seeds from a wind-blown flower. Rat's radio crackled unexpectedly.

"Susan Bird-in-the-Ground to *Exile* fighter. Come in."

He thumbed his com to her signal. "Rat, piloting the *Cuchulainn*. I copy, Bird-in-the-Ground."

"If you're looking for a squad to join, you can fall in with us."

He found himself grinning unexpectedly, an odd excitement thrumming in his veins. A part of him *knew* this. "On my way."

They weren't flying a conventional formation, but that didn't bother him; he could still see where he could take up position to do the most good. The squad's chatter flowed past him, but that too seemed weirdly familiar, even though he didn't know the individuals involved.

Then his scan went red, a huge flare as Zat fighters launched at them, attracted by the *Red Cloud*. "We're going in," Susan Bird-in-the-Ground said in his ear. "*Hoka-Hey!*"

"*Hoka-hey!*" came the other voices. "*Hoka-hey!*"

Rat hit his com, feeling the surge of adrenaline, of anticipation, of certainty. "*Hoka-hey!*" he shouted, and shouted it with all his being, voice and mind, no holding back.

And then they were among the Zat fighters.

* * *

Everything fell together, that feeling of knowing exactly what to do, of having no questions and no doubts. Rat slid the *Cuchulainn* among the enemy fighters like a black dart of death. The

fighter unleashed its fury, and the red blips on his scan turned orange and went out, going into darkness along with the men and women who died gasping in the vacuum.

Other fighters, those marked in green, went black as well. He caught a confused glimpse of Susan Bird-in-the-Ground's ship in front of him, before it turned into a bloom of orange fire that kissed the skin of the *Cuchulainn* as he shot past. Another fighter tumbled past, hull intact but all control gone, and he hoped that someone would be able to pick up the pilot before the air ran out.

Then he was past the thick of the fighting, with no other ships nearby, and he took the brief moment to do a quick check of scan. To his surprise, the defense that had formed between the Zat fleet and Paradise still held. The *Exile* was going strong, using its new guns to good advantage in a duel with one of the smaller Zat ships. The *Red Cloud* had managed to put some holes in one Klegger, disabling it, or at least killing most of the crew when the hull had breached.

If we can just hold them off long enough...just convince them that they'd be better off falling back...maybe we can still save the people left on Paradise. Maybe...

Then a new ship came out of jump, farther down the gravity well than the first wave of Zat ships had dared. For a moment, it was just a formless spot of red, until the beacon found its transponder signature.

The Obsidian Blades had arrived.

Dozens of prismatic-class fighters launched from the Blades' ship, and Rat stared blankly at his display, an odd sinking feeling in his heart. Who piloted those fighters? People who had once been his friends? His companions? His lover?

A proximity warning beeped in his ear, and he hastily returned his attention to his immediate surroundings. He changed vector sharply, letting physics do the work for him as he slewed around and targeted the ordinary Zat fighter that had spotted him.

I've got to get over there. I've got to try and stop the Blades. He clicked on his com, broadcasting in a band to every ship in reach. "Target the new ship and its fighters! They're Obsidian Blades!"

There came a confused chatter over the com, but he ignored it. Either they would listen to him, or they wouldn't; he didn't have time to worry about anything else. Several of the *Red Cloud's* fighters fell in behind him, and he felt a brief surge of hope, that maybe they could reach the Blades in time to make a difference.

He pushed the *Cuchulainn* as fast as he dared within its—and his—limits. Had there been nothing to do but fly in a straight line, perhaps that might have been enough. But a battle was taking place in between, ships moving in from all directions, and every course correction, every burst of fire to clear an enemy out of the way, cost both time and speed.

He kept as much attention as he could spare on the events playing out around the Obsidian Blades. They had targeted the spot where defense was thinnest, and were coming down the gravity well at high speed straight at it.

Some of the pirates might not know who the Blades were, what it meant to be facing them. Some of them did, however, and even as Rat watched in horror, several of the ships in their path changed vector and started a retreat.

They haven't even fired a shot yet. He wanted to scream at the captains to turn around, to hold the line, to do something, anything, just to delay the Blades long enough for him to have a chance.

One ship didn't change vector—a single, glowing green dot on a collision course with the Blades. The *Apocalypse*.

The com crackled, Iluka's voice on open com. "Damn it, Cameron, get out of there! You're

one ship!”

“Can’t. We’ve lost thrusters. Nothing but a straight line for us.” There was grim humor in Cameron’s voice, as if she wouldn’t have chosen any other way.

The *Apocalypse* was firing now, throwing everything it had at the Blade Klegger. The prismatic fighters were coming around from all sides, swarming at the small pirate ship in too many directions for the guns to target them all. “Bring it on!” Cameron shouted suddenly over the com. “You hear me? Bring it—”

Then there was nothing but a brief blaze of fire that vanished as soon as the oxygen had burned away.

Nothing between the Blades and Paradise.

No. Damn it, no, Rat thought. He felt angry, desperate, and wished that there was some way to reach across space and do *something* to stop what was coming. But the distance was too great, and the limits of man and machine too near. Nothing could be done...except watch.

It seemed to take forever and no time at all for the Klegger to come in range of Paradise. Two other Zatvian warships fell in behind it as the defense around the station disintegrated. Their guns punched a hole through the docking ring first, then into the heart of the station. Rat imagined Bernard Bellicose yelling imprecations and orders even as a firestorm evaporated Control around him. Imagined steel and ceramic peeling away, vacuum and violent trauma and fire all competing with each other to claim the lives of the inhabitants...

Fire, brief goutts of it as the oxygen rushed out through breaches. And then nothing but debris, some of it human, trailing from the dying station as it disintegrated. The three warships slipped away from their kill, moving slowly now, like three sharks hunting some unimaginably deep ocean.

The com crackled in his ear. “Iluka Toora to the *Cuchulainn*. We’re moving out. Get back here as fast as you can.”

Moving out. Nothing left to protect. Nothing left to risk lives for.

“I copy,” he said numbly, and signed off.

There were still skirmishes being fought—the Zats weren’t going to let their prey escape so easily. The *Red Cloud* lent its presence to the *Exile’s* retreat, riding close even as its own fighters changed course and returned to their bays.

Rat felt the weight of defeat on him, seeming to drag at the fighter, making the journey back to the *Exile* long and lonely. He evaded two Zat fighters, sending their pilots to join the dead of Paradise, and wondered dimly what it all meant.

A crisp tone over his com startled him out of his fugue. Blinking, he glanced at the readout—then looked again.

No call from the *Exile*, that was for sure. This was a tight-beam transmission, the only way to hope to keep a signal private, and for a minute he thought that he must have simply flown through its path by accident.

When the symbol of the Obsidian Blades appeared on his display, he knew that it had been meant for him after all.

“This is useless, Xian.” Mirra’s voice in his ear, quiet and a bit sad. “I don’t know why you’ve turned against us, or what you think you’re going to gain, but surely you’re starting to realize that the path you’ve chosen is futile. You’re risking your life to no benefit.

“It doesn’t have to be that way. There are things that you don’t know. Things that you’ve forgotten, that I didn’t have a chance to tell you. You have no idea how important you are, how much depends on you.

“Come to me, and I’ll explain everything. I guarantee you—and anyone you’re with—safe passage into the Core. You have my word on that. This offer has been cleared up to the highest levels of Command. That should give you some idea of how critical you are to us.

“You have to come back, Xian. I can’t say anything more right now. This is too sensitive to take the chance it might be intercepted. Come to the Core, and I’ll explain everything.

“Safe flying, my love. Mirra Hunter, out.”

The transmission ended. Rat stared at the now-blank display for a long moment, his heart hammering in his chest. Then he looked at scan, at the long debris trails that marked what had been a station and thousands of lives only a short time ago.

“To hell with you, Mirra,” he said, although there was no one but himself to hear. “And to hell with your critical plans. The next time I see you, I’ll kill you.”

Changing vector slightly, just in case Mirra decided to send him something less benign than a transmission, he steered the *Cuchulainn* after the retreating pirate ships.

Chapter 28: Moments in Space

We failed, Drake thought, taking a sip of his coffee and wishing that it were something stronger. *We failed again.*

It burned, as if he'd swallowed acid. Paradise was gone, and every soul that had been on the station at the time had gone with it. Had anyone been evacuated? If so, it couldn't have been many, not in the confusion. Monk, Bernard, Rabbi Berkovic...all dead, along with thousands of others. Of course, compared to the loss of life on Harvest, or in some other systems, the death toll from Paradise was minor. That didn't make it any easier to bear.

He sat at the galley table along with Iluka, Marcus, Anusha, and Juanita. They had wandered in, off shift, searching for coffee and maybe for the sort of comfort to be had from the presence of others. Juanita looked solemn, her plain face closed to any emotion, and Drake guessed that she had lost more friends than any of them when Paradise had blown.

"So," Iluka said, breaking the depressing silence that had settled over the galley. "It looks like you're going to be with us for a while."

"Yes." Juanita nodded firmly. "I work hard. Make the Zats pay for what they did."

Where have I heard that before? It seemed as though all of them had wanted to make the Zats pay for something, one time or another. But had they ever even come close to that goal? And even if they had, surely the Zats had ultimately done even more damage to *them*.

We're losing this war of ours. Or maybe everyone else was right. Maybe they had already lost it years ago.

Iluka nodded, accepting Juanita's offer. "We're hard-up for space onboard. We've already got one crewmember sleeping in the laundry. You'll have to share with someone."

"She can room with me," Anusha said unexpectedly. Drake gave her a curious look, wondering why she would make such an offer to an obvious grounder, but Anusha didn't meet his eyes.

"Thank you," Juanita said. She reached into the pouch at her belt and started to take out a cigar, but was cut short by Iluka.

"Not on this ship," the captain said sternly. "I've got more regard for the filters than Bernard did. Now, what skills do you have? Can you sit scan? Com? Navigate?"

Juanita sighed, tucked the cigar away, and absently straightened her colorful shawls. "I have a few skills. Bernard taught me. The world I was born on...it was almost a darkworld, except for the spaceport. In the mountains where I lived, people were afraid of the ships. My father thought they punched holes in the clouds, made the Rain Gods angry.

"Then I met Bernard. He was impressed—said I was strong. I said I had to be, to haul water and stones up the mountains every day. He offered me a chance to test my strength, and to see things I had never dreamed of. So I said goodbye to my family and went with him. He taught me

to sit scan, then. But I have a better use to you, I think.”

Iluka arched a gray brow. “And what would that be?”

Juanita smiled and pushed back her shawls, exposing arms corded with muscle. “You need a strong arm when you go aboard a station, yes? For protection? That will be me.”

Marcus set down his coffee cup with an audible *thump*. “That’s my job!”

Juanita looked him over skeptically. “Scrawny thing like you? Hmph. Might as well use that Rat-man.”

Marcus’ eyes widened in a mixture of shock and affront. “What?! There are weights in the rec-room—I can bench-press twice what you can!”

Juanita gave him a wide grin. “You’re on.”

* * *

Rat finished the last post-flight check on the *Cuchulainn* and sealed the hatch between the spine and the fighter’s hold. The hours he had spent alone, carefully going over all of the fighter’s systems and making certain that nothing had been damaged during the battle, had given him time to think.

None of those thoughts had made him happy. Too many of them had revolved around the last message Mirra had sent him, which he had uploaded to Iluka shortly after returning to the ship. He wondered if Mirra truly thought they would take her up on her offer, or if it had been more of a threat than a lure. A reminder that the Blades were still out there, and that they still wanted him back.

Which brought him around to other things he’d rather not think about.

He took the lift to the level where the ‘suits were stored and slowly put his away, lingering over the checks and maintenance that would make certain it was ready to go the next time he put it on. Stalling, he supposed. Trying to figure out how to put his vague suppositions and fears into words.

Maybe I ought to sleep first. Get Jasmine, play with her, soothe my nerves. I’m tired—worn out after the fight. Not at my best.

The mood of the rest of the crew wasn’t making it any easier. He could feel their unhappiness, their depression, like a heavy, damp blanket over his soul. Bad enough that the sight of Paradise disintegrating kept replaying itself in his own mind, but whenever he was near anyone else, he kept catching bits of other disasters, other griefs, all tangled up in this newest loss.

He wearily caught the lift to crew level. When the doors slid open, Tarak stood on the other side. “Tarak,” Rat said, letting the other man know he was there. “I’m just getting off here.” He put his hand on the edge of the lift door, intending to hold it open until Tarak was on.

Tarak’s blind eyes turned toward him. “Oh. Yes.” He reached out, no doubt in order to orient himself as to exactly where the opening to the lift was, and inadvertently laid his fingers on Rat’s. For an instant, their skin was in contact; then, Tarak snatched his hand back as if it had been burned. “Sorry.”

“N-no,” Rat stuttered. “Don’t be.” He quickly stepped off the lift, getting out of the way. As soon as the doors had closed, he spun on his heel and strode towards the infirmary, all thought of food and sleep forgotten.

* * *

"I tell you, that woman is inhuman!" Marcus muttered from his seat on the diagnostic bed.

Neva sorted through one of the cabinets and came up with an ointment for strained muscles. "I haven't done a DNA scan," she said dryly, "but I somehow doubt that Juanita is one of the Star Riders' mythical aliens."

"Hmph." Marcus twisted about to look at her, then winced as the muscles in his shoulders protested. "Then she's a mutant. Or on enhancers. Or something."

Neva scowled as she smeared the ointment over the skin of his wide shoulders, then ran a small ultrasonic wand over it, to help the salve penetrate. "Or she's just younger and stronger than you are. Honestly, challenging her to a weight lifting competition, as if you don't have anything better to do—"

"She insulted me!"

Neva started to tell him to grow up and stop acting like a baby, when the door opened and interrupted her. Rat came in, then stopped, a wild look on his face. "Why didn't you tell me I seduced Tarak?"

Neva realized her mouth was hanging open, and shut it with a snap. "I...you did what?"

"I don't want to hear this," Marcus said.

Rat ignored him. "Seduced Tarak! We were passing on the lift, and touched by accident, and suddenly he's thinking about how I kiss!"

"Oh." Neva's mouth went dry, and she felt her heart sinking. "Are you sure it wasn't just a...a dream? Or a fantasy?"

"I said I don't want to hear this," Marcus repeated loudly. "And if you don't pay attention to what you're doing with that wand, you're going to cook my insides."

"It wasn't a dream. He knew I have a goatee. He can't see, and he's never touched my face—that I remember, apparently. How else would he know that?" Rat tugged wildly at the crinkly hairs on his chin, as if he might yank them out. "What haven't you told me?"

Neva felt cold. "I don't...I didn't mean...I didn't realize..."

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" Marcus started to stand up, but Neva automatically pushed him back down. "What your girlfriend—who was supposed to be treating me, thanks so much for the interruption—is trying to say is that you turned evil."

Rat blinked, seeming to realize that Marcus was there for the first time. "What?"

"Evil. E-v-i-l. Those idiots from the *Grendel* didn't just knock you out—they drugged you up and made you crazy. Iluka and Drake don't know, and the rest of us decided not to ever bring it up again."

Rat sagged against the doorframe, as though Marcus' words had been a physical blow. "Is that true, Neva? Why didn't you tell me? Why did you lie to me?"

"You're a crappy telepath, you know that?" Marcus said.

Neva realized that she was holding the wand in the air, where it wasn't doing much good, and started passing it over Marcus' shoulders again. "I'm sorry, Rat. I just...no one else wanted to talk about it. So I went along. I didn't mean to lie to you, but...I had just gotten you back, and I was afraid that if I told you what happened, you would feel bad, and might break up with me again."

"Isn't that my decision to make?" He ran his hand distractedly through his locks. "What—what happened? What did I do?"

"You tried to take over the ship." Neva winced at his stricken expression. "You beat up Marcus—"

“He did not! It was a sucker punch! I wasn't expecting it!”

“—said some hurtful things to me, to get me to leave the ship, and locked Anusha into a morgue unit. Tarak was knocked out with a tranq patch...but I guess you had to get close enough to use it.”

“Goddess.” Rat covered his eyes with his hands. “I don't remember any of it.”

“You wouldn't. That's the usual action of the drug.” She bit her lip, desperate to say something to make the situation better. “Rat, even people who are...” *Normal*, she almost said, but that sounded too harsh. “Who haven't been experimented on, can say and do things they don't mean under the influence of drugs. You aren't the first. It wasn't your fault.” She hesitated, uncertain how to ask the question that was burning in her.

Either Rat caught her thought, or guessed what she wanted to know. “I don't think it went any farther than kissing. That isn't the impression I got.”

“Not wanting to hear this, either,” Marcus interjected.

“You're done.” Neva switched off the wand. Muttering to himself, Marcus pulled his shirt back on and left. Rat moved farther into the small room, and the door slid shut behind him.

“I'm sorry,” Neva said again, quietly. “I just...I didn't want to upset you, that's all. And everyone else wanted to forget it happened.”

His dreadlocks had fallen across his face; he glanced up at her through them, his expression half-hidden. “I hurt you.”

“You showed me things about myself that I didn't like,” she said honestly. “I've let my insecurities rule me at times. I know that you didn't mean any of the things you said, that it was just the drugs talking. But it was still a valuable lesson for me.” She paused, then hesitantly asked, “Rat...are you attracted to Tarak?”

He considered for a long moment...then shrugged. “I'm with you.”

“I know that, but you only have a few years' worth of memories. I don't want to-to hold you back, if you discover that I'm not what you really want.”

Not the easiest thing to say, not with all of her heart silently begging him to stay with her. *But I have to be fair to him. I want him to be happy.*

Rat cast her a rueful smile; all of his anger seemed to have vanished. “The whole time I was on Muldar Station, running, hiding...I just...I never even thought about sex.”

“Makes sense.” She seized on the opportunity to be clinical, to get some emotional distance. “Stress tends to suppress all sorts of hormones, including the ones responsible for the sex drive.” Neva reached out and touched him lightly on the arm. “And then you came on the *Exile*. You haven't had much opportunity since then to even meet anyone except the rest of the crew. I just...I want to be fair to you.”

Rat took her hand in his, twining their fingers together. “I suppose that Tarak is attractive in his own way. But I'm really concealing a passionate desire for Marcus.”

She punched him in the arm, and they both started laughing. Rat wound his arms around her, pulling her close so that he could rest his forehead against hers. “I love *you*, remember? That's what matters. That's the only thing that matters.”

Neva trailed her fingers down the side of his face, then kissed him softly. “Good.”

* * *

When Drake entered Iluka's quarters, he found her seated at her desk. The lighting was dim, only the faintest amber glow, except for the data tablet in her hands, which flung stark highlights

onto her face.

"Drake," she said, not looking up.

He sat down opposite her and waited, until she finally set the tablet aside and looked at him expectantly. "What next?" he asked, when he had her attention.

She raked her long dreads back from her face. "We stick to the plan. I promised Joshua that we'd go with him to Waga Chun."

"And then what?"

Her fingers drummed lightly on the surface of the desk. "You've got something to say. Spit it out, Drake."

Drake shook his head. "I just have questions to ask, Iluka. Now that Paradise is gone, where do we go next? When the ship needs repairs, where will we go without worrying about our guns and the fighter being discovered? How are we going to move any cargo we steal from the Zats, stuff that would put up a red flag if we unloaded it in a station under their control? For that matter, what are Joshua and his crew going to do? Their options are even more limited than ours."

Iluka's mouth tightened slightly. "We have two Star Riders on board. That ought to be good for passage into some of their hidden ports."

"How many safe places are left now? Do you know? Do they?"

"I don't know!" Iluka scowled at him. "Let's worry about living through this little trip to Waga Chun first, shall we?"

Drake leaned back in his chair. "Fair enough. But at least give a thought to our future after, so that we don't find ourselves inconveniently alive and without a plan."

"I'm not looking for death any more than you are, Drake Morgenstern."

"Are you certain of that?"

Iluka stood up, sending her chair flying off along its track. "Damn it, Drake, what's wrong with you? You've been riding my ass since before we reached Paradise. If you have a problem with me, if you think that I'm not capable of commanding anymore, then you damn well tell me to my face. And then we'll go to the crew and ask them if they want me to step down, and let you have the ship!"

"I don't want the damned ship!" he snapped, hurt that she would even make such an accusation. He stood up as well, using his height to his advantage. She stared back up at him, and he could see anger in her dark eyes. She held herself confidently, not backing down, not for an instant, and he felt a curious flash of pride. She was his captain, his friend, and there wasn't another woman in the universe who could match her.

"Then what do you want, Drake?" she asked into the sudden silence.

He took a deep breath, let it out. He felt transfixed, as if her black gaze had speared him straight through the heart. "I want for you to get off this road you're so determined to go down. I want you to see what you're doing to yourself, to this crew. I'm afraid that you've decided that you don't have any choices left, that it doesn't matter what you do, because the Zats are going to kill us all anyway. I want for you to look past the next step and use that brilliant mind of yours for something other than destruction."

For a long moment, she said nothing, only stared at him. Then, very slowly, she lifted one hand and clasped him gently on the arm. "You're a good man, Drake. Too good for where you are, but that's the way the dice rolled, and I'm grateful for it."

"Captain—"

"Let me finish." Her fingers tightened on his bicep, then relaxed. "I'm running out of plans,

Drake. Running out of smart answers. I don't know where we're going. I can't see it anymore for the darkness. So the only thing I know to do is to keep going, and if things get more and more desperate, that's just how it is. We're fighting for our lives, but I won't let them take us, not while I still have a breath in my body. What happens after that is up to you."

"Iluka." But he couldn't think what to say.

She smiled and patted him gently on the arm, before turning away. "Go on, Drake. Get some sleep. I'll let you know when I need you to come on shift."

There had to be something he could say, something he could do. Nothing came to him, though, so at last he simply murmured, "Aye, Captain," and let himself out of the room.

* * *

Juanita and Anusha were eating in the galley when Rat and Neva came in. Marcus was there as well, making himself samosas and determinedly *not* looking in Juanita's direction.

They had stopped by the laundry and let Jasmine out; filled with energy after being confined for too long, she raced back and forth, her tail held high and her wet nose twitching. Juanita smiled and tossed a grape from her plate, which Jasmine caught and ate.

"I'm going back on shift," Anusha announced to no one in particular, standing up and dropping her plate into the washer. As she went out, she glanced briefly at Rat, then away. Rat watched her go, looking puzzled, and Neva wondered what was bothering him.

Maybe he seduced her, too, she thought wryly.

Marcus sat at the end of the table away from all of them, probably wishing they would go away. Juanita's dark eyes sparkled with mischief when she noticed his choice of seating. "Feeling better?"

Marcus glared, then stuffed a samosa in his mouth to avoid answering.

"I patched him up," Neva offered, deciding that it wouldn't be a bad thing to get back at Marcus just a little. "And reminded him that he's a bit old to be overdoing it."

Marcus' glare intensified.

"I had an advantage," Juanita said, waving a hand dismissively. "Bernard made all of us who worked for him keep in shape. I spent a lot of time in the gym on Paradise."

Paradise. Neva felt the casual reference like a kick to the gut. She'd been trying not to think about what had happened, about all the people who had died. About Gretchen, who'd been her only link to Harvest, or about all the children she'd treated at the clinic.

Rat reached under the table and took her hand, but she stared fixedly at her food—she suddenly felt not even slightly hungry.

Juanita pulled a small tablet out of some hiding-place under her shawls and called up a holo showing a group of smiling people, all of them oiled and muscular. "That was us, back when we worked the circuit with Bernard," she said, laying it on the table so they could all see. "Those were the good days." The holo changed, flipping through a host of stills: wrestlers in the ring, someone holding up a trophy, Bernard standing on the dock at Paradise.

Then the picture switched to that of a child, standing on a steep mountainside, holding the halter of some sort of beast of burden. "That's my little brother," Juanita said proudly. "And my sister, here, and my niece. I haven't seen any of them since I left with Bernard—they must be all grown up now. Have children of their own, probably."

Marcus had leaned over to look despite himself. Juanita noticed and gave him a grin. "What about you? You have any children?"

Marcus sat back, mouth pressing into a hard line. "One."

"Let's see a picture, then." When he didn't say anything for a moment, Juanita sighed. "Come now, what parent does not have at least one holo of his...son? Daughter?"

For a moment, Marcus looked torn, as if he begrudged any mention of his missing child. "Daughter," he said at last, and produced a picture. "Genevieve."

It didn't seem possible that the laughing girl in the picture could be related to the dour Marcus. But the pale, blue eyes were the same, and the white-blond hair that hung down over her shoulders might have been his as well, before he went gray. "She's beautiful," Neva said, trying to imagine Marcus as a father. Had he smiled more then?

"How old is she?" Juanita asked.

Marcus sighed. "She was twelve in that holo. It was made just before...before the Zats came and took her away. Now..." He shrugged. "Depends on if she's been on ships, or on stations or planets, doesn't it? Real-time, out in the universe, it's been seven years since I saw her. She'd be a woman now. For me, it's been four and a half years, relative. I hope...I just keep hoping that she's been in hyperspace a lot, on jump time, so that when I see her again, she'll still be young enough to be my little girl."

Juanita's eyes were dark with sympathy. "Don't worry. She'll be that when she's fifty, yes?"

To Neva's surprise, it got a faint smile out of him. "Yes." Marcus retrieved his picture and stood up. "I'm going to bed."

"You will spar with me next shift?"

He hesitated at the door...then shrugged. "Fine. Just don't expect me to go easy on you."

Juanita grinned. "I won't."

* * *

Rat had intended to go to sleep as soon as he had some food in his belly. But instead, he found himself silently walking Neva back to her quarters. He could feel her weariness, her grief, and her desperate hope that perhaps somehow Gretchen had made it off station alive, no matter how slender the odds.

"Can I ask a favor?" he said, when they stopped at her door.

"Of course." She took his hand and gave him a wan smile. "Anything."

"I'd like to read up on the drug they gave me. The one that made me—how did Marcus put it? Evil."

Neva's mouth tightened. **(guilt) a hex on Marcus** "I'm not lying to you."

"I didn't think you were. I just wanted to find out about it," he said carefully.

And now who's the one lying?

"All right. I have some files on it—some of them are pretty heavy on the medical jargon, though. Do you want me to pull them up for you?"

"No. Just tell me how to access them." He kissed her forehead softly, tasting sweat. The scent of sandalwood and rosemary hung about her, underlain by the astringent smell of the infirmary. "You should get some sleep."

wish he was coming to bed with me (sleep, snuggle, safe, love)

So do I, sweetheart, he thought, careful to keep the words only in his own head. *So do I.*

For the next several hours, Rat sat alone in the infirmary, reading. Jasmine played for a while, then, growing bored with his silence, went to sleep on the diagnostic bed. The main lights switched themselves off when he didn't move for a long time, leaving only the steady glow of

equipment lights, the occasional contented *beep* as some system satisfied its arcane internal analysis.

As he had expected, or perhaps dreaded, delving into the information on one drug led him to others. Mostly, the notes discussed their uses in various types of therapy, often in terms that left him utterly baffled. But some of the notes talked about broader applications...and mentioned that some governments had investigated their potential for use in covert operations. Spying. Military intelligence.

Brainwashing.

It was an old story. Even a quick search through the historical databases brought thousands of references to attempts at mind control. Long before humans had ever left their homeworld, governments had dreamed about creating perfect citizens, or model spies, or soldiers who never thought or questioned.

I might be wrong. Paranoid. Insane. Goddess, please let that be true.

At last, he forced himself to move, even though a part of him wanted to curl up and forget all the dark thoughts chasing themselves around in his head. Collecting Jasmine, he walked down the deserted hall until he came to the captain's quarters.

She sounded irritable when she answered the com. "I'm in the middle of my sleep cycle. Can't this wait?"

Rat swallowed and licked lips gone dry. "N-no, Captain. I'm sorry, but I don't think it can."

There came a long pause, then the door finally opened. Iluka's dreads hung half-in her face, and she looked both groggy and pissed off. The shirt she wore was wrinkled, as if she'd fished it out of the hamper. "This had better be good."

"I'm sorry, Captain." He followed her to her desk and sank down into one of the chairs. In the corner, her bed was mussed, covers flung every which way. He had the feeling that she wouldn't be returning to it any time soon, not after she heard what he had to say. It wasn't the sort of thing conducive to rest.

Iluka rubbed sleep from her eyes. "Now, what's this about?"

"It's about Gavin Ionas. Sort of."

Puzzlement showed in her eyes. "You did good work, there. Even more would have died at Paradise without your warning."

"This isn't about that. Exactly." He closed his eyes briefly, forcing himself to remember the details of Gavin's horrible last moments. "Captain Ionas sabotaged the ship, just like he'd done to others before, when he had the chance. But he didn't tell the Zats where we were going. He didn't know anything about the Obsidian Blades or Colonel Hunter."

Silence. Then Iluka sat up straighter. "You sure?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Damn it, why didn't you mention this before?"

"Because there were bigger things to worry about. Like the Zats coming to kill us all." He sighed. "Truthfully, with everything else going on, I almost forgot it myself. But I started thinking about it later, when I was working on the *Cuchulainn*. Gavin Ionas wanted to kill us, because that was what he did for the Zats. But whoever led the Blades to us had a different agenda. The Blades want to get me back, alive—that much is obvious from Mirra's message. They wouldn't have sabotaged the ship and risked me dying on it."

"So you're saying Gavin was acting on his own initiative." Iluka said. All the sleep was gone from her eyes, and Rat felt as though her gaze had pinned him to his chair. "And you're saying that there was more than one traitor."

“Aye, Captain.” And now came the hard part. “And I think he...or she...has to be on board the *Exile*. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Iluka’s brows drew down. “Wouldn’t you know if they were?”

“That was what I thought, too. That was what I kept telling myself. But Neva, uh, happened to mention some psychotropic drugs that can make people act strangely, and then not remember it later. So I started doing some reading. There’s been a lot of research over the years into making double agents.

“One reoccurring theme concerned the use of psychological torture to create a secondary personality, one that would take orders and execute them, without the primary personality even being aware that anything odd was going on. They would betray their friends and not even remember it, because they truly don’t know that they even have a secondary personality, let alone what it’s been up to.”

Iluka’s eyes darkened, and he realized that she had come to the same conclusion he had. “And if they don’t know...you wouldn’t know, either.”

“Not unless the secondary personality was active when I was present.”

“Ancestors, give me strength.” Iluka pressed her fingertips to her forehead. “I don’t like this one damned bit, Rat.”

“I don’t, either.” A shiver went through him. “I might be wrong.”

“You might, but I’m not betting my life on it.” She dropped her hand and stared at him. “It could be anyone, then. Even me.”

“Or me.”

“No. You’re in the clear, I’m thinking. It wouldn’t make sense—they’d want someone who was on the other side, not someone who was already working for them. The whole point of this is that the agent won’t arouse suspicion, right?”

“Aye, Captain.”

Iluka frowned at nothing. “But why put a spy on the *Exile*? We’re no one. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe they weren’t supposed to end up here,” Rat said uncertainly. “I’ve been told that the crew was just thrown together—that most of them couldn’t get a berth anywhere else, or that this was the first opening they found when things got crazy at the end of the war, when so many ships had been lost or damaged. Maybe the spy was supposed to go somewhere else, but got stuck here by chance.”

After a long moment, Iluka nodded thoughtfully. “Makes sense.”

“Which would mean that it isn’t you, because you’re the only original crew left.”

Iluka smiled, but it was a grim expression. “I guess that ought to be reassuring.”

“I could be wrong about everything, Captain. I hope I am.”

“Is there any way to find out for sure?” Iluka gestured vaguely towards him. “You’re a telepath, and I do understand what you said about buried personalities and the like...but surely there’s a way to get past all that. To peel back the conditioning and see what’s underneath.”

A shudder went through him, remembering what he had done to Gavin. To others. “There is. If you don’t mind killing everyone.”

“I need something better than that.”

“I can’t do any better!” Rat’s hands curled into fists, and he bit his lip in frustration. “I can’t just wander around in someone’s brain, delve into their deepest memories, and not hurt them! I don’t want it to be that way, but it is.”

Iluka leaned forward, lacing her hands together on the desk. “I’m hearing a lot of ‘don’t’ and

'can't' out of you, boy."

Rat took a deep breath, fighting back sudden anger. What did Iluka want from him?

What did she ever want? A weapon. A tool.

"What do you want me to do?" he demanded. "Shall I start experimenting on Drake? Neva? Tarak? Risk frying their minds? Killing them?"

"No." Iluka sat back, but her eyes never left his. "You're going to start experimenting on me."

Chapter 29: Tempest

“Again,” Iluka said, a hoarse edge to her voice. She looked exhausted, ragged, short on sleep and patience, both. Delicate traceries of blood made twin lines between her nostrils and upper lip.

Rat swallowed hard. “We should stop for tonight,” he said, unable to look away from the blood. *Goddess, help us both.*

They were in hyperspace now, in line for a rendezvous with the *Red Cloud*. They would meet up at a tiny mass point, one that the Zats hopefully didn't know about, and lay plans for their next move from there: a Star Rider station, in the hopes that the presence of Tarak and Anusha would buy them entrance to a place normally closed to outsiders. There they could regroup, make any needed repairs, and lay course to Waga Chun.

If the Zats hadn't already destroyed the Star Rider outpost, of course. Or if their unknown traitor wasn't doing something sneaky, leaving behind a trail that the Zats could follow from Paradise.

That was the possibility that made Rat's blood turn to ice in his veins, the one that had convinced him to agree to Iluka's insane proposal. And so here they sat, facing each other cross-legged on her bed, in the middle of what should have been their sleep-cycle, trying to figure out how—if—he could reach deep enough to uncover a traitor without causing irreparable brain damage.

Being short on sleep didn't make things any easier for either of them. Rat could feel Iluka's exhaustion whenever he concentrated on her, feel all the aches and pains that age had accumulated in her joints, and a part of him wanted to suggest they put it off, or find some other way. But no one else on the crew could know—or even suspect—what they were really up to. Because if they did, that could be the trigger that would bring out the secondary personality, who might...Goddess only knew. Kill Iluka, kill Rat, destroy the ship, kill him- or herself to avoid questioning...the possibilities were endless, and Rat didn't like any of them.

Iluka locked gazes with him, and he suppressed a shiver. Her eyes were haunted, by worry, by the ghosts of her dead kin, by responsibility. “Again,” she repeated.

“You're bleeding.”

“It will stop.”

“Not if we do this again.”

“Then I guess you'd better not make it worse.”

No relenting from her, not that he'd really expected it. She would sacrifice her life if she thought that's what it took. She'd sacrifice his, too.

It was odd, the view of him that he'd found inside her mind. They'd both known that she was giving up all pretense at privacy by doing this, and yet she hadn't really worried about that,

even though there were things she didn't want to share with anyone. She trusted him to keep her secrets, to never bring up anything he found.

She trusted him—liked him, even—and yet, if it came down to sacrificing anyone on the crew after her, he'd be the first to go, no hesitation. In part because he'd been a stowaway, and in part because he'd been a Zat, and in part because he was dangerous, but mostly because he was useful, in a way that no one else ever could be. And if that usefulness meant destroying him, either mentally or physically, then she would.

Bizarrely, it made him feel as if he had a privileged position among the crew. Which was probably just another sign that he was crazy.

"Aye, Captain," he said, and stretched out his hands for the physical contact that would make everything easier. She settled her palms lightly against his; he could feel dry skin and calluses overlaying the strength of muscle and tendon and bone. He closed his eyes, to block out the sight of the blood on her face and the fear it provoked in him.

A few deep breaths, and he slipped into the meditative state that Neva had taught him. Carefully, keeping his own thoughts as tranquil as possible, he focused on the continuous stream of thoughts and feelings that bore the stamp of Iluka's voice.

Conscious thoughts were loudest. **don't let something in my head get broken, leg's falling asleep (ache) got to find the traitor can't believe it's one of my crew (fear/worry/grief) Drake (fear) ought to be used to betrayal by now, Mandu (old man, anger, bitterness) (dusty world, a young girl) but he's dead now too, shouldn't think ill of the dead, hell with that he was a bastard**

Rat breathed slowly, trying to be still. Trying to be receptive above all else, just to take what came to him and not go looking for it. Trying not to think *at* her.

Below the constant stream of conscious and half-conscious thought, there were...other things. The subconscious, he supposed, although that was a simple word to describe what was layers and layers of personality. Memories, and images, and what seemed to be the processing of sensory data.

The strange part was that a lot of the things he sensed deep down in her unconscious mind didn't seem to impinge directly on his consciousness, either, or at least not much. Later on, he would just know things about Iluka that he didn't recall having seen/heard/felt. So presumably, some of what came from her unconscious was received and sorted out by his.

What was it I read? Two-thirds of everything in our minds goes on without our even being aware of it? No wonder there's room for a whole different personality to be created.

After what seemed like hours, a timer beeped softly. Rat opened his eyes, and found Iluka watching him warily. The blood had dried on her lip; there wasn't any fresh. "Did you do anything?" she asked skeptically.

"I didn't deceive you because I was worried about hurting you more," he said, repeating her own thought back to her.

Iluka grinned and dropped her hands. "Good boy. You're getting better, then."

"I think so. Slowly." He clasped his hands loosely in his lap. "But I don't know what might happen under other circumstances. If I was under more stress."

Iluka arched a grizzled brow. "Having a traitor on board isn't stressful enough? Tough man."

It got a wry laugh out of him. "That isn't what I meant. I'm just...worried."

"You worry too damn much."

So do you. "I know."

Iluka swiveled around and dropped her legs off the side of the bed, wincing as she did so. "Damn it, my leg's asleep." She stood up cautiously and stretched, working blood back into her limbs. "Too old for this, that's what I am. A few years ago, if you'd asked me what I'd be doing now, I'd have told you that I'd be at the end of my career, rich and fat from a life's worth of profit. Maybe I'd have retired, moved to tropical beach on some world where the living was good and the authorities few."

"You'd never retire." Rat stood up and walked to the door, then paused. "Tomorrow?"

Iluka retrieved a washcloth from her private bathroom, and wiped the blood off her face. Tossing it into the hamper, she came to stand by him. "All right," she said as the door opened to let him out. "Tomorrow it is—"

She stopped abruptly. Anusha stood in the hall outside; it looked as if she had been walking past when the door opened. The navigator's eyes were wide; she blinked a moment, then hurried on her way.

"Damn it," Iluka muttered quietly.

Rat sighed. "We couldn't keep it totally secret forever, not on a ship of this size," he pointed out. "Maybe we ought to come up with a cover story, in case anyone asks?"

Iluka scowled. "All right. I'll think about it. But not now—I'm worn out."

"Aye, Captain." He stepped out, and the door hummed shut behind him. Anusha had been surprised to see him coming out of Iluka's room, in the middle of what was supposed to be their sleep-cycle. If she was their traitor—if she suspected something was going on—

Stop that. Why would she suspect anything? Even so, he felt uneasy. Maybe I should ask Juanita to keep an eye on her, now that they're roommates. Or Tarak...but how could I tell him that his sister might have been brainwashed by the Zats?

He and Iluka had gone through the crew roster, trying to eliminate anyone they could from their list of potential suspects. Juanita was the most obvious, seeing as she hadn't even been on board before Paradise. Tarak, also, had been eliminated. After all, as Iluka had pointed out, why would the Zats have damaged their own agent by blinding him?

Which still left far too many suspects: Drake, Marcus, Anusha...

Neva.

She had spent two years in a civilian hospital undergoing reconstructive surgery...or had she? None of them could verify that. Even if they could, his research had showed that plenty of military-funded brainwashing experiments had taken place in civilian institutions, so that was no guarantee of anything.

And anyone who might have known her from before...anyone who might have been able to detect a subtle change in her personality...is dead now.

Rat found himself standing in front of the laundry, so lost in his thoughts that he'd barely noticed anything else. Jasmine chattered at him when he opened the door, not happy about being left locked up by herself. Patting her absently, he climbed into his hammock and lay staring at the ceiling.

When Neva got the summons to come take her aunt's place on the Exile, she didn't know what she was heading into. So the Zats would have had no reason to send her here to spy on us.

Unless they suspected that her aunt was involved in something. Agnes paid for Neva's surgeries, didn't she? Maybe some irregularity there made them think she was involved with pirates. When the chance came to get Neva on board, they took it. And when I stowed away on the same ship, it was like they'd just won the damned lottery.

Rat rubbed his eyes, pressing his fingers so hard that he saw spots behind his closed lids.

Goddess, please. Don't let it be Neva. Please.

But his doubts wouldn't leave him, and he lay awake for most of the night, his heart and mind in turmoil.

* * *

"That's ridiculous," Tarak was saying as Drake stepped into the galley. Drake was coming on shift, looking for breakfast, while the two Star Riders were having their dinner and getting ready for some down time. Not that shifts mattered much in hyperspace; there was little to do except scheduled maintenance and testing. So long as everything got done, Iluka didn't particularly care what schedules they worked out.

Anusha looked up sharply as Drake entered, an expression of guilt on her face that disappeared quickly. "It's just Drake," she told Tarak, sounding relieved.

Drake suppressed a sigh. Even on a small ship like theirs, gossip could become rampant. "I take it you weren't talking about me," he said wryly as he went to the coffeemaker.

"Just speculating why Rat's been spending so much time in Iluka's quarters, when they're both supposed to be asleep," Anusha said.

Drake blinked, startled by this information. "All of us have gone to the captain for something one time or another," he pointed out carefully.

"But three shifts in a row? That we know about, anyway?"

"Anusha is convinced that they're having a hot love affair," Tarak explained with a shake of his head.

Drake's hands tightened sharply on his coffee cup. "That's ridiculous."

"That's what I said," Tarak agreed.

Anusha shrugged. "I was just speculating. It just seems odd that they're spending that much time alone, without anyone else knowing what they're up to. And last shift, when I was walking past on my way to the shower, I saw Rat come out of her room. The bed looked pretty ruffled to me."

"I thought Rat turned down your offer because he's with Neva," Tarak pointed out. "So now he's trying to sneak around behind her back with a woman more than twice his age? On a ship this size, where he's bound to get caught? That doesn't make sense."

"He's crazy—don't expect him to be rational."

"Even if he is crazy, Iluka isn't," Drake said sharply.

Tarak pushed his plate away. "We're *all* getting crazy. Stuck on this damned boat, with the same people, jump after jump, and no choices for companionship. I don't know. Maybe Anusha's right."

Drake set his coffee mug down so hard that it made both Star Riders flinch. "Iluka isn't going to start sleeping with a crewmember just because she's lonely. That's absurd."

Tarak muttered something under his breath, then got up and left.

Anusha winced. "Sorry. I didn't mean to make that much trouble. I was just talking."

"Idle speculation doesn't do anyone any good. I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense. We have to work as a team, and gossip doesn't help things."

"Neither does sneaking around behind everyone else's back," Anusha said with a wry twist of her mouth. Then she held up her hands. "Never mind. Who gives a damn, really?"

I do. "Tarak has a point. Maybe we're all getting crazy."

"Maybe." Anusha shrugged, then climbed to her feet. "I'm off to spar with Juanita for a

while.”

It surprised him—she normally spent all her free time with Tarak. “You’re getting along, then?”

“Well enough.” Anusha hesitated, her eyes darkening suddenly. “Someone pointed out to me that I’ve been...a bit...smothering when it comes to Tarak. So I decided it wouldn’t hurt to find some new interests. Juanita’s right there in my quarters, so why not hang out with her?”

“Even though she’s a grounder?”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Sorry,” he said with a smile. Anusha dropped her dishes into the washer and headed out the door.

“Wish me luck,” she called as she left.

“Luck,” Drake said absently. But after she was gone, he sat for a while and stared at his breakfast as it got colder and colder.

* * *

“You’ve been quiet lately,” Neva commented. She and Rat were in the infirmary, using the down time as an opportunity to take inventory.

Rat had been sorting through a crate of bags filled with IV fluids, making certain that none of them had been compromised, and counting to see if the number they actually had matched what was stenciled on the crate. That was the problem with buying supplies on a pirate station, Neva reflected—you couldn’t ever be sure that no one had skimmed some for themselves, or was trying to pass off shoddy or expired goods, until you checked things personally.

“I’m sorry,” he said, setting one bag aside and picking up another. “I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

“We all have.” Neva hesitated, trying to put into words what had been taking shape in her mind. “After Paradise...and with our future so uncertain...we’re all worried. I try not to think about the future much, or at least I used to. Ever since I’ve come on board—no, ever since Mabon—I’ve been just...coasting along, never thinking ahead, just letting the future come as it would, without even trying to prepare for it.” She sighed and absently tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I don’t think I can do that anymore. I’m tired of feeling helpless, Rat. I’m tired of being surprised all the time. I want to be prepared for what comes.”

He glanced up from the bag that he’d been inspecting, a slight frown drawing his brows together. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” Neva stared at her hands, with their short trimmed nails. A few old scars showed faintly against her skin, the nicks and cuts of a lifetime. “Maybe it would help to have a better idea of where we’re going next. I think the captain said a secret Star Rider station?”

Rat’s hand jerked, and the bag of fluids fell to the floor. “Sorry,” he gasped, and snatched it up.

“It’s nothing. Are you all right? You seem tense.”

“No. Not tense.” He gave her a false smile that did nothing to dispel her concern. “Yes. A Star Rider station.”

Neva frowned, but decided to let the matter drop. “Well, that seems as good a place to begin as any. Do you know much about Star Riders? I was under the impression that they don’t usually let outsiders into their secret places. But then, Paradise started out as one of their holdings, so maybe I misunderstood.”

Rat's skin had taken on a yellowish hue. "You're right," he agreed quietly. "They don't usually let outsiders come to them. But when Anusha was visiting with the clans on Paradise, they gave her the coordinates of a safe haven. We're hoping that means that the rest of us will be allowed to put into port as well."

"So we might not be able to dock?"

"I don't know." Rat stood up sharply, wiping his hands on his thighs. "I have to go. I just remembered that I have a meeting with the captain."

"Oh. All right," she said, but he was already out the door.

* * *

Drake had told himself that he wasn't going to question Iluka. Things had been tense enough between them lately; prying into her personal life, where he had no business, wasn't going to go over well with her. Not to mention that if he repeated Anusha's gossip, she'd probably think he was insane, or perhaps just stupid.

And yet, here he was, standing outside her door.

God. Turn around, Drake. Leave. This doesn't concern you.

The door opened suddenly, making him jump. Iluka strode out, almost colliding with him before she realized he was even there. "Drake!"

"Sorry, Captain," he said, and sounded guilty even to himself.

Iluka rested one hand lightly on the doorframe, the beginnings of a frown on her face. "Were you coming to see me?"

He glanced up and down the corridor, but another excuse for his presence failed to miraculously appear. "Um, yes. Yes."

"Is there a problem?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Actually, that was what I wanted to ask you. Is there anything going on that I should know about?"

The frown disappeared from her face, and Drake felt a wash of relief, that she wasn't angry. "Of course not. You're my first mate, aren't you?"

"It's just that...you've been spending a lot of time with Rat, ever since we entered hyperspace. I wanted to make sure that everything's all right."

Iluka snorted. "You're the one who seemed to think I was using him badly. Maybe I decided to take your advice, stop thinking of him as a weapon. Seems to me that getting to know him better would be a logical first step, wouldn't it?"

"Aye, Captain." *"Getting to know him better"*—*what does that mean?* "Anything I can help with? If you need another hand for cards, or something."

Iluka gave him an easy smile. "Thanks for the offer, Drake. I'll keep it in mind."

It was then that he realized what he should have known all along: Iluka was showing him her trader's face. She had spent most of her life negotiating with merchants and dock masters, and she was canny enough to know when to hide her real thoughts behind a friendly façade.

She'd never been anything less than honest with him before, which was why he hadn't immediately seen through the charade. *But why is she doing this at all? What is she trying to hide from me?*

What the hell is going on here?

* * *

Rat jogged down the corridor, his heart pounding wildly. *It can't be*, he told himself, over and over. *It can't be Neva. Oh, Goddess, please, just this once, give me this one thing, just cut me some damned slack.*

But that wasn't how the universe worked, was it?

He had to calm down, had to think straight, but he couldn't. *Not going to accomplish anything this way.* Maybe he should have tried to read her, tried to dig deep enough to learn the truth with certainty—but worried and scared as he was, he didn't trust himself not to push too hard and hurt her.

I can't do that. Not even if it turns out I'm right. I can't hurt her.

He heard the rapid sound of boots tapping on the decking, just before he caught sight of Iluka. She walked quickly, purposefully, her mouth set into a straight line that betrayed nothing of the turmoil she was in.

...there he is, thank the Ancestors, didn't dare place a call over com to find him, not with Drake (grief) the com officer

"Captain," Rat said hurriedly. "I've been looking for you—I—"

"Not out here." Iluka put a hand to his arm, her fingers tightening on the muscle, and he felt her pain like a knife shoved in his chest. "The laundry's closest. In there."

There was nothing he could do but nod and lead the way towards what served as his quarters. Jasmine had been wandering the deck, occupying herself, but she caught sight of them as they opened the laundry door, and ran to him. He caught her up in his arms, burying his face in her fur. *Jasmine, oh Jasmine, you're all I've got.*

(distress) She tried to groom him with her good hand, her best means of comforting, and he was grateful even though it didn't do a thing to ease his fear.

"We've got trouble," Iluka said as soon as the door closed. Beside her, the dryer rattled and clanked loudly, so that Rat had to strain to make out her words. He supposed it at least meant they wouldn't be overheard.

"I know," he said numbly. "Neva—"

"Drake—"

They both broke off and stared at one another in surprise. "You first," Rat said after a moment.

Iluka leaned back against the dryer and crossed her arms over her chest. "Drake knows we're up to something. He showed up just a few minutes ago, asking questions, wanting to know what you were doing in my quarters. It was damned suspicious."

Her certainty took him aback. "Are you sure?" he asked cautiously. "I mean, there might be another explanation. What did he ask, exactly?"

"If there was something going on that he should know about."

"He's the first mate. It doesn't seem like an odd question to ask."

"Maybe," Iluka allowed. "But then he started asking more specific questions. Let me know that he knew you were involved somehow. I made up an excuse, that I just wanted to get to know you better, but he was persistent."

"Did it ever occur to you that, from Drake's point of view, we're the ones acting suspicious?"

Iluka frowned. "I told him that it was nothing. I don't see why he'd keep asking unless there's something more going on with him than the rest of us know."

Rat could certainly think of another explanation as to why Drake wanted to know what he

and Iluka were doing together. No matter what Marcus said, he wasn't *that* bad of a telepath. But that was the sort of private stuff that he was supposed to ignore, even if the people involved were shouting it at him, the way Iluka was now.

I won't say anything, unless Iluka starts talking about putting Drake out the airlock over this. Not my business, otherwise.

"I think you're reading too much into it," he said at last. "Because...I was coming to find you, to tell you that Neva was acting suspicious."

Iluka straightened. **(relief/hope) maybe it isn't Drake, Ancestors let me be wrong** "What happened?"

"We were in the infirmary, doing inventory. She...she started asking about our destination. About the Star Riders. And I remembered what Anusha always says—that the Zats hate the Star Riders, worse than anything, because of all their secrets."

"So you think Neva was trying to gather the information, so that she could somehow let the Zats know the location of a Star Rider holding?" Iluka guessed. Her brown eyes were thoughtful. "Did you sense a change in her? A different personality?"

"N-no. And it didn't seem as though she was lying about her reasons for asking. But what if she thought it wasn't a lie? What if she didn't know herself?"

A familiar scowl transformed Iluka's face. "Damn it, boy, what have we been wasting our time for, if that's the best you can do? *Did you sense anything?*"

"No!" Rat shivered, and Jasmine snuggled closer. "But I was afraid to probe. I was afraid to even stay there any longer, because I might push without meaning to, out of fear. I might hurt her."

For a moment, he thought Iluka might punch him. Instead, she hurled a virulent curse that made him flinch. "That's it—I've had enough. This can't go on. Besides the two of us, we know we can trust Juanita and Tarak. That's four of us, against four potential traitors. We're going to round them all up, have a sit-down, and none of us are going to leave until you've told me who the mole is."

Rat stared at her in horror. "I can't! I'm not ready!"

"You'll never *be* ready, damn your eyes! I'm not going to let your lack of confidence get us all killed, you understand me? You are going to do this, and you're going to do it right, and that's all there is to it."

Rat bit back an angry denial. In part, Iluka was right—he would never feel ready for any of this. He never had. Maybe, if things had been different in the beginning, if his abilities hadn't been so out of control, then he would feel better about using them now.

I hate being this way. I don't want this. I don't want any of it.

"Aye, Captain," he said quietly. "Just tell me what you want me to do."

* * *

Rat sat silently in the laundry, knowing that time was passing, but unable to force himself to move. Jasmine had fallen asleep on his shoulder, and he tried to concentrate on the feel of her fur on his skin, the soothing rhythm of her breathing. But the reality of his situation kept intruding.

Iluka didn't intend to waste any time. She was off gathering Tarak and Juanita, telling them everything that Rat had discovered or guessed. Because his blindness would make him a liability in a fight, Tarak would go to the bridge and monitor the situation remotely from there. Then Iluka would sound the com, calling everyone to the galley, supposedly for an emergency crew

meeting. Once Marcus, Anusha, Drake, and Neva were inside, Iluka, Juanita, and himself would enter with guns drawn. While Iluka and Juanita kept an eye on everyone, he would do his best to discover what horrors might be lurking, tucked deep away within the subconscious minds of his crewmates.

Unless the very announcement that they knew—guessed—about the secondary personality triggered it to emerge, in which case it would be easy to learn the mole's identity. He hoped that would be the case. He hoped he wouldn't have to dig too deeply.

He hoped he wouldn't kill anyone.

If he hurt Neva, he would never forgive himself. Never.

The com on the laundry wall *dinged*. "All crew, report to the galley immediately. All crew, report to the galley."

Rat closed his eyes. *I have to go. I have to do this. I have to.*

Time slipped by. Most likely, everyone was in the galley by now. Iluka and Juanita would be waiting for him. He couldn't delay any longer.

Even so, he let a few more precious minutes slide by, before climbing numbly to his feet. Jasmine complained when he pulled her loose and laid her on her soft nest on top of the washer, but quickly went back to sleep. Wishing that he could join her, Rat stepped out into the hall.

The sound of the lift startled him. Apparently, he'd been wrong in his timing, and everyone hadn't gone to the galley yet. Deciding that he might as well meet whomever it was, he went to the lift doors, tracking the lights that showed it moving between levels. It seemed to be coming up from the bridge, and he supposed it might be Anusha, assuming she had been with Tarak. Had the blind pilot been able to get rid of her with a lie, or would he be forced to come to the meeting as well, to keep her from growing suspicious?

The light glowed as the lift reached crew level...then kept going, all the way up to the spine.

What the hell?

He ought to call Iluka, tell her that something odd was going on. But maybe she already knew. For all he knew, it might have been Iluka in the lift, if something had gone wrong.

He should just go to the galley like he was supposed to, and let someone else worry about this. *I should just go...and get on with risking my friends' lives.*

Someone really ought to check on this. A few more minutes won't make that much of a difference.

His decision made, he punched the button to call the lift.

* * *

What now? Drake wondered wearily. With the bad luck they'd had recently, there could be a thousand reasons Iluka might call an unscheduled meeting of the whole crew. *The engines probably fell off the ship.*

"What's this about?" Anusha asked from the other end of the table. Marcus and Neva sat in between, looking just as confused as Anusha. Drake knew how they felt.

"I don't know. Iluka didn't say anything to me about calling a meeting," he said, and heard the trace of bitterness in his voice. *She doesn't tell me anything anymore.*

Time crept by. "Where the hell is everyone else?" Anusha complained, shifting in her seat.

"I don't know, but I'm not sitting here any longer." Marcus pushed his chair back and stood up. "I'm supposed to be in my sleep cycle. If it's so damned important that everyone be here, Iluka should at least have bothered to show up herself. Tell her I've gone back to bed."

Marcus strode to the door. It slid open, to reveal Iluka and Juanita waiting outside, both of them with guns in their hands.

Drake barely had time to register what he was seeing, when the two women brought their weapons to bear. Marcus stumbled back with an oath, grabbing for his own gun. Drake surged to his feet, drawing his weapon, although he wasn't sure what he was going to do with it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Anusha had done the same.

Neva let out a soft shout of surprise and dived behind her chair, which was probably the sensible thing to do. Even so, the movement caught Iluka's attention. "Everyone stay where you are!"

"What the hell is this about?" Marcus demanded.

Iluka clicked the safety off of her gun. "Don't you point that gun at me, Marcus Werner. Put it down! Now!"

Anusha leveled her gun at Iluka. "Where's Tarak?"

Juanita brought her rifle to bear on Anusha. "Safe. Don't worry. Just put down your weapon, yes?"

"You first."

"What is this about?" Neva asked. She started to rise, her hands held out from her sides, to show that she at least was unarmed.

"Stay down, Neva," Drake advised, and was grateful to hear that his voice sounded far steadier than he felt.

"She doesn't have anything to be afraid of," Iluka said. "Neither do the rest of you."

Drake met her dark gaze. His own weapon was aimed at the ceiling, but he didn't put it away. "I'd be a lot more convinced of that if you weren't pointing a gun at me, Captain," he said calmly.

"Sorry, Drake, but I've got no choice." Iluka's mouth thinned to a hard line. "It seems that someone on this boat is a mole, and we've narrowed the list of suspects to you four. Rat's going to come and suss out which of you it is. Until then, put your weapons down and stay calm."

A mole? But how? Drake remembered the look in her eyes earlier, and his heart sank. *She thinks it's me. How can she do that? After everything we've been through, how can she believe that I'd betray her?*

"I'm not letting that freak walk around in my brain," Marcus snarled. He still hadn't lowered his weapon.

"You are, or I'll shoot you down right now," Iluka replied.

Marcus hesitated, glancing around for support. "She means it," Drake said softly. "Don't you, Iluka?"

Something that might have been hurt flashed over Iluka's face and was gone. "Just do what you're told, all of you, and everything will be fine."

Neva very slowly moved out from behind her chair, then sat down. "Where is Rat?" she asked shakily.

"That's what I want to know," Iluka muttered. Apparently, everything wasn't going as she had planned. Keeping her eyes on them, she leaned over and punched the com panel. "Rat! Where the hell are you? Get your ass to the galley *now!* Hear me?"

But the only response was silence.

* * *

As the lift stopped on the level of the spine, gravity gave up its hold. Rat grabbed a handhold, doing his best to flatten himself against the wall, just in case the doors opened onto gunfire. Hopefully, whoever had sneaked down here wasn't paying attention and wouldn't realize that anyone had followed, but he wasn't taking any chances.

As soon as I see them—sense them—I'll stun them, the way I did with the crowd on Paradise, he thought. *Not a loud shout, just enough to incapacitate them. I hope. Oh, Goddess, don't let me kill anyone.*

The door opened with a soft tone, and Rat tensed. Nothing happened, though, and after a moment he chanced a peek out, into the spine.

A tether had been secured next to the lift, its line spooling out into the dimness, which was illuminated only by the soft glow of the lights by the hatches. On the other end of the tether, a figure was making its way slowly along the spine, dreads floating in a corona about his head in the absence of gravity. After a moment, Rat realized that it was Tarak.

Relief flooded through him. *Not our mole after all.*

"Is someone there?" Tarak called.

"Just me." Rat kicked off from the wall, drifting out of the lift. The doors slid softly shut behind him. "I thought...well, never mind. Do you need help? I'm supposed to be at the galley by now—Iluka's going to kill me."

He caught a convenient handhold, arresting his movement halfway to Tarak. For an instant, he felt confused, disoriented. Something was wrong, but it took him a moment to realize what.

Although he had spent months learning to ignore the incessant whisper of voices in his brain, the murmurs of the crew's thoughts had become a familiar background, like the color of the walls or the arrangement of the furniture. Now, though, he felt like a man who had inadvertently walked into the wrong house...because he didn't recognize the voice coming from Tarak at all.

"You—" he started.

There came a blinding flash of light. Pain slammed through Rat's entire body, as if every nerve ending had been ripped free and dipped in acid. He tried to scream, but nothing was working right. Spasms tore through his arms and legs, and the taste of blood filled his mouth.

The next thing he knew, he was drifting free, the convulsions having sent him spinning away from any handhold. Blinking, he tried to orient himself to a wall, but nothing seemed to be working right.

"I hear you breathing," Tarak said softly, sounding dangerously near. As Rat's inert body rotated slowly, the pilot came into view, cloud eyes gleaming faintly in the darkness. The muzzle of a short, ugly gun showed in one hand.

"Crowd control weapon," Tarak said mildly. "Broad range—enough to hit anything standing in the spine. A gun even a blind man can use."

He fired again.

Chapter 30: All Fall Down

Neva sat in the galley, her hands clenched in her lap, silently praying that no one got spooked and started shooting. The barrels of the guns that Iluka and Juanita held looked like dark eyes, staring death at her. How had it come to this, members of the crew pointing weapons at each other, distrust thick in the air?

A mole, Iluka had claimed, but she hadn't elaborated. A traitor among them.

"I thought Gavin Ionas was the traitor," Neva said, trying to sound calm.

"Seems he wasn't the only one," Iluka replied, her voice harsh and flat. She hit the com panel again. "Damn it, Rat, where the hell are you? Answer now, or I swear by the Ancestors that I'll put you out an airlock without a 'suit!'"

At last, the com crackled to life. But the shaky voice that came out of it didn't belong to Rat. "Captain? Tarak here. I...I found Rat. He's hurt—I don't know how bad."

Terror pooled through Neva's veins, and she came to her feet, barely aware of Juanita tracking the movement with her gun. "Where are you? I'll be right there!"

"No!" Tarak's voice cracked with strain. "Captain, don't let her! When I found him, Rat was still barely conscious. I asked who had done this to him...and he said a name. Neva."

What the...? Neva felt the blood drain from her face. "Then he was delirious," she said, striving to stay calm. "I would never hurt any of you. Now please, let me go to him. If he's hurt, he needs my help."

The flat look in Iluka's eyes made her heart sink. "I should have listened to Rat earlier. He told me that you were acting strangely, but I thought...never mind."

"He thought *I* was acting strangely?" Goddess, if they both lived through this, she was going to kill him. "Iluka, *listen* to me! I didn't do anything—I wouldn't hurt anyone! You *know* that."

Iluka shook her head slowly, almost regretfully. "Do I? What really went on, those two years in the hospital? You say they were putting you back together—but what else happened? I'll tell you what I think. The Zats were there the entire time, digging around in your brain, stripping away everything you were and burying a sleeper personality that would jump to their orders. There wasn't even anyone left alive who would notice if the new you was any different from the old."

No. Goddess, no. "That isn't what happened," Neva said. "*Please*, Iluka, just let me help Rat. Maybe I can bring him around, and he can *tell* you I didn't do anything."

"Don't!" Tarak's voice over the com again; he'd been listening in. "I don't know how bad Rat's hurt, but he's out cold. If she gets near him, she'll kill him, to keep him from blowing her cover!"

"No!" Neva started around the table, then froze as even more guns leveled at her. "It isn't true, I swear!"

“Lock her up, while we see to Rat and decide what to do next,” Iluka ordered.

“Hold up,” Marcus said, when Juanita moved to obey. “Neva carries all sorts of junk around in those pockets on her pants. She could have a tranq, or poison, or anything. Make her empty them.”

Neva wondered if she ought to feel flattered that Marcus gave her credit for being dangerous. Anusha made a short motion with her weapon. “Take off your pants.”

“Fine.” Neva kicked off her shoes, undid her belt, and let her trousers fall, leaving her in nothing more than a tank top and her underwear. “Satisfied? You can see for yourself that I don’t have anything on me, so why not let me take a look at Rat, all right? You can stand there with a gun at my temple the whole time if you’d like, just let me see him.”

“Sorry, Whitestone, but that’s too dangerous.” Iluka gestured to the other two women. “Juanita, Anusha, take her to the laundry, take out Rat’s stuff so she can’t use it, and lock her in.”

“Captain, please, just let me see him, I won’t come close, just let me—”

“Stow it,” Anusha snarled. “Come on, traitor. And keep your hands where I can see them.”

Her heart pounding with a mixture of fear and frustrated anger, Neva slowly walked around the table and out of the galley. Juanita and Anusha followed her, and she could all but feel the guns pointed at her back.

This can’t be happening, she thought wildly. I have to make them understand that I’m innocent. I have to help Rat.

Goddess, please let him be all right.

* * *

Drake sat in the galley, his head in his hands, trying not to despair. Marcus had gone to help Tarak with Rat, and Anusha and Juanita were busy with Neva, which left only himself and Iluka to wait.

“What are we going to do with her?” he asked quietly, after a long silence.

“Whatever we have to.” Iluka didn’t look at him, all of her concentration seeming to focus on the cup of coffee she had poured for herself.

Drake let his hands fall, knowing that he was on shaky ground with her, but unwilling to keep silent. “You thought it was me.”

She shrugged, just a quick lift of one brown shoulder. “I didn’t rule it out.”

“No. You came here, expecting to find out that I was the one.” He felt hurt, bewildered. “Why?”

Iluka took a sip of her coffee, still staring off in another direction, as if she’d look anywhere but at him. “Because that was what I most dreaded.”

Whatever he might have said died in his throat. He wanted to ask her just what she meant by that, but the words wouldn’t come.

The door slid open, and Marcus walked in. As if glad for an excuse to change the subject, Iluka said, “How’s Rat doing?”

Marcus shook his head. “Couldn’t say. I’m no medic, and neither is Tarak. I didn’t see any wounds on him, but that doesn’t mean anything. Whatever happened, he’s still out. Tarak’s getting him settled and secured.” Marcus shrugged. “Not much we can do except wait for him to wake up.”

Voices sounded down the hall. A few moments later, Anusha and Juanita came in, followed by Tarak. “The prisoner is secure,” Juanita reported. Although her expression betrayed nothing,

Drake wondered if she was beginning to regret her involvement with the *Exile*.

"I don't see why we're bothering to lock her up," Anusha grumbled as she dropped into a seat. "It would be a hell of a lot faster to put her out the airlock now instead of later."

Drake felt his blood turn cold. "We haven't made that decision—at least, not so far as I'm aware."

He cast a questioning glance at Iluka. "No," she said after a moment's pause. "We haven't."

"You can't be serious!" Tarak burst out. He stood behind an empty chair, his hands gripping it so hard that his knuckles paled. "She's a traitor! An agent of the Zats! She's already tried to kill one of us—surely you aren't going to give her a chance to do away with the rest of the crew as well!"

The outburst surprised Drake. Anusha, he had expected to argue for Neva's execution, but not the gentle pilot. "I know this is upsetting," he said carefully. "Which is exactly *why* we need to take our time and think about what needs to be done, instead of just reacting. Iluka says that Rat suspected our traitor might have an implanted personality, a sleeper. The sleeper would be aware of everything that went on, even when she wasn't in control, whereas the original personality would experience periods of memory loss whenever the sleeper took over. Can we hold Neva responsible for actions she may not even recall?"

"We have to protect ourselves," Tarak argued. "I'm sorry for what happened to Neva, I'm sure it wasn't her fault, but the fact remains that she's a danger to us all. Go down to the infirmary now if you want to see what she's capable of."

Iluka sighed. "We're on mark for drop in less than an hour. After we make drop and get this boat turned for the next jump, we'll make a decision. Until then, everyone calm down. I want everyone's mind on business—no mistakes, hear me?"

"I'll get Rat secured for the jump," Tarak offered.

Marcus' blue eyes narrowed slightly. "I can do that. You ought to be on the bridge."

"It won't take but a few seconds," Tarak argued. "Just let me do this."

Marcus shrugged. "Sure. Whatever you want." He hesitated, then glanced at Iluka. "Captain, there's no guarantee Neva won't try to find some way out of the laundry and finish the job. I know it isn't likely, but who knows what kind of spy training the Zats programmed into her? I'd feel better if someone rode through drop down here, just to be sure. I'm more than willing to do it."

Iluka nodded. "All right. Tarak, hurry it up in the infirmary. I want you on the bridge in ten minutes. Then rest of you, get to work."

* * *

Neva perched on the dryer, staring bleakly at her linked hands. *Goddess, I have to get out of here. I have to. Please, help me.*

As soon as the door had closed behind her, she'd set about searching the room for something, anything, that might help her escape. Anusha and Juanita had been thorough, however; there weren't even any clothes left in the dryer. They'd even stowed Jasmine in her little carrier and taken her away, to be secured somewhere else during drop. The only thing that remained was the hammock/safety web hanging in the corner, but try as she might, Neva couldn't imagine how that would be of any use to her.

The air was cold against her bare legs, so she'd turned on the empty dryer for heat. Although she would have enjoyed the feel of the warm metal under normal circumstances, at the

moment it was the only thing that stood between her and complete misery. Worry for Rat wrung her heart, combined with concern for herself. What would Iluka do to her? How badly was Rat hurt? Would this insanity see either or both of them dead before they reached the Star Rider station?

After what seemed like an eternity, the door opened. Marcus stepped inside, and hastily shut it behind him. In his hand he held her discarded shoes and trousers.

Neva straightened. "What's happening?"

"I'm either making a giant mistake, or preventing one," Marcus said grimly. He tossed her clothing onto the dryer beside her. "Put your pants on."

To Neva's surprise, all of her things were still in the pockets. "So what mistake are you about to make?"

Marcus sighed and leaned against the wall, fixing her with his pale eyes. "Tarak wants you dead awfully bad. I figure there are three possible reasons for that. One, he's afraid of you. Two, he's the guilty party and is trying to pin it on you. Three, he's jealous and sees this as an opportunity to get you out of the way and have Rat to himself, and whether or not you're guilty is beside the point."

Neva blinked, startled by Marcus' line of reasoning. "I don't think—"

"I was there for the whole 'I seduced Tarak' conversation, remember? Not that I wanted to be. I used to teach ancient literature, so I know a little bit about history. Using treachery to get rid of a sexual rival isn't a new invention; we've been doing it since the dawn of time." Marcus shook his head in disgust. "Why so many people want in that crazy bastard's pants, I don't see, but fighter pilots always get laid."

"I don't think Tarak would have me killed just to get rid of me," Neva said hesitantly.

"Why not? Anyway, the fact that you're arguing for his innocence makes me think that you aren't guilty. Or you're just stupid, which I'm not ruling out."

Neva didn't think Marcus was correct about Tarak, but he was right about one thing: it was foolish to argue with him when he was offering her a way out. "Take me to Rat—he's the only one who knows who actually attacked him."

The grim look on Marcus' face made her heart stutter. "He's out of it, Neva. Out cold. I helped carry him up from the spine, where Tarak found him, and—"

"What was Tarak doing in the spine?"

"He claimed that when Rat didn't answer Iluka's summons, he got worried, and decided to search. Came across him in the spine just as he was going out."

"Convenient," Neva muttered.

The corner of Marcus' mouth twitched into a faint smile. "That's what I thought. Come on, then."

The corridor was deserted; presumably, everyone else was on the bridge, making ready for reentry into the normal universe. Marcus led the way to the infirmary, then stood to one side while she entered.

Rat lay on the diagnostic bed, the safety web pulled tight across him. Moving quickly, Neva snapped the web loose with one hand, turning on the diagnostics function with the other. What she saw chilled her.

"Breathing is shallow," she said aloud, for Marcus' benefit. "Pulse weak. What injuries did you find?"

Marcus shrugged. "I didn't see anything, but I only took a quick look. No wounds."

Neva swore silently. "Help me get his clothes off."

While Marcus propped up Rat's limp body, Neva yanked off his coat, then his shirt—then stopped. Against the golden skin of his upper back, half-hidden by his dreadlocks, was a line of dermal patches.

Pulling on a protective glove, Neva peeled them off quickly, one at a time. "What's that?" Marcus asked.

"Tranquilizers." Anger flushed through Neva. "Whoever put them on him wanted to keep him quiet, and thought that putting more than one on would keep him out longer. But these things are *dangerous*."

"Great. Can you bring him around?"

Neva didn't reply, too busy opening cabinets and filling syringes. She needed something to stimulate his system, to counteract the depressant effect of the tranqs. Thank the Goddess he was still breathing; if they had taken much longer to reach him, she didn't know if he would have been.

His breathing improved almost immediately after the injections. Hoping that her hunch was right, and she could help him another way, she sat down by him and laid her hands along either side of his face. "Rat," she said quietly, urgently. "Come on, sweetie. We need you to wake up."

After what seemed like a long time, his eyelids fluttered. "Neva," he mumbled. "Wha...?"

She brushed her hand lightly across his face. "How are you feeling?"

"Thirsty."

While Neva dug out a squeezebottle, Rat managed to sit up. His hands shook visibly as he drained it, but when he set the empty bottle aside, he looked a bit steadier. "What happened?"

"You're supposed to tell us that," Marcus said from the doorway. "I carried you up from the spine—you were unconscious, and that was before all the tranqs."

Rat's amber eyes went wide with alarm. "Tarak! I saw the lift go down to the spine—I remember going to find out what was happening. I saw Tarak standing there, and then..." He paused, then shook his head. "That's all. I don't remember what happened next."

Neva took his hand. "It looks like Tarak attacked you, then tried to blame it on me."

Rat's fingers tightened on hers. "I don't understand. How could Tarak be the sleeper? The Zats took his sight—it doesn't make any sense!"

"Nothing on this damn boat has made any sense lately," Marcus said bluntly. "What matters is that right now, that traitor is up on the bridge, at the controls, waiting to take the ship through drop." He turned to the com panel and punched it. "Marcus to Iluka—answer."

Silence.

"Iluka, do you read? Drake? Anybody? Hello? Damn it!" Marcus slammed his hand against the com unit. "Of all the times for the damned thing to give up the ghost, why the hell does it pick now?"

"I just had a bad thought," Rat said. "What if it isn't a coincidence? Tarak's board has attachments that allow him to pilot the ship. When his rig was wired in, what if it ended up connected to more systems than it was strictly supposed to?"

Neva felt her blood turn to ice. "Does that mean he knows we're on to him?"

"With our luck? Of course he does," Marcus said darkly. "One good thing is that he seems to want you alive, crazy man, so at least he can't play around with the life support just to get rid of Neva and me."

Rat shivered. "The Zats want me back," he said. Neva gave his hand a squeeze, and he flashed her a rueful look. "Tarak must be under orders not to kill me."

"Doesn't matter now." Marcus checked the charge on his weapon, then, satisfied, held it

loosely in his hand "If we can't use the com, we'll have to go to the bridge ourselves."

"We're in countdown to drop," Neva pointed out. "We've got, what, ten minutes? We have to take hold!"

"Plenty of time." Marcus strode out of the room. Wincing, Rat slid off the bed and onto his feet.

"Are you going to be all right?" Neva asked hesitantly.

Rat nodded, even though he was far from steady, and managed a wan smile for her. "I'll be fine. Come on—Marcus is going to need us."

By the time they made it to the lift, they found Marcus beating at the controls and swearing furiously. Neva's heart sank. "Tarak has frozen it, hasn't he?"

"It, but not us." Marcus jammed his gun back in its holster, and began to tug on the doors to force them apart. "I'll climb down the damned shaft if I have to."

"Are you insane? If the ship drops and brakes while you're in there, you'll be killed! We have to get to a take hold!"

Marcus shook his head, not ceasing his tugging on the doors. "I don't know what that bastard has planned, or what he was doing down in the spine, but I don't want him in control of this ship when we come back out into normal space."

Rat looked back and forth between them for a moment...then stepped past Neva and added his effort to the doors. "Get to a take hold," he told her, panting for breath as the doors reluctantly edged open, revealing the shaft beyond. "We'll be fine."

"I'm not leaving you to get killed." Silently questioning all their sanity, she added her own strength to the doors, and they slowly slid open.

The inside of the shaft was dark. A narrow emergency ladder ran up just to the left of the doors, recessed so that it wouldn't interfere with the operation of the lift. "Damned dark," Marcus muttered, peering in. Neva fished a small flashlight out of her copious pockets and handed it to him silently.

Holding the light in his teeth, Marcus swung onto the ladder and started to descend. "You next," Rat said, and Neva did as he asked.

The ladder seemed to vanish into darkness. Neva tried not to look down, only stared at the wall as they went. At least they were going down and not up, she thought wryly.

Warning claxons sounded, muffled by the walls but still audible through the open doors above them. "Three minutes until drop. Take hold; take hold; take hold."

We're not going to make it.

The lift was parked at bridge level; Marcus hopped off the ladder onto the roof and yanked open the emergency hatch. "Hurry!"

Neva risked jumping the last few feet, and landed badly, scraping her knees. Cursing softly, she slithered down through the hatch into the lift car. Marcus shoved her towards the take hold inside, even as Rat dropped down beside her. The take hold wasn't much—just a couple of handholds to grip, and a single safety web.

Rat pushed her against the wall, yanked the safety web across her, and grabbed the handholds to either side of her body, so that he was pinned against her. Swearing furiously, Marcus grabbed one handhold with his left hand, while with the other he palmed the override to open the doors.

"Hold for drop."

"It's Tarak!" Marcus shouted as the doors slid open. "He's the sleeper! He—"

The ship dropped, the transition back into normal space making Neva momentarily feel as

though the lift car had given way beneath her, plunging into freefall. Rat's arms suddenly tensed to either side of her, and Marcus yelled as his feet went out from under him.

Then the ship *braked*, hard, and suddenly the front of the lift was most definitely *down*. Marcus' body flew towards the doors, stopped only by the hold he still had with his left hand. The sound of tearing muscle and cartilage was loud, drowned out only by Marcus' howl of pain. His grip came loose, and he slammed into the wall beneath the control panel.

"What the hell is going on?" Iluka bellowed. "Tarak, what are you doing to my ship? Stand down, now!"

Anusha's voice, loud and panicked: "Tarak, what are you doing? Don't listen to Marcus—we know it isn't true!"

Rat's head whipped around. "Look out, he's got a weapon!"

There came a loud crack, like lightning, and someone screamed. *Some sort of electrical weapon*, Neva realized, even as she struggled against the restraints of the safety web. *That's why Rat didn't have any wounds on him.*

"Tarak, *stop!*" Anusha shouted.

Then the world stood on its head, the ship *accelerating* instead of braking. Only the safety web kept Neva from hitting the back of the lift. Marcus' body slammed into her legs, and Rat's; his good arm locked around her calf with bruising force.

"Stun him!" Marcus yelled at Rat. "God damn you, use your damned brain and put him down!"

"Shut up!" Rat shouted back. "My head's still fuzzy from the tranqs, so shut up so I can concentrate!"

The lift doors slammed shut, and the whole thing lurched into motion.

"Oh no you don't." Tarak's voice came from the com by the control panel. "It becomes harder to do anything from a distance, doesn't it? That's what they told me on Prospero Station."

Neva's heart sank. When the rest of them had been captured by the Obsidian Blades, someone must have taken the opportunity to contact Tarak's sleeper personality.

"The most dangerous man in the universe," Tarak was musing. "But the most valuable, too. You have no idea how badly they want you back. Tell you what—kill the two rebels with you, and we'll sit tight together while we wait for Colonel Hunter to arrive. How does that sound?"

Rat didn't answer; his eyes were closed, and Neva guessed that he was trying to make contact with Tarak's mind. His face was only inches from her own, and she could see the lines of frustration spring up around his eyes.

"What did you do to the rest of the crew?" Neva demanded, hoping to distract Tarak for a few critical moments before he could do any more damage to them. The lift had reached the spine and came to a halt, but the acceleration pressure hadn't eased, and they couldn't move around in any kind of safety. "You shot them with some sort of electrical weapon. Broad range, I'd guess, so you wouldn't have to aim."

"I don't have any orders to keep them alive. By the time the Blades get here, they won't be. Safer, that way."

Damn it. "How can you take orders from the Zats?" Neva asked. "They tortured you, blinded you! How can you serve them?"

The laugh from the com made her hair stand on end. Whoever that laugh belonged to, it wasn't the Tarak she had known. "Ah, but the Zats didn't take my sight," he said bitterly. "That fool Tarak did it to himself. The...conditioning...wasn't complete. He was aware that something was happening to him, even if he didn't know what. The fool blinded himself, so he wouldn't

have to look in the mirror and see *me* staring back.”

Dear Goddess. Neva let out a gasp of horror. The pickups must have gotten it, because Tarak laughed again. “Not that it did him any good. A couple of sessions convinced him that the Zatvians had done it to him, made him forget what he had been so afraid of. After that, it was safe for me to come out and play.” Another nasty laugh. “But then that bitch sister of his screwed everything up by rescuing him before we were ready. The conditioning hadn’t taken completely, so instead of running right back to the Star Riders where I could perform my mission, he actually started *avoiding* them. He was *scared*. So I ended up trapped on this miserable ship, in this miserable, blind body, unable to fulfill my mission, all because of him.”

There came a faint moan over the com...then Iluka’s voice, nothing but a thread of sound. “What have you...my ship...”

“Sorry, Iluka,” Tarak said cheerfully. “But it’s time to die.”

There came the sudden crack of gunfire. Rat jerked, as if shot, and his eyes flew open. For a moment, Neva found herself staring back at him, and she saw a look of utter horror in his eyes. Then, with a muffled moan, he leaned against her, hiding his face against her hair.

Not Iluka, Goddess, he’s killed her...

Acceleration suddenly eased, and the lift floor became *down* once again. The com crackled...and Anusha’s voice came out.

“Help,” she said in a small voice. “Neva, please...I’ve shot Tarak.”

* * *

Rat sat on the floor outside of the infirmary, his head bowed and his hands loosely clasped around his knees. Anusha sat across from him; she hadn’t moved in all the hours since she had sunk to the decking, crushed by despair. The image of Tarak, his face twisted beyond recognition, played over and over in her mind, accompanied by the way the gun had kicked in her hand, the arc his blood had made, racing for the far wall. The scene played out again and again, her mind caught in a loop that wouldn’t let her go.

Neva had immediately taken charge of the situation, ordering Rat to carry Tarak down from the bridge even as she fought to stem the gush of blood. Marcus had done what he could to help, but he had only one good arm. Iluka, Juanita, and Drake had been left to come around on their own, which they had managed to do without complication. Drake was on the bridge now, explaining things to the *Red Cloud*, which had come out of hyperspace to find the *Exile* nowhere near the position it was supposed to be occupying. At the moment, fighters from the *Red Cloud* were sweeping the area, searching for whatever tattletale Tarak had been in the process of setting up when Rat had discovered him. Presumably, it would have dropped off as soon as they reentered normal space to leave a trail for the Blades to follow.

Rat longed to launch the *Cuchulainn* and join the sweep. It would be quiet out there, away from grief and terror and pain. At least Tarak had been unconscious; Marcus was in utter agony, even though he hid it as well as he could, not wanting to distract Neva from Tarak. And any physical pain was far eclipsed by Anusha’s internal anguish.

Iluka paced the corridor, circling around and around, passing by the closed doors of the infirmary at clockwork intervals. He could hear her boots approaching yet again, tapping and tapping on the floor...

The door opened. Startled, he looked up into Neva’s pale face. He had been trying not to listen for her, trying to block out even that most familiar voice, because he had been afraid to

hear what it might tell him. But now, at this proximity, he had no defense against her.

She looked haggard, her eyes circled by dark bruises that might have been from weariness and might have been from the rapid acceleration and deceleration that Tarak had put the ship through. Her gloves and smock were stained with blood; she'd already pulled off the hood that protected her during surgery and tossed it into the biohazard disposal.

Iluka halted. "What's the news?"

Neva's mouth tightened, but she looked at Anusha instead of the captain. "I'm sorry. There were just too many damaged organs; while I tried to save one, two others were giving out. Tarak died about five minutes ago."

Anusha let out a small hiccupping sob, and buried her face in her hands. "I'm very sorry," Neva said again, stripping off her gloves and her bloodied smock.

Anusha swallowed and wiped her eyes. "I know you did everything you could," she said in a low, quavering voice like nothing Rat had ever heard from her before. "Can I...can I see him?"

"Of course."

Rat helped Anusha to her feet. **I did this, what am I going to do, my fault, my fault, my fault**

He let go of her quickly; she didn't seem to notice, moving past them and into the infirmary like a sleepwalker. Neva would have taken the time to arrange Tarak properly, to cover the gaping hole in his abdomen, to wipe off the blood, so that Anusha would be confronted with a body that looked as much at peace as was possible.

As soon as Anusha was gone, Neva glanced at him. "Where is Marcus?"

"Waiting in the galley, with Juanita," Rat said. He wanted to touch her, but sensed that wouldn't be welcome. Not yet. "He's in a lot of pain."

Neva's mouth tightened. "Aren't we all," she said, and went to see her next patient.

* * *

Marcus' shoulder turned out to be dislocated. With the help of Rat, Juanita, and a good dose of muscle relaxants, Neva shoved it back into place with a loud pop and a lot of cursing from Marcus. Only when everyone else had left, did she sag, and Rat felt the full weight of her exhaustion and sorrow. "You didn't fail," he told her.

She sighed and pushed back hair that had gone stiff with sweat. "Intellectually...I know that. I did everything I could. There are times when nothing you do makes any difference, and you just have to accept that. But my heart says that I was supposed to do more. That everyone was counting on me, and I let them down. That I let him die."

"That isn't true, Neva." He held out a hand to her, and she took it wearily. "Come on. You'll feel better after a shower and some sleep."

She let him lead her to the shower, and leaned on his arm while she pulled off her boots. He helped her strip, careful to keep the touch that of a friend rather than a lover. A ridge of scar tissue arced from below her collarbone across one breast; he caught a flash of worry from her, that he might think her ugly, but she was too tired to spend much energy on such thoughts now.

You're beautiful to me, he thought, but this wasn't the time or place for that. Instead, he kissed her softly on the forehead, helped her into the shower, and left.

Jasmine's carrier was in Neva's quarters, and she was anxious to be let out. She ran about wildly as soon as she was freed, jumping and leaping in the sheer joy of being alive. Her antics made him smile, despite everything, as he searched Neva's drawers for some old, comfortable

clothes to take back to the shower.

“Thank you,” she said, when she found him waiting patiently outside. Other than that, neither of them spoke; it wasn’t necessary. Back in her quarters, he helped her into bed, stripped off his jacket and boots, and slid under the covers with her, still in his shirt and pants. With his arms around her, she cried for a long time, until weariness and grief took them both down into sleep.

Chapter 31: Interlude

Neva carried a container loaded with coffee and sandwiches up from the galley, balancing it carefully so as not to spill. Although the container would keep the cups and plates from turning into projectiles if the ship underwent any sudden movements, she had been in space long enough now that it made her slightly nervous anyway.

The lift doors opened onto the bridge, and Neva stepped out, almost tripping over a loose cable as she did so. Both the pilot's and navigator's boards were partially dismantled; panels lay propped haphazardly against chairs and walls, while cables and bundles of conduit straggled everywhere, like the tentacles of some strange sea creature. Iluka sat cross-legged on the floor, scowling at the delicate wiring on a device she held in one hand, prodding at it with a tiny instrument of some kind.

"I thought you might like lunch," Neva said, glancing uncertainly at the disarray.

"Does that offer include coffee?" Rat called; his voice sounded muffled. After a few moments of searching, she discovered a pair of legs sticking out from beneath the half-gutted pilot's board.

"It does."

Rat slid out from under the board. His shirt and pants were rumpled and stained, and he had a small gel bandage on his thumb to seal a cut. "The mercy of the Goddess must have sent you," he said fervently. "I was starting to consider taking a nap under there and hoping that Iluka wouldn't notice."

"The snores would have given it away," Iluka replied. With a sigh, she tossed aside the part she had been working on. "Not that I'm complaining, but why is our medic suddenly running food and coffee?"

"I thought you might need it. You've been working nonstop all shift."

Rat patted the spot on the floor beside him. "Join us?"

She sat down by him, close enough that their knees touched. "How are things coming?" she asked as she passed a sandwich to Rat and selected one for herself.

"A damned sight slower than it would be if we had Anusha to help us," Iluka answered. "But I couldn't ask her, so I suppose we'll muddle through."

"Disconnecting Tarak's gear itself isn't too hard," Rat added, between bites of his sandwich. "It's making sure that there aren't any nasty surprises wired in with it that's the trick. And I'm just a fighter jock—I know some of the mechanics, but not well enough to work with any kind of speed. I have to keep stopping and asking Iluka what to do, which slows us down."

Neva winced slightly at the mention of Tarak's name. She missed his quiet, gentle presence already. *And the way he died...that just makes everything so much worse.*

"How is Anusha doing?" she asked quietly.

"I've got her on maintenance duty—I figured it would give her something to do other than brood." Iluka shrugged. "She said that the funeral would wait until we get to the Star Rider station, although I think it would do this crew better to get it over with sooner."

Rat turned his coffee cup around and around aimlessly. "She's angry," he said quietly, not looking at any of them. "She blames me, for not having realized earlier."

Iluka shook her head. "That's foolishness."

"It really isn't."

Neva put her hand to his shoulder; the lean muscles beneath were tense as wires. "It's the Zats' fault, Rat. They're the ones who did this to him."

"Listen to the woman," Iluka advised, and finished her coffee with a gulp. "And speaking of the Zats, we'd better get this boat ready to move before they come in behind us. Their agent seemed pretty confident they were on the way."

Their agent. Tarak.

No, not Tarak. Tarak was gone even before then.

He never even got the chance to say goodbye.

Rat finished his coffee as well. "Yeah. They aren't going to stop looking for me."

Iluka gave him a grim smile. "They want you, but we've got you. Enough reason to keep you, even if you didn't come in handy once in a while. Now stop lollygagging and get back to work."

* * *

As Neva took her seat at scan, she silently reflected that the new seating arrangement on the bridge drove home the fact that Tarak wasn't coming back in a way that nothing else had. Iluka now occupied what had been his place; she had once been the ship's pilot, before her promotion to captain. *Hopefully, she still remembers all the tricks*, Neva thought uneasily. Although she had seen Iluka fly a courier vessel, a freighter-turned-pirate ship was an entirely different proposition, at least according to Rat. It didn't help that Iluka was running on long hours with little sleep.

A brief check on Anusha trebled Neva's worry. The Star Rider looked bad, her rich brown skin dull, with darker circles under her bloodshot eyes. Creases and stains showed on her clothing, and grime crusted her fingernails. The most troubling thing was the look in her eyes; they were lifeless, dark as dying suns. It reminded Neva of the expressions she'd seen on patients who had given up the struggle to live.

Curse it. If anyone sent them all to the back of beyond, it would be Anusha. But she was their only navigator; they had no choice but to rely on her.

Juanita was riding out their movements in crew quarters, while Rat was stationed in the *Cuchulainn*. The last was just a precaution; there had been no sign of the Zats yet, but if the need did arise, he wouldn't be able to get to the fighter while the ship was undergoing maneuvers.

The bridge crew itself was unnaturally quiet, with none of the usual chatter between stations. The silence added to the gloomy air, and made Neva feel as though they were all holding their breath, although for what she didn't know.

Iluka finally broke the prolonged silence. "All right, everyone, get ready. Our speed is good, but our position is bad. We've got some maneuvering to do before we can get out of here. Take hold, take hold, take hold."

Out of the corner of her eye, Neva saw Anusha flinch. Hearing the words spoken by

someone other than Tarak felt strange, wrong, even to Neva's ears; what must it be like for Anusha?

Iluka's hands moved across the reconfigured boards, and Neva felt the beginnings of acceleration, pushing her back and to one side. Reminding herself that she had a task of her own, Neva hurriedly turned her attention back to her boards. The *Red Cloud* shone green on scan, its position between the *Exile* and the point where they had entered the system. *Guarding our backs, in case the Zats come through.* Smaller blips showed where fighters patrolled around the warship, and she wondered if Rat would have preferred to be out there with them, rather than leashed to the *Exile*.

It was a long, monotonous business, getting the ship back on course. Being in a nearly-empty system made things worse; there was nothing to look at but two ships, the fighters, a few asteroids, and a lone mass point. Before long, Neva's mind began to wander. So far, the *Exile* and the *Red Cloud* were the only refugees from Paradise who had taken this route. How many others had escaped, and where had they gone? Were the Zats even now hunting the last of the pirates who had defied them? Or did other safe ports exist that she knew nothing of?

When the red blips first appeared on her screen, Neva stared blankly at them for several seconds before her mind registered exactly what she was seeing.

"Priority!" she shouted. "Zatvian ships have entered the system!"

Marcus swore furiously, and Anusha let out a gasp of pained breath. "Get Joshua on the horn!" Iluka ordered. "What's our lag time?"

The lag-time counter appeared. "I'm reading two ships, both Kleggers," Neva said. "Make that four. No, three. One of lead ships just...disappeared?"

"Has the *Red Cloud* engaged them already?" Iluka asked, sounding surprised.

"No. I'm not sure what happened," Neva confessed helplessly. She expected mocking words from Anusha, but for once the navigator said nothing.

Joshua's voice sounded over allship; Drake had apparently patched him through. "Hold your course, Iluka. We've already taken out one of them."

Iluka scowled in puzzlement. "What the hell are you doing back there, Ten Bears?"

It seemed to take forever for his answer to reach them; in the meantime, a second Klegger dropped off scan. "When my fighters were out looking for the pointer your traitor had left, we took the opportunity to lay mines along the trajectory of anyone coming in from Paradise."

"Tarak wasn't a traitor!" Anusha said. A quick glance revealed a murderous look on her face.

Iluka didn't acknowledge the remark. "Damned dangerous," she muttered. Neva silently agreed—what if the ships coming in had been allies escaping Paradise?

"Don't complain—we've destroyed two of them, but the rest got lucky and are beyond the perimeter. My fighters will take care of them—hold your course. Ten Bears out."

Rat's voice sounded on the heels of Joshua's transmission. "Requesting permission to launch."

"Denied!" Iluka snapped. "We're too far out for you to do any good, and too close to jump to let you go wandering without risking leaving you behind."

"Then we should turn and fight!" Anusha burst out unexpectedly.

"Belay that! Our job is to get out of here."

"You mean to run away like cowards!" Tears of rage edged Anusha's voice, barely restrained. "After what the Zats did to Tarak, we're just going to run away, like he didn't even matter—"

"Enough." Iluka didn't raise her voice, but there was warning in it.

"You know that isn't true," Neva said, searching desperately for something that would make Anusha feel better, "We all cared about Tarak—"

Anusha rounded on her with a snarl. "Shut up! *You're* the one who let him die! You were angry with him because he accused you, you didn't care if it wasn't really him, and you let him die!"

The accusation felt like a punch to the gut—worse, in some ways. Taking a deep, shaky breath to calm herself, Neva said, "That isn't true, Anusha. I did everything I could for Tarak. If my skills were inadequate, then I'm sorry, but I would never deliberately—"

"That's what you say, but we only have your word for that, don't we?"

Rat's voice cut suddenly over the com. "Shut up, Anusha. If you want to blame me, fine. But don't put this off on Neva."

"Oh, I blame you, all right!"

"Then we'll have this out when we put into station. Just you and me. But you have to get us there first."

"*Enough,*" Iluka snapped. "One more word out of any of you that doesn't pertain to the business of flying this ship, and I'm putting the lot of you out the airlock."

Neva hurriedly bent her head to her screens. Behind them, the fighters swarmed the remaining Kleggers. Ahead of them was only emptiness, as the *Exile* hurtled unimpeded towards jump.

* * *

Neva sat meditating in front of a small piece of raw amethyst, breathing in the scents of sandalwood and lavender oils wafting from a diffuser. She breathed deeply, slowly, seeking peace, but any that she found was disrupted when the chime sounded at her door.

With a heavy sigh, she switched off the diffuser. "Come in."

Rat entered, Jasmine riding on his shoulder, her tail looped loosely around his neck. "Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all." She gestured for him to come sit by her. "How are you doing?"

He shrugged, looking at the crystal rather than at her. "I'm tired, I guess. A couple of days of downtime while we're in hyperspace would be nice."

Neva reached for his hand. "About Anusha...there's no reason to blame you. No reason to blame anyone. She's just angry, lashing out in her pain. Don't take it to heart."

Rat gave her a rueful smile. "Believe me, I'm well aware of what Anusha thinks. She's screaming all the time, in here." He touched his temple lightly with his free hand. "Maybe I'm not to blame the way Anusha thinks I am. The sleeper was too well hidden. If Tarak didn't know about it, didn't even remember that he'd mutilated his own eyes, I couldn't have known, either. Even if I'd caught some hint of the sleeper, I might have put it down to the normal complexity of a mind.

"I could have handled things differently, though. At least, when Iluka called me to the galley that day, I should have gone immediately. Then the circumstances would have been different; maybe we could have subdued Tarak, instead of forcing Anusha to choose between shooting him or watching him kill the rest of us. But I was afraid. And so, when I saw the lift moving to the spine, I used it as an excuse. I didn't really think there was anything sinister going on; I would have alerted Iluka or Juanita if I had. It was just cowardice, just a reason to put things off. And

maybe Tarak died because of that.”

Neva tightened her grip on his hand. “Leave off with the what-ifs and might-have-beens, my love,” she said gently. “None of us can know what might have happened. We could all be dead now, had things gone differently.”

“I suppose.” He looked directly into her eyes. “There’s something that Iluka told me, though, that I’ve been thinking about a lot. When I said I wasn’t ready, she told me that I’ll never be ready. I can’t put things off forever, hiding behind the excuse of needing more time, waiting for the moment when everything is perfect, because that moment will never come.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Rat stood up, forcing her to crane her head back. “For now, I’m going to talk strategy with Iluka. I don’t know what Captain Ten Bears is dragging us into, so I want to find out more, and maybe even start planning.”

“That’s a good idea.”

He reached out to touch her face; she closed her eyes and leaned into the caress. “Thank you,” he said softly. “For everything.”

Then there was only air against her skin, and the sound of the door shutting behind him.

Chapter 32: Woe

Rat sat in the cockpit of the *Cuchulainn*, counting heartbeats until the transition back to normal space. Most likely, there wouldn't be any trouble, with Anusha on the bridge to explain what the hell a *dache* ship was doing in Star Rider space. But there was enough uncertainty that Iluka had stationed him here, just in case. In the meantime, there was nothing for him to do but sit and wait.

And listen to the whispers, of course, all of them overlain by a scream of pain that had begun the moment Tarak died.

He tried to distract himself by deciding if he could perceive a directional component to the whispers. That was one of the things Iluka had suggested, during their meetings—was it possible to “hear” someone coming? To know where they approached from, or how far away they might be?

He didn't know. He wasn't even sure about the range at which he could pick up on thoughts, let alone the rest of it. But he had the feeling that if they were going to survive whatever Joshua Ten Bears had planned, he'd best find out quick.

“Prepare for drop,” Iluka said over com.

His heart lurched. It should have been Tarak saying that. Would have been, if Rat hadn't been such a coward.

if I hadn't pulled the trigger

Rat took a deep breath, then let it out, only half aware of the feel of the ship dropping out from under him as they transited back to normal space. It wasn't enough that he had to deal with his own guilt, but he'd had Anusha hammering at him on shift and off, her silent scream filling all the empty spaces, until he thought he might start screaming himself. It had invaded what little sleep he'd gotten, troubling his dreams, making him edgy and snappish with everyone. Not even casting a circle with Neva had helped.

It will be over soon, he told himself. *It damned well better be.*

To be fair, he wasn't the only one who had been on edge. After the combined losses of Paradise and Tarak, grief and stress had frayed everyone's nerves. Quarrels had broken out over every small thing, from duty assignments, to the contents of the galley, to whose turn it was to use the shower. Drake had even snarled at him for not folding the laundry correctly.

The ship braked, pushing him sideways. Anusha's voice came over the com, speaking rapid-fire in the tongue that the Star Riders used amongst themselves. To hear her, no one would ever guess that she was disintegrating inside.

And she's taking me with her.

Re-checking the *Cuchulainn*'s systems gave him something to focus on. If anything went wrong, he would be ready. *Goddess, let something go wrong, just so I can get away from the*

damned ship and into silence for a while...

No. I don't mean that. Not really. Do I?

They were far out in the system, and there was nothing to do now but wait for the station's answer. The bridge would have a lag-time counter, but he could only sit alone in the darkness, except for the faint glow of the controls.

"The *Red Cloud* is in," Neva reported after a brief interval.

"Get me Joshua on the com," Iluka ordered.

It didn't take long for the other captain to respond; the ships were close to each other, then. "Bad news. We weren't able to destroy the Kleggers, and I lost several fighters in the attempt. The Kleggers were damaged, so they won't be on our heels, but they will have marked our vector."

"Doesn't matter," Anusha said. "The Star Riders here would have to abandon the station anyway." **because no one knows what Tarak might have told the Zats oh gods he was my little brother I was supposed to keep him safe**

Rat bit his lip against a sudden rush of pain...and anger. Despite what Anusha said, it made a hell of a difference to Joshua, who'd lost crew over this. Damn certain it made a difference to the families of the dead fighters. He remembered the bravery of the men and women he'd flown with at Paradise. How many of them were gone now?

Eventually, a response came from the station. "We've got clearance to dock," Anusha translated.

"Good work," Iluka said. "Thank them for me. Rat, you can stand down."

Anusha's reply seemed too wordy for a simple thank-you. When she was done, she said, "I told them to prepare for a funeral." **oh gods oh gods oh gods no no no no** "And to prepare for an *olu*."

At last.

"Which is...?" Iluka prompted.

Anusha didn't answer immediately, instead asking, "Are you listening in, Rat?"

"I am."

"You said we'd have it out on station. I agreed. Tarak will have justice. Blood for blood. Two people, two guns, and seven meters. Last one standing wins."

There came a moment of silence from the bridge. Then Marcus spoke up. "Wait a minute—a *duel*? You're challenging the crazy man to a *duel*?" He burst out laughing. "This I have got to see."

* * *

"I still think this is too dangerous," Neva told Rat in a low voice as they walked down the boarding tube together.

Rat sighed and adjusted the satchel slung over one shoulder. Jasmine perched on the other, her little nose quivering as she took in the new scents from the station. "So you told me," he murmured back, too low for anyone else to hear. "Several times, in fact."

She flung up her hands in frustration. "Then listen to me and call this off, before you get killed!"

"I'm not going to get killed. I know what I'm doing, Neva. Trust me."

"You've always insisted that hearing thoughts isn't exact. Now suddenly you're betting your life on the opposite. I think a little concern is in order here."

They reached the bottom of the tube, which forced Neva to silence—outwardly, at least. At this range, though, he could still hear her fear even over Anusha's screams.

Ever since Anusha's challenge, Neva had been trying to talk him out of going through with the duel. He had explained to her why he had accepted it, but that hadn't done anything to ease her worry. Clearly, she expected Anusha to shoot him dead, or at least severely injure him.

And, if he was to be honest with himself, Neva's worry wasn't completely unfounded. He was a good shot—a damned good shot—but anyone could miss, and there might always be that bad turn of luck. That wasn't something he wasn't anxious to admit to Neva, however.

Anusha, Drake, and Iluka had already exited the tube in front of them, while the rest of the crew followed behind. Iluka wasn't any happier about the duel than Neva, but as it was taking place off the ship, there was little she could do about it without breaking her own rules.

The cavernous space of the dock was bitterly cold, and bore signs of the Star Riders' evacuation. Cables trailed here and there, no longer connected to anything, and there were large stretches of emptiness where cargo loaders and other equipment had once stood.

too open (cold) don't like

He touched Jasmine lightly, reassuring her. *This won't take long.*

A party of Star Riders awaited them. An ancient woman, her skin seamed with the years and her white hair swept up into an elaborate style, opened her arms in a welcoming gesture to Anusha. "Welcome to Heart's Rest Station. Come within, Anusha of the Cat's Eye Clan. Our home is yours, and the grief you bear is ours as well. I am Hoshi of the Crab Clan, Elder of this station."

Anusha swallowed heavily. "Thank you." Her eyes went past the Elder to one of the men. "Suhayl."

"I'm sorry, Anusha," he said, moving forward and embracing her. "Come, stay with us."

Hoshi's eyes traveled over the rest of the *Exile's* crew. "While it is not our normal custom, these troubled times have made many things necessary. You are also welcome, although I ask that you call for a guide whenever you leave your ship. That restriction is also extended to the other ship, when it docks."

Iluka nodded shortly. "Understood."

"It is customary for those involved in an *olu* to spend the time beforehand in solitary contemplation. Rooms have been prepared on the station for this purpose. Anusha, who will you face in the *olu*?"

Anusha stepped away from her kinsman and nodded in Rat's direction. "Him. Rat."

The whispers from the Star Riders grew louder. **(curious, worried) what did he do?**

Hoshi nodded, remaining outwardly unperturbed. "Come with me, then."

Neva reached for his arm, but let her hand fall before actually touching him. "Don't worry," he murmured to her. "Everything is going to be all right."

"I'll be there, with an emergency kit," she told him, but her voice trembled slightly. **I couldn't save Tarak after Anusha shot him, what if I can't save Rat?**

Wishing he could ease her worry, he brushed his lips gently against her forehead, then resolutely turned away. "I'm ready," he told Hoshi.

The station Elder took him to a small room, just off a huge chamber that the whispers told him had once served as both market and gathering place for the station. The room had belonged to a young couple who had already removed their things to their clan's ship. For the most part, it was bare, except for a bed that consisted of a thick piece of foam covered with jewel-toned sheets, a profusion of pillows decorated with beads, a low table, and a larger pillow meant to

serve as a place to sit.

"Thank you," he said.

"Is there anything you need? Food? Drink?"

"No. I'm fine." Rat gave her a small smile. "I'm sorry to put you out."

"It is no trouble. Much of the station is empty now."

There was a beautiful serenity to her thoughts; although he was aware of the murmuring of the other inhabitants of the station, her voice was somehow stronger, less chaotic. **a shame that we must abandon this place (regret) but it will be good to be on the star roads again**

"I must leave you," she said aloud. "Someone will come for you when it is time for the *olu*." **too bad about that (pretty eyes)** "Afterwards, we will have a celebration honoring the life of the dead. A wake, some call it." **such a pity that he won't be there**

Rat smiled at her assumption that he couldn't possibly win the *olu*. It seemed at the moment that everyone doubted him—except, ironically, for Anusha herself. "Thank you."

When Hoshi had gone, he let his satchel fall to the floor. Jasmine had already hopped off his shoulder to explore the room. Leaving the bed to her, Rat sat down on the largest pillow and arranged himself in a meditative position. It would help pass the time, he thought. It would also help him prepare for what he was going to have to do to Anusha.

* * *

The Star Rider who came for Rat wasn't nearly as serene as Hoshi had been. The young man glared the few times he even deigned to look at Rat, and didn't speak aloud except to gruffly tell him to follow. **letting dache on the station they practically led the Zats to our doorstep, have to run (anger) what did this one do, something about Tarak (image of Tarak, his eyes dark brown, unscarred) what right do any of them have to be here?**

Rat breathed deeply, concentrating on a silent mantra, letting the rage flow past him. They passed through the old market again, and he saw that it was being prepared for the wake. The smell of cooking food filled the air, and a group of sweating men rolled kegs into place. A fragment of melody, almost obscured by the murmur of conversation, floated past as a musician tuned his instrument. It looked to be a lively night, and he wondered if he would be allowed to enjoy even a small part of it.

His guide led him back to the docks. This section appeared to have already been mothballed, though; not even the emergency lights still shone. The guide switched on a small flashlight, but that just made the darkness seem vaster. Every footstep echoed weirdly, and Rat shivered, feeling as if they were trespassing in a mausoleum.

From a distance, he could make out the isolated patch of light that marked their destination. As they drew closer, he realized that a small series of floodlights had been erected for the duel. A group of about two-dozen people stood there. Hoshi was present, as well as the rest of the crew of the *Exile*. The remainder of the crowd consisted of Star Riders and various crew from the *Red Cloud*, including Captain Ten Bears.

As they approached, Rat made certain that both his guns were in place, one at his side, the other concealed in his right sleeve. The rules of the *olu* were simple, and didn't forbid carrying multiple weapons. There was no real reason to; if you didn't hit your opponent on your first couple of shots, there wasn't much chance of getting any more.

The floodlights washed what little color there was out of Neva's face, making her look gray and drawn with worry. As promised, she held a medical bag, ready to spring into action to save

him. He thought about handing Jasmine off to her, but realized that she would want both hands free. Instead, he stopped beside Juanita. "Will you hold Jasmine for me?"

Juanita was cheerfully puffing on one of her cigars; the smoke curled about her face like fog. "Yes. Hello, little monkey."

Go with her. I'll be right back, Rat told Jasmine silently.

go other-mommy? (image of Neva) pale, smells nice (love)

Not yet.

She seemed nervous, but after a long moment, she clambered off of him and onto Juanita's muscular arm. Juanita dug a piece of fruit candy out of her pocket, which Jasmine accepted with great relish.

As Rat turned away, he briefly caught Marcus' eye. Marcus had been unusually cooperative when Rat had asked for the smaller gun currently hidden in his right sleeve. Rather than argue, he'd just laughed and said, "If you think Anusha hates you now, just wait."

But that's just it. She doesn't hate me. Can't fool a telepath quite that easily. Even one as bad as me.

Anusha waited for him in the center of the gathering. She looked terrible, her face drawn, her eyes haunted. The rest of the voices disappeared, drowned out once more by her silent scream. Rat swallowed hard, forcing himself to be calm, to let it move past him, through him. *I can do this. Just for a little while longer.*

Hoshi stepped forward. The long, ivory robes she wore blazed in the floodlights, making her seem ethereal, like some ancient ghost doomed to wander the docks forever. "Anusha of the Cat's Eye Clan," she said formally, "you have declared a grievance against Rat, of no clan. Will you now face him in the *olu*?"

Anusha nodded. The clamor in Rat's head dimmed slightly, soothed by the words and her realization that it would all soon be over.

"Rat of no clan, will you accept this challenge and face Anusha in the *olu*?"

"I will," he said, and was half-surprised by the firmness of his own voice.

"Then I will speak the rules of the *olu*, so that all will know it is done in accordance with the laws of the clans." Hoshi indicated the decking beneath their feet, and Rat saw that temporary lines had been painted on it at equal intervals. "You will begin here, back to back. I will count; with each count, you step to the next line. At twenty, you will turn and fire whatever weapons you may have. All others will wait outside the line-of-fire. Should you hit anyone other than your opponent, you will be punished. Are there any questions?"

"No," Rat said. Anusha shook her head silently.

"Then assume your positions."

Anusha met his eyes as they stepped up to the starting line, then looked away, as if afraid he'd see too much. Not that it mattered. Although thoughts were seldom precise, at the moment he couldn't have had a better understanding of her intentions if she'd written them on the wall in fifty-meter-high, flaming letters.

Then she turned her back to him, and he did the same. He unclipped the gun at his belt and held it in his left hand.

Into the vast silence that seemed to grip the docks, Hoshi began to count. "One...two...three..."

Rat stepped from line to line, listening as the echoes of his footfalls chased each other into darkness.

"...seven...eight...nine...ten..."

He shook his right arm slightly, and the small gun Marcus had prepared for him slipped out of his sleeve and dropped into his hand.

"...twelve...thirteen...fourteen...fifteen..."

He too a deep breath, let it out. Now was the time to rely on his instincts, on things his mind didn't remember learning, but that his body knew all the way to the bone. At the other end of the lines he walked, Anusha was doing something similar, preparing herself, the pain finally receding before this certainty...

"...eighteen...nineteen...twenty..."

Rat pivoted on his foot even as it touched the final line, bringing up the gun in his right hand and squeezing the trigger. The shot was true, as he'd known it would be, and hit Anusha dead in the center of her chest.

She froze, her gun only half-raised, and stared wide-eyed at her shirt. A smear of bright red paint showed vividly against the drab cloth, dripping like blood onto her pants.

"What the hell?" she whispered. Then she jerked her eyes up to his, and he felt her desperation and fury. "Star fry you!" she screamed—and started to bring up her gun the rest of the way.

He squeezed off a second shot; she cried out at the stinging impact of the pellet, the gun falling from her bruised hand and spinning away. She dropped to her knees, as if to go after it, but he strode across the intervening space and kicked it away even as her fingers brushed its grip. She looked up at him, tears streaming down her face, and he pointed the other gun—the lethal one—at her head.

"What are you playing at, you bastard?" Anusha demanded. "Just finish it. Do you hear me? *Finish it!*"

Rat ignored her demands. Instead, he stared at her, deep into her eyes, until she flinched and looked away.

"I've been asking myself some questions," he said into the silence that followed. "I seem to recall that you were impressed by my hand-eye coordination, once upon a time. And yet, you challenged me to this duel, on the flimsiest of pretenses, even though you knew you couldn't win."

He let the gun drop, so that it pointed at the deck. "I'm sorry, Anusha. I understand the justice you wanted for Tarak, but it isn't what *he* would have wished for. If you want to commit suicide, you're going to have to use your own hand. I won't do it for you."

She made no answer, only sobbed quietly. The whispers were full of misery, but that long shriek of pain had finally come to an end. Holstering both his guns, Rat turned and walked away. As he passed by Hoshi, she touched his arm in gratitude. He nodded, then went to Juanita and collected Jasmine. Not wanting to linger, he bowed his head and left.

* * *

Rat had intended simply return to his room and go to sleep. But after he had tossed down his guns and stripped off his jacket, he found himself restlessly pacing the floor. He had done the right thing, he was certain of it. Nothing else would have gotten through to Anusha, or provided the catharsis she so badly needed. Whether anyone else would see it that way, he didn't know.

Neva, at least, might still be mad. Her concerns had almost become reality, in that moment when Anusha had brought up her own gun, furious enough to kill. If he'd been slower or missed his second shot, he might have ended up bleeding on the decking, despite the fact that Anusha

hadn't originally intended to shoot him.

The door chime sounded. Startled, he palmed it open to find two Star Rider women on the other side. Both were young, perhaps twenty, one dark and one light. The sound of music and voices came from behind them, and he guessed that the wake was getting underway.

The paler of the two smiled at him. "I'm Vega. I was at the *olu*, and I was just telling Arista here what a good shot you are."

Arista gave him a big smile, her teeth dazzling white in her dark face. **oh he is cute, love the scruffy types, just look at those eyes (desire) wonder what that goatee would feel like against my thighs**

Rat swallowed hard at the image and felt his face heat. "N-nice to meet you," he stammered.

"You aren't going to sit here by yourself all night, are you?" asked Vega with a sly grin at her friend that made Rat certain he was being set up.

"Um, actually, I was just going to stay in."

"Well, then we'd be happy to keep you company," said Arista with a smile that promised all sorts of things.

Rat imagined trying to explain that to Neva if word got out. "Actually, I changed my mind. I'd rather go to the wake."

"We'll walk with you."

"Uh, thanks." Rat glanced into the room behind him and saw that Jasmine had already crawled into her carrier for a nap. His jacket lay crumpled on the floor; he thought about grabbing it, then decided that the heat of dancing bodies at the wake would probably keep him warm. "Let's go."

* * *

The enormous room where the wake was being held was packed with people; every Star Rider still at Heart's Rest must have been there, along with most of the crew from the *Red Cloud*. Hundreds of voices built to a cacophony in Rat's head, but he forced himself to ignore them as best he could. Most of the center of the room had been given over to dancing; bodies writhed in time to the music, and he could smell their sweat. Around the periphery, people were cooking, eating, talking—and drinking.

"Would you like to view the body first?" Arista asked him tentatively.

Rat blinked, caught off balance. This was meant to celebrate Tarak's life, of course, and he wondered suddenly if the pilot would have approved. Probably—Tarak had loved dancing and having a good time as much as anyone.

"No, that's all right," he said, thinking privately that the practice seemed a bit macabre. He'd rather remember Tarak as alive and vital, rather than as a cold gray corpse.

"Something to drink, then?"

"Rat!" someone called. Startled, he glanced over and saw a group of crew from the *Red Cloud*. A short, compact woman with a friendly smile waved at him. "That's right, isn't it? Rat from the *Exile*? I'm Gloria Long River—we flew together at Paradise."

"Oh! Yes." Rat returned her smile, and a moment later found himself drawn in among the group, which turned out to be comprised exclusively of fighter pilots. Someone pressed a drink into his hand, before he could turn it down. They were a rowdy bunch, swapping stories and boasting, telling jokes at the Zats' expense, and before long they attracted some of the Star Riders, until they had become their own private party.

Rat found himself with Arista on one arm, and on the other a male pilot from the *Red Cloud* who was trying to tell a long, complicated story despite the amount of beer he'd consumed. Rat laughed at something the pilot said, then stopped as a shocking revelation took hold.

I feel like I belong here. These people accepted him, respected him. They'd only seen him as a pilot or during the *olu*—they had no memory of the shuddering wreck he'd once been, no knowledge that there was something deeply, profoundly wrong with him. They liked him, wanted his company. They thought he was normal, and maybe, because of that, he *felt* normal for the first time he could remember.

"So," Arista said, snuggling up against his side, "would you like to go somewhere more private? We can take the other flyboy along too, if you'd like."

Oh my.

"I'm sorry," he started to say, despite the sudden dryness in his mouth. Then a familiar whisper caught his attention, and he looked up, to find Neva watching him from a few meters away. She did not look at all pleased by what she saw.

"I'm sorry," he said again, loud enough that she could hear this time, "but my heart is given to a woman who sadly has no appreciation for my talents whatsoever. In fact, she thinks I'm no good at all."

A chorus of voices rang out around him, most advising him to dump her, and a few offering to help him forget she even existed. But the only thing he cared about was the small smile that reluctantly bloomed on Neva's face. Extricating himself gently from Arista and the pilot, whose name he hadn't caught, he went to stand before her.

"Merry meet," he said.

"I'm not sure if I should laugh or be jealous," she mused. "What is it with you and Star Riders, anyway?"

"To be fair, they weren't both Star Riders."

"I should rent you out. Make a fortune."

"Rather stay with you."

That got another smile out of her. "I do appreciate your talents, you know. I particularly appreciate them keeping you alive, since I thought for a moment there that Anusha was going to kill you."

"You thought I couldn't do it."

"I thought it was a stupid risk."

He shrugged. "It worked, though, didn't it? How is Anusha?"

Neva sighed. "All right—or she will be. She hasn't been taking care of herself, but it's nothing that a little food, fluids, and rest won't fix. Emotionally, well, you can say better than I. She had a good cry, if nothing else."

"She'll be all right." Rat glanced around. "So what do you want to do?"

Neva moved closer, slipping an arm around his waist, so that he could feel the curves of her body. "What say we find something to drink?"

He silently handed her his still-full glass, and she laughed. "One advantage to a boyfriend who can't drink alcohol."

"Maybe we can find some others."

She cocked an eyebrow at him, obviously intrigued. "Maybe. What did you have in mind?"

"Let go of me, woman!" yelled a familiar voice.

Neva exchanged a startled glance with him. "That sounded like Marcus."

Rat craned his head around, finally catching sight of Marcus standing near the edge of the

dancing area, his arms folded obstinately across his chest. Beside him stood Juanita, who didn't seem at all put off by his protest.

"You need to loosen up, have fun," Juanita said, gesturing at the crowd. "So we dance."

"I don't dance!"

"Then you learn," she replied cheerfully, even as she grabbed his shirt and hauled him bodily after her.

"Well," Rat said, bemused. "That might be a start. Dancing, that is."

Neva grinned. "You're on."

* * *

Drake sat beside Iluka at a table well back from the edge of the crowd. The captain of the *Red Cloud* sat across from them, nursing a beer. Only a little light reached them here; random strobes caught Iluka's gray hair, or gleamed in Joshua's eyes.

"So what next, Ten Bears?" Iluka asked. "Where are we going from here? You want to make a run to Waga Chun, and I've agreed to that, to settle our debt. But how much of this have you planned ahead of time?"

Joshua shrugged. "Since I don't know what will await us, I can only plan so far ahead."

Drake turned his glass of rum around and around in circles, watching the light reflecting in its brown depths. Joshua's evasiveness made him nervous. "But you do have a plan for sneaking us in, don't you?"

"That I do have." Joshua took a slow sip of beer—stalling, Drake thought. "But I don't know what the situation is planetside. I haven't had any word from official sources for a while now. Too long. Which is why I have to find out if there's anything left to salvage or not."

Iluka's mouth tightened, causing a forest of wrinkles to spring up around it. "We'd all like to know that about our respective homeworlds."

"Of course. But we don't all have warships under our command, and we weren't all still receiving information from a resistance government until recently." He smiled faintly, to ease the sting of his words. "I hope, though, that this will be beneficial to us all, if only because it gives us a clearer picture of what the Zats are up to."

"I hope you're right." Iluka settled back in her chair and fixed a steely eye on the other captain. "I don't want to throw away the lives of my crew for no good reason."

"Neither do I." Joshua stood up. "I'll have one of my navigators send you the information for our next moves. Once they have the chance to sober up, anyway." He nodded to them both, then walked away.

Iluka watched him go, then shook her head. "What do you bet that at least some of his people aren't nearly as drunk as they look?"

"I'm not taking that bet." Drake took a swallow of his rum, then glanced at Iluka. "This is good, though. We all needed a chance to blow off some steam."

"I suppose. If I was twenty years younger, I'd be out there tearing it up with them." A regretful smile played briefly across her lips. "As it is, I'm heading back to the ship."

"I'll go with you."

"You *are* twenty years younger. No reason for you to not enjoy yourself."

"Of course there is. I'm a terrible dancer."

She snorted, as though she didn't buy the excuse. "Fine. Then we'll spend a fun evening staring at star charts and worrying about what the hell Joshua is leading us into."

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Drake downed the rest of his drink in a single swallow, then followed her as she headed away from the light and music, back onto the cold darkness of the docks.

* * *

Rat didn’t know if it was the fact that it was a wake, or if all Star Rider celebrations were similar, but the dancers moved with an energy and lack of inhibition that screamed they were celebrating *life*. They might all be dead tomorrow, but for now they lived, and they were going to make the most of it.

The gyrating bodies heated the air until it was stifling. Sweat plastered Neva’s hair to her face and darkened her shirt. She was definitely enjoying it, though, grinning at him in a way that made him feel as though the temperature had spiked another ten degrees. Squeezebottles of water were being passed around, along with the alcohol; Rat took one when it came his way, draining it in a couple of gulps.

Neva moved closer. “You look hot.”

“I am.”

Her hands moved to the edge of his shirt, tugging it up. “You could take this off.”

His breath caught in his throat at the feel of her fingers skating across his belly. *Whatever you want*. Pulling the shirt off, he dropped it blindly, not caring at the moment if he ever saw it again.

mmm yes gorgeous skin could lick all that sweat off

She ran her hands lightly up his chest, lingering over the biohazard tattoo. **biohazard, stay away, triple crescent sign of the Goddess, gives and takes away, I love him**

He drew in a ragged breath, then pulled her closer to kiss her. He felt as though he were falling, spinning out of control, on the edge of that precipice where he wouldn’t know anymore where he began and she ended. *Not yet, though, not here*.

“What do you want?” he whispered in her ear, and felt it start a delicious shiver in her. Felt, too, the acute ache of her desire, coupled with a faint touch of worry.

It almost made him laugh. Instead, he pulled her tighter, so that they were dancing hip to hip. “I’ve already seen your scars,” he reminded her. *And, as you can feel, I don’t give a damn about them except as they’re a part of you*.

“Oh.” She pulled back just far enough to give him a wicked grin. **you’re the telepath ought to know what I want, right?**

He grinned back, then took her hand and led her out, wending a path through the flailing limbs of the dancers. It was cooler on the edge of the crowd, but he snatched and downed another bottle of water, as did Neva. A few tables were set up, probably for crowd-watching, and he caught sight of Marcus sitting at one. As far as he could tell, the gunner was attempting to out-drink Juanita; they both had small pyramids of empty shot-glasses in front of them.

* * *

Rat hesitated at the door to his room, feeling suddenly nervous. Neva wound her arms around him from behind; *she* wasn’t nervous, not at all. It occurred to him suddenly that he had no memory whatsoever of ever having done anything like this before, all prior experience gone in the blank place that represented the first twenty-three years of his life. But, Goddess, if being a telepath couldn’t help him get this right, then the talent was truly useless.

“The room isn’t much,” he said, opening the door and gesturing her through.

Neva turned to him. “You’re here with me. That’s enough.”

She kissed him as though nothing else existed in the world. Desire thrummed in his veins; his, hers, it didn’t matter. He accepted it, let it all flow into him, without fighting, without trying to cling to any sense of self. He tasted the salt of his own skin against her tongue, felt the texture of his hair as she wove her fingers into his dreads.

His head spun, drunk on her smell, her taste. Somehow, they ended up on the bed. Touch had always enhanced his abilities, but no casual touch compared to this shock of skin-on-skin. He felt as though he drowned, lost, intoxicated beyond reason. Her fingernails drove in his shoulders, and he was distantly aware of his own hands clenching the pillows piled beneath them, so far gone that she had hijacked half his nervous system.

Her pleasure was a fire in his head, blazing like a star, flaring into a nova, and he disintegrated within it. It occurred to him suddenly, in whatever small portion of his brain remained capable of rational thought, that his fears had all been misplaced, that *he* might die from the intensity, his neurons short-circuited, but it didn’t matter, didn’t matter, nothing mattered but this, but her...

Time ceased to have meaning. Eventually, he became aware of her breath against his cheek, slowing back to a normal rate. Her arms and legs were wrapped loosely around him; the whispers made a contented background hum, like the purr of a cat. He drew back a little, to look into her eyes. She gave him a sleepy smile, and brushed his hair out of his face.

“Wow,” she murmured.

He grinned, then kissed her tenderly. “Yeah. Wow.”

Chapter 33: Beginnings and Endings

Neva drifted into wakefulness, gradually becoming aware of the comforting feel of arms around her, the warmth of skin against her back, the slight stirring of breath against the small hairs of her neck. *Rat*. She snuggled closer, felt his lips lightly brush her shoulder. "Mmm. Good morning," she mumbled.

"Indeed it is."

"Have you been awake long?"

"A while." Another kiss, this time in the curve where her neck met her shoulder. "You were dreaming."

She closed her eyes, a feeling of profound contentment soaking through her skin, as if transmitted directly by his warmth. A part of her knew that it wouldn't last long, but she refused to consider anything but the moment. The past was gone, and the future would take care of itself; now was all that mattered. "I remember."

"A good dream?"

She smiled sleepily. "The best. We were walking on the beach together. It seemed so real. I could feel the wind in my hair, and smell the salt on the air. I remember thinking your skin looked so beautiful in the sunlight."

He was silent for a moment, making her wish that she could see his face. "I don't think I've ever seen the ocean," he said at last. "I wouldn't remember, but...I know what an ocean is, but I don't have any sense of what one would be like. So I don't think I've ever really seen one."

"I love the sea." A faint shadow of grief fell over her heart, but at the same time it wasn't the bitter pain it had once been. "I used to go there all the time. Wight's Beach was my favorite place in the whole world. The water was so powerful, so...primal. Mysterious. They say that life began in the ocean, back on Old Earth, and when I stood in the water with the waves coming up to my knees, I felt closer to the Goddess than anywhere else."

"It sounds wonderful."

Neva swallowed, half-afraid to say what she wanted to aloud. She had lost everything once, and their lives were so uncertain that it seemed foolhardy to even imagine a future that didn't include them all being killed by the Zats. "I want to walk on a planet again, *Rat*. I want to feel wind on my face again, real wind, not processed air. I want to show you the ocean, and see what your skin looks like in sunlight."

His arms tightened gently around her. "I want that too," he said, voice just a low murmur, as much a vibration in his chest as something she heard with her ears.

A soft, insistent *beep* filled the small room, breaking the moment. *Rat* sighed, rolled away, and began to hunt through their discarded clothing. "Damned wake-up alarm on the com." He shut it off, then hit the panel to bring the lights on, just bright enough that Neva could make out

the contours of the room. Jasmine vocalized a complaint and went to hide in her carrier.

"Goddess." Neva sat up, and ran a hand back through her hair. It was sticky with dried sweat, and she could only imagine what she must look like. "Please tell me there's a shower we can use without having to walk all the way back to the ship."

Rat dropped back down on the bed beside her. "Just down the hall. Most of the Star Riders are sleeping on their ships now, so we should have it to ourselves."

"Thank the Goddess." Despite her own desire to get clean, she said, "You can go first, if you'd like."

He cocked his head to one side, then gave her a slow, sly grin that made her pulse quicken. "It would be more efficient if we showered together, don't you think? That way, we'll only use half the water."

She found herself grinning back in answer. "You're absolutely right. Far more efficient."

* * *

Of course, it turned out to be more fun than efficient, and so it was some time before they started back to the *Exile*. The stripping of the station had moved into high gear; despite the excesses of the night before, everywhere there were men and women working frantically to glean anything salvageable before the Zats arrived. The sound of tools rang loudly in the cavernous room where the wake had been held, and nothing more than a little trash remained in the corners to indicate that only hours before it had been the site of a great deal of drinking and dancing. The effect was oddly depressing, and Neva felt her spirits sinking.

Up until that moment, she had managed to put aside all thoughts of Tarak's funeral. Now, she felt as though the dead station somehow mirrored the dead man, both stripped of everything that had made them vital, leaving nothing but an empty shell. Rat must have sensed her morbid thoughts; he let go of her hand to put an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against him gratefully.

Jasmine raced wildly up and down the hall outside crew quarters, excited and happy to be back in familiar surroundings. Except for her antics, the corridors of the *Exile* were curiously quiet, seeming an extension of her mood. Anusha had remained on station with the Star Riders, and Drake, Iluka, and Juanita were all sealed in their quarters, either sleeping or getting themselves ready for the funeral. Only Marcus was visible, sitting at the galley table, nursing a cup of coffee and looking thoroughly miserable. "Don't talk to me," he said when they came in.

Neva shrugged. "Fine. I was going to offer you a pain patch, and something to get you hydrated better than coffee. But if you don't want my help..."

Marcus cursed her without enthusiasm, then followed her down the hall to the infirmary. Once she had given him the promised meds and a squeezebag of water fortified with electrolytes, she sent him to his quarters to rest and returned to the galley. The smell that greeted her made her stomach rumble, and to her surprise she saw that Rat was in the midst of cooking a full breakfast.

"Smells wonderful," she said, sitting down at the table. He brought her a cup of coffee, hot and sweet, just like she liked it. "I was expecting instant oatmeal."

He shrugged as he went back to stirring the diced potatoes on the coil, pausing occasionally to flip a chunk to Jasmine. "I thought this would be more romantic. And it might cheer up you a little."

"Thank you." She watched him over the rim of her cup, every little movement reminding her of the taste and feel of his body. "I'm sorry if I'm somber this morning."

“Don’t apologize.” He carefully transferred the potatoes to two plates, along with some sort of vegetable pancake. “The good things in the world don’t make all the bad ones just go away.”

“No. But maybe they make them balance out.” He had taken the chair across from her, so she leaned over and gripped his hand, meeting his gaze directly. “I’m glad. Really glad.”

His smile lit up his eyes, like sunlight through amber. “So am I.”

* * *

The funeral was held in a section of the docks that had been set aside for such ceremonial occasions. The walls of the room were lavishly decorated with scenes of glowing nebulae, brilliant novae, and a thousand different stars. Dark blue carpeting decorated with stylized yellow stars covered the floor, muting footsteps and quelling echoes. Unfamiliar incense perfumed the air with a soothing scent.

Except for Anusha, the crew of the *Exile* had come in a group; Iluka paused indecisively for an instant, then led them all towards the back of the room, where they would be out of the way. She and Drake were formally dressed, in coats and plumed hats, the buckles on their boots shined to a high gloss. Their finery made Neva feel shabby; all of her clothing was painfully practical, with the sole exception of the scanty outfit she’d received from Gretchen on Paradise. She’d ended up wearing a dark shirt and the least-faded pair of pants that she owned, and hoped that no one would think her disrespectful. Rat and Marcus were no better dressed than she, although Juanita had worn her brightly-colored shawl, wrapped in a slightly-different configuration than usual, which no doubt had some significance.

Most of the Star Riders wore flowing caftans, some of them plain, some worked in dazzling colors and patterns. They arranged themselves in a rough half-circle, leaving the front of the room to Hoshi and Anusha. Tarak’s body had been removed from the morgue unit and placed in a sleek coffin, painted in abstract patterns of orange and red, and studded all over with stars. It lay upon a table, near what appeared to be a small airlock.

The quiet sound of murmurs filled the air as they waited for the last mourners to trickle in. Rat took Neva’s hand in his, and she felt a flash of gratitude. Although she had already mourned Tarak in her own way, during the long shifts when they had been in hyperspace, the formality of the funeral seemed to bring home again that he was gone.

He’s the only one who’s even had a funeral, she realized, grief constricting her throat. Devin’s body had been hastily disposed of by strangers, along with the rest of those killed on Mabon. Harvest had been the funeral pyre for its inhabitants. Goddess only knew what had happened to Agnes’ body—Drake had never said. And Gretchen’s atoms were scattered along with the rest of Paradise.

And when my turn comes? It didn’t matter to her—funerals were for the living, not the dead, after all. But hard on the heels of that thought came a sudden, painful awareness of the terrible fragility of life, the vulnerability of the living hand in hers, of the man beside her. *Goddess, what would I do if anything happened to him? How could I bear it?*

Hoshi went to stand by the coffin, resting one golden hand on its surface. Silence fell, interrupted only by the sound of breathing, the occasional rustle of cloth. Her almond-shaped eyes regarded the coffin for a solemn moment, before she turned to the waiting mourners.

“We are Star Riders.” She said it defiantly, as if daring the universe itself to challenge her. “We hold in our hearts the most sacred truth: that we are all made of stars. Every element other than hydrogen and helium was created in the furnace of the stars. Our bodies—every speck of

carbon, of nitrogen, the iron in our blood—was once part of a star. We are one, with each other, and with the universe. And so, born of stars, we seek them out. We do not fear to tread the star-roads, we do not turn away from the hidden places, because they are our rightful heritage.

“Tarak of the Cat’s Eye Clan did not turn from his duty: to learn, to explore. He stood with his clan, and kept his obligations. The bonds of love tie him to us, and we wish for him to remain. But we are Star Riders, and we will not keep one of our own from the next part of his journey, but instead send him forth with joy and without fear. Farewell, Tarak, and may the wonders you behold be great indeed.”

She bent down and pressed her aged lips to the coffin, before stepping aside. One by one, the rest of the Star Riders formed into a line, each stopping briefly at the coffin and kissing it. Some of them spoke aloud, addressing Tarak, while others remained silent. At a nod from Hoshi, Iluka led the rest of the *Exile’s* crew to the back of the line.

Eventually, Neva found herself standing in front of the coffin. The bright, cheerful colors made more sense, now that Hoshi had spoken, and she felt her heart lift, just a little. *Goddess guide you, wherever you wish to go*, she thought as she bent over. The metal surface was cool against her lips.

Anusha went last; for a moment, Neva thought she would fling herself on the coffin in her grief. But she only stood, trembling, before carefully touching it with one hand, as if afraid that something terrible would happen at the contact. When nothing did, she seemed to gain courage, and placed her other hand on it as well. No one spoke or moved, and Anusha herself seemed like a statue carved from wood, something which had once been alive but now contained only a fading echo. Then, moving like an old woman, she stepped back and nodded to Hoshi.

The inner doors of the airlock opened, and some of the Star Riders lifted the coffin and placed it inside. The doors closed again; the light above it went from green to red, and a chime sounded a single note, as of a small, sweet bell being struck. That was all; Tarak’s body was on its way to the local star, to be consumed in the primordial fire.

One by the one, the mourners headed to the door. The sounds of lowered voices filled the air again, as they returned to their lives. Anusha lingered by the airlock, and to Neva’s surprise, Rat stayed where he was as well. She cast him a questioning glance, but he only shook his head slightly.

When everyone else had left, Rat let go of her hand and crossed the room to Anusha. Neva tensed—despite what Rat said, she didn’t expect Anusha to harbor any good feelings towards him after the duel. But when he stopped beside her, Anusha finally tore her gaze away from the airlock and looked at him. Something seemed to pass between them in silence; then Rat stepped forward and very gently kissed her on the forehead. Anusha closed her eyes, and for the first time Neva saw the glitter of tears on her cheeks.

Rat didn’t say anything, just turned away and came back to Neva. She took his hand, and they departed, leaving Anusha alone in her silence.

* * *

Joshua Ten Bears sat at one end of the table in the *Exile’s* galley, sipping coffee with an ease that suggested he might as well be on his own ship. In a way he was, Drake reflected silently; after all, thanks to their debt, they were now taking orders from him. Not something that would sit well with Iluka, although she didn’t show it, seated as she was across from Joshua. At the moment, her dark eyes didn’t show much at all, except maybe a mild curiosity that was nothing

more than a mask, an old reflex from the trader she had once been.

For once, Joshua hadn't come alone. One of his crewmembers, a man he'd introduced as Jason Silent Hawk, sat beside him. Joshua hadn't said why he'd brought the man, and his looks and manner of dress didn't reveal anything, either: dark shirt and pants, his long face framed by a pair of feather earrings, his hair drawn back in a single braid that hung to his waist.

"We're in countdown for undock, Ten Bears," Iluka reminded the other captain mildly. "The Star Riders have stripped this hulk, and they've set it to blow as soon as everyone is clear. Not really the time for an idle chat."

A faint smile ghosted across Joshua's mouth. "You know me better than that, Iluka Toora. I've come because you're down a pilot, although not a navigator. It surprised me; I thought she would have gone with her own people."

It had surprised Drake as well; after Anusha and Rat had faced off in the *olu*, he'd half expected her to march off to the Star Riders and never come back. Yet not only had she returned well before it was time to leave dock, but she and Rat actually seemed more friendly with one another than ever before.

"My crew are loyal," Iluka said, taking a sip of her coffee. "I can pilot, if need be."

"True, but it would be better if you could concentrate on the business of captaining your ship. Silent Hawk has volunteered to pilot for you."

Iluka arched a brow and shot him a swift glance. "Is that so?"

The pilot bowed his head slightly. "Yes, Captain."

"Hmph. I suppose that explains the bag sitting out on the dock." She shook her head. "Presumptuous."

"Jason Silent Hawk will be of value to you," Joshua said, unperturbed. "His bravery is great—before coming aboard the *Red Cloud*, he piloted a smaller ship against the Zatzvians, and accounted for many of their lives. His full record is available, if you would like it."

Iluka waved a negating hand. "I'm not questioning his bravery."

No she isn't. She's questioning whether or not she wants to let someone on board who we know is loyal to another ship. Would Joshua use him to spy on us? We don't have any great secrets from him—but at the same time, I'm not sure I want this ship's business to become common knowledge.

Joshua nodded solemnly. "He will also be valuable because he knows the codes that will keep the beacon at Waga Chun from displaying any ship transmitting them."

"Ah." Iluka shifted her seat slightly. "That's interesting. So the *Exile* and the *Red Cloud* will be invisible to the Zats, at least as long as we stay passive?"

"Precisely."

"Fine. You drop us in system where the Zats can't see us. Then what?"

Joshua shook his head. "I wish I had answers for you. We'll be coming in close to what used to be a defense installation, in orbit around one of the gas planets in our system. My last information said that the Zats had taken it over, and were using it not only as their main military base within the system, but also to house prisoners whom they hoped to be able to use against any rebellion brewing on the planet itself."

"Please tell me you aren't considering attacking it with only two ships."

"That depends on a great deal. It seems the best chance of not only damaging the Zatzvian presence, but of discovering more about their plans, should we actually manage to infiltrate the station." Joshua shrugged. "There are many factors that we won't know until we arrive."

Iluka gave him a penetrating look. "Do any of these factors include the presence of another

warship?"

Dear God. Just how big is this mission?

Joshua smiled faintly. "Possibly."

"That's what I love about you, Ten Bears. The perfect clarity." She turned to Jason. "All right, Silent Hawk. Go get your bag off the docks. We don't have much space on board this ship, so you'll be bunking with Marcus, our gunner."

In other words, Iluka was putting him with someone she knew would keep an eye on him. Drake approved—it was what he would have suggested.

"Yes, Captain." Jason stood up and left, without a backward glance or word to his former captain. Most likely Joshua had already been over everything with him well in advance.

"Well, then." Joshua unhooked a pouch from his belt, and pulled out a small flask. "Since you're always telling me I owe you a drink, I thought now would be a good time to pay the debt."

Wondering what this was about, Drake fetched three glasses and set them on the table. Joshua poured dark rum into each. The scent suggested that this was no rotgut, and he wondered where it had come from.

"One of your customs," Joshua said, raising his glass. "A toast. The next time we meet face-to-face, it will be in victory or in death. My people have a saying: It's a good day to die."

Iluka smiled grimly. "I'll drink to that."

The rum did little to dispel the cold gathering in Drake's belly. When the three glasses were drained, Joshua stood up. "I'd best be going. See you on the other side, Iluka, Drake."

"Other side," Drake murmured. And hoped to God that it was only the other side of jump that Joshua referred to.

Chapter 34: Battle Ready

Rat struck the punching bag a flurry of hard blows, followed up by a roundhouse kick. He'd tied back his dreads to keep them out of his eyes, and Neva could see that his brows were drawn together in concentration, his lips unconsciously pulled back from his teeth in a silent snarl. He wore only boots and a loose pair of pants; the biohazard tattoo stood out starkly against the lean muscles of his chest.

Neva sighed and leaned against the wall. They'd spent far too much time here in the rec room, she reflected, when there were other, more fun, things they could have been doing during the long stretches of hyperspace between jumps. But Rat had insisted that, without knowing what lay ahead, they should be prepared for anything.

Including hand-to-hand combat that he can't possibly engage in with a real person.

The door slid open, and Marcus came in. He gave Rat a sideways glance and headed over to the weights. "Good moves, if you have to fight a bag," he said.

Neva scowled, even though she'd been thinking almost the same thing herself. Rat paused, pulling loose the tie holding back his hair, so that his dreads fell around his face. "Don't worry. I intend to shoot first," he said.

"Good. Because I'm not hauling your skinny ass out of a fight. Just so you know."

The door opened yet again, and Juanita came in, making the small room go from crowded to packed. She stopped by Rat and pinched his arm critically. "Still scrawny. Going to hit realspace soon—better hurry up."

Rat grinned at her, clearly unoffended by her jibe. "I don't think I'm going to get much better in less than a shift." His expression changed slightly, worry darkening his amber eyes. "Marcus, has Jason said anything to you about what he expects when we come out of hyperspace?"

Marcus snorted as he started doing arm-curls. "If he hadn't already taken us in and out of jumps, I'd say we couldn't tear him away from his books long enough to bother piloting. I've never seen anyone read so much, and that's saying something, considering I used to work in academia."

Neva cocked her head curiously. She hadn't seen much of their new pilot, except during bridge operations. "What is he reading?"

Marcus shrugged. "He let me look through his tablet, when he found out that I used to teach literature. A lot of what he has isn't in any language I know, though, so I couldn't tell you for certain. The rest of it is all over the place: philosophers, biographies, fiction. Homer, Tolkien, Li Bai...you name it. I've had the most stimulating conversation since I left university, but try to talk about anything other than books, and he somehow always manages to change the subject."

"That makes me nervous," Neva said. And then wondered how much she had changed

lately, that she wasn't arguing to give Jason the benefit of the doubt instead.

Rat cast her a look that made her suspect he'd caught the thought. "Maybe he's just quiet."

"You'd know, wouldn't you?" Juanita asked. She stood by the weight bench, spotting Marcus while he lifted the heavier weights. "Look into his skull and see what he's hiding?"

It was one of the few times she'd ever mentioned Rat's disability, and it seemed to catch him off guard. "Not exactly."

"But sort of?"

He shrugged, clearly uncomfortable. "If I'd heard anything that made me doubt him, I would have spoken up. So far as I can tell, he's not trying to hide anything nefarious. At the same time, he's on a strange ship, with people he barely knows. And he knows about me. It doesn't make things any easier."

Neva blinked; he hadn't mentioned that last fact before. "He knows about you? Joshua told him?"

"I imagine so." Rat shrugged. "I would have, if I were Captain Ten Bears, asking a man to serve on a ship with me." He wiped the sweat off his brow and turned to Neva. "I'm grabbing a shower and some sleep before the fun starts. Want to go with me?"

"Sure." She ignored Marcus' exaggerated eye-roll, took Rat's hand, and followed him out the door.

They went back to her quarters—their quarters, now. She'd teased him about that, claiming that he'd slept with her just to get out of doing everyone's laundry. As the door closed behind them, Jasmine launched herself at him; he caught her without even looking, giving her a kiss and a cuddle before she extricated herself to go about her business. "You're worried," he said, sitting down on the bed.

Neva hesitated, not wanting to burden him, not now when they were so close to their destination and its unknown dangers. "I...I just don't think I'm going to take a nap right now."

He looked at her for a long moment, his amber eyes seeming to peer straight into her soul. Then he patted the bed beside him. "Come here, sweetheart. Please?"

She sat by him, slid into a loose embrace, her head resting against his shoulder. "You've been having bad dreams," he said quietly. One hand stroked her hair, rhythmic and soothing.

She mock-punched him, trying for a humor she didn't feel. "How am I supposed to stay mysterious and alluring when you know what I'm thinking?"

"Now you're trying to change the subject."

Neva sighed. This was the downside of sleeping with a telepath, she supposed. She couldn't just lie and pretend that everything was all right. "It's this mission," she said at last. "Iluka talks as though she's certain we're going to see some fighting. I just...worry. About all of us."

"And the dreams?"

I'm not sure how he's going to take this. That was the other problem with being involved with a telepath; she couldn't filter the truth out of deference to his feelings. "I've been having it since we left Heart's Rest. It's the same one, over and over, with a few minor variations. I'm...I'm on Mabon. At the gun emplacement. The dreams starts out the way things really happened. At least, I think so—a lot of my memories are hazy, because of the concussion. In the dream, though, everything's very clear. I can smell fear and grease...I have my assignment, and I'm going to my gun, and a part of me doesn't want to. I'm still asking myself if this is the right thing to do, and if I'll be able to live with taking a life, even a Zatvian one. The sirens start to sound, and I see them coming in on the screen.

"That's where the dream starts to deviate from reality. I shoot back, and I take out the entire

squadron, all alone. And I'm so happy, because I saved everyone around me. I turn around, to say something to...to the man beside me, and then I realize that I've been wrong, that a missile did get through, but somehow I didn't hear it, somehow I haven't been hurt. But the station next to me got hit, and he's...he's..."

She swallowed hard against the constriction in her throat. Rat pulled her closer, pressed his lips against her forehead. "It isn't Devin, is it? It's me."

"Yes." She bit her lip. "I don't want to lose you, Rat. I can't."

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

"But you can't promise. I can't. We could both be dead two shifts from now."

He shifted her into his lap, tilted her head back so that he could look into her eyes. "What was it you said to me one time? 'Then I'll die in love with you.'"

"You shouldn't quote my own words back at me. It isn't fair," she said with a shaky attempt at a smile.

"Sorry."

"No, you're right. I didn't ask for more certainty then, and I'm not really asking for it now. That doesn't keep me from wishing I had it, though."

He sighed, then kissed her softly. "I know," he whispered against her lips. "So do I."

* * *

"All right, people, look sharp," Iluka ordered. They were in the last minutes before drop back into normal space, and the tension in the room was greater than Neva had ever felt it except during a battle.

Of course, we might be dropping right into the middle of a firefight, she thought. Goddess forefend.

"We should come in well outside the range of Zatvian activity within the system," Jason said in his quiet, even voice. "Once there, I can tight-beam a transmission to the beacon that will cause it to hide us no matter what we do. Although the Zatvians will spot us if we should have to turn on active scan, not seeing us on the beacon will at least confuse them."

"I've got the transmission set up; final tweaks to be done as soon as we're in," Drake said.

"Thank you."

Iluka punched the com through to the *Cuchulainn*. "Iluka Toora to Rat—you copy?"

Static buzzed. "I copy, Captain."

"You stand ready—I say go, I want you gone, understand? And if we come out into a fight, I want you gone even before I can say go."

"Aye, Captain."

"Ten seconds until drop," Jason said smoothly. "Nine, eight..."

Neva swallowed against the nervousness fluttering in her belly and ran a last check of her board, making certain that scan was set to passive reception only. That was the other dangerous part of this mission; they had to rely only on what the beacon or their passives told them. Even though they were coming in far out on the edge of the system, as distant from the sun's mass as they could and still make it back to realspace, there was always the possibility that something might be sitting in their way, something that they wouldn't see in time to avoid a collision.

The ship seemed to drop out from under her, as if she were momentarily in free fall. Then the world slammed back into coherence, the pressure of braking shoving her into the safety web even as her boards lit up. Flares and nonsense chased each other across her vision as the ship

sorted signals distorted by speed and distance. Then everything firmed up as the transmission from the beacon came through.

"We're in, Captain," Anusha said from her station beside Neva. She and Jason had spent most of their on-duty time in transit working together, and it seemed as if they were well-matched, although they lacked the coordination that came only with a long-term partnership. "Right on our target."

"Transmit when ready, Jason," Drake said.

Neva listened to the chatter of operations with half her attention, the rest on what scan was telling her. "The system is full of Zats. I've got half a dozen warships showing up. Four of them are close in to the planet; the other two are docked at station." Although she knew the distance was great, they had deliberately put in on the same side of the system as the station farthest from the planet, and it looked frighteningly close on her boards. "No sign of the *Red Cloud*."

"Which is probably a good thing," Iluka pointed out. "Neva, keep an eye on the optics. If Joshua's here, he'll signal."

In order to keep the Zats from catching onto their presence too soon, the two ships would use tight-beam transmissions, a proposition that carried some risk if the *Red Cloud* wasn't precisely where it was supposed to be.

As soon as braking maneuvers were complete, Jason shut down their main engines. "We're first law, Captain," he reported.

"Good. Now we wait," Iluka said.

The wait wasn't long. Even before the standard operational chatter had dwindled, a soft chime sounded on Drake's board. "Priority. The *Red Cloud* is hailing us."

"Put it on speakers."

Joshua's voice boomed out. "Ten Bears to Iluka Toora: I've made contact with allies."

"Joshua to Iluka: I have made contact with allies. Acknowledge."

"Contact? That was damned fast," Iluka said darkly. "What have you got for us?"

Several moments of lagtime ticked by, before the reply came. "The warship *Hail Storm*, captained by Bill Sees in the Dark, will join us. According to his intelligence, the planet is in open rebellion. The Zatvians have concentrated their forces near the planet to provide support for their ground troops. A few other ships are scattered throughout the system, but the other two warships are docked at Far Station."

Iluka scowled. "Six warships in one system? What the hell is that about?"

"The Zatvians ate up other systems like a wolf eating rabbits. Then they came here, and discovered what it was like to eat a porcupine."

"Cocky bastard," Marcus muttered, too low for the com to pick up.

"The station must be taken, not destroyed, so that we can use it as a base. There are prisoners on board, so we must move quickly. Our action will draw some of the warships away from the planet, so we must have a defensible position by the time they arrive."

Iluka pursed her lips. "So where does the *Exile* fit into this?"

"The *Hail Storm* and the *Red Cloud* will take care of the warships. Your job is to get close enough to the station to launch boarding pods."

Iluka nodded, as if she had suspected the like. "I want fighter support. The station isn't going to just sit there and let us fly in, after all."

"We'll give you anything we can spare. We'll load the pods with troops from both ships, and strap them onto the *Exile's* spine. The pods are self-supporting. If you have any personnel you can spare to help with taking the station, we would be grateful."

“Affirmative. Juanita can join them. Any other requests?”

There was more of a lag between message and reply this time, and Neva wondered if there was a discussion occurring on the warship. “I would like to request two more,” Joshua finally said. “Your medic is one, to help Michael Shot With an Arrow set up a field hospital as soon as we have a spot secured for them on the station.”

Iluka glanced at Neva, who nodded. “Anything I can do,” she told Iluka.

“You’ve got her,” Iluka sent. “Who else?”

“Rat.”

Iluka frowned. “Elaborate. He’s a damned good fighter pilot—it might be smarter to keep him out here.”

“Fighters pilots I have. On the station, my troops will need information, and need it quickly. There won’t be time for interrogation.”

“You want him to pull info out of their brains.”

“Affirmative.”

No, Neva thought. But it wasn’t her choice.

The hiss of static from the *Cuchulainn’s* com sounded. “I’ll go, Captain,” Rat said. He sounded quiet, subdued...but certain.

Iluka nodded. “You’ve got it, Ten Bears. Let’s get moving, before the Zats trip over us. Get those pods ready and over here. Our tug can put them in place.”

“Affirmative—we’ll use skimmers to move them over, to avoid detection. Good luck, Iluka Toora.”

“Damned if I’m not going to need it,” she muttered. “You too, Ten Bears. Iluka out.”

* * *

The last of the pods with their cargo of soldiers settled into place with a loud *clang*. The sound rang through the ship as Neva, Rat, and Juanita met in front of the lift. Neva gripped the bag with her emergency equipment in it, going over its contents and wondering once again if she had forgotten anything that she would need. The weight of the body armor they had dressed in dragged at her, far worse than a ‘suit, and added to the surreal feel of it all. *A few hours from now, I’ll be patching up injured soldiers, she thought. Some of them are going to die. Maybe even some I know.*

Assuming we don’t get shot out of space before we even have time to board, of course.

Juanita sighed loudly. “Wish I could smoke,” she said regretfully. “You’d think the captain would make exceptions for times like this, but no.”

Rat gave her a grin. “Unreasonable, her wanting to keep the filters clean so the rest of us don’t die.”

“Completely.”

The com by the lift squawked at them. “All right, you’re clear to go to the spine,” Iluka said. “Good luck.”

Marcus’ voice unexpectedly sounded over the speaker. “Juanita? You better not get yourself shot up down there. I need somebody to spot me on the weights, and the rest of this lot is damned useless.”

She laughed, her teeth bright in her brown face. “Don’t worry about me—you worry about shooting straight enough to hit some Zats. Don’t want to come back and find out those other ships got all of the glory, yes?”

Neva wanted to join in the pre-combat banter, meant to cover everyone's nervousness, but her tongue felt thick. As the lift doors opened, she pulled on her helmet along with the others. It made her feel as though she were smothering, even though it was designed to filter the air against any sort of gas attack. Gravity vanished as they entered the spine; Rat grabbed her elbow, but the warmth of his body didn't make it through the heavy gloves and protective gear, and she felt a keen sense of loss. Silently telling herself to quit worrying, that it would accomplish nothing, she let him help her out of the lift. It made her feel a little better that Juanita's movements in zero-g were as unpracticed as her own.

The hatches facing the two nearest pods were open, and a pair of figures in helmets and body armor waited for them. Their armor was painted with bright symbols: hand prints, lighting bolts, spots, and spirals. One of them wore a long sash knotted incongruously around his waist; it floated behind him, stirring idly in response to the air currents.

The coms in their helmets had been set to use the same frequencies as those used by the rest of the boarders. Daniel Long River's voice sounded in Neva's ear, startling her. "Rat, Juanita, you're with me. Neva, Michael Shot With an Arrow will get you settled."

The other man waved. "Good to see you again, Neva."

Rat's hand tightened slightly on her elbow. "Be careful, sweetheart. I'll see you soon."

"You be careful, too."

He let go of her and started away with Juanita, to the open door of the pod that would take them to the station. Telling herself that their parting was only temporary, Neva turned away and joined the other medics in their pod. The small space was crowded, but there were plenty of helping hands, and within moments she and her bag were secured. The airlock slid shut, sealing them off from the *Exile* with a feeling of finality.

* * *

With both Neva and Juanita gone, Anusha was sitting scan on the bridge. "Priority. The *Red Cloud* is moving," she reported tensely.

And if the Zats don't know something is up yet, they will in a few minutes, Drake thought. As soon as the warships and the *Exile* fired up active scan, they'd light up somebody's screen for sure. *God, watch over us.*

"Have they showed up on the beacon?" Iluka asked. Although she probably sounded calm to everyone else, Drake knew her well enough to hear the tension underlying the words. They had gotten themselves into a situation more suitable for a military ship, and there was no certainty that they'd be coming out the other side in one piece.

"Negative, Captain."

"Well, I guess those codes still work after all," Iluka said grimly. "Good news for us, huh?"

"Priority. The *Hail Storm* is moving, same heading as the *Red Cloud*. They're both making for the station."

"Well, we wouldn't want the Zats to overlook them," Iluka said wryly. "Stand by, Jason, and be ready to go on my mark."

"Aye, Captain."

"Priority," Drake said, pressing the bud against his ear, as if it would allow him to hear better. "Transmission from the *Red Cloud*. Joshua is demanding that the Zats surrender and leave the system immediately."

Iluka snorted. "He wants to make them nice and mad. Ancestors, I hope he knows what he's

doing.”

Anusha straightened. “Priority! The Zats are moving! Fighters scrambling from the station!”

Drake felt his pulse kick up a notch. “Transmission from the station—they’re demanding Joshua stand down and surrender. They’re also threatening him with legal action for hiding his ship from the beacon.” Either the station commander was a bureaucrat’s bureaucrat, or had a sense of humor. Personally, Drake was betting on the former.

“I’m sure that’s put the fear of the gods in him.”

“Allied warships changing heading,” Anusha reported tensely. “Moving at an angle to the station now.”

That was the plan—the two warships would make a show of threatening the station, then move off, as if they were planning to go in-system, towards the planet instead. With any luck, most of the station fighters and both the Zat warships would chase after them, leaving the station under-defended long enough for the *Exile* to slip in and drop the boarding pods.

The only problem was that, so far, the Zat ships hadn’t moved. “Come on, you bastards, move,” Iluka said. “Damn it, what’s taking them so long to launch?”

“Priority—the fighters have engaged allied ships,” Anusha said, then immediately: “Priority! Zat warships are launching!”

“About damned time.” Iluka shook her head. “I’m too old to wait around on the Zats these days.”

Even so, they had no choice but to wait. Although the warships had launched, some of the fighters had been recalled, back to the station...meaning that it might not be as under-defended as they had hoped. Drake swore silently. They had to be in position to drop the pods, which meant no evasive maneuvers would be possible during that part of the run. *We’re going to be a nice, big target. Might as well paint a bulls-eye on our belly.*

“Priority—warships have engaged,” Anusha said urgently. “Captain, shouldn’t we be moving?”

Iluka snorted. “And I thought I was impatient. All right, Jason—let’s go. Get us close enough that we can count the Zats’ nose hairs.”

“Rather not be doing that,” Marcus muttered. The weapons on his board were all uncapped and ready to go. The biggest problem was that they couldn’t do substantial damage to the station, should it start shooting at them—but the station gunners would certainly have no qualms about damaging *them*. Not for the first time, Drake wondered if Iluka had been crazy to agree to this mission.

A small group of allied fighters had been hovering around the *Exile*; as acceleration gently began to press Drake back into his seat, they streaked ahead of the slower ship. His com pinged on the frequency the *Red Cloud*’s fighters used, and he switched over. “Elkhorn to *Exile*,” said a cheerful voice. “We’ll clear the way for you. Hoka-hey!”

* * *

Rat felt the ship begin to accelerate, pushing him against the webbing that held him strapped to the pod’s curved side. A jolt of adrenaline washed through him, and he saw some of the other soldiers touch the weapons hung from their rigs. The whispers changed character, becoming a clamor of excitement, the charged thrill that comes when waiting for the battle turns into beginning the battle. He closed his eyes briefly, keeping his breathing even, letting the myriad of whispers wash over and through him.

"Not long now, and we will take back what is ours," Daniel Long River said encouragingly, and some of the soldiers shouted wordless replies.

Juanita reached over and touched his arm. Rat looked back and her, saw the grave expression in her eyes, heard the whispers that told him they were in this together. He nodded back, understanding. Together.

* * *

Drake fought the press of acceleration, keeping his hands on the boards, even though his arms felt like lead weights. They were *moving* now, pushing the limits of endurance, and he hoped Jason intended to slow down once they were near the station.

"Allied fighters have engaged," Anusha reported. "One of the Zats slipped the net—coming our way!"

"I've got him," Marcus growled. A faint whine sounded through the hull, the *Exile's* guns coming into play. A moment later, debris shrieked down the side of the ship.

"Still green," Iluka said, meaning that the remains of the destroyed fighter hadn't done any damage.

A transmission on a Zat frequency came into Drake's board. He flipped it to audio, heard the voice of the station commander, full of anger and what sounded like affront, as if he couldn't believe they were daring to attack. "Unidentified ship, you are hereby ordered to cease hostilities, activate your transponder, cease interference with an authorized beacon, and alter your course. Comply immediately, or we will take definitive action."

"They want us to surrender," Drake relayed to Iluka.

Her answer was laced with obscenities. "Do you want me to transmit that?" he asked dryly.

"No—let them stew."

"Priority—station guns have begun firing!"

A cry that turned into silence sounded over the channel dedicated to their fighter support. Someone else let out a howl of rage and grief.

"Marcus—do something about those guns!" Iluka shouted.

"Like what?" Marcus snapped back. "Blow a hole in the Goddamned station?"

There was no answer to that, of course. "We're almost in position for our run, Captain," Jason said, as calmly as if they were putting into a friendly port instead of doing a flyby in the face of a lot of guns.

Drake switched over to the fighters' frequency. "*Exile* to fighter support. This is it."

"We've got you," Elkhorn replied. He sounded far less cheerful now.

"Put it on the mains," Iluka said.

The main displays came up, showing what the *Exile's* optics picked up. They were far enough out from the sun that there wasn't much light for the station to reflect. Hazard signals glared angrily across space, accompanied by spots for the docking ring. The fighters swarmed ahead of them, drawing the wrath of the station guns. One went up, a soundless flash of fire as the oxygen was consumed.

God, let this work. Their fighter support was being cut to pieces, and they might easily be next. One direct hit from the big guns, and the *Exile* would disintegrate in a fireball.

"Prepare for vector change," Jason advised. The station was getting larger in their view far too fast, and Drake hoped that Jason knew what the hell he was doing. Slamming full-tilt into the station wouldn't be much of an improvement over being blown up by Zat guns.

“Priority! Fighters coming up behind us,” Anusha shouted.

“I see them,” said Marcus. “Got one. The rest are hanging back—they’re going to try to catch us when we slow to turn.”

Jason laughed softly. “Who said anything about slowing?”

The direction that Drake’s inner sense said was *down* shifted, pushing him into the seat as well as back. The station was close now, near enough that details were visible in the optics. A cluster of antennae thrust up at them, all but scraping their belly. “Watch out for those com masts!” Anusha snapped, panicked.

“I see them,” Jason replied, unaffected. “Completing vector change.”

The ship shuddered and bucked suddenly, and Iluka swore. “We’ve taken a hit on the spine! At least two pods are gone, and we’ve got breach.”

The direction that was *down* leveled out again, so that it seemed Drake was lying on his back. The bulk of the station flashed by on the screen, looking so close he felt he could have reached out and touched it.

“Launching pods,” Anusha said, and a further series of shudders shook the ship. The remaining pods dropped off at timed intervals, scattering across the surface of the station. The pods’ automatic guidance kicked in, and Drake saw the flash of thrusters as they oriented towards the surface. One disintegrated as its course intersected with fire from the station.

In the forward view, an allied fighter took a hit that was probably meant for the *Exile*; this time, the debris slammed directly into them, sending up a hellish screaming as it tore down the hull.

“Damn it!” Iluka shouted, and Drake’s heart lurched, imaging all the sensitive things the debris might have ripped through.

“Scan is damaged,” Anusha called. “We’ve got beacon and optics, and that’s it.” Which meant that they were now blind to their own allies.

Drake switched on his com. “*Exile* to allied fighters—scan is hit, we’re feeling our way along here.”

“Affirmative, *Exile*—stay on this heading, and keep channel open.”

Then the station was falling away behind them. Jason still didn’t slow, putting as much distance between them and the Zat guns as possible. *We did it*, Drake thought, amazed. *They might blow us out of the sky in the next second, but we still did it.*

Now it was up to the boarding parties.

Chapter 35: Alecto

The pod stuck with a jolt that rattled Rat's teeth, then latched onto the station skin with a powerful seal. Now that they were locked into station rotation, the illusion of gravity asserted itself, pulling him against the safety web. The airlock was now oriented overhead, meaning the boarding party would be coming up through the floor of whatever part of the station they were about to cut into. A loud whine sounded from the other side of the lock, as the cutter built into the pod's mouth kicked in, burning its way through the thick hull. The pod would remain attached and act as a seal, preventing the station from being exposed to vacuum.

All around Rat, the other boarders were untangling themselves from the safety webs. Guns were pulled free from their holsters and held at the ready, and two soldiers extended the fold-away ladder from beneath the air lock, then climbed up it and readied their weapons, prepared to shoot the moment the cutter was through and the hatch opened.

And please, Goddess, don't let us be coming out in the middle of a Zat squadron, Rat thought.

Daniel Long River swung up on the ladder, clinging with one hand while he lifted the other in exhortation. "Now is the time to take back what is ours!" he shouted over the whine of the cutter. "Think of the innocents, of the old, of the children, of those who cannot protect themselves, and nail your sashes to the ground! Hoka-hey!"

Shouts rang through the pod: "*Hoka-hey!*" Rat added his voice to the cries, feeling his heart starting to pound with a mixture of dread and excitement. There came the sound of a muffled explosion, the cutter ejecting whatever it had sliced into out of the way. An instant later, the airlock opened.

There was a general rush up the ladder; Rat let himself be carried along with it. A blanket of heat-resistant material had been flung over the molten edges of the hole that the cutter had made, but even so he felt hot air against his face and smelled scorched insulation. At the top of the ladder, hands grabbed his arms, helping him up. He moved as soon as his feet were on solid deck, clearing the way for those coming up behind him.

Fortunately, they hadn't come up in the middle of a Zat squadron. Instead, the room they were in appeared to have been some sort of maintenance area. As soon as the last soldier had cleared the hole in the floor, Daniel—who hopefully had at least some idea where they were—led them out of the room and down a corridor at the fast jog.

Amidst the painted and decorated armor, Rat caught a glimpse of Juanita's plain back. He picked up his pace to come abreast of her. She gave him a glance and a brief nod, before turning her attention back to the business at hand.

How long will it be before we run into the Zats? Rat wondered uneasily. How thin are they spread right now? Did all the pods make it safely?

Is Neva all right?

There came a flash of light ahead of them, followed by a shriek of pain. **shooting (agony), Zats (rage), target/get them/shoot/save** Rat flung himself up against the wall, caught sight of Zatvian troops bearing down on them, and let training that he had no conscious memory of receiving take over. His first shot took out the foremost Zat; then, a hail of weapons fire tore both directions down the corridor. Paint on the walls blistered and bubbled, and smoke billowed suddenly from a ruptured pipe carrying Goddess knew what.

Rat caught a glimpse of dark shapes moving in the smoke, more sensed than seen, and fired again. A return shot caught him on the shoulder, but the body armor protected him, dissipating the heat. The tough fibers were designed to hold up well against weapons fire, especially shots that came in at an angle rather than full-on, and were resistant to edged shrapnel. Blunt force was another story, but unless they somehow ended up in hand-to-hand combat, it wouldn't matter.

Someone charged past him with a war cry. There was another barrage of shooting—then nothing. Rat chanced a look, and saw that the Zat resistance had broken. Bodies lay scattered across the floor, and the smell of scorched flesh joined the stink of burning insulation.

“Rat!” shouted one of the smoke-veiled figures. He jogged over, saw that Daniel Long River and several others were grouped around one of the fallen Zats. The man was still alive, but seemed unable to stand. He was propped up against the wall, his legs limp in front of him; someone had pulled off his helmet, and Rat saw a young face and terrified eyes.

This is it. Rat took a deep breath, then dropped into a crouch by the Zat, who stared at him fearfully. **(pain)** hammered at Rat, and he forced himself to relax, to let it flow over him.

Stripping off one glove, he touched his fingertips to the skin of the young man's face. **(fear) what is he doing, they're going to kill me, Mother Mary full of grace save this sinner, forgive me I'm sorry I don't want to die, please don't let me die, Christ it hurts it hurts it hurts**

“Be calm,” Rat whispered, careful only to say it, not to *push*. “We aren't going to hurt you.”

Daniel crouched down by him. “Where are they holding the prisoners?” he asked urgently.

are they going to torture me, take me somewhere, I'm dying (feel of blood trickling down the hollow of the back) can't feel my feet, how bad is it, should I tell them (image: soldiers, a sign, a desk) will they help me if I tell them

“Section 2, level 5,” Rat read from the sign in the soldier's mind.

how did he know that, what are they doing, he doesn't look like one of them

“Are there any more troops in this area?” Daniel asked.

alpha group, don't know where they've gone, what if I can't answer, Mother Mary they'll turn loose the Furies for this (fear)

Rat frowned. “The Furies?”

(fear/disgust/horror) soldiers not-soldiers the Furies will take them apart, creepy bitches, what will they do to me if they find out I've told oh God oh God oh God

Rat let his hand drop, then pulled on his glove. His fingers shook so badly that it took two attempts. “He's going into shock. I don't think he knew much about other troops in the area, but there was something...someone...I don't know. The Furies. Whoever or whatever they are, he's scared of them.”

Through the clear shield of his helmet, Rat saw Daniel frown. “Some sort of special troops, perhaps?”

“Maybe. I don't know. They're exclusively women, I think, but that's all I know.”

“All right. Leave the prisoner here.” Daniel stood up in a single move. “We have a destination now—let's get to it!”

Rat fell into line as they made their way further down the corridor. He glanced back, once, but the injured Zat was no longer visible. The image of the man's frightened eyes lingered, though...along with the same sense of dread that had filled the Zat's thoughts, and the inescapable sensation that something very bad was waiting for them ahead.

* * *

"Elkhorn to *Exile*, we've got enemy fighters coming up on our tail."

Drake swore silently. "Affirmative," he responded, then, "Anusha?"

"They're showing up on the feed from the beacon, but the damned thing is time-lagged to hell and back."

"Wonderful!" Marcus muttered. "So I can't even shoot at them and hope to hit anything. Unless one of our allied fighters, that we can't even see on beacon, gets in the fucking way!"

"Marcus, switch to optics," Iluka ordered.

"Captain, they'll be on top of us by the time I can see them to target."

"Then that's where they'll be—I don't see any other damned options, do you?"

Drake spared a glance at Iluka. He could only see her profile, but it was set and hard, her brows pulled low and her dark eyes like chips of obsidian.

"We'll get them," he said, hoping to defuse some of the tension. "Just keep your eyes peeled, Marcus."

"At that range, they'll get us, too," Marcus pointed out.

Iluka shook her head. "Then they'll get us, but it won't be without a fight. If I'm going to hell, then by the Ancestors I'm taking some Zats with me!"

Marcus snorted. "I'm too handsome for God to send me to hell. The rest of you are in for it, though."

Iluka laughed, and a faint smile twitched the corner of Anusha's mouth. "This is exactly why we Star Riders don't believe in gods. Too much favoritism."

Elkhorn's voice sounded in Drake's ear. "We've engaged enemy fighters, *Exile*. Keep going, we'll make them give up the chase."

"Priority!" Anusha barked. "Zat fighters changing formation. Damn it, looks like some of them are keeping our fighter support busy so the rest can come after us."

A few seconds later, Elkhorn confirmed. "Enemy fighters heading your way, *Exile*. We're trying to block them, but there aren't enough of us left."

"Affirmative, Elkhorn. We'll take care of them," Drake replied, with a confidence he didn't feel.

"I can take evasive maneuvers, Captain," Jason suggested. "But I'm afraid that they're far more maneuverable than we are."

Iluka stared grimly at her boards. "Keep on course, Silent Hawk. Marcus, it's up to you."

Marcus made no reply. Silence descended over the bridge, and Drake could all but feel the seconds ticking away, counting down to the moment that the Zatvian fighters caught up with them. He wondered how the two warships were faring, and if the boarding parties were having any success. If they were going to die in the next few minutes, it would be nice to at least know that their efforts hadn't been entirely in vain.

But how many ever get that kind of reassurance? You just have to have faith that somehow, somewhere, it all mattered.

The ship trembled, and a hellish noise rang through the hull from somewhere aft. "We've

taken a hit," Iluka said. "Marcus, damn your eyes, shoot them!"

"I will once I can see them!" he snapped. A moment later, he depressed the firing button. "Missed! Damn it!"

"Stay steady," Drake told him. "You can do it."

Another shudder of the ship. "Got one," Marcus said with satisfaction, but it was short-lived.

Red lights sprang out across Iluka's boards. "The Savvies took that hit. Not going to be jumping out of here to save our skins."

"Bastards," Marcus snarled. He'd been firing non-stop, but so far as Drake could tell, not having much success after his first hit. "They're closing up around us—they're going to come from all sides, like a pack of dogs taking down a deer."

"Get as many as you can," Iluka said.

"I am. Fuck. Here they come—"

"Priority!" Anusha shouted, making Drake's heart lurch. "Another ship is entering the system—damn it, they're coming down on our heads!"

That's it, then. Even if they could have survived the fighter assault, another ship would be their doom. There was nothing left but to fight, and hope that they could take a few Zats with them when they died.

"What the...?" Anusha murmured. "Wait a minute. Captain! The beacon says it isn't Zatvian."

A new transmission came over Drake's board. Startled, he punched it through, and heard a familiar voice. "Priority! Captain, it's *Devi's Challenge!*"

For an instant, Iluka only looked stunned. Then she recovered. "Put it on the speakers."

"*Devi's Challenge to Exile,*" said Harini Chandrashekar's voice. "You look like you're having a little difficulty, Toora."

Iluka's face lit up in a grin. "Damn, it's good to hear you! We could use some assistance, Harini, if you're willing."

The other captain laughed. "I've been chasing your tail ever since Paradise. I haven't covered half of space just to have you blown up as soon as I find you."

Apparently, the Zatvians didn't like the new odds. "Zatvian fighters are dropping back!" Marcus crowed. "Hah! Got one in the ass! Take that!"

Thank you, God, Drake thought fervently. They were safe, at least for the moment, but the battle was far from over. The odds had shifted, but if the boarding parties didn't succeed, they could still lose everything.

* * *

"We're getting close to the area where the prisoners are being held," Daniel Long River said. "Once we're there, we've got to move fast, before the Zats can use them as hostages."

It seemed to Rat as if time stretched, caught in an endless loop. They had fought their way from the boarding site towards the core of the station, bursts of movement interspersed with firefights. Several members of the party had been killed, and more injured, although for the most part they had fared well. He and Juanita were both unharmed, although fatigue was beginning to creep up on him. He wished vaguely that he had thought to practice running in body armor to build up his endurance; as it was, the unfamiliar weight was starting to tell.

Not much farther, he told himself. *Then we'll free the prisoners, find a defensible position, and take a rest.*

The lights in the corridor went out.

For a moment, there was nothing but absolute blackness, and the sound of Juanita swearing vehemently. **fear** surged from all sides, the primal instinct of a diurnal animal caught in the dark. Then the visor of Rat's helmet responded, switching over to night-vision mode. Sight returned, but the corridor looked colorless and ghostly, and the hair on the back of his neck tried to stand up.

"Everyone good?" called Daniel Long River, and received affirmatives in reply.

"Did something blow?" Rat asked. "Has life support been hit?" Goddess, if the air had gone along with the lights, they could be in a great deal of trouble in a very short time.

"I don't know." Daniel moved forward, taking point. "All the more reason to hurry as quickly as we—"

A figure stepped out from a side corridor ahead—and broke into a run, charging directly toward them.

Rat shouted a warning and tried to take aim, but for once even his reflexes weren't quick enough. The lone figure sprang into the air, somersaulted, then vaulted off its hands, too fast for anyone to target it. *A woman*, Rat thought, even as he tried to get a lock on her. *A Fury?*

Daniel, who was closest, tried to back away, but in comparison to the Fury it looked as if he moved in slow motion. She was on him in the space of seconds, too close now for anyone to use their weapons for risk of hitting each other rather than her. One arm struck his hand, sending his gun flying, while the other punched into his midriff. As he doubled over, she sprang into the air, lashing out with a kick that caught him on the chin with such force that it sent him over backwards into the wall. He crumpled to the floor, unmoving.

Shouts of alarm erupted behind them, and Rat realized that they had been outflanked. He hoped desperately that their rear guard could deal with whatever was coming up behind him, because he didn't have any attention to spare from the Fury.

The two soldiers who had been directly behind Daniel charged her in a concerted attack, but somehow she evaded them, dodging and jumping with a grace and speed that bordered on inhuman. She slapped her gloved hand against one of them, and his entire body went rigid, back arching as if he had grabbed a live electrical wire. As he collapsed, she grasped his helmeted head and twisted it almost backwards. The other man went down seconds later, disabled with a series of kicks and punches.

"To hell with this!" snarled Juanita. Slinging her useless rifle over her back, she rushed the Fury in a display of pure, raw strength rather than finesse. Somehow, she made it past the Fury's guard, punching the other woman hard in the shoulder.

The Fury didn't even flinch. Instead, she grabbed Juanita's outstretched arm with both hands and wrenched. When Juanita stumbled back with a yell of pain, the Fury let go—and kicked hard, smashing her boot into Juanita's leg. The crack of the femur breaking was loud enough to be heard even over the cacophony of battle.

"No!" Rat shouted, even as Juanita went down. He moved on instinct, knowing only that he had to draw off the Fury before she could do any further harm to the helpless Juanita.

Distracted by the sound, she turned to face him. Although most of her face was covered by a helmet and breather, he could see her eyes, and the blankness in them sent a chill down his spine. *She isn't wearing a visor. How can she see in the dark?*

Then she was moving towards him, and he had no more time for anything but survival. A flurry of strikes that he was barely fast enough to block shoved him back.

**keep moving ::adrenaline levels good, minor damage to left shoulder, endorphins adjusted*

*to compensate:: watch for an opening ::push him back against the wall he will be pinned we will kill him then::**

The whispers coming from the Fury were...wrong. Deeply wrong, as though they came from two minds, not just one.

And there's no emotion at all. No anger, no fear, no pain...nothing but a clinical analysis of the situation.

What is she?

The Fury's foot slipped slightly in something—blood, for all he knew—and for just an instant she was off balance. Seizing the opportunity, Rat threw a hard punch at her chest, a part of him bracing for the painful feedback that he would endure. He felt his hand connect, hard enough to bruise his own knuckles inside the protection of his glove.

There was no pain.

There was no pain, because she was incapable of feeling it.

The Fury staggered, just slightly—then regrouped and came back at him, faster than he would have thought possible. And this time, it was she who seized the upper hand.

Rat tried to block, but he'd let himself be distracted for that critical instant, and he was too slow. Her knee slammed into his ribs, the force stunning even through the body armor, and he felt something *give*. Pain flared; he tried to drop back, but she came after him, not even giving him an instant to react. A series of blows slammed into him, and he crashed against the wall. Agony flared in the left side of his chest, so intense that he could barely breathe. His legs went out from under him, and the taste of blood filled his mouth.

Vaguely, he wondered if his visor was malfunctioning, because the night-vision didn't seem to be working very well. Everything was getting dark around the edges, leaving only a tunnel to look through. He tried to breathe, but the stabbing pain in his chest made it difficult.

Someone was standing over him. Feeling oddly disconnected, he stared up at the Fury. She was going to kill him, he thought, but the realization lacked weight or urgency.

Then, suddenly, the Fury stiffened. Her arms jerked up in the air, a strange parody of her earlier grace, before her legs folded and she collapsed into a heap. Most of her back was gone, with only the heavy arch of the scorched spine recognizable amidst the torn and shredded tissue.

Juanita lay sprawled across the corridor, where she had dragged herself, despite her broken leg. In one hand she held her rifle, which she must have pressed point-blank to the Fury's back. Seeing Rat, she dropped the weapon and struggled towards him.

There were voices in his head, in his ears from the com, but he couldn't make sense of what any of them were saying. He thought that he ought to get up, that he was in the way, but even the idea of moving made him tired. Coughing racked him suddenly, sending white-hot agony through his chest and abdomen.

"I'm not feeling very well," he managed to say. And then everything went black.

* * *

Neva stripped off bloody gloves and a stained coverup as other medics hurriedly removed the last patient from the table. *Goddess, lend me your strength*, she thought as she pulled a new coverup from the stack in the corner.

They had set up a field hospital in what had once been a cafeteria. As she had expected, it was primitive at best, everything jury-rigged together as fast as possible before the casualties began flooding in. Three makeshift operating bays were at one end, separated from each other

only by loose curtains. Triage medics worked at the other end, shuttling the most critical cases to the bays.

Almost since the moment she had gotten set up, there had been an endless stream of wounded men and women coming across her table. No fancy diagnostic bed here; instead, they made do with an operating table and a portable imager. So far, she had been lucky, and although at least one of her patients was still critical, none had died yet.

Yet. In a situation like this, treating soldiers who had been shot or shredded by shrapnel, missing body parts or losing blood, there was bound to be a loss on the table eventually.

“Coming in!” someone shouted, and Neva tiredly turned back to her work. Two men ran up with a stretcher, sliding it into place on the table without disturbing the patient. One of them pulled back the blanket covering the wounded man, and Neva found herself staring down at a familiar face.

Oh, Goddess, no.

An O₂ mask covered the lower part of Rat's features, but the color of the skin above it had paled to a sickly yellow hue. The triage team had already gotten him stripped, and although he was still covered to the chest, she could see the beginnings of ugly, black bruising on his chest. With a shaking hand, she pulled the cover farther back. It didn't get better.

“Suspect a collapsed lung and internal bleeding,” one of the triage team was saying, but his voice seemed oddly distant. “We've started him on fluids and oxygen.”

Neva nodded. Training took over, momentarily swamping her fear that she was going to make some mistake that would end up killing her lover. “I want him intubated,” she said to the medics that were working with her.

Grabbing the imager, she pulled it into place. It hummed to itself; an instant later, a false-color three-dimensional image of Rat's internals came into view.

Goddess.

“Confirmation on that collapsed left lung. Three ribs have fractures—they're lined up, don't worry about them right now. Blood pressure is dangerously low. Spleen's ruptured—he's bleeding out into the abdominal cavity. Get me some 'bots!”

Someone handed her a syringe. The clear liquid inside contained thousands of nanobots, all of them created to be attracted to the body's own signals, which would lead them to the source of bleeding and allow them to help stop it. She thrust the long needle through his skin, through the muscular wall of the abdomen, watching its progress on the imager.

Rat began to cough, and the medic in the process of guiding a tube into his trachea swore. Bloody phlegm appeared on his lips. To Neva's horror, his eyelids fluttered, and his head thrashed weakly to one side, threatening to pull out the tube.

“He's coming out of it! Someone get him under!” the medic with the tube was shouting, and someone else jumped to inject sedative into the fluid port. The moment Rat stopped moving, Neva reached for a scalpel.

Some things could be done by nanobots, but in other ways medicine was as primitive as it had ever been. Using the imager to guide her, Neva carefully made an incision between his ribs, then slipped in a tube that would drain off the fluid exerting pressure on his lung. “I'd like some antibots, in case of infection,” she said, and another syringe full of bots went into the IV port.

When she checked again, Neva found that the ruptured spleen was no longer hemorrhaging, and a series of vasoconstrictors had gotten his blood pressure to something approaching an acceptable level. The left kidney had decided to quit working in the meantime; that could wait, though, so long as the right one was still going.

She hooked up a bag of synthesized blood and ran a line. She wanted, desperately, to keep monitoring him, but now that he was at least stabilized, his priority had dropped according to the harsh rules of triage. With the tube in place, the collapsed lung should reinflate; his heartbeat was strong, and he was on oxygen to assist his breathing. No reason remained to keep him in on a table that could be used for someone in worse condition.

Even so, it was hard to let him go. "He's stable for now," she forced herself to say. "Put a critical care tag on him—if his blood pressure drops at all, I want him right back here."

A medic strapped a monitor on Rat's arm, and they moved him, a parade of stretcher, tubes, oxygen, and fluid and blood packs. Her heart ached, seeing him like that, and she wanted to go after him, to sit by him and make damned sure that the bleeding didn't start again. But there were others who needed her now, and her head knew it, even if her heart didn't.

"We're clear—bring in the next one," she said, and stripped off the gloves covered with Rat's blood.

* * *

Neva slumped in a chair, her head bowed. Exhaustion hazed her mind and made everything feel surreal, but she told herself that she needed to get back to her patients. She didn't know how many hours she had spent in the operating bay, trying to patch the wounded back together, or even how many of the injured she had seen. Everything blurred together, a long stretch of blood and gore, punctuated only by worry for Rat.

When a break had finally come in the stream of wounded, she had taken the opportunity to find a chair in an out-of-the-way corner and sit down. At the time, it had seemed like a good idea, but now she was beginning to wonder how she would stand up again.

A figure appeared before her; startled, she looked up, and found Michael Shot With an Arrow. He looked every bit as tired as she felt, but he managed a weary smile. "Good work, Neva. Thank you."

She started to stand up. "I should get back."

"Things have slowed down—you have time to get some sleep. I'm going to. A tired medic is a dangerous medic." He lowered himself into a chair by her, moving as if his joints pained him. "I've got good news—the two Zat warships have been destroyed or disabled, and our own are still intact. The last resistance on the station just surrendered. Your ship was damaged, but reports say that everyone is all right, and it will be able to dock under its own power."

Neva realized guiltily that she hadn't even spared a thought for the *Exile*, so focused had she been on her own task. "Thank you. What about the prisoners?"

Michael's eyes darkened. "They've all been set free. Some of them are in bad shape, thanks to the Zats' interrogation techniques, but none are critical."

At least all this wasn't in vain, then. "Good."

"We're going to move operations here into the station hospital. Some of the soldiers who aren't needed in the mop-up are going to help us shuffle everyone over. This would be a good chance to grab a nap."

She nodded, glad that they would soon have better facilities to do their work in. "I think I will grab an hour or two of sleep. I've got something to check on first, though."

The critically injured were currently being housed in a room near the field surgery; they'd be the first transferred to the hospital facility. At the moment, the room was crowded with machinery and bodies. Neva threaded her way through the maze, until she caught sight of Juanita

sitting by a stretcher. Juanita's right leg and hip were enclosed in a stabilizer, so that she couldn't sit normally, but was forced to lean awkwardly to one side.

I didn't even know she was hurt. Despite her weariness, Neva picked up her pace. "Juanita! Are you all right? Do you need help?"

Juanita managed a tired smile. "I'm fine. They say they will put a pin in my leg sometime, take me out of this damned stabilizer." She gestured dismissively in the general direction of the leg, as though it were of no consequence. "So I sit here with Rat and wait."

Rat lay on the stretcher, covered with self-warming blankets. The monitor on his arm told her that his blood pressure had come up, thank the Goddess. He was still under heavy sedation, to keep him from pulling the oxygen tube out of his trachea, and so didn't stir at all when Neva reached out and tenderly brushed his dreads back from his face. A feeling of relief flooded her, so intense that it left her weak. She sat down by his stretcher, resisting the urge to put her head in her hands and cry.

"He doesn't look very good," Juanita said critically. "Will he make it, do you think?"

"Yes. Assuming the Zats don't blow up the entire station, and all of us with it, anyway."

"Good," Juanita nodded solemnly. "I'm glad. He saved my life, you know."

"No. I didn't know that."

"I saved his, too, so we're even. You look bad. You should rest."

Neva nodded and put her head down against Rat's arm. Within moments, despite the hardness of the floor, she fell deeply asleep.

Chapter 36: Speaking With the Dead

Despite the damage to the ship, the *Exile* put into dock without incident, although Drake suspected that had more to do with Jason's skill than with the state of the vessel. Because the spine was now open to vacuum, they had to put on 'suits to exit the ship—a damned nuisance, if nothing else. Drake would have preferred to stay on board until the hole in the spine was patched, but Iluka had a meeting with the other captains, and had asked him to come with her. Anusha was staying on the ship, but Jason and Marcus both requested permission to go on station.

Everything was still in such a state of flux that they hadn't received any word of Neva, Rat, or Juanita. And so, when they exited the tube onto the docks to find Juanita waiting for them, Drake felt a stab of relief. She leaned heavily against the burned-out husk of a dockside transport. Her body armor and helmet were gone, and she wore a tattered sleeveless shirt and loose pants, which were partially obscured by a bulky-looking stabilizer strapped to one leg.

Marcus ripped off his 'suit's helmet. "What the hell is that?" he demanded, pointing at her leg. "Didn't I tell you not to get shot up?"

Juanita shrugged. "I didn't get shot. Got kicked."

"Kicked? By what, a horse?"

"Not sure what a horse is. I got kicked by a woman." Juanita started to shift her weight from the transport to her feet, but Marcus put a hand out and pushed her back.

"Damn it, woman, you shouldn't be walking around on that thing," he growled. "What sort of operation are they running here? You need surgery! Where the hell is Neva—off with that useless boyfriend of hers?"

Juanita's put a calming hand on his arm. "Neva's got other things to do, yes? People hurt worse. I can wait my turn. When a man's bleeding to death in front of my eyes, I'm not so selfish as to say 'you fix my leg, let Rat die.'"

Drake felt the cold of the docks leech into him. At his side, Iluka swore and paused in stripping off her bulky 'suit. "Rat was hurt? How is he?"

"Alive." Juanita shook her head unhappily. "Same woman as broke my leg decided to smash up his insides. Would have been me, if he hadn't gotten her attention when I was down."

Juanita shivered, and Marcus hastily pulled her shawl out of his bag and put it around her shoulders. "Here. I thought you might want this."

Drake exchanged a worried look with Iluka. "What sort of training are the Zats giving their soldiers these days, if one of them can take out five people?"

"Not training," Juanita said. Her big hands pulled her shawl more tightly about her, as if warding off an inner chill. "This woman...she did it with her bare hands, yes? On the wrestling circuit, I saw lots of strong people, but nothing like her. Almost like she wasn't human."

Oh hell, that didn't sound good at all. "Is there anything more about her you can tell us?"
"Not much. Rat-man did his thing on one of the Zats, said that there was something on station called Furies. Maybe she was one of them."
Marcus paled. "There are more?"
"Yeah." Juanita shivered again, and leaned against him, as if for comfort. "I think so."

* * *

Neva sat by Rat's bed, watching him sleep. He was off the oxygen now, but a heavy mix of painkillers still flowed into him through the IV, keeping him sedated. The faint sounds of voices came through the thin curtains hung up around the bed, the only thing sealing them off from the rest of critical ward. The air smelled of disinfectant, a welcome change from the stink of blood that had hung over the field hospital.

The curtains rustled, and Michael Shot With an Arrow peeked in. "Am I interrupting?"

"No. Come on in."

He stepped inside, running a professional eye over Rat's inert form. "How is he?"

Neva reached out and carefully stroked a stray lock of hair back from Rat's face. He didn't stir at the touch, and his stillness made her heart ache, even though she knew it was for the best. "We're having to keep him heavily sedated," she said unhappily. "Not so much for his own pain, but because of others." She glanced up at Michael to gauge his reaction.

Michael nodded his comprehension. "Continue."

"It would be hard on him to be here at the best of times, but I think he could do it. But weak as he is right now, if I let him wake up, I think he'd start to react before he even became fully conscious. I don't want to take the chance that he'll tear something and start bleeding again." She sighed and let her hand fall away from his face. "I'd like to transfer him to the *Exile* as soon as possible, and bring him out of it there."

"That won't be easy," Michael said ruefully. "I'd come to tell you that your ship has put in to dock, but that it's got a big hole in its spine. However, we could find temporary quarters for you on station, and move him there, where he'd be more insulated from others."

A hole in the spine? Neva thought, but didn't ask. At least no one had been killed, but clearly the *Exile* had seen action. "I'd appreciate that. Thank you, Michael."

"It isn't just for you. I have the feeling that Captain Ten Bears is going to want to question him." Michael's eyes darkened slightly. "Of everyone who faced a Fury, he might have the most valuable knowledge."

Neva frowned. "A Fury? What's that?"

"An excellent question, and one I hope you can help us answer. They appear to be special forces—all women. There were five of them on this station. All were eventually killed, but not before they decimated the troops facing them."

"They're all dead?"

Michael shrugged. "According to reports, they acted as if they didn't even feel their wounds. They kept coming until lethal force was used."

Neva felt a chill walk down her spine. "Were they drugged somehow?"

"That's what I intend to find out. Their bodies, or what's left of them, are awaiting autopsy now. And that's where you come in. I could use another pair of hands—are you interested?"

Interested in what almost killed Rat? She swallowed against the anger in her belly and nodded sharply. "I'm in."

* * *

Rena Crow Wing, Joshua's first mate, guided Iluka and Drake through the station to the room which had been set aside for the Captains' Council. Rena was, understandably, in high spirits, exchanging boisterous greetings with everyone they passed. Most of the men and women she hailed seemed to be involved in sweeping the station for any listening devices that the Zats might have installed; the rest were repair crews patching any critical systems that had been damaged.

Typically, the Zats had attempted to put their stamp on the station, painting all the walls a uniform white and covering the floors with beige carpeting. But they hadn't been able to alter the basic architecture, which consisted of a more flowing style than the Zat norm, and here and there some damage to the walls revealed the coats of brighter paint underneath the white, waiting to be restored some day. Assuming that the original owners managed to hold onto it long enough, anyway.

As if in reminder of how precarious their victory was, they passed through an area where there had clearly been a desperate firefight. The walls were scorched, and the carpet burned away to metal in places. Two pipes had been breached, and crews were busy resealing them at that moment. One of the workers called something to Rena in their own language that caused her to start backtracking.

"We can't go that way," she explained. "A grenade went off, and the floor is breached clear through to the level beneath."

A grenade? "What lunatic would set off a grenade on a station?" Drake asked, aghast.

Rena's mouth tightened, and some of the joy faded from her dark eyes. "They had no choice. The Zats had a new kind of soldier here."

"The Furies?" Iluka asked, surprised.

"Yes."

"And it took that big a grenade to stop them?"

"*One* of them. Yes." Rena shook her head in disbelief. "Our medical personnel are investigating now."

Iluka didn't say anything, but Drake could tell from the set of her mouth that she didn't like what she was hearing. He didn't, either.

One worry at a time, Drake. There's nothing you can do about the Furies now. Focus on the Captains' Council first.

They made it to the council room without any further detours. The chamber was large and round, which made the square Zat-style table in the middle seem horribly out of place. A few coffee cups were scattered around the table, and in the center was a small clay bowl that held what looked like lit coals. They didn't seem to be putting out much smoke, so Drake assumed that either the filters could handle such a small fire, or that they were already so damaged from the battle that it no longer mattered. A number of men and women sat around the table, including two familiar faces: Joshua Ten Bears and Harini Chandrashekar.

"Iluka!" Harini called from her seat. She wore a sari that had been dyed the color of flame; yellow at one edge, fading through orange and into deep red. The gold in her ears and nose, and at her wrists, flashed brilliantly even in the muted light. "They tell me you got your ship shot up before I came into the fray. Damned sloppy of you, I must say."

Iluka grinned. "Never been so glad to see anyone in my life as you, Harini. That's twice

you've come flying in to the rescue."

"Then you owe me drink or two."

"I owe you a whole damned bar full of drinks." Iluka found an empty seat and dropped into it with a sigh. "How did you manage to tail us here?"

A sly smile appeared on Harini's face. "I saw you and Ten Bears here hightailing it out of Paradise on the same vector, and thought you might be going somewhere interesting. Having no other plans, I followed you. We almost came out into a group of Zat Kleggers, just in time to see the *Red Cloud* leaving the system. The Zats were already having trouble, so we shot them up some more as we passed by, then headed out on the same vector the *Red Cloud* had taken. This time, we almost missed you altogether. We came out to find no sign of you, and a lot of annoyed Star Riders instead. Fortunately, one of the ships had done some trading with me on Paradise, and was courteous enough to tell me where you'd gone. And so here we are."

"Out of the frying pan, Harini," Iluka said with a crooked smile. "Would you have followed us if you'd known what you were in for?"

Harini snorted indelicately. "You insult me with that question, Iluka. I would have followed twice as far for a chance to blow some Zats to hell."

Drake sank into a chair beside Iluka, while Rena found a seat beside Joshua. The captain of the *Red Cloud* cleared his throat. "We are fortunate to have you here, Harini. Welcome." He glanced at Iluka then, and smiled. "And here we meet again, old friend, on the other side of victory. Allow me to introduce those you don't know. This is Captain Bill Sees in the Dark, of the *Hail Storm*."

The other warship captain exchanged a greeting with Iluka. Drake sat back and silently observed the men and women gathered around the table while the introductions went on. They included the first mate of the *Hail Storm*, as well as three of the prisoners who had been rescued from the Zats. Although they apparently considered themselves well enough to attend a council, Drake was silently amazed they had been released from the hospital. All were thin to the point of gauntness. Shaven heads exacerbated the image of starvation; Drake suspected that their Zat captors had removed their hair in an attempt at humiliation. One of them had hands swathed in bandages, while another was missing an ear. To his surprise, he felt a faint flush of shame—would he have been there, discussing strategy, if he had undergone a similar ordeal?

Maybe. He remembered the rabbis he had known, speaking of history and the ability of humans to continue against terrible odds. *I suppose one never knows how one will act, until one is tested. God willing, I won't ever have to find out.*

"We have done well," Joshua said, when introductions were finished. "But we cannot rest. A single victory does little to turn the tide, let alone win the war. Even as we speak, two of the Zatvian warships near the planet are laying new courses that will bring them here. We must not only defeat them, but guard against the possibility of new ships coming into the system. Although at this point we can't directly aid the rebellion on the planet, hopefully drawing off some of the Zat firepower will make a difference in their chances for success."

One of the erstwhile prisoners shifted. "If I could get to the planet, I could spread the news of our victory here, that would give heart to the rebels," she said. "I'm willing to take the risk, if we can spare even a single in-system ship to make the drop."

"How are conditions on the planet?" Iluka asked.

The woman's mouth tightened. "Difficult. The Zats have installed strip-mining operations over vast sections of land. There is so much dust in the air that the average temperature has dropped across the world. Some of our people have been forced to work in the mines and in

other operations, but the Zats have also brought in slaves from other systems. There is no thought of health or safety—apparently, one thing the Zats have no shortage of is slaves, and so they are simply worked to death.”

“There are many different rebel factions, of course,” said another man. A bandage covered both his eyes, but his voice was strong and firm. “We sabotage where we can, help slaves escape, and cause whatever trouble seems feasible. Many of us have been working in isolation from one another, but if we can retake the skies and the communications satellites, that will change very quickly.”

The conversation turned to strategy, none of which included the *Exile* at the moment. Crews were already working on patching the hole in the spine, and fixing the damage to the engines—an even higher priority than repairing the station at the moment, because even the firepower of a freighter-turned-pirate ship might make the difference in an engagement. Harini was eager to deal the Zats some damage, and *Devi's Challenge* would be deployed alongside the two warships. As the conversation continued, Drake switched his attention to Iluka, and was disturbed to see an unhappy look on her face. No one who hadn't served close beside her would probably notice it, but to him it was as obvious as if she had shouted aloud.

She wants in on the action. We almost died, and she's ready to go back into the fray without a second of rest. Our debt to Joshua is paid, so that isn't what's driving her.

What is it you're looking for, Iluka? What will finally make you content? But I already know the answer to that, don't I? You won't be happy until the Zats are on their knees. And, since that doesn't seem damned likely, you'll keep pushing us all until...what?

* * *

The autopsy room was next to the station morgue. Neva pulled on a set of disposable scrubs, an air filter, and a pair of heavy gloves. The lighting in the small room was bright, meant to illuminate all the details of death. A portable medscan stood in the corner, dragged in to help the morgue attendants identify bodies. The chill air smelled of disinfectant and sage, but the stink of charred meat, ruptured organs, and blood was far stronger.

Someone had already laid out the bodies of the Furies—or, at least, what was left of them. One corpse was merely bits and pieces of mangled flesh and bone, and wasn't likely to offer much information past what could be gleaned from the cellular level. The others were in various states, none of them whole, and Neva remembered what Michael had said about the need to use lethal force.

Michael indicated one of the tables. The figure on it was mainly whole between the upper torso and head, and from the legs down. Everything in between was nothing but charcoal and melted textiles, with only the heavy column of the spine escaping more or less intact.

“If you're ready to begin, I'll start the recording equipment.”

Neva nodded her consent and went to the table. The Fury was still in her uniform; the first thing, then, would be to carefully remove it and set it aside for later analysis by technical teams. The Fury's head covering seemed to consist of two pieces, a hood and a helmet with a mask-like apparatus no doubt intended to filter out gas attacks. Neva removed both, then stopped, shocked. “Goddess, she's young.”

The girl was pale in death, and Neva thought her open eyes had been green, before they had collapsed back into her head. Her scalp was completely shaved, which made her round face look even more childlike.

Michael glanced over from his table, where he had been performing a similar procedure. "So is this one, although it would appear that she was at least eighteen."

"If she had been a low-level grunt, that wouldn't be remarkable." Neva shook her head uncertainly. "Specialized troops like this...from the way it sounds, they must have had years of training. But I thought the minimum age for Zatvian service was eighteen."

The protective filters hid most of Michael's face, but she heard the frown in his voice. "True. I'll put in a request for their service records to the teams going through the Zat database, although it won't be much of a priority at this point. See if you can find out who she is. There should be identification on her somewhere."

Neva unfastened the armored jacket, carefully peeling it away where it was burned and melted, so that not too much flesh came off with it. As she went to roll the body over, however, her fingers encountered a bulky pack at the base of the Fury's neck, where it had previously been hidden and protected by the hood.

The pack was about the size of a fist, and enclosed in tough, shockproof fibers. A series of small tubes emerged from it, all of them feeding into what looked like permanent shunts of some kind, centered over the jugulars. As Neva cautiously attempted to peel the pack back, she discovered another connection, this time through a port in her spine.

What's going on here?

"I want the contents of this analyzed," she said grimly, carefully setting the pack with its dangling tubes aside. "But if I had to guess, we've just found out why they didn't seem to react to pain. They were pumped so full of drugs that they didn't feel a thing." *Although that doesn't explain the connection with the spine.*

I don't like this.

With a sense of growing unease, Neva finished stripping the corpse. A badge of some sort was attached to the Fury's belt. Hoping that it consisted of her identification, Neva waved it under the reader.

Ordinarily, the reader should have returned name, rank, and unit assignment. Instead, only a few words glowed softly from its screen: DECEMBER GROUP 13.4, Y.A.P.

Maybe this isn't an ID badge after all? But there seemed nothing else it could be, nor any other type of identification to be found on the body. Deciding to set it aside for the moment, Neva bagged and labeled each of the Fury's effects, then set the bags aside for the technical team to pick up when they had the chance. Now ready to begin her real work, she switched on the table's diagnostic functions, and pulled a screen into place to scan the body.

At first, she thought the screen was malfunctioning. Then she heard Michael swear, and knew that he was getting the same anomalous readings from the body he was working on. She turned to look at him, saw him staring back, his dark eyes wide with shock.

"Tell me what you see," he ordered.

Neva swallowed and turned back to her scanner. "The subject seems to possess an entire secondary nervous system. I don't recognize its configuration at all, but it appears to have infiltrated both her central and peripheral nervous systems on every level. In addition, there are some kind of cells in her arms and face that the scan doesn't recognize at all." Neva stepped back, shaking her head in disbelief. "What the hell is going on here?"

"I don't know," Michael said grimly. "But I think that request for their service records just got a lot more urgent."

* * *

By the time Neva reached her new quarters, she felt as though she had been awake for days. *Ten hours in the morgue, and we still have more questions than answers.* She and Michael had gone over all the remains with every available diagnostic device, and all of them had returned the same unfathomable results. The Furies had entire nervous systems that they shouldn't possess, not to mention an assortment of specialized cells whose functions she couldn't even guess at.

Michael had put in a priority request to the teams going through the data the Zats had left behind—assuming that “December Group 13.4, Y.A.P.” was indeed some sort of ID, and not code for something entirely different. With luck, they would have the records by the next shift, although Neva wasn't sure how much information the station would have. If the Furies hadn't been created—and she felt that created was indeed the word for it—in this system, but only assigned here afterwards, it seemed unlikely that anything remotely sensitive would have been sent along with them.

When she finally reached her quarters, she found a small room, mostly taken up with a bed and a chair. The bed was occupied by Rat, and the chair by Jason Silent Hawk.

Jason glanced up at her entrance. “Hello, Neva. The crew thought that someone should sit with Rat. Juanita is in surgery for her leg, and Marcus is with her; Drake and Iluka are in council, and Anusha remained aboard the *Exile*. Therefore, here I am.”

“He's been reading to me,” said a reedy imitation of Rat's voice.

Her heart leapt, and she would have run to the bedside if there had been enough room to do so. “Rat? How are you feeling?”

His golden skin still had an unhealthy yellow tinge, and his amber eyes looked sleepy, but he managed to reach out with the hand that wasn't hooked to an IV. “Pretty good, all things considered,” he rasped.

She took his hand in both of hers, bringing it to her lips. Her heart ached with emotion: relief, love, and gratitude.

Jason stood up and went to the door. “If you will excuse me, I have other duties,” he said tactfully.

“Yes. Of course. Thank you, Jason.” Neva cast him a smile. “For everything.”

Jason smiled back. “Serving with you has been an adventure,” he said wryly, then stepped through the door, leaving them alone.

Neva automatically checked the diagnostic readout monitoring Rat's condition. “Am I going to make it?” he asked with a crooked smile.

“I'm afraid so,” she deadpanned. She disdained the chair to perch on the bed by him, wanting to be close. “You can probably guess what happened. You're lucky to be alive.”

“Nah. I've got a good healer.” His hand tightened on hers. “Neva, I have something to tell you.”

She leaned over and gently pressed her lips to his forehead. “It can wait, love. Just rest.”

“No. It can't wait. The woman I fought...the Fury...” He trailed off for a moment, as if uncertain how to continue. “Do you remember the commander on Gethsemane? I think...he knew about them...hadn't seen one, didn't really know, just enough to fear them.”

“Rat, please. Just relax. There's nothing that can't wait.”

“They don't feel, Neva. No pain. I hit her—I hit *them*—and there was nothing.”

“She was drugged,” Neva said, remembering the packs. “There was only one, though, according to Juanita.”

“One body. Two minds.”

Neva felt as though the cold of space had entered into the room, crystallizing her blood. *One body. Two minds.*

Two nervous systems, intimately connected. You wouldn't need an entire second brain, if you could tap into the functions handled by the first. Complete awareness of the shared body, but with separate cognitive functions.

That wasn't just an odd collection of cells grown in her. It was an entirely different entity.

Neva snapped to her feet, heart pounding. "I've got to find Michael. I'm sorry—I know I should stay with you—but this is important."

"It's all right." Rat smiled wanly. "I'm sleepy, anyway."

"If you need anything, just push the call button on the bed, and someone will find me. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I know." He tilted his head back slightly, so that he could kiss her lightly on the lips. His eyes fluttered closed, worn out by the aftereffects of the sedatives and his body's need for rest.

Neva paused for just an instant to reassure herself that he was simply asleep. Then, putting aside her own desire to curl up by him, she hurried out, certain that it was going to be a long time before she would rest again.

* * *

A week later, Neva sat in the galley of the *Exile*, staring at the damning words displayed on the tablet in front of her. She wished, desperately, that she could change the Fury's service records, make the facts add up to some other conclusion. That had been one of the hardest things she'd had to learn, when she'd entered medical school: sometimes, the results weren't what you wanted, and no amount of wishing in the universe would change things.

At least this meeting could take place on the ship, instead of the still unfamiliar territory of the station. Crews had patched the hole in the *Exile's* spine, allowing them to enter and exit the ship without having to resort to airlocks and 'suits. The sensors were functional once again, and the Savvies would be back online shortly, which meant that the *Exile* would be able to rejoin the fighting.

Several skirmishes had already been fought farther in-system, towards the only inhabited world. The Zats weren't yet ready to relinquish their hold on Waga Chun, but the news Neva had heard was encouraging. A handful of decisive battles had been won on the planet, and the *Red Cloud* and *Hail Storm* had destroyed another warship, before the *Red Cloud* had taken up patrol farther out system, waiting for the inevitable arrival of other Zat ships. With luck, they could keep word of what the rebellion contained long enough that, by the time the Zats realized what was happening and sent reinforcements, the system would be securely in the hands of its original inhabitants.

Rat and Juanita had both returned to the ship to finish recuperating there, rather than strain station resources any further. Neva had been glad for Rat's presence, even though she hadn't seen him awake very much. All of her on-duty time was spent in the station hospital, and her off hours were spent pouring over reports that filled her with dread.

Now, he sat across the table from her in a motorized chair borrowed from the station. Thankfully, his recovery had been uneventful, and soon he would be ready to walk short distances under his own power. Jasmine had been thrilled by his enforced leisure time, as it meant that he had more hours to play with her.

Rat hadn't said anything when she called the all-crew meeting, but she suspected that he

either knew or guessed what she had found. If nothing else, he could sense her distress. He had been watching her quietly while she fidgeted, but just when it seemed that he was about to speak, he stopped and instead looked towards the door. A moment later, it slid open, and the rest of the crew came in. Juanita moved awkwardly, forced to use a brace while her broken femur knitted itself back together. Although Marcus didn't do anything overt to help her, Neva noted that he kept a sharp eye on her progress, ready to step in if she should lose her footing. Drake went to the counter and poured a cup of coffee, while Iluka and Anusha arranged themselves at the ends of the table. At the moment, without a permanent pilot, they represented the entire crew.

"All right, Neva," Iluka said when everyone had gotten settled. "What's this all about?"

Neva took a breath. "I have news. Michael Shot With an Arrow and I have been working on finding out more about the Furies. Not just who they are...but what."

She launched into an explanation of everything they had found so far, including the drug delivery system and the symbiote. "Our medical scanners had trouble with some of cell types, and it was a while before we realized why. The scanners are set up to identify human cells only, but the Furies incorporate cell types found in other vertebrates but not in humans. Infrared sensors, like those in pit vipers, allow them to function in complete darkness. They also have what are called electroplaques—special cells that can store and discharge electricity. Metal plates in their gloves help deliver a shock to an opponent, temporarily incapacitating them."

Drake arched a brow. "Could they use those to short out information storage? Wipe files? Disrupt electronic locks on doors?"

Neva shrugged. "I have no idea, but it sounds plausible."

Iluka shook her head unhappily. "I don't like this. Super soldiers, drugged into unfeeling aggression, who can see in the dark, and have some kind of symbiote implanted in them...if the Zats have many of them, we're in serious trouble."

"I don't think there are many of them now," Neva said carefully. "It's impossible to say, but I think that this batch, at least, were experimental." She found herself staring at the table, not wanting to look any of her crewmembers in the eye. "I...I'd like to tell you about one of them, if I may. Not as a thing, but as a person."

"We don't know what her name was. None of the Furies had names in their service files. Her only identity was December Group 13.4. The designation probably means something, but we don't know what at this point. We do know that December joined the Zativian military at age eleven."

"That's not possible," Anusha objected. "The Zats don't take recruits under eighteen."

"December was part of a special program. I seriously doubt that she was a volunteer, either. They took her away from her home at age eleven. They took away her name. And then, they implanted a *thing* in her, another consciousness that could plan strategy, that could monitor the drugs they were flooding into her body, and that could handle the sensory input from the novel cells they also implanted in her. To make such delicate connections, the symbiote would have to have been literally grown in place from its stem cells. By the time it was done, it was another person, someone she couldn't get rid of. Maybe even something that directly controlled her, although from Rat's description it doesn't sound that way."

"How horrible," Juanita whispered. "How could they do such a thing to a child?"

Neva smiled crookedly. "They probably had no choice. I don't know that an adult would be adaptable enough to handle such an...invasion...of their nervous system. The best solution would be to implant the symbiote in a newborn, or even a fetus, but if they'd gone that route it would have been even more years before they knew if their program was a success or not. Research

funds dry up over time ranges like that, even in the Zatvian military. So they compromised and used children.”

There came a moment of silence. Then: “Is that all you have?” Marcus asked in a hollow voice.

Neva forced herself to look up and meet Marcus’ eyes. His face had gone utterly white, and his blue eyes held a fear that she had never imagined seeing in him. “Not quite,” she said quietly. “According to their records, December—like the rest of the Furies—was from New Breyers.”

“No!” At the mention of his homeworld, Marcus brought his fist down on the table.

Neva winced. “They were brought into the military as part of something called the Youth Advantage Program.”

“No—you’re lying!”

Juanita’s dark eyes were huge. “Your daughter—she was taken for this program, yes?”

Marcus ignored her, staring fixedly at Neva. Begging her, maybe, to tell him that it was all a macabre joke, that none of it was true. “I ran a comparison against a sample of your DNA,” she said. “None of the Furies stationed here were related to you. That’s all I can tell you.”

“It’s a Zat trick.” Marcus’ hands balled into fists. “Genevieve is in a boarding school somewhere, with other hostages. Or maybe dumped on a colony world. Not this. Not taken, and drugged, and *tortured*—”

His voice broke, and he covered his face with his hands, sobbing hoarsely. Juanita slipped one arm around him, leaning her head against his shoulder. From the other side, Rat reached out and rested a hand on Marcus’ arm, saying nothing.

“I’m sorry, Marcus,” Neva whispered, feeling the prick of sympathetic tears in her own eyes. “I’m so sorry. But at least she wasn’t here. At least there might be some chance that she’s still alive somewhere.”

Drake bowed his head, and his lips moved silently, perhaps in prayer. Iluka said nothing for a long time, but her face grew harder and harder with every passing moment. Finally, she rose to her feet.

“We’ll make them pay for it, Marcus,” she said, and there was an unyielding rage in her voice that made Neva glad that she wasn’t on the receiving end of it. “I swear, somehow, they will pay.”

* * *

“That was bad,” Neva said quietly.

Rat tightened his arm around her. They sat on their bed, leaning against the wall, ostensibly reading. But he’d known that no text would take her mind off the scene in the galley, or lessen the feeling of **miser** pouring off of her. Even Jasmine approaching and clambering onto her lap, something that normally cheered Neva, had failed to make a dent in her mood.

Of course, her pain was nothing compared to the heartrending depths of Marcus’ despair. It had been hard to sit there by him, hard to put his hand on Marcus’ shoulder, thereby intensifying his own awareness of the gunner’s emotions. But the gesture of comfort had been appreciated even at the moment, and would be more appreciated later.

“It’s not your fault,” Rat said, and felt her lean against him. “You had to deliver the message—you aren’t responsible for the content.”

“Maybe,” she said softly. Her hands stroked Jasmine’s fur, and the little primate sprawled out with a sleepy sigh. “I can’t help wondering if I shouldn’t have said anything. At least Marcus

had hope before. Now he has nothing.”

“He had the right to know. And if he’d found out somehow later on, he would have been angry that you hadn’t shared the knowledge with him.”

“I keep telling myself that...but it doesn’t make things any easier. When I first came on board, I would never have imagined that Marcus *could* cry, let alone that he would in front of everybody.”

“Yeah.” Rat took a deep breath, smelling the herbal scent of her shampoo. Finding comfort in that, in the simple things like the warmth of her body, the way she smelled, even in the familiar murmur at the back of his mind that was the stream of her thoughts and emotions and impressions.

The com buzzed suddenly. “Alert,” said Drake, his voice tense. “Zatvian ships entering the system. All hands to the bridge.”

Goddess now what (worry) got to get moving Rat can't fly the Cuchulainn (internals broken and bleeding, fear) we're down a pilot maybe the Red Cloud will take them out before we have to fight

Neva stowed Jasmine in her carrier, despite the le-murr’s protests, while Rat shifted from the bed to his motorized chair. He moved too quickly, and got a twinge from his abdomen that made him grit his teeth. Thankfully, Neva was too busy with Jasmine to notice.

They arrived on the bridge to find the rest of the crew already in place. The whispers rose sharply, grim and stressed. **bastards I hope we get some of the action can't wait to put a hole in them, hope they die screaming* *barely got the damned ship patched back together Joshua better take care of them* *need more time (grief) don't know what he might do**

“Report,” Iluka ordered as she dropped into her seat.

“Two Kleggers have entered the system,” Drake said grimly, pressing the ear bud with his fingers as if to hear the chatter better. “The *Red Cloud* is moving to intercept, and has ordered them to stand down. *Hail Storm* is following.”

Iluka snorted. **(relief)** “They’ll be able to take out the Kleggers without our help, unless the Zats have some surprise up their sleeve we don’t know about.”

Neva had taken her position at scan. “Captain, these are the same ships that followed us from Paradise.”

“Guess they’re wishing now that they had given up and gone home,” Iluka said with a grim smile.

“Priority!” Drake said. “The lead Klegger is transmitting.” The he frowned, going pale. “Captain...I’m going to put this on allship.”

A familiar voice came from the speakers, and Rat felt his heart contract. *Goddess, no. I should have known, after Paradise. I should have realized that she wouldn't give up.*

“This is Colonel Mirra Hunter of the Obsidian Blades. Be advised that I have no interest in whatever petty rebellion has occurred here. I have come to demand the immediate surrender of one Xian Jackson, alias Rat. Hand him over, and we will go on our way with no shots fired. Refuse to comply, and I will seize him anyway...even if I have to kill every man, woman, and child in this system to do it. Hunter out.”

Chapter 37: Smoke and Mirrors

Rat sat very still in the motorized chair, feeling as though super-cooled nitrogen had replaced all the blood in his veins. He'd been a fool not to see this coming, he thought distantly. He'd known that the Zatvians wanted him, for reasons he didn't completely understand, and that they were willing to go to great lengths to get him back. But he'd thought that they'd been left behind, that the *Exile's* jump out of Star Rider space might have gone untraced.

Had it been an ordinary Zatvian captain pursuing him, perhaps that would indeed have been the end of it. But Mirra had already proven herself more than capable when it came to following his trail. He should have expected her to show up, should have planned for it. But he hadn't.

He thought about the last time he had heard from her, and his oath to kill her if he ever saw her again. Of course, he hadn't expected to be recovering from serious injuries when the time came.

Neva cast him a desperate glance from her seat at scan, and he knew that she wished to comfort him. He only nodded to her, not wanting to be a distraction if he could help it, and concentrated on the babble of voices sounding over the com.

"Bold words," Joshua was saying, and Rat guessed that the *Red Cloud* was closing rapidly on the Obsidian Blades, not giving the Zats time to formulate a strategy. "But as you see, you're in no position to make demands. Power down your engines and your weapons, place your crew in the emergency pods, and abandon your ships. You have my guarantee that you will be rescued and taken into custody."

Mirra's voice responded after a brief lag time. "Don't be a fool. Give me a single man, and we'll leave without a fight. Refuse further, and we'll do whatever it takes to secure him. You might defeat us, but at what cost to yourselves? He isn't even one of your people."

"Unlike Zatvian scum, we don't betray our friends whenever it becomes convenient." Joshua's voice dripped with contempt. "You will not take him."

"I will. The only question is how many of you have to die first."

Rat shook his head. "No," he said aloud, and caused most of the bridge crew to look at him. "I won't let them sacrifice themselves for me. Put me on com—I have to stop this."

Iluka scowled. "If you think I'm going to let you just turn yourself over to the Zats, then I guess that Fury must have knocked what little sense you had clean out of your head."

Rat's fingers tightened on the armrests of his chair. "Iluka, please. Just let me talk to Colonel Hunter. Maybe I can reason with her."

Marcus snorted. "Reason with a Zat? Are you crazy? Oh, wait a minute, I already know the answer to that one."

"Shut up, Marcus." Iluka met Rat's gaze for a long moment, as if she were the telepath instead of him. "All right. Drake, patch us through. Everyone else, keep your mouths shut—I

don't want to broadcast anything we don't have to."

Silence fell over the bridge, broken only by the whisper of breath, the soft rustle of cloth from small movements. Rat's throat was suddenly dry, and he had to swallow before he could speak. "Rat to Mirra Hunter. There's no need for this."

"Hello, Xian," she responded after a lag time that felt decades long. "Have you decided to quit the life of a fugitive and come home with me?"

Rat winced—the entire system now knew that he had once been a part of the Zatvian war machine. Or his body had, anyway. "I might be better persuaded if I knew what you want me for."

"Come with me, and I'll tell you everything."

"No one here is stupid enough to fall for that," Iluka drawled.

"Who is this?"

"Rat's damned captain, that's who it is. That's a member of my crew you're demanding. I think I have a right to know what's going on."

The pause that followed was longer than could be accounted for by lag time. "What are you proposing?" Mirra asked eventually.

Iluka smiled, but there was a deadly edge to it. "Not much. A meeting. Face-to-face, where we won't be blabbing everything over an open com."

"Very well. I will meet Xian alone, on my ship."

"Didn't realize I was talking to a comedian. Can you fly a shuttle?"

"...Yes."

"Good. Fly one of your shuttles—my first mate will send you the coordinates—and we'll meet you there. You come alone. I'll have to fly our shuttle, but I'll bring Rat. We'll all come unarmed."

"Rat can fly his own shuttle."

Iluka snorted. "He could, if one of your lot hadn't ground up his insides for him. Deal?"

"Xian—you've been hurt?"

Rat wondered if his ears were playing tricks, or if Mirra really did sound concerned. Then again, she'd chased him across half of space—it was only logical that she didn't want him to die before she got her hands on him. "I'll live," he said shortly.

"Deal?" Iluka repeated doggedly.

There came a faint sigh over com. "Very well. You have a deal. I'll meet you at the prearranged place and time. Hunter out."

As soon as the connection died, Drake spun half-around and shot Iluka a questioning look. "Captain? Are you sure you want to do this?"

Iluka grinned, a slow, predatory grin that was bright in her dark face. "I know what I'm doing, Drake. Rat, I want to talk to you in private for a bit."

"I should come," Neva said, casting an anxious glance in Rat's direction. "Rat still isn't recovered."

Iluka nodded. "Duly noted, medic. And it might convince Hunter that he's worse off than he really is, if that should become necessary. Drake, make the arrangements to borrow a shuttle from the station. Neva, get whatever you need to take. Rat, you're with me."

She has a plan, Rat thought as he followed her to the lift. A plan that she doesn't want to share with the rest of the crew. Which means they won't like it.

Why do I have the feeling that I'm not going to like it, either?

* * *

The shuttle that the station provided for them was surprisingly roomy for such a small vessel, and Rat wondered what its original purpose had been. Iluka took the helm, and Neva and he strapped in for the maneuvers that would take them to the rendezvous point. The *Red Cloud* shadowed them like a shark moving through the dark waters of space, a silent threat to the Zats should they do anything to break the temporary truce.

Rat did his best to ignore the nerves tightening his belly. His last face-to-face encounter with Mirra Hunter had resulted in pain and despair, and he couldn't help but feel that just seeing her again would be enough to trigger some additional horror.

She's my past. I can repudiate Xian Jackson and all his actions until my last breath, but the truth is that there's someone out there who remembers him. Who remembers what I—what he—did.

The whispers spoke to him of other feelings. Nervousness, yes, but anger and outrage as well. And a thin thread of jealousy, amazingly enough, as if some irrational part of Neva believed Rat might have feelings for Xian's old love. *Assuming Xian was even capable of feeling anything resembling love.*

After what seemed like an endless series of maneuvers, Iluka powered down her board. "We're linked," she announced, turning her attention to a small display. "I want to be sure Hunter's the only one coming on board before I unlock the lift. I wouldn't put it past the Zats to try and rush us."

From his vantage, Rat could make out a small figure emerging into the diminutive spine of the shuttle. Iluka grunted and flipped a switch. "There. Airlock is sealed." She flicked open the com. "I've unlocked the lift. Come up, and don't try anything."

Iluka stood up and casually drew a gun, which she held in front of her as they left the bridge for the hall outside. The lift had already stopped, and as the door opened, Iluka took aim at it.

Mirra stepped out, then froze. She looked pale and tired, Rat thought, as if things had not been going well for her. Her blonde hair was held back from her head by the same clip she had worn on Prospero, tiny crystals sparkling brightly from it. It seemed incongruous, considering that otherwise she was dressed in full Obsidian Blade uniform—surely the Zats weren't so lax that they allowed soldiers to wear fancy jewelry on duty.

I still can't hear anything from her. Why? Could it have something to do with that clip? Somehow, he doubted that she would tell him if he asked her.

"Nice and easy," Iluka said. "Hands away from your sides."

Mirra frowned. "All parties were to be unarmed. That was the agreement."

"I lied."

Mirra's blue eyes went past Iluka, to Neva, who stood in front of Rat as though to protect him. "We also agreed that it would only be you and Xian."

"Lied about that, too."

An odd, almost contemptuous, smile touched Mirra's mouth. "Well, then. Shall we get down to business?"

Iluka nodded, and motioned with her weapon. "Galley is this way—might as well be comfortable. You, of course, will keep your hands in sight at all times."

"Of course."

The motorized chair had been too awkward to use on the small shuttle, so Rat made his way carefully, leaning heavily on a cane as he went. When he collapsed gratefully into a chair at the

galley table, Neva came to him immediately. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine."

Mirra paused to look at him, then went to a seat on the far end when Iluka gestured impatiently with her gun. "Hands on the table where I can see them," Iluka warned.

Mirra's mouth thinned, and Rat thought that she was getting tired to taking orders from a pirate. If so, it might help his gambit.

"Who did this to you, Xian?" Mirra asked, as though they were friends.

He wanted to scream at her not to call him that, but he swallowed down the impulse, knowing that she might lower her guard if he let her believe that something of Xian Jackson remained. "A Fury," he said, wondering if she knew the term.

A dark cloud passed over her face. "That's what comes of replacing *real* soldiers with brainwashed minions," she said with a haughty sneer that left no doubt she considered herself a real soldier. "How is your recovery? Once you're onboard the Klegger with me, you'll have the best medical treatment available, I promise."

Neva stiffened and narrowed her eyes. "He's already had the best medical treatment possible," she said frostily.

Mirra responded with a cruel smile. "If you consider leeches and chanting to be medical treatment, then I suppose he has."

"You seem awfully damned sure that he's going anywhere with you," Iluka broke in. She still had her gun trained on Mirra, as if she suspected that the Blade might leap over the table and attack.

She might. She's not as good as the Furies, but I'd bet none of the Blades are bad at hand-to-hand. My body remembers fighting, even if the rest of me doesn't, and I had to train somewhere.

Mirra folded her hands in front of her, seeming perfectly relaxed despite the gun. "He is. Either Xian returns in my shuttle with me, or the rest of the Blades will take this system apart one piece at a time to get to him. Killing me will only exacerbate the process."

Iluka's dark eyes were shuttered, giving nothing away, but the whispers coming from her were cool and collected. Bargaining had been a part of her life long before the Zatvians, after all. "Why go to all this trouble for one man? Why is he so important that you'll do anything to get him back?"

Mirra smiled slightly and shook her head. "Oh no. I'm no fool. I have no doubt that this shuttle is full of listening devices, and this information is too sensitive to let loose in a friendly system, let alone a hostile one. Once Xian is on board the Klegger with me, then I'll brief him in full. Not until then."

"And I've already told you he isn't going anywhere with you."

"And I've already told you my response to that." Mirra leaned back with a smirk. "Hand him over, or die. Really, you don't have any choice."

"I could just shoot him instead," Iluka mused, casting Rat a single, thoughtful glance with her brown eyes. "Maybe I'd rather do that than hand him over to your kind. It would be a hell of a lot more merciful."

Although Rat couldn't hear Mirra's thoughts, he saw the flash of horror and outright fear in her eyes, before she was able to compose herself. Unlike Neva, she believed that Iluka might carry out her threat. As for Rat himself, he had no doubts that Iluka would indeed shoot him if she thought it necessary.

Why is Mirra so frightened? Is it just because she doesn't want anything to happen to me

because she still has feelings for Xian, or is it something more?

"That would be exceedingly foolish," Mirra said at last.

"No more foolish than just giving him to you for reasons you won't say. I'm guessing you want to use him as some kind of weapon." Iluka shrugged. "I know what he can do, and I'll put a hole in his brain before I let you turn it on me."

"Interesting premise," Mirra said carefully. "But the Blades have far easier ways to ensure your death."

"Then we have a stalemate."

That was the signal for Rat to step in. "At Paradise, Mirra offered safe passage to the Core, not only for me but for my companions," he said, pretending uncertainty. "Would that be acceptable, Captain?"

Iluka cocked her head to the side, as if considering. "Safe passage?"

Mirra shifted uncomfortably. "It would be simpler to hand him over to me and walk away."

"We aren't giving up Rat, you stupid bitch!" Neva burst out suddenly.

Surprised, Rat turned to her; her face was a mask of fury, her lips drawn back from her teeth. The red scars stood out like brands against her pale skin. This was not part of the plan, and he suspected that Iluka wouldn't be too happy about Neva's outburst.

Mirra didn't seem upset, but then her victims had probably called her far worse. "Are you this attached to all your patients?"

Neva glowered. "My relationship with Rat is none of your business."

"Ah. I see. You're my replacement." Mirra shook her head sadly. "Your options must have been limited indeed, Xian."

Rat wanted to tell her to shut up, but if he did that, everything he and Iluka had planned would fall apart. "I want to talk to Mirra alone," he said quickly, before Neva could start a real fight.

Silence met his request. Neva blinked at him, obviously surprised. After a moment, however, Iluka nodded. "All right. We'll wait in the hall outside. You need help, yell."

"We can't—" Neva started.

"I don't remember asking for a discussion, Whitestone," Iluka growled. "Now come on."

They left. As soon as the door had shut behind them, Rat reached into his pocket and pulled out a small device, which he activated and laid on the table. One of the techs on the station had given it to him at Iluka's request, and he marveled that his captain had been clever enough to see the potential need.

"This will allow us to talk without being monitored," he explained as the device beeped and hummed happily to itself.

Interest sparked in Mirra's eyes, and she leaned forward. "I see. And what are we going to talk about?"

Even though he would have preferred to punch her in the face after her words to Neva, he forced himself to give her a sly smile. "How about you not making my life so damned hard, gorgeous?"

Surprise and something else flickered in her eyes. "How so?"

"I'm trying to give you a present here, and you're screwing it all up. The truth is, I should have gone with you when I had the chance. I made a mistake on Prospero, but you can't blame me, now can you? You tried to deceive me and capture the rest of the crew. I didn't know what you had in store for me, so it seemed safer to run."

"And now?"

He snorted, which pulled on his abdomen, making him wince. "Now I know that Iluka's going to get me killed, one way or another. I almost died during the fight with the Fury. It...changed my perspective on things. I'm tired of running, of hurting. I just want it all to stop."

In other words, I'm the same heartless bastard you fell in love with.

Mirra's mouth softened slightly. "I'm sorry for the way I handled the situation when we met before. I thought it would be best for you. You're very important to me—to us. If you come with me, you'll be treated like a returning hero. You won't have to ever step foot on a battlefield again."

Interesting.

"Iluka won't let me go that easily," he said. "I'm her weapon, Mirra. I'm too useful for her to just give up. Which is why I suggested offering free passage into the Core. If she takes the bait, I can keep an eye on her all the way there. And once we arrive...well, you'll not only have me, but a pirate ship as a prize." He gave her a slow smile. "Consider it a peace offering."

Mirra laughed softly. "And most men just give me flowers." She studied him for a long moment, and he wished desperately that he could hear her thoughts. Odd, how he'd come to depend on the disability that had so disrupted his life.

"You can convince her to take the offer?" Mirra asked at last.

Rat nodded. "I wouldn't be much of a telepath if I couldn't."

"Well then." She sat back, her eyes shining. "Welcome home, Xian."

* * *

"Good work," Iluka said.

They were back aboard the *Exile*, still docked at the station for the moment. Supplies were being gathered, and there were still consultations to be held with Joshua, but it would only be a few shifts before they undocked and prepared to follow the Kleggers straight into the heart of Zatvian territory.

The thought of that filled Rat with silent terror. A part of him wanted to beg Neva to stay here, although Goddess knew Waga Chun wasn't exactly safe. The rest of the Zatvian military could show up at any moment, looking to put down the rebellion and kill everyone they found.

Nowhere is safe. Not that Neva would leave us even if such a place existed.

Rat shifted slightly in his chair, where he sat at Iluka's desk. The cool amber light of the room failed to soothe his nerves, and he couldn't even accept her offer of rum. "I couldn't hear Mirra's thoughts, anymore than I could on Prospero. I think she has some way of blocking me, although I might be wrong about that."

Iluka swallowed rum from the glass she had poured for herself. "So you got nothing useful from her."

"Not entirely. I think that she still regards me as Xian Jackson, even though a part of her knows better."

Iluka shook her head. "They say love is blind. Guess it's stupid, too."

"Not always."

"No. Not always." For a moment, her lips pressed together, and something like regret showed in her eyes. **(pain/grief) if only things were different**

Rat hesitated, uncertain if he should say anything. He had tried not to interfere, tried not to remind the crew that he couldn't help but pick up on things. Where did he draw the line, he wondered, between being helpful and meddling in things better left alone?

But this...it might change things, might take away some of the darkness the whispers wrapped around him whenever he was in Iluka's presence.

"Drake loves you," he said gently, and hoped that he was doing the right thing.

A brief smile appeared and died on her face. "I know." She rose to her feet and looked down at him sadly. "And that just makes everything that much harder."

"You don't have to do this."

"You're wrong." She walked around the desk, laid one hand on his shoulder. Her fingers were still strong as those of a woman half her age. "I've got one chance to do some good, and I'm going to take it. And I can't let a little thing like love stand in the way."

She left, the door swishing closed behind her. Alone, Rat shut his eyes, and silently prayed that Iluka was wrong. Because, when she touched him, he had glimpsed something that he doubted she had intended for him to see.

Iluka was going to the Core. But she had left herself no hope that she would live to return.

Chapter 38: Walking into Night

Rat ran his hand idly through Neva's sweat-damp hair. There was a faint pain in his gut, which he hadn't noticed until that moment—nothing serious, just an aching reminder that his body was still patching itself back together, and that overdoing it would be a bad idea. He closed his eyes, trying to just drift, to focus on the sound of Neva's breathing as it returned to normal. Trying to keep his brain from coming back online, mostly, knowing that if it did, he'd start worrying again.

Don't worry. Might as well tell space not to be cold, he supposed, especially considering that they would be leaving for Zatvian territory in less than a shift. Not just Zatvian-controlled systems, either, but the very heart of their military might.

We're all out of our minds, he decided. *Any sane person would run screaming in the opposite direction.*

Well, least it isn't just me that's crazy this time.

Neva had collapsed against him, her mental voice muted with sleepy contentment. But a thread of worry started to work its way into her thoughts as well—not worry for what was to come, but for what had just finished.

“Are you all right?” she asked, propping herself up on her arms to take her weight off his abdomen.

Earlier, she had given him a look that made his heart race, and suggested that she thought he had healed enough for some more intimate exercise, so long as he promised to speak up if he was in pain. Now, he ran his fingers over her face and pulled her down for a small kiss. “A little achy, but no more than if I'd been up and about,” he assured her. “And I swear I didn't notice at all at the time.”

Neva snorted. “Endorphins will do that.” She rolled off him, cuddling against his side. Her fingers trailed idly over his arm, ivory on dark gold. “You're worrying, aren't you?”

Rat tugged the blankets up over their rapidly-cooling skin. “I thought I was supposed to be the telepath here.”

She gave him a light thump on the arm for that remark. “Don't change the subject.”

He sighed and stared up at the ceiling. The paint was flaking off the metal, just as it was in the corridors, on the walls, and he could see the first spots of rust taking hold. The *Exile* had been out in the cold dark for too long, far from any port safe enough to get the interior refurbished. He wondered who else had stared at that same ceiling over the years, what thoughts and dreams had occupied them, and if they had ever imagined that their ship would come to this place and time.

“What was it like, before the Zatvians came?” He hadn't even meant to ask the question until it was out.

Neva propped herself up on her elbow and peered down at him with hazel eyes, her pale

brows drawn together. "What do you mean?"

"I've never known a life without war," he said after a moment of consideration. "My first memories are of hiding from soldiers. I just wondered...what is it like, not to be afraid for your life? Not to be on the run? Not to worry that everyone you know and love is about to be killed?"

Neva's eyes fell, focusing on her fingers, but he didn't think she really saw them. The whispers were filled with **(grief)**, a wistfulness for things lost.

"I've almost forgotten myself," she said quietly, her mouth quirking into a self-deprecating smile. "It was...normal, I guess. People just went about their lives. Going to school, shopping, taking vacations. Raising families. Worrying and fighting about things that seem pretty stupid now. Harvest was pretty prosperous—maybe it was different other places, where there was more poverty. My mom was an accountant. My dad stayed home and raised us kids."

"You had a younger brother. Jordan."

"Yeah. He was twelve years younger than me, so by the time I left to go to school, he was still little enough that he needed looking after. Whenever I'd come home, we'd go out into the garden and do the weeding, or pick what we needed to make dinner that night. Working with the land was a way of getting closer to the Goddess, and it was sort of our special time together." She smiled at the memory, and Rat thought that was a good thing. Time had muted her ripping grief to something deep and still, something that let her think about the good times without being crushed by loss. "I saw him just before I left for Mabon. He'd gotten so tall."

and then he was dead, never got to reach his full height, never got to fall in love or find out what he might have been, all that potential gone and lost, and for what—so the Zats could scare everyone into submission (anger)

Rat pressed his lips to her forehead. "But you remember what it was like."

"Yes." She absently plucked at one of his dreadlocks, first twining it around her finger, then straightening it. "Sometimes, though...it's like remembering a dream. I know that it all really happened, but it seems so impossibly far away. Other times, it's like it was all just yesterday."

"I don't think Iluka remembers anymore," he said.

why do we always end up talking about other people when we're in bed together?

"But that can wait," he added hastily, horrified. *Brilliant, Rat. Moron.*

Neva sighed. "No, no, I can tell you're worried. I'd just hoped that I'd managed to distract you a bit."

"You did! I swear!" He smacked himself on the forehead. "My brain won't shut up. I'm an idiot. I'm sorry."

She snorted. **love him** "Stop carrying on and tell me what you're worried about this time."

Rat lay silent for a long moment, thinking. "I'm worried about a lot of things," he admitted at last. "Mostly, though, I'm worried about Iluka."

That surprised her. "Why?"

"Because I'm afraid she's going to do something terrible."

* * *

Drake wandered onto the bridge, intending to get some work done. True, he could stay in his cabin and check any messages left in the system, but he preferred to conduct the ship's business on the bridge, and keep his private space for his personal contemplations.

Juanita was sitting at his station; she glanced over her shoulder when he came in. "Drake.

Coming on shift?"

As he started to reply, he heard a distant thump, and felt an accompanying vibration in his bones. "What was that?"

"Cargo loading. Anusha's up in the spine, manning the station there. Left me to listen here in case we get any urgent transmissions."

Cargo? Drake frowned, baffled. They were going on a desperate mission deep into Zat space, not a trading run. *So it probably isn't legitimate cargo at all.* "What is this supposed cargo?"

Juanita shrugged muscular shoulders. "Don't know. Something from Joshua."

"Where's Iluka?"

"Off the ship some place."

Something wasn't adding up here. They were taking on mysterious cargo from their allies, and Iluka had left the ship. *Maybe she needed to confer with Joshua on things she didn't want to say over com.*

But why didn't she take me, if that's the case? It wasn't like Iluka to just take off by herself without even letting her first mate know where she'd gone. True, he'd been off shift, but that had never stopped her from waking him from a sound sleep before.

Feeling decidedly uneasy, he went over to scan and took a look at their position. The bulk of the station was currently between them and the Zats, and he didn't think that was a coincidence. Whatever Iluka was up to, she didn't want their enemies to know about it.

Com beeped softly, and Juanita sat forward. A moment later, she turned to him. "It's for you. Iluka."

"Send it to this station."

Com crackled. They never had hunted down the bug that made half the coms spit static, Drake reflected. There had never been the time for it.

"Iluka Toora to Drake Morgenstern. You there, Drake?"

"I'm here." He wanted to ask her what was going on, but it already seemed obvious that she didn't want to talk about it over open com, so he held his peace and waited.

"Good. I need you to join me on the station."

A conference, then, he decided. One that she wanted his eyes and ears at in addition to her own.

So why didn't she take me in the first place?

Yet another question he couldn't ask at the moment. "Tell me where," he said, and tried to ignore the uneasy feeling that something wasn't adding up.

* * *

Drake began to wonder if Iluka had given him the correct address. He'd expected to find himself in or near the conference room they'd been in before, or even in the station offices, assuming they'd survived the assault. Instead, he found himself in what had probably been a residential section before the Zats had taken over. Already, people were coming back, as ex-prisoners and miscellaneous personnel claimed rooms for themselves. Spartan Zat furnishings lay here and there in the corridors, thrown out by angry residents who found any reminder of their enemy bitter. Drake wondered if there had been more suitable furniture in storage somewhere, or if people were sleeping on the floor.

When he came to the room Iluka had specified, he hesitated before palming open the door.

I'm going to feel stupid if I find myself in someone's living room. The door opened at his touch, and he found himself looking into a small, cozy room. The walls were gently curved, flowing organically rather than harshly squared off, even though the coat of white paint the Zats had put on them hadn't yet been removed. The lighting was low, gentle, and Drake had to squint for a moment before realizing that Iluka sat at the table that was the room's only furniture. More doors, all of them closed, led to the other rooms of the suite.

"Drake," Iluka said as the door to the corridor closed behind him. "Thanks for coming. Have a seat."

There were only two chairs at the table, he noted. A bottle of rum stood to one side; Iluka had already poured two glasses, one in front of her, and one no doubt meant for him. Feeling suddenly off-balance, he sat down in the surprisingly-comfortable chair. "Iluka? What's this all about?"

She pursed her lips and stared at her drink, not meeting his eyes. "I wanted to talk to you."

Not like her to be this hesitant. Suddenly very worried, Drake hazarded a guess. "What's this cargo we're taking on?"

Iluka glanced up and him, a faint smile on her mouth now. "All business with you, isn't it, Drake? The cargo is a little present from Joshua, one that I asked for, as a favor. Jason Silent Hawk is coming on board again as well. According to Joshua, Jason's older sister was a neuroscientist who went missing in the early days of the invasion. Jason thinks the Obsidian Blades might have taken her, forced her to help out with poking holes in people's heads." Iluka held up a hand, forestalling any response. "But that's business. It can wait."

She hadn't answered his question about the cargo, he noted. "Wait for what? Iluka, what is this all about?"

Iluka leaned forward, linking her hands under her chin and giving him a piercing look. "Can't we just have a drink and enjoy each other's company?"

It caught him off guard. Drake blinked stupidly, then cursed himself. "I've always enjoyed your company, Iluka. But don't we usually do our drinking on the ship?"

Iluka shrugged, seeming suddenly uncomfortable. "Things are different on the ship. I have to be the captain. Set a standard. Here, I can just be Iluka. Just be a woman."

"Oh." It wasn't the most brilliant response, but it was the only one his brain could formulate.

"We've been together a long time, Drake," Iluka went on, apparently not put off by his stunned silence. "I've come to care about you a great deal. More than as just a friend."

A rush of wild happiness went through him, and he found himself grinning like an idiot. He felt young, suddenly, eighteen again, except with the experience that made the energy worthwhile. "I feel the same. For what it's worth, I've always seen you as a woman. But you're also the best captain, the smartest captain, in all of space. There's no one I'd rather be with, in any capacity."

Her dark eyes softened, and for a moment he thought that she was going to say something. Then she seemed to catch herself, and instead reached for the glass in front of her. "To the future," she said quietly, holding it up.

He clinked his glass against hers, then drained it in a single gulp. The rum was good, and its warmth filled his belly, spreading into his veins. Drake set the glass back down, then realized that the table seemed to have inexplicably gotten much farther away.

Lassitude flooded him, and it belatedly occurred to him that the warmth wasn't just from the alcohol. His tongue felt thick, and the already-low light seemed to get dimmer and dimmer. He tried to push back from the table, to do something, anything, but his limbs were no longer

coordinated. The chair crashed to the floor, and he found himself lying on his back, staring at the ceiling.

Iluka walked around the table, and for a moment he felt muzzy relief, that the rum hadn't been poisoned after all, that she was fine. Then he realized that she didn't seem at all surprised by his condition, and the ice that went through him drove back the lassitude just enough for him to think.

Iluka poured the glasses before I arrived. She put something in my drink. She did this to me.

He tried to ask why, but his lips were numb and wouldn't obey. Iluka crouched down beside him, her long gray dreads brushing his neck. Gently, she reached out and touched his face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know if this would have worked out between us, but I would have liked to find out." Her hand dropped to her side, and she stood suddenly. "You're more than a friend to me, Drake, or even a lover. You're my conscience. And where I'm going, that's the one thing I can't afford to have."

The room was getting darker and darker. He tried to reach out to her, but his body refused to respond. The door opened, and for an instant he saw her framed against the bright light. Then it shut behind her, leaving him in darkness.

* * *

When the lift let Neva out onto the bridge, she was surprised to see Juanita at com, occupying what was normally Drake's seat. Both Drake and Iluka were gone, which struck her as odd; they were both usually on the bridge long before countdown began. Wherever they had gotten to, they were cutting it close.

Everyone else was present, except for Rat, who was riding out maneuvers in their quarters; Anusha and Marcus sat their usual stations, and beside Anusha...

"Jason!" Neva exclaimed. "You're coming with us?"

He cast a brief glance over his shoulder, his glossy black hair framing a warm smile. "Indeed."

"I thought you were more sensible than that."

"Apparently, you were mistaken."

If Jason, an outsider, thought they had a hope of pulling off a trip into the heart of the Zatvian war machine, perhaps things weren't as bleak as they seemed. Feeling a bit more optimistic, Neva went to her seat and powered up her boards. Scan showed the station and its traffic, the two warships...and the Zat Kleggers, their signatures a scarlet smear on the screen. *At least Hunter hasn't been putting in any calls to Rat*, she thought. Given how persistent the woman had been, Neva had expected her to badger Rat up until the moment of departure.

The lift worked behind them, and Neva spared a quick glance over her shoulder when the doors opened. To her surprise, Iluka walked in alone, her lined face grim. "Where's Drake?"

Iluka strode to her board, not glancing at anyone. "He's not coming on this trip."

"What?" Neva asked, certain she had misheard. Everyone else had stopped what they were doing, and had now turned to Iluka as well. "Why not? Is something wrong?" Surely if he'd been hurt, Iluka would have let them know.

"Nothing is wrong." Iluka dropped into her chair, as if her words were true. "Back to your work, people! We're in countdown!"

"Like hell nothing's wrong," Anusha snapped. "Drake wouldn't just abandon us."

"She's right," Marcus added, glowering at Iluka. "Drake—"

Iluka came to her feet, and the motion commanded instant silence. "Drake does what he's told, and I told him that his services were no longer needed."

"Are you out of your mind? We need every spare hand we can get!" Neva burst out.

"She's right," Anusha added. "Drake's a damn fine officer—what the hell are you thinking, Captain?"

The look on Iluka's face was thunderous. "You're all out of line. So listen to me, and listen good. This little trip of ours is hazardous enough that I consider this to be a state of emergency. According to the articles you signed, this ship has just quit being a democracy. *I* have the final say about everything right now. And if I say that Drake stays here, then by all the gods in the universe, I had better not hear any dissent, or else I'll brand the lot of you as mutineers!"

Stunned silence met her words. *She can't mean it*, Neva thought.

Goddess. She does mean it.

"Eyes back to your stations," Iluka snapped.

Feeling as though the universe had slipped sideways, Neva turned reluctantly back to her boards, peripherally aware of the others doing the same. The flow of operational chatter returned gradually, but it was muted and unhappy. No one liked this new development, but without more information as to what had caused it, no one was willing to openly rebel, either.

Not yet, at least. But we'd better get some answers before we reach the Zatvian station. We can't go in there blind.

But if Iluka won't talk...what choices do we have left? Rat could—

Rat. He knew this was going to happen. No wonder he'd been so worried that Iluka had forgotten what it was to live a normal life, that she had been fighting so long that she'd lost the person she'd once been. At the time, Neva had thought it was just the worry of one friend for another. Now...she thought it was more.

What scared Rat wasn't just what might become of Iluka, but of them all.

Goddess. We're in trouble, aren't we?

* * *

Drake blinked, his conscious stealing sluggishly back, like a drunkard trying not to wake the rest of the house. His mouth tasted like used cotton socks, and his brain felt muzzy, as if a wet blanket hung between him and the world. Lethargy gripped him, trying to pull him down into unconsciousness, and he would have let it if not for the lingering feeling that he had something urgent to do.

The bed felt wrong, not like his bunk on the *Exile*, and the scent of the air was that of sage and cedar, different from the familiar oil and spice of the ship. Something beeped softly nearby, and he realized suddenly that he must be in the station hospital. Startled, he forced his eyes open, found himself staring at the ceiling.

What the hell? For a moment, he could not remember how he had come there. Then memory flooded back, and with a curse he sat up. Or, rather, he tried to. His body had other ideas, however, and stayed put.

Someone stirred in his peripheral vision. Drake managed to turn his head, and saw Joshua sitting in a chair by the bed, regarding him with an air of regret. A feeling of impotent rage swept over Drake; he wanted to leap up and pummel Joshua senseless, but at the moment he could barely move his fingers. So instead, he settled for asking questions.

"You were in on this with her, weren't you?" he managed to get out through gritted teeth.

Joshua sighed. "Forgive me, Drake. I told Iluka that it was the wrong thing to do, but she wouldn't listen."

"Then why help her?"

"I thought it would be better than letting her dump you in some corner where we might not find you for days."

"Get me to the *Exile*, then. Help me!"

Joshua's mouth thinned. "I would if I could, Drake. But the *Exile* has already undocked and started its first burn. They're gone."

Damn it, no. Drake turned his head away, not wanting to see the pity in Joshua's eyes. He felt as if a pit had opened up in his chest, sucking his heart down into its depths. His ship, his crewmates, had left him. *Iluka* had left him.

"I am sorry," Joshua said. "I told Iluka that you would feel she had betrayed you, but it made no difference."

"You're wrong." Drake felt the sting of tears behind his eyes. "Iluka hasn't betrayed me. She's betrayed herself."

Chapter 39: Reversal

Neva stared at her board, even though there was nothing to see at the moment. They were still in hyperspace, where there was no signal to be had, no landmark, nothing to show that they were coming out again except for Anusha's calculations and Jason's confidence. This was the part Neva hated—had hated, ever since the first time she'd sat scan. The blank gray of the monitor brought home the fact that there was always a chance, no matter how slim, that they wouldn't make it out the other end of jump, that they'd spend the rest of their lives dying slowly in hyperspace. Intellectually, she knew that the chance was small—Jason or Anusha no doubt could have given her an exact percentage—but her gut never quite believed it.

And to think, Star Riders make uncertain jumps into nothing all the time. Well, maybe not all the time, but it was part of their explorer heritage, and they considered it something of an honor to die that way. *Which just shows that madness takes all forms.*

Then again, we're the ones coming out into the heart of Zatvian space. Suddenly, jumping into nothing looks like a better bet for long-term survival, doesn't it?

The crew's tension was palpable. They had been following the Obsidian Blades through jump after jump, moving deeper and deeper into Zatvian-controlled territory, and until now Mirra Hunter had been as good as her word.

But now we've followed the spider into the center of her web.

"Steady, people," Iluka said.

Neva spared her a glance, but couldn't make out anything but the captain's profile. What she could see looked calm. Collected. Cold, even.

Which is part of the problem.

Juanita had taken over Drake's position at com, but she wasn't happy about it. No one was, especially with Iluka not giving out any real answers as to what had happened to their former crewmate. Rat might have been able to tell them more, but he didn't. Wouldn't.

Neva pressed her lips into a tight line, trying not to think about it. She had confronted him shortly after they left Waga Chun, wanting to know what he might have picked up from Iluka. He had evaded the question at first, and then finally refused to talk about it any more, which had led to a stupid argument. Despite all the make-up sex, the fight still lay between them, like a splinter forgotten until something nudged it.

He's loyal to Iluka. But does she deserve his loyalty any more?

"Counting down to drop," Jason reported. "In ten."

"Look sharp," Iluka said grimly. "The system will be crawling with Zat warships of all kinds, and Ancestors know what nasty tricks they might try to play on us. Rat, you with us?"

Com crackled. "*Cuchulainn* standing by."

"Marcus?"

"Guns are hot, Captain."

"All right." Iluka settled back into her seat. "This is it."

The universe fell away from under them. Neva's board went from blank gray to static, as the antennas searched for intelligible signals. Braking pushed her hard into her safety web, but she kept her attention focused, and a moment later the static resolved into a clear picture of the system.

Neva opened her mouth to report...then stopped. And stared.

That can't be right.

"Whitestone! Report!" Iluka snapped through the rest of the operational chatter.

"I...there must be something wrong, Captain." Neva blinked hard, but the picture remained the same. "We're on mark. Our Klegger escort is also on mark, ahead of us and moving in-system. There are two couriers heading out bound from system plane. Station is in planetary orbit; it's showing two passenger class ships and three freighters at dock. And...that's it."

"They must have screwed with the beacon," Marcus said.

"Dangerous if they did, since they'd be blinding everyone else as well as us," Jason pointed out.

Iluka swore. "I want active scan online. Hit them with everything we've got."

Neva obediently brought up their scan system. Although it wouldn't tell them much about the farther reaches of the system, it would give them a clearer picture of the area immediately around them.

The output didn't change.

"That's it, Captain," Neva said helplessly. "Active, passive, beacon—they all agree. The system is nearly deserted."

"I'm picking up a lot of chatter from our friends," Juanita said. "All encrypted, though. I'm not having any luck cracking it yet."

Iluka sat back and pursed her lips. "Ask them what's going on."

Juanita looked skeptical but complied. "*Exile* to Zat Klegger. What's going on here? You having a party somewhere else and forgot to tell us?" She listened for a few seconds of lag time, then frowned. "That was rude."

Anusha snorted. "Figures. They aren't going to tell us anything. Should we abort the mission? Try to make it back out of here before they realize what's going on?"

"No." Iluka drummed her fingers briefly on the arm of her chair. "I think that, whatever is happening here...it was as much a surprise to them as to us."

Jason shook his head. "That doesn't bode well."

Com crackled. "Rat to Iluka. Do you want me to try asking Mirra?"

Neva ground her teeth, annoyance replacing the nervousness inspired by the nearly-empty system. *Can't he just call her "Hunter" or "that Zatvian bitch" like everyone else? I don't see why he has to act like he's on a first name basis with her.*

"Affirmative," Iluka replied.

"Let me launch, then. I can tight-beam from the *Cuchulainn*, convince her I'm talking to her without your knowledge."

Neva didn't like *that*, either, but there was nothing for it. *She's Xian's ex, not Rat's*, she told herself firmly, even as a soft shudder ran through the ship, marking the launch of the fighter. *Right. But does Hunter realize that?*

* * *

Almost as soon as the *Cuchulainn* left the *Exile* behind and entered the silence of space, Rat's com pinged softly. "Klegger X9-80 to fighter. Do not make any hostile moves. Do not—"

Rat switched over to a tight-beam transmission rather than replying on the same frequency. "This is Xian Jackson to Klegger X9-80. I want to talk to Colonel Hunter right now. In private."

Come on, Mirra. Don't disappoint me.

There came a few minutes of silence. Then com pinged again; this time, video feed accompanied it. Mirra appeared, looking rather harried. Her normally immaculate hair was in disarray, and the expression on her face was one of worry. "I don't have time for this, Xian," she began.

"Then make it," he interrupted. Damn, if only he could meet with her in person, without whatever device she had which blocked his ability to hear her thoughts. "I talked Captain Toora into sending me out here, as a little show of force."

"I see. And will you report back everything I say?"

"Don't be stupid. Why do you think I'm tight-beaming this? They have no idea I'm talking to you. I want answers, Mirra. I came here because I thought you were offering me a deal. Instead, I'm seeing things that don't add up, and I'm thinking what you really have for me is a trap."

Mirra scowled. "The only trap here is for the pirates."

"Then what the hell is going on? The system is nearly deserted!"

"I'm still in the process of finding out myself." Mirra's shoulders slumped slightly, and for a moment she seemed like just another young woman, despite her uniform. "According to Control, the Core—and the rest of the installations in this system—have been evacuated, except for critical personnel."

Ice water flooded his veins. It would take a terrible threat to cause the evacuation of an entire system—and, whatever was going on here, the *Exile* had just flown right into the middle of it. "I didn't come here just to die. What's going on?"

Mirra closed her eyes. "It's all tied into the reason you—and the other telepaths—were created. For the last five years—"

The light from the video feed changed, and Rat heard a voice from off screen: "Colonel? The general wants to talk to you."

Mirra glanced to the side and nodded firmly. Once again, her spine was straight, the vulnerable woman replaced by the Obsidian Blade. "I'm sorry, Xian, but I have to go. Don't worry—I won't let anything happen to you. Your safety is more imperative now than ever. I'll see you on station. Mirra out."

* * *

"Damn it," Iluka snarled. Her fist connected hard with the galley table, making everyone jump.

Rat sat in the chair opposite her, Jasmine grooming herself in his lap. He concentrated on the thoughts of the le-murr, on her contentment at being with him, in an effort to shut out all the turbulent whispers coming from the rest of the crew.

if Mel (love, worry, anguish) was here, did they evacuate her (gone) how will I ever find her

**damned Zats are going to get us all killed, probably some kind of trick (suspicion) ought to*

*just hightail it the hell out of here**

what else did she say to him (image of Mirra) Goddess she's playing us all (anger, jealousy)

was going to take out a major installation, now they've taken even that from me, how bad will it hurt them if there's no one left (rage), too late too late

"Could it be a trick?" Juanita asked uncertainly. "Some sort of trap?"

Marcus shook his head. His mouth was set in a grim line, and he looked as if he wanted to find something to hit. "No. I can't believe they'd empty out one of their main military headquarters just to fool one little ship of pirates. This is real."

"We should leave," Anusha put in. She looked tired, Rat thought. But then, so did everyone else. "Something happened, something bad enough to make the Zats all but abandon this place. We'd be stupid not to do the same. We've shed a lot of velocity, but we might still be able to cut and run, since it doesn't look like there are many ships left here to chase us."

"Except for the Kleggers," Marcus reminded her.

"If they weren't expecting this either, then maybe—"

"Mirra isn't going to let me go," Rat said flatly. Beside him, Neva tensed.

"Easy enough, then," Marcus said amiably. "We just stick you in a 'suit, toss you out an airlock, and be on our way."

"Not funny, Marcus," Neva snapped.

"Hey—I said we'd give him a 'suit before we tossed him."

Juanita poked him in the ribs. "You don't want to toss the crazy Rat-man out. Who would you have to complain about?"

"Oh, I think I'd find somebody," Marcus muttered, rubbing the spot where she'd poked him. "It was just a joke, anyway."

"I didn't hear anybody laughing," Neva started, but the captain held up a hand, cutting her off.

Iluka's dark eyes were impenetrable, her face a mask that gave nothing away. **can still get something out of this, and if not, at least we'll take a few Obsidian Blades out of the universe, that's got to count for something, wish to hell we could get some of those Furies but they're probably long gone if they were here to start with**

"We're going in," she said aloud. "That's final. We're going in, and we're going to get some damned answers."

"And getting back out again?" Anusha asked.

Iluka smiled crookedly. "Well. That's the trick, isn't it? Marcus, you and Juanita make sure all our guns are in good order and fully charged—I'm not walking onto a Zat station unless every one of us is heavily armed. The rest of you, get some sleep. We've got to stay sharp."

Dismissed, the crew drifted out of the galley. Rat followed Neva, careful not to meet Iluka's eyes when he walked past her. *As if she were the mind reader instead of me*, he thought, and grinned at his own foolishness. Jasmine had climbed to his shoulder, and began to play with his dreads. He wished that he could share her innocent happiness.

Neva sat down on the edge of the bed when they reached their quarters, her hands folded under her chin and her eyes staring into nothingness. Jasmine launched herself into a hammock they had strung up in the corner for her to play on.

Rat paused at the door, leaning against the wall and watching Neva. The muted light of the room made her pale hair glow with a silvery-white sheen, and her hazel eyes had darkened with thought. Her form-fitting tee and baggy pants were creased and rumpled, as if she had slept in

them.

After a moment, she seemed to register his contemplation. "Is something wrong?" she asked, glancing up at him.

"No. Just admiring the view."

One of her hands drifted automatically to the scars that ran from her left cheek to the corner of her mouth. "You don't have to say that."

He cocked his head to one side, puzzled. "The scars show that you've survived, Neva. Nothing more. You know I never cared about them before, so why would I now?"

She shrugged, but a rueful grin touched her mouth. "I don't know. I'm being silly, aren't I?"

"Yes." He went and sat by her on the bed, taking her hands with his and bringing them to his chest, so that she could feel the beating of his heart. "I love you. Remember that...no matter what happens. Promise?"

She leaned forward for a kiss, but he pulled back, shaking his head. "Promise me, first, Neva."

Confusion clouded her eyes for a moment, but she nodded. "I promise."

"Thank you," he said, and kissed her gently.

* * *

Neva felt there should have been something different about putting into dock at the Core. Veiled threats from Control, perhaps, or hovering warships. At least the clanks and bangs associated with docking should have sounded more ominous than usual. There was none of that, however; the procedure was entirely ordinary.

"We're in dock," Jason reported solemnly when the last clang from the docking clamps rang through the hull. He had a pensive look on his face, no doubt wondering what had become of the sister who had supposedly been brought here.

Iluka took a deep breath, then let it out. "All right. Arm yourselves, and let's get moving."

Marcus and Juanita handed out weapons from the locker. Neva took the gun reluctantly, tucking it into one of the pockets of her pants, where she could easily reach it. Rat strapped several holsters about his person, not bothering to hide them, and tucked a smaller gun into his jacket pocket. Jasmine rode on his shoulder, her eyes bright and tail held high, and Neva wondered at the wisdom of bringing her onto the station with them. Rat had insisted, however, and Iluka had made no objections.

Nervousness coiled in Neva's belly as they took the lift down. Rat took her hand briefly and gave it a quick squeeze. "Hold Jasmine for me?"

"All right." Neva took the little primate, who promptly settled onto her shoulder, tail curled loosely about her neck. Jasmine's fur was soft, and the warmth and solidity of her body proved oddly comforting, even under the circumstances.

The boarding tube bounced under them as they reached the dock. A group of Obsidian Blades waited near the access, their black uniforms contrastingly sharply with the pale walls, as though something of the darkness of space had leaked inside. Mirra Hunter stood in front of them, her face cool and composed, her blonde hair swept immaculately back.

"Welcome home, Xian," Hunter said with a cold smile. Behind her, the other Blades raised their guns threateningly. "The rest of you, lay down your weapons, and you won't be harmed."

Iluka halted, her nostrils flared. Her left hand snuck into a pocket, although her right hovered near her gun. "Didn't waste much time taking the gloves off, did you?" she asked.

“I like to keep things simple.” Hunter’s smile didn’t waver, but her eyes flickered to Rat. “Xian?”

Rat’s gaze was fixed on Iluka. For a moment, he seemed to hesitate, his full lips compressing into a taut line. Then, without speaking, he stepped forward and touched the back of Iluka’s head.

To Neva’s horror, Iluka stiffened slightly...and then crumpled to the decking. A fine tracery of blood leaked from both nostrils, bright against her dark skin.

“I’m sorry, Iluka,” Rat said quietly. “But you didn’t leave me any choice.”

Chapter 40: Coup d'État

Several things happened at once. Neva let out a shout, both mental and physical, and dropped to her knees at Iluka's side. "Traitor!" Anusha yelled, and the whispers turned into shrieks of anger and dismay. The whine of the Zats' guns powering up cut through the rising cacophony.

"Stay where you are," Mirra ordered, a smile of triumph blooming on her face. "Well played, Xian."

Neva made a small, choked sound. Rat spared her a quick glance, saw that she was crouched over Iluka, checking the captain's pulse. *Goddess, please, don't let me have hurt Iluka. Not too bad, anyway. I just wanted to get her out of the action for a minute.*

"Neva," he said quietly, careful to keep his voice utterly calm, betraying nothing of his self-doubt, "will you please reach into Iluka's left pocket and remove what you find there."

She cast him a startled look, but complied. Jasmine, unsettled by all the shouting and moving, launched herself onto Rat's shoulder; several of the Zat guns jerked at the unexpected movement, but thank the Goddess no one fired.

Iluka stirred slightly as Neva dug into her pocket, then went still. Neva withdrew a small, cylinder-shape device, and held it out towards Rat.

Jason let out a suppressed gasp at the sight. "That's a detonator."

"It is," Rat agreed, taking it from Neva and tucking it securely into the inner pocket of his jacket. The last thing he needed was to have Jasmine find it and push the wrong button out of curiosity.

"The cargo," Marcus said suddenly. "It's a bomb."

"Yes."

"Iluka was going to blow us up!"

"Yes." He refocused his attention on Mirra, who was smirking slightly at the exchange. No doubt she assumed that he'd had everything under control the entire time.

"And you knew about it!"

"Yes." Rat glanced at Iluka again, saw that her breathing seemed even, at least. "I knew. And Iluka knew that I knew, but it didn't bother her. And that was her mistake. She'd spent so much time trying to force herself to think of me as nothing more than a weapon, that she forgot I'm a man."

"Foolish," Mirra agreed. She held out her hand, and her eyes were full of promises. "Step over here, Xian, and let the team handle the rest of the pirates."

Rat nodded. Reaching out, he took her hand—and yanked her against him with all his strength.

Caught off guard, she stumbled into him. Before she had the chance to react, he looped one

arm around her neck, jerking her against his body. With the other, he pressed a gun against her temple.

“And your mistake,” he snarled, “was confusing me with Xian Jackson, a man who is very, very dead. Stop struggling! Tell your goons to stand down, or I swear I’ll splatter your brains all over this dock!”

Mirra went still in his grip. He could feel her heart pounding frantically, taste her anger and confusion and hurt, but her control remained flawless. “Quit it with the sweet talk, lover.”

“Tell the rest of the Blades to drop their weapons.” He ground the barrel of his gun into her skin, shared the slight flare of pain. It was everything he could do to keep his hands from shaking, but he knew that any sign of weakness would be fatal now. “If you think I won’t kill you, you’re damned wrong, Mirra. I’m sick of you, and I’m sick of your games, and right now I’m close to taking any excuse not to have to deal with you for one second more. Understand me?”

this can't be happening, not after everything (anger, grief) how could he do this to me (Xian) got to play this right or else we'll lose it all

“Stand down,” Mirra said aloud. When none of the Blades moved, she raised her voice. “I said stand down!”

Slowly, reluctantly, they lowered their weapons, all of them watching the crew of the *Exile* carefully. Perhaps, in other circumstances, they would have been right to be wary, but at the moment the pirates were too shell-shocked to take the advantage.

“Thank you,” Rat said, glad that his voice didn’t quaver. “You want something from me, Mirra. I came here to find out what it was. Now, we can do this the hard way and start shooting each other, or we can pretend that we’re civilized people, call a truce, and discuss this. Your decision. Just don’t forget that I’ll know if you’re lying. That little gizmo in your hair doesn’t protect you if we’re touching.”

Mirra was silent for a long moment. “All right,” she agreed at last. “We’ll start over. I agree to your truce.”

(come to me)

Rat flinched, and felt Mirra jerk in reaction to his movement. *What the hell...?*

The whisper—no, not a whisper, but a clear statement—hadn’t come from Mirra. Something about it reminded him of Jasmine; the thought had been formed not of words, but of pure intent. Emotion.

But from where? Who?

Rat could feel the eyes of everyone, both friend and enemy, on him. *Not the time to start cracking up again.* Trying to behave normally, he lowered his gun and stepped away from Mirra. “She’s telling the truth.”

Mirra gave him a crooked smile, but he could tell that she was covering over the hurt that his actions had caused her. “Very well, then. There’s a conference room nearby—shall we adjourn?”

“Iluka needs rest,” Neva said. She still crouched beside the fallen captain, fingers pale against the dark skin of Iluka’s wrist. At the sound of her name, Iluka stirred slightly, her eyelids fluttering open but not really focusing on anything.

Guilt tore through Rat, but he shoved it ruthlessly aside. “Will she be all right?”

“I think so. We should take her back to the infirmary—”

“I’m not leaving her on board with that bomb,” Rat cut in. “She’s coming with us. Marcus?”

Marcus cast Rat a speculative look, but bent over and scooped Iluka up in his arms. She mumbled something incoherent and struggled for a moment, before relaxing.

“Well, then. If you’re ready,” Mirra said, and strode off. Rat followed her, acutely conscious of the stares of the other Obsidian Blades as he walked past them. Some of the whispers floating from them were puzzled, but many were hostile, and a few so angry that he didn’t like turning his back on them.

These were my friends, at one time, he thought. And I’ve betrayed them. Again.

It was starting to turn into a habit.

Mirra led them through a series of corridors, all of which were eerily empty. As they walked, passing posters admonishing them to report traitors, Neva fell in beside him. “Why didn’t you tell us?” she asked quietly.

Rat winced. “I thought that, if I did, no one would come. Which would have meant a fight with Mirra and her forces at Waga Chun. I thought this way, we could not only avoid that, but get some answers as well.”

“A little risky, yes?” Juanita asked from behind them.

“Iluka wasn’t planning on killing us, not if she could help it.” Of course, she’d be likely to kill *him* when she came around and realized what he’d done. “Plan A was to come here, learn what we could, and then steal a Zat ship and escape on that. Most of us, anyway—she meant to stay behind and blow up the station. She would only detonate early if something went horribly wrong, and we had no real chance of escape.”

“Funny, she opted for Plan B awfully quick,” Anusha muttered.

Rat shrugged. “She was off-balance. She’d expected a thriving station, a real target. Her original idea wasn’t a bad plan—it *would* have hurt the Zatvian command structure, badly...if they had still been here. Iluka had no way of knowing that the system would be evacuated. When she found out that it was, that certain things she’d done had all been for nothing...she didn’t take it well. And when Mirra pulled the guns out right away...well. I don’t think she saw another option.”

“Lost her fucking mind, that’s what she’s done,” Marcus growled, shifting Iluka in his arms.

Her dark eyes opened further. “Damn you,” she mumbled. “My head...”

(where are you? come to me)

Rat stumbled, then caught himself. Mirra glanced back over her shoulder, frowning slightly, and he decided that there was no point in pretending any longer. “Who is she?”

Puzzlement. “Who?”

“The one who’s calling me. In my head.”

“Great, he’s crazy again,” Marcus said. “Isn’t that just what we need?”

Mirra’s eyes widened slightly, however. “Damn,” she murmured. “Damn it, damn it.”

That wasn’t good. “Tell me.”

Mirra’s face was grim. “Her name is—was—Lieutenant Rebecca Dimo. She was a Project Zero inductee.”

Rat came to a halt. “There’s another telepath on this station?” His head reeled at the prospect. Ever since the moment of changeover, he had been alone, surrounded by people who had no understanding of what he went through every day. To finally come face-to-face with someone like himself...

“Yes. Unlike you, she underwent complete brain-wipe. Rebecca has no memory, no language, and no comprehension of the world around her. The techs are short-handed with the evacuation—they must have missed a dose of her medication.”

Rat’s heart sank. So much for someone like him. He’d hoped that, after all the time that had passed, some of the others might have recovered at least partially. Unfortunately, it didn’t sound

that way.

"She has to be kept heavily sedated to keep her from killing everyone who comes within her range," Mirra went on. "The fact that she can reach Xian from such a distance...she's never done that before. It doesn't bode well."

"Wonderful. Just what we needed—more good news," Marcus said. "So if she can reach Rat, does that mean she's going to kill the rest of us at any moment?"

"I certainly hope not. If she is, there isn't much we can do about it now." Mirra stepped through the open door, beckoning to them. Rat entered warily behind her, and found himself in a simple conference room, equipped with a long table, chairs, and a large display on one wall. The air smelled faintly of some sort of cleaning solution.

"I'd send for coffee, but I doubt you'd trust me enough to drink it," Mirra said. Although the words were spoken lightly, Rat thought that he caught an undertone of bitterness. *She's upset with me. Angry that I tricked her. Hurt that I'm not who she wanted me to be.*

Mirra wasn't the only one—there was a great deal of hurt and anger in the whispers, most of it directed at Iluka. And as for Iluka herself...

"Put me down," she told Marcus irritably. Her voice sounded stronger, and Rat felt a rush of relief, that he hadn't unintentionally given her brain damage. Marcus did as ordered; Iluka swayed on her feet, grabbing at the back of a chair and squinting as if the light hurt her eyes. Her long dreads hung down around a face twisted with pain and fury. Rat took a step towards her automatically, then stopped when she looked up at him.

Drying blood painted her face, gleaming faintly in the harsh lighting. "You," she said. "Back-stabber. You're off my ship. You can stay here and rot with the Zats."

Rat blinked at her stupidly for a moment as her words sank in. He'd expected her to be angry...but not so angry as to throw him off the ship altogether.

"You can't!" Neva started, but Marcus held up his hand, cutting her off.

"I'm calling a vote," he said.

The rest of the crew stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. Mirra leaned against a chair, surveying them all with amusement. "A vote? How...quaint."

"Shut up, you," Marcus snapped. "And how about stepping outside for a minute? Not that I don't think you won't be listening in, but you could at least pretend to let us talk things over amongst ourselves."

Mirra shrugged. "Fine." As she swept past Rat, she murmured, "You should have stayed on my side, Xian. These fools will be the death of you."

The door closed behind her, and Marcus seemed to relax marginally. "All right. As for the vote—"

"There's no vote," Iluka snarled. "Damn you, under a state of emergency, the captain—"

"I vote we get ourselves a new captain."

Iluka fell silent, her mouth open.

Neva dropped into a seat and fixed her eyes on Marcus. "I suppose that would be you?"

Marcus shook his head. "No. I've got no interest in that. More importantly, I've got no plan to get us the hell out of this. I've got no leverage to deal with the Zats. But *he* does."

It took Rat a moment to realize that Marcus was pointing at him. "This is no time for jokes, Marcus."

"No joke."

Rat shook his head. Marcus either had picked a truly bad time to play a trick on him, or else picked an equally bad time to go mad. "You can't be serious."

Marcus shrugged. "I am. Anyone else think this is a good idea?"

"I vote for the crazy man with a plan," Juanita agreed, folding her arms over her chest and glaring at Iluka.

"What the hell? And you're saying *I'm* crazy!"

Jason gave him a faintly amused look. "Aye. For the new captaincy, not for calling you crazy, by the way."

"Listen, you can't—"

Anusha cut him off. "Anything is better than getting blown up. Aye."

Everyone looked at Neva, who at least ought to know better than anyone that he couldn't do this, that is was some sudden insanity on everyone else's part. But apparently whatever had infected the rest of them had gotten her too. "Aye," she said. "Looks like we've got a new captain."

"The hell!" Iluka's fingers clutched the back of the chair so hard that Rat half expected her nails to punch through the upholstery. He was glad to have someone else finally agree with him, although he wouldn't have expected Iluka to be the voice of reason at the moment. "You can't do this! The *Exile* is my damned boat!"

"Not how it works, Iluka." Marcus leaned casually against the wall, his arms folded over his chest, but Rat knew that he was tensed to move should he need to. "The articles we all signed give us the right to choose our captain. Just because you never thought we'd actually exercise that right doesn't give you the option of changing the rules now." His pale eyes flicked to Rat's face. "Well? What are your orders, Captain?"

Panic touched Rat. *They can't be serious. I can't do this. I'm just a fighter pilot—just a weapon. I take orders; I don't give them.* Someone else—Neva, Anusha, Jason, hell even Marcus—would be better at it. He opened his mouth to tell them no, he wasn't going to do this, he wasn't up to it, and they were crazier than he was if they thought otherwise.

"Zats are probably getting impatient, Captain," Juanita prompted him.

Mirra. She was waiting in the hall even now. Waiting to strike some sort of pact or truce, or Goddess only knew what.

They just gave me the authority to deal with her.

Mirra wasn't going to accept a deal with anyone except him. That much he knew from his brief exposure to her thoughts on the dock. She didn't give a damn about anyone else, and she'd see any truce brokered through a third party as an inconvenience to be disposed of the moment she could.

It has to be me, doesn't it? If I walk away from this, things are going to get ugly. Uglier than they already are, anyway.

I'm going to let everyone down, aren't I? It's inevitable.

Neva's hazel eyes were on him: steady, certain. She believed in him. Goddess, *Marcus* believed in him. And if that was possible, then maybe anything could happen.

He straightened his shoulders, and clasped his hands together behind his back. "All right. Juanita, please call Mirra back in."

Before Juanita could make a move, the door opened...but it wasn't Mirra who stood on the other side. Instead, a pale-skinned, gray-haired man stared back at them. All around him were arrayed the Obsidian Blades, their guns pointed into the room.

"Take the telepath alive," the man said. "Kill the rest."

"Shit!" Marcus lunged for the panel by the door; it slid shut just in time, judging from the sound of weapons fire coming from the other side.

Neva was on her feet, her gun drawn. “What happened to Hunter? Rat, you said she was serious about the truce!”

Oh hell. “She was. Maybe somebody above her didn’t like that.”

“The door’s locked, but that isn’t going to last long,” Marcus said, falling back. “I hope someone’s got a brilliant idea about now.”

(COME TO ME!)

Rat yelped, clapping his hands over his ears, although of course it did not good. Jasmine was still clinging to his shoulder, and he felt her yank hard on his hair when his abrupt movement almost dislodged her. “The other telepath,” he managed to say. “Maybe, if we can get to her, she can do something to help us. She seems to want to communicate with us...badly.”

“Great idea. The only problem is the troop of Zats blocking the only way out of here,” Marcus snapped.

“I have a suggestion,” Jason said mildly. Rat turned to him, and found the pilot intently studying the ceiling. He looked up as well, but saw only the usual grid of panels. Panels...that covered the space used for running things like conduits.

“Well, we need to go up to reach the other telepath anyway,” he said, clambering onto the table. “Somebody pass me a chair.”

* * *

Mirra stood at the end of the corridor, seething with rage. She’d thought that she had been upset when Xian played his nasty trick on her, but that was nothing compared to what she was feeling at the moment.

I had things under control. I could have explained things, convinced Xian to cooperate. But General Hsin had to let fear make his decisions for him, and now everything’s gone to hell.

The moment she’d stepped out of the conference room, she’d found herself face-to-face with a squad of Blades—*her* squad, damn it—and General Hsin. A pale, sweating General Hsin, who’d pulled rank and told her to get out of the way. Who told her *she’d* been the one to botch things. And who, when she’d requested permission to continue her damned mission, had decided that he knew better than she how to get Xian’s cooperation.

Contempt filled her as she watched him yell at the Blades to blast open the door. Hsin believed that if he had Xian prisoner, he’d be able to compel him to do whatever the general wished. Which, primarily, was protecting Hsin from what might be headed their way even now.

The door burst open, and the Blades rushed in. Mirra closed her eyes, hoping desperately that Hsin’s desperation to control Xian didn’t wind up killing him. But no sound of gunfire came to her.

Startled, she opened her eyes and moved closer, peering inside the room. It was completely empty.

It was everything she could do not to burst out laughing at the horrified look on the general’s face.

* * *

“I don’t sense anyone beneath us,” Rat said. A moment later, there came a muffled thump as Jason kicked open a panel. Light streamed in from the corridor below, augmenting the flashlights they had been using and revealing a tangle of cobwebs beside Neva’s head. She moved aside

carefully; Goddess only knew what made its living here in the crawlspace, and she didn't want to chance putting her hand on anything that might have a venomous bite.

Jason dropped down through the open panel, followed by Marcus, Juanita, Anusha, and Iluka. When Neva reached the opening, Rat took her wrists and helped lower her carefully; Marcus caught her from below and set her on her feet. Jasmine bounded down after, chittering happily; at least one of them had found the crawlspace more fascinating than frightening. A moment later, Rat's boots appeared, followed by the rest of him.

As he had predicted, the nondescript corridor was free of Zats, but that wouldn't last long. "Where to next?" Neva asked, hoping that someone had an answer.

"Be nice if we had a map," Juanita said morosely.

Rat's face looked drawn, his full mouth set in a taut line. He'd handled the sudden responsibility Marcus had thrust upon him better than Neva would have predicted—better than *he* would have predicted, she suspected.

Even so, we're following a man who has a voice talking to him in his head.

Better than a woman willing to blow us all up.

Iluka stood off to one side, dark eyes blazing with an emotion that Neva couldn't name. *I still can't believe that she came here to die. That she was willing to take us all with her, if it meant killing Zats at the same time.*

"I think I can find her," Rat said slowly. "The other telepath. I know what direction she's in, anyway. We're going to have to take a lift up."

"The whole station's going to be looking for us," Anusha pointed out.

"Fortunately for us, the whole station is nothing but a skeleton crew," Rat replied, sweeping past her. The rest of the crew fell in behind him. "But we shouldn't assume anything. I'm going to try and sense if anyone is ahead of us, but that's no guarantee."

Neva hefted her gun, feeling its cold weight in her hands. *Please don't let us have to fight our way through.*

And our way out? How are we going to get off this station again? Does Rat have a plan, or is he just making it up as he goes along?

The corridors in this section were only dimly lit, suggesting that it had been partially mothballed after the evacuation. They passed through several halls, making the occasional turn, until Rat suddenly held up his hand. They stopped, and he signaled for them to flatten themselves against the wall, then gestured for Marcus to join him. The two men ghosted around the nearest corner...then, a moment later, there came a muted thump and a curse. Before Neva could begin to worry, they reappeared, dragging an unconscious man dressed in a maintenance uniform between them. Juanita found an unlocked door, which opened onto a darkened office; they dumped the worker in there and shut the door after.

"Should have shot him," Iluka muttered. "That way, he wouldn't be able to raise the alarm."

"Yes, gunshots are so quiet. They'd never raise an alarm." Juanita rolled her eyes.

Rat's amber eyes blazed in the dimness. "He was just a maintenance worker, Iluka. He didn't even have a gun. I want to fight the Zats, not turn into them."

"Again," Marcus said with a slight smirk.

A rueful smile touched Rat's mouth and vanished. "Something like that. Let's get moving."

Before much longer, they came to a lift. Rat summoned it, and they all climbed in, hoping that the Zats didn't realize where they were and freeze the lift between floors. As they crowded up against one another, Juanita pointed to the buttons. "Which level?"

Rat winced. "I'm not sure. Select the highest, and get ready to hit the emergency stop when I

tell you.”

“If I had more time, I might be able to crack into station broadcast and get us a map,” Jason said wistfully.

“Time is one thing we don’t have.” Rat closed his eyes, and Neva wondered what he was doing. Calling to the other telepath somehow? Or just trying to decide from which direction she was calling him?

A faint gasp escaped him, and his whole body stiffened. “What’s wrong?” Neva asked anxiously.

“She’s...insistent,” he said through gritted teeth. “I need to concentrate.”

The lift rose smoothly, indicator lights flashing by in silence. Suddenly, Rat flung out one hand. “This is it!”

Juanita hastily punched the emergency stop, and the lift jerked to a halt. She and Marcus gripped the doors and hauled them apart, revealing that the lift had stopped with its floor a good meter above the floor of the hall. They jumped out, rifles held at ready, and everyone else followed.

“We’ve got to hurry,” Anusha said. “That stop is going to sound an alarm somewhere, and I don’t care how stripped down this station is, it’s going to get someone’s attention.”

“We’re close.” Rat took the lead and strode off down the white corridor. The lights weren’t dimmed at all here, Neva noticed nervously, which probably meant that it was still in use.

Without warning, weapons fire streaked down the hall behind them. Marcus swore and spun, laying down fire of his own. Neva chanced a look over her shoulder, saw that the Zats had come from a cross-corridor and were using the corner as cover. Her heart pounding, she pulled out her own gun, but no target presented itself.

“This way! Hurry!” Rat shouted, and a moment later they were all racing down the hall, ducking around another corridor, and down a short hall. Pounding footsteps sounded behind them; Juanita fired off a few shots of her own in response. Neva’s heart raced; she didn’t dare look back now. Every second, she expected to feel the burn of gunfire in her spine.

The short hall dead-ended in a pair of heavy doors. “There,” Rat panted. “We’ve got to get in!”

Iluka slapped the control panel by the door. Predictably, nothing happened. She swore and raised her gun, but Rat grabbed it, forcing it down. “If we fry that, we won’t be able to lock it behind us!”

“And if we don’t do it, we’re going to be caught and killed before that’s an issue, you damned idiot!” she shouted back. “We don’t have time for the lock pick! Those Zats are going to—”

The door opened.

A woman stood there, framed in the bright light coming from the other side. She wore a blue lab coat, and a pair of safety goggles perched on top of her shining black hair. A metal band, dotted with green lights, circled her left wrist. In one hand, she held a scalpel, but it was pointed towards the ground. At her feet lay a second woman, a pool of blood rapidly widening around her throat.

“Mel!” Jason shouted. He flung himself over the body and embraced the woman. With an incredulous sound that was half sob, she hugged him back.

“Well, don’t just stand there gaping!” Marcus snapped. He grabbed the dying woman by one arm and yanked her out into the hall, as everyone else hurried inside.

Neva found herself in what was obviously some sort of high tech lab. Equipment of every

description stood neatly on tables, and signs on all the walls warned of various hazards. Monitors displayed crystalline structures, molecular diagrams, and DNA sequences. Another door opened off the room, and she caught a glimpse of desks and yet more equipment.

"There they are!" came a shout from behind them.

Jason's sister tore herself away from him and flung herself at the door panel, rapidly punching in a code. The doors whisked closed, just as shots hit them from the other side. A monitor beside the door showed the Zats piling up in the hall outside. "That's a secure lock—they won't be able to override it. I've been poking around in the computer systems for years now, on the sly, hoping that someday I'd actually be in a position to need something like this. They'll get it open eventually, but they'll have to use physical force to do it."

Despite their danger, Jason was grinning broadly. "Good work, sister."

"I'd ask how you found me, but I think the more important question is: how are we going to get out of here?"

Iluka snorted and turned her dark eyes on Rat. "Good question. Ask our fearless leader here. I'm sure he's got a great idea."

"Leave him alone," Neva snapped.

"It's all right," Rat said quietly. He stepped forward. "Mel, is it?"

"Dr. Melinda Silent Hawk," the woman said with a business-like nod. "And you are..." she trailed off, black brows drawing together. "Wait a minute. I know you." Her eyes widened, and she took a wary step back, bringing up her bloodied scalpel. "I didn't recognize you at first...but those eyes...Jason, this man is a Zat."

Neva's heart sped up. "You. Damn it, you were one of the doctors who did this to him!"

"It's all right, Mel," Jason said soothingly. "Rat's on our side."

Mel lowered her scalpel, looking confused. "You were one of the Project Zero volunteers. But you're here, walking and talking like a normal person. That isn't possible."

A faint smile touched Rat's mouth. "I guess Mirra didn't share any information about our previous encounter."

"I'm a prisoner here." She displayed the band around her wrist. "I can't leave the lab area. The Zats only tell me what they want me to do, and nothing more."

"Might want to hurry up," Juanita said conversationally, from where she'd been watching the monitor. Neva looked at the screen, and her heart sank. The Zats were applying something to the doors that she strongly suspected was some sort of explosive.

"We're here for the other telepath," Rat told Melinda. "She's been calling to me."

Mel muttered something that Neva suspected was a curse. "Rebecca Dimo is being held in a secure lab. I can take you there, but if she's alert, I can't go in, and I'd advise you not to as well, unless you have one of the blockers with you."

"Blockers? Look like wire with crystals on it?"

"Yes."

Rat nodded, as if she'd confirmed something for him. "I thought Mirra was up to something with that hair clip. We don't have one, but I think...I hope...I might be able to communicate with her without my brain turning into a slurry. Is there any other way into this complex?"

"No. For safety reasons, given some of the things we were working with, this is it." Mel gestured to the door. "I suppose it made it easier for them to control us prisoners as well."

Rat hesitated, then took a deep breath. "All right. Mel and I are going to get the other telepath."

Marcus nodded grimly. "We'll hold off the Zats, then."

Fear went through Neva, and she found herself staring at Rat. He was going to face another telepath, one far stronger and more dangerous than himself. If he was wrong, if he was as susceptible as anyone else, then he would die.

He turned to her, perhaps sensing her worry, and met her gaze briefly. His amber eyes were desperate, staring at her as if he had to memorize every line of her face. Then he turned away and followed Mel, as she led him farther into the lab complex.

On the monitor, the Zats were withdrawing, which must mean they were ready to blow the door. Marcus seemed to have the same thought, because he hefted his rifle and gestured to the room behind them. "All right, everyone, take cover and get ready. Here they come."

Chapter 41: Mouse Trap

Rat followed Mel Silent Hawk deeper into the lab complex. They passed banks of equipment whose functions he couldn't guess, as well as operating rooms, conference rooms, and even offices. Away from the outer rooms, everything was eerily silent, and he wondered what the place had been like before most of its personnel had been evacuated.

I've been here before. I must have. This is where they did...it. Started the process that would kill Xian Jackson, and make me.

"I don't remember any of this," he said aloud. "I don't remember anything from before changeover. I didn't even know I had been a Zatvian until Mirra found me."

Mel cast him a thoughtful look. **(curiosity) what was different, could it be that the procedure didn't work completely in his case?** "You retained language, though? Knowledge of how to speak, how to behave, how to dress yourself?"

"Yes. All of that. Just no memory of learning any of it, no idea who I was or what had happened to me." He swallowed nervously. "I'm under the impression that my personality is pretty different from...who I used to be."

Mel laughed, but it was a sound without humor. **(image of cold amber eyes, mocking smile) no different than the rest of them** "Given that you're here with Jason, on the run from the Obsidian Blades, I can guarantee that, Colonel Jackson."

"Call me Rat." A part of him wanted to ask her what Xian Jackson had been like, if he'd treated her badly or just as a non-entity, but he wasn't sure he wanted an answer. "This is Jasmine," he added, touching the le-murr who rode on his shoulder. "She helped me concentrate, especially at first. I couldn't hurt her with my mind, so it was safe to focus on her."

Mel look intrigued. "Really? Interesting. The other telepaths have been completely uncontrollable—they kill everyone who doesn't have a blocker, unless they're heavily sedated. We've attempted to suppress their abilities so we can help them, but nothing has worked. Certainly it didn't occur to us to expose them to non-human primates. I take it you didn't kill everyone you came into contact with, even at first?"

"At the moment of changeover, I did. My first memory is standing in a white room, with bleeding corpses all around me. I didn't know who they were, or who *I* was, or what was going on. I was confused and scared, so I ran. I spent two years running. Hiding. Sometimes...I would have seizures. That was bad, not just for me, but for anyone near me."

"Fascinating. But you don't have them any more?"

"No. Neva helped me, taught me how to meditate, how to just...let it all flow past me."

"I'd love to study your brain activity patterns...assuming we all survive this," she added wryly. "Here we are."

She led the way into a smallish room equipped with a monitor array. Most of the screens

were dark, except for one that threw a lone square of light into the darkened room. Rat went to it, and felt his heart contract sharply.

The view was from a camera affixed near the ceiling of the room it surveyed. The small chamber was divided by what appeared to be a glass wall. The lighting was dim, but Rat could make out a hospital bed and a bank of some sort of medical monitors.

A lone woman stood pressed against the glass, staring fixedly up at the camera, giving the illusion that she was gazing directly at Rat. Dark circles surrounded her eyes, and her hair had been shaved to the scalp, perhaps to make it easier to keep clean. Her arms hung slack against her sides. Although the shapeless hospital gown made it hard to tell, Rat thought that she was painfully thin, her muscles wasted from long inactivity.

(COME TO ME)

Rat was acutely aware of his heart pounding in his chest, of the sweat slicking his palms. *That could have been me. I could have spent the last few years a prisoner, sedated, unable to recognize anything or anyone.* It had never occurred to him that the life he'd led since changeover had been a gift instead of a curse, but at that moment he realized exactly how much he had to be thankful for.

"She's gotten loose from her restraints," Mel murmured, peering over his shoulder. "Damn it. The techs who normally tend her were evacuated. The only ones left were me and that idiot out there." She jerked her head in the direction of the main door, indicating the woman she'd killed.

"What was the evacuation for?"

"No idea. They don't tell prisoners." Mel shrugged and absently rubbed at the metal cuff encircling her wrist. "Rat, I understand that this is important to you, but I advise you again to leave Major Dimo alone. There is an excellent chance that this encounter will kill you."

Rat swallowed hard, staring at the monitor. Haunted eyes looked back at him. He could *feel* her desperation, her need...

"I can't," he said softly. "I've got to do this."

Mel shrugged and stepped to a closed door opposite the one through which they had entered. Like the outer door into the facility, it was heavily reinforced. Mel punched in a code, then stepped back when it swished open to reveal a long hall. "There you go. Just follow the hall to the end, and you'll be there. I'll watch on the monitor, but there's not much I can do to help if things go wrong. There's a way to flood the room with knockout gas, but those of us here under coercion weren't given the code, in case we decided to use it against the Zat techs. Unfortunately, I was never able to crack that part of the system."

"It's all right." Rat took a deep breath. "If I...if things go wrong, tell the rest of the crew to get the hell off this station, any way they can. Don't try to save me."

Mel inclined her head in a slight bow. "Understood. Good luck."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need it." Rat took Jasmine from his shoulder, cuddled her close for a second, then set her gently in a chair in front of one of the inactive monitors.

go now?

Stay here. He stroked her fur, murmuring softly, and she settled a little.

don't like

Neither do I, sweetheart. Neither do I. Ignoring the pang that her anxious eyes gave him, he let her go and turned to the open door.

Now or never.

Squaring his shoulders, Rat stepped through the door.

* * *

Even with the wall as a barrier, the explosion when the Zats blew the outer door was painfully loud. Debris flew past, and Neva instinctively ducked farther down. Metal scraped on metal as bits of the door tore into the wall and the decking, and the stink of burning electronics washed over them, carried on the shockwave that came through the open doorway.

Silence fell, deafening after the concussive blast. Neva tightened her grip on her gun, her heart in her mouth. *Goddess, protect us, please don't let us be overrun and killed. And Rat...*

A fierce cry shattered the silence. Iluka lunged past Neva, through the doorway, and into the outer room, squeezing off a barrage of shots as she went. Neva caught a confused glimpse of her face, her lips drawn back from her teeth in a grimace, her eyes narrowed into slits, before she charged out of sight and presumably straight at the oncoming Zats.

"No! Iluka, get back here!" Marcus yelled furiously. "Damn it! Put up some cover fire!"

It was a suicide charge, Neva thought, leaning around the corner and looking for a target to aim at. *Iluka expects them to kill her.*

If nothing else, Iluka's unexpected charge had taken the Zats by surprise. Neva caught a glimpse of black uniforms milling around the entrance, the gleam of a gun barrel. She fired at it; the shot was abysmal, but at least it made the Blade draw back.

"I'm going after that fool," Marcus said, and a moment later he, too, plunged into the outer room. Iluka was standing in the center, feet braced, laying down a blistering barrage of fire. Marcus caught her around the waist, jerking her down and behind the cover of an overturned desk, just as return fire spattered the decking where Iluka had stood.

"Damn you!" Iluka bellowed, struggling to get free from Marcus.

Marcus jerked her back down behind cover. "Damn *you*, woman, we need every gun we've got! Don't you fucking get yourself killed over nothing and leave us in the lurch, or I swear to God I'll hunt you down in hell!"

One of the Blades came around the ruin of the door. Neva swore silently and squeezed off another shot, again missing by meters. Juanita's aim was far better, and the Zat dropped back when her shot splattered off his body armor.

"We got to get closer," Juanita said. Her hat had fallen off at some point, and her shawl lay in a puddle on the floor. "Come on!"

She sprang out from concealment, running towards a bank of monitors that might provide protection, crouched low to make herself less of a target. Praying that she didn't get shot, Neva followed.

* * *

The corridor seemed to stretch endlessly ahead. Rat's boots roused echoes, making it sound as if a legion trooped down the long hall.

(need yes come yes please)

How am I going to make her understand anything? She doesn't have language—there's only so much I can communicate through emotion alone. Goddess, I should have ignored Iluka, left everyone at Waga Chun, and come here with Mirra alone. I should have forced them to let me go.

Mirra. Where is she? She isn't responsible for this fiasco—someone decided to take me by

force and kill the rest, no matter what Mirra had agreed to. If I find him...

Survive this first.

He found himself at the end of the corridor. The door swished open at his approach, letting him into a large room. A glass wall divided the room into halves. The nearest part of the room must have been intended for observation of some kind, but it was empty now, except for a few stray bits of equipment that stood forlornly against one wall, covered in drapes to keep dust away from them.

The second half of the room could have been a long-term care setup in any hospital. There were monitors for respiration and blood pressure, IV stands, and a bed designed to prevent bedsores from developing. The only difference was the restraints hanging loose, their ends trailing on the floor.

The woman stood there, pressed against the glass, and he felt her rush of delight as he stepped fully into the room. Up close, she looked even more haggard, and the sight invoked both pity and horror. *Goddess. Thank you for keeping me from this, at least.*

A single door penetrated the glass wall, and he wondered why she hadn't let herself out. Maybe she didn't know how. He moved towards it, and felt her eyes follow him avidly. So far, he hadn't suffered any ill effects in her presence, something that he doubted would have been true of any non-telepaths. But what he was about to do would open him utterly to her.

He paused, his hand on the door, and glanced over his shoulder at the camera, knowing that Mel would be watching. Then, taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped through.

* * *

The smell of scorched decking filled the air, forcing Neva to breathe shallowly. She and Juanita crouched behind their scant cover; Jason had joined them, and Anusha had managed to take up position elsewhere.

"Why don't they just toss in a grenade?" she asked, ducking down after chancing a shot in the direction of the door, where the Zats still lurked.

"Maybe they don't want to blow up their expensive junk," Juanita suggested, slapping the bank of machines they hid behind.

Jason shook his head, long hair rippling. "No. They don't realize that Rat isn't here, and they don't want to risk killing him. That's the only thing that has held them back so far."

"I hope he's doing better than we are," Neva said.

"Hope he gets back soon with some way out of here," Juanita added.

Jason peered around the end of the bank of equipment, but didn't fire his gun. "So do I. Because this can't be good."

Neva's heart sank. "What's wrong?"

"They've stopped shooting."

She listened for a moment, realized that indeed there was only silence except for the sound of their breathing and Iluka's voice cursing Marcus. "What do you think it means?"

Jason checked the charge on his blaster, then pulled another from the holster slung over his shoulder. "I don't know, but I imagine we'll find out soon enough."

* * *

(joy/relief/need)

Dimly, Rat was aware of the woman's approach, but he was overwhelmed by her sudden burst of emotion. *I've come to help you*, he projected at her. *Calm. Please. A tranquil pond, smooth, no wind ruffling the surface...*

She reached out to him, and he to her, their movements synchronized. Her hands felt cold against his; at the same instant, he felt her perception of the warmth of his skin.

(touch warmth) yes at last

I'm Rat. I've come to help you.

Yes show me

Her green eyes were bottomless; he was falling into them, past them. He was aware of everything about her, from the feel of the rough gown against her skin, to the sight of his amber eyes blazing back at her, to her loneliness and terror. Above all else, he was aware of her desperate hunger to *know*, to communicate, to understand...

show me teach me

yes here

There were thoughts in his head that he didn't think had originated there, but Goddess he couldn't tell. This was nothing like the incessant whispers he heard from everyone else, no more than listening to recorded music was the same as playing an instrument. Flashes of memory spiked through him—piloting the *Cuchulainn*, arguing with Marcus, petting Jasmine, holding Neva, running from the Zats, putting on a 'suit, writing in blood on the wall, stealing Jasmine, eating dinner...

Everything. She's taking everything.

Sharing everything, yes. I have to learn to be.

That's how you do it, I see I see I understand...

I'm...I'm...

We are.

* * *

The eerie silence from the Zats continued, drawing Neva's nerves taut. "Maybe they're hoping we'll come out and expose ourselves," she whispered, tightening her grip on her gun.

"Maybe." Juanita fished a cigar out of her pocket, pulled off the auto-light tab, and stuck it between her lips. Smoke curled lazily about her face, and she puffed contentedly, apparently having decided that she might as well have one last smoke if they were all about to die.

The lights in the lab went out.

Marcus swore loudly from somewhere in the stygian blackness. Her heart pounding wildly, Neva fumbled out her flashlight and switched it on, accidentally shining it in Juanita's eyes. Juanita yelped and shoved it aside.

"Sorry, sorry," Neva whispered. Praying that she didn't get shot for her trouble, she risked peeking over the top of the machines and shone her light at the entrance.

A shadow flickered through the beam.

"Someone's coming!" Neva shouted, frantically trying to spot the figure again. Other flashlight beams joined her, swinging crazily, and for a second she caught a glimpse of a hood and face mask, a pair of pale blue eyes glaring above it.

"Fury!" Juanita screamed.

Oh no...

A barrage of fire came from every direction, but the Fury wasn't there any more. The

darkness had swallowed her, but she was still out there, stalking them. Terror clawed at the back of Neva's throat—the Fury could sense them perfectly well in the dark, but they couldn't see her. She might be right behind Neva at that very moment, hand stretching out towards her throat...

No, stop it, don't panic. She swallowed hard, forced her shaking hand to swing the flashlight in searching arcs, trying to spot the Fury so that someone could take a good shot.

A startled scream came from the blackness, only to be abruptly cut off. "She's among us!" Jason shouted, and suddenly there were bodies running, flashlights strobing into Neva's eyes.

Someone's hurt.

Neva stuffed her gun in her pocket, and started to crawl in the direction she thought the scream had come from. Her heart pounded in her throat, and at any moment she expected the Fury's hands to close around her, or for a shot to tear through her flesh. *Just keep moving, just keep moving, someone's hurt, you've got to find them...*

"Bring her down!" Marcus roared, as if anyone needed encouragement. There came a flurry of wild shots, and something shattered loudly. Sparks erupted from some of the equipment, and the acrid smell of smoke filled the air.

One of the flashlight beams found the swiftly-moving figure of the Fury, and someone else crossed the beam, charging. "Iluka, no!" Marcus yelled. "Shit!"

A single shot, and Iluka started screaming hoarsely, a terrible, agonized sound.

Goddess, no!

She's going to pick us off one at a time, and we can't stop her.

Neva swallowed hard and forced herself to keep going. Iluka's shrieks had turned into moans, which at least meant that she was still alive. *I'll get to her next. Have to find whoever got hit first, make sure they're okay.* Utterly blind in the dark, Neva groped ahead of her; her fingers touched a hot piece of metal, burning her skin, and she bit back a cry of pain. Then her other hand fell into something wet and sticky. Shining her flashlight around, she saw blood.

Anusha lay there on her side, her back to Neva. "It's me," Neva whispered. She touched Anusha's shoulder, then slid her fingers up to check the pulse. Instead of smooth, brown skin, she felt only blood and slippery meat. Her heart contracting sharply, she tugged Anusha onto her back. The Star Rider's head lolled unnaturally; most of her throat was simply gone.

Neva crouched unable to move. She felt oddly detached, as though she watched events from some place outside of herself. Dimly, she was aware of someone crying out in pain, but it seemed oddly unimportant.

One more down. She's going to kill us all.

The soft sound of footsteps came from the darkness to one side. Still feeling eerily calm, Neva drew her gun and pointed her flashlight up.

The Fury stood there, staring down. Neva squeezed the trigger of her gun automatically; at this distance, even she couldn't miss. The shot hit the Fury in the chest, staggering her slightly, but not penetrating her body armor. Another soldier might have been hurt, but the Fury could feel no pain, so there wasn't even that tiny bit of satisfaction.

The bore of the Fury's rifle came around, pointing directly at Neva's head. Neva stared up, into the pitiless blue eyes, and wondered dimly if she would feel any pain when her brain vaporized.

And then, suddenly, the Fury jerked, as if something had grabbed hold of her nervous system and yanked. Her rifle clattered to the deck, and a moment later she followed, arms and legs drumming weakly against the floor as she convulsed.

What...?

An ominous silence had fallen, in which it seemed that no one so much as breathed. After a long moment, Neva realized that a dim light shone from the room behind her, growing brighter.

“Neva!” Marcus called; his voice was strained. A moment later, he staggered into the light, his shirt covered with blood. “Iluka’s hurt, I...who the fuck are you?”

Someone stepped up beside Neva. Startled, she blinked up, saw a thin, shaven-headed woman dressed in a hospital gown. A moment later, Rat appeared beside her, followed by Mel Silent Hawk, who held an emergency lantern in one hand.

“Rebecca?” Neva guessed.

A sly smile curved the woman’s mouth. “Mouse,” she said—and was echoed at the same moment by Rat.

Neva blinked. “Rat?”

“Are you all right, Neva?” the telepaths asked in unison. As if they were one thing.

Dread built in Neva, squeezing a hand around her chest. “I’m...I’m fine,” she said uncertainly.

Their eyes dropped to Anusha. Fists curled, and two sets of eyes glittered suddenly with tears. “Anusha,” they whispered, voices harsh and strained. “The Fury did this?”

I don’t like this. Neva swallowed, nodded. “Yes.”

They turned to the Fury, puppets on a string. *But which is the puppeteer?*

The Fury still twitched spasmodically. “Mouse took the host, but not the symbiote,” they said, the edge of anger and hate in their voices. “It’s trapped. Afraid. Grieving.”

Marcus stared at them in horror. “For what?” he asked, his voice nothing more than a whisper.

“Her. The host. It’s alone now. It’s never been alone before. It loved her, and now she’s gone.” Two sets of eyes narrowed. “It killed Anusha.”

“Rat.” Neva stood up sharply. “Stop this!”

They blinked at her, then looked back at the Fury. It stiffened...then relaxed and lay still, completely dead at last.

Marcus dropped to the decking by the dead Fury and yanked her hood off. It occurred to Neva suddenly that he had given the order to fight back even suspecting that his daughter was a Fury—might even, for all he knew, be the one coming to kill them. She glanced anxiously at him, saw the look of relief pass over his face as he pulled the breather off. “Not her. Oh, Christ, thank you.”

“You’re hurt.” She gestured to his bloody shirt, but he shook his head.

“Iluka’s hurt worse. She tried to charge the Fury. We’ll pull her back here, where you can work under cover. As soon as the Zats realize what happened, they’ll be back to finish the job.”

“They already know,” Rat and Mouse said. Their attention had moved to the door. “Most of the Blades have fallen back.”

Marcus stared at them worriedly, no doubt asking himself what this bizarre behavior meant. “What now?”

A pair of smiles. “Now, we have a guest.”

There came an odd, shuffling step near the outer door, and a moment later a lone man stumbled in. His short graying hair was plastered against his head, and his eyes were full of terror. Blood leaked from both nostrils, painting his face crimson.

“General Hsin,” Rat and Mouse said. They moved towards him, like a pair of stalking wolves. “You’ve got a great deal to answer for. We think it’s time you started talking.”

Chapter 42: Revelations

Neva crouched by Iluka, hastily applying a bandage to the shredded flesh and shattered bone that had once been a leg. Mel Silent Hawk had found a thermal blanket in the lab's emergency supplies, and was busy tucking it around Iluka's still form. "Her breathing is shallow, pulse thready," Mel reported.

"Shock." Neva tugged the edge of the blanket down over what remained of Iluka's left leg. "I've got the bleeding stopped, but she isn't stable enough for surgery yet." *Not that I'm going to have an opportunity to do surgery, considering we're surrounded by hostile Zats.*

Neva glanced in the direction of the ruined door. The Zatvian general, Hsin, still stood there, blood from his nostrils dripping gently from his chin. Blood was now starting to leak from the corners of his glazed eyes as well. Rat and Mouse circled him steadily, like a pair of sharks scenting a kill.

They're taking his brain apart. Neva felt a shiver travel up her spine. *But it's Rat I'm worried about, not some Zat general. Thanks to Hsin, Iluka lost her leg, and Anusha...*

The navigator's body still lay sprawled where she had fallen. No one had dared take their eyes off the situation long enough to move her. Marcus trained a rifle on the blast-destroyed doorway, in case any more Zats should show up; his face had taken on a grayish hue, and his shirt was soaked in scarlet. Juanita stood by him, her gun pointed at the door, but her eyes on the bleeding man beside her. Jason Silent Hawk covered the entrance from the other direction. All of them seemed to feel that the two telepaths had Hsin sufficiently under control.

"Why have you done this?" Rat and Mouse asked in eerie unison, and Neva felt the hair on her neck stand up. "You were afraid...but not of us. Why?"

The general's mouth worked, but no words came out. Blood bubbled on his lips.

"You were afraid, of something *worse* than us. Something we...came from? Is that right?" Rat cocked his head to one side, puzzled, and Mouse mirrored the motion precisely. "Five years ago, some Zatvian ships were found with their crews all dead, and no explanation as to why. Just like the *New Beginning*. Footage from sensor logs was found, reviewed, and finally a picture began to form." Both telepaths froze in their circling, turning as one to face the general. "No. That isn't possible."

Very slowly, the general toppled forward and lay on the floor, dead.

"I'm afraid it is," said a new voice. A moment later, Mirra Hunter appeared in the ruined doorway, her hands held up to show that she was unarmed.

Three guns fixed on her. "Hold it right there," Marcus ordered tautly.

"I'm not here to fight you," Mirra said coolly. "That was the general's brilliant idea, and he pulled rank on me. I'm here to continue our conversation."

Rat and Mouse prowled towards her. Mirra merely watched them come, making Neva

wonder whether the woman was brave, desperate, or stupid.

"And the other Blades just let you?" the telepaths asked.

"As I am now the highest-ranking official on this station, then yes." Mirra nodded casually to the general's dead body, without any apparent trace of regret. "Thank you for expediting that, by the way. Rebecca, I presume you're feeling better?"

They stopped, eyes narrowing. "We don't like you."

"Can we just shoot her?" Juanita asked hopefully.

"That's too quick."

"Not happy about the spooky twin thing you've got going here, Captain," Marcus growled. "Think you can pretend to be rational for a few minutes?"

Two heads snapped around. "We *are* rational."

Neva stood up slowly, swallowing against the constriction fear made in her throat. "Rat? Sweetheart, please. You're scaring everyone."

For a moment, no one moved. Then, abruptly, Mouse turned away, folding her arms defensively in front of her chest. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice.

Rat started to say it, too, then caught himself. He closed his eyes briefly, opened them again. "Sorry."

"So, do we shoot the Zat?" Juanita asked again.

"No." Rat passed his hand over his face, then dropped it abruptly. "S-stand down."

"Rat?" Neva took a tentative step toward him, but he held up his hand.

"I'm fine. Just...I'm fine." He straightened self-consciously and turned to Mirra. Mouse mimicked the movement, although she didn't speak the words. "All right, Mirra. Talk to me. Tell me what's got the Zats so scared, and what the hell it has to do with Mouse and me."

"Mouse? How...quaint."

Mouse cast an anxious glance in Rat's direction, seeming suddenly vulnerable. "I thought it was funny." Her lone voice was small, cracked, as if she'd needed him to give her strength.

"It was." His amber eyes stayed fixed on Mirra. "Colonel. Talk."

Mirra shrugged. "It won't take long to explain. The source of Project Zero, the thing that you were created to help us fight, the thing that has caused a massive evacuation of this station, is very simple.

"We've made contact with aliens. And they're killing us."

There came a long period of silence. Then Marcus let out a barking laugh that held no humor. "You're going to have to come up with something better than that, Zat. Everyone knows that aliens are just a fairy tale."

The grave expression on Mirra's face didn't waver. "You're wrong. They are very, very real indeed. And, as of right now, they're within a single, easy jump of this station. For all that we know, they're coming here next. If that happens, and we can't find a way of communicating with them, then we're all going to die."

* * *

Rat selected one of the conference rooms within the laboratory complex for the meeting with Mirra. On his orders, Mel Silent Hawk had turned on the room's recorders, to make certain that nothing was missed. While they had been setting up, Neva had treated Iluka in one of the med labs, and done some basic first aid on Marcus' wound. Juanita and Jason had removed Anusha and the Fury to morgue units.

Anusha. Rat's heart constricted, and he automatically stroked Jasmine, who clung to the front of his shirt. He couldn't believe that the navigator was gone. *If only we'd been a little faster, returned a little sooner...*

(grief) I miss her, too. Mouse told him. She perched on the edge of the table, swinging her legs in the air, like a child on a high chair. She hadn't walked more than a few meters in years, and he could feel the exhaustion that the last hour had caused her, could feel the trembling in her limbs. They'd scrounged up some regular clothes for her, a simple jumpsuit such as those worn by maintenance workers, and a pair of boots. The sleeves and legs were too long, and had to be rolled up.

You can't miss Anusha. You never met her.

I have all your memories. I have all your feelings imprinted on my brain. I admired Anusha. I remember when she propositioned me on Paradise, how bizarre and frightening that was, how part of me wanted to take her up on it.

That wasn't you.

I remember it as though it was. She shook her head; the light gleamed on her shaved scalp. **I don't like this distance. It's hard work, and it feels unnatural.**

I know. It was hard, holding himself apart, not letting her thoughts slide into his like two liquids mixing together. No, not two liquids—just one, that had been poured into two different containers, and could now finally be rejoined.

We can't. We frightened them all. You felt it.

They're afraid of me, but they're my friends. I remember them being my friends.

The door opened, and Neva walked through. She looked tired, and Rat saw a dozen minor cuts on her white skin where shrapnel had caught her. He wondered if she even realized they were there, or if adrenaline and exhaustion had masked any pain.

Mouse leaned forward slightly, looking distressed. **(love) Goddess, she's always thinking of everyone else. She feels guilty about Anusha, but there was nothing she could have done.**

"How is Iluka?" Rat asked, hoping that he sounded normal. He was in charge now, and the crew had already lost confidence in him thanks to the scene with Mouse. *I have to hold it together, sound like nothing is different. Please, Mouse, just...be quiet, if you can.*

Neva pulled out a chair and collapsed into it. "Iluka is stable for now. I've got her sedated for the pain. Eventually, I'm going to have to operate and take the end of the leg off. A hospital would be able to grow her a new one, but that's way beyond the resources we have on board the *Exile*."

"Keep me informed on her condition, then," he said, because it sounded a captain-ish thing to say. Straightening his shoulders, he turned to Mirra, who had been watching them bemusedly from the other end of the conference table. "All right, Mirra. Talk. What's this about aliens?"

Surely it can't be true. Surely.

But the general was so certain.

Mirra clasped her hands loosely in front of her, staring blindly into nothing. "It began five years ago...a little more than that, now. This was about two years prior to the Protected Worlds Treaty."

"Before you destroyed Harvest and frightened everyone else into complying," Neva interrupted coldly.

Mirra shrugged. "That's not the official version of events."

"Let's stay on the subject here," Rat interjected, before an argument could start.

"A supply ship was late. At first, no one thought anything of it. The ship had been well away

from the battle lines, so it didn't seem likely that it had vanished as a result of terrorist activities. But when it never showed up, the government became concerned, and sent a ship to look for it. They found it. Everyone on board was dead."

Rat felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. "Just like the *New Beginning*," he said quietly.

Marcus swore.

"Since the *New Beginning* was never recovered by the Cooperative, I'll have to take your word for that." Mirra shrugged. "So we had a ship with a crew that had died under very mysterious circumstances. Autopsies revealed that they all seemed to have suffered closed-head trauma. Bleeding in the brain and sinus cavities, but with no apparent cause. At first, our scientists thought that some new weapon had been developed, its nature a mystery. There was a great deal of panic amongst the higher-ups once they heard that.

"Their panic grew more acute when another ship suffered the same fate. As with the first, the sensor logs indicated that it had encountered a ship matching no known configuration, that it had been attacked without provocation, and that no actual weapon deployment had been detected. The crew simply...died.

"The third time it happened, we had an unexpected stroke of luck. A freighter transporting weapons didn't show up when it was supposed to. Its armed escorts had also vanished. When we went to investigate, we discovered something in addition to our three ships: the remains of one of the mysterious attackers.

"We aren't certain what happened to it, exactly. All we could retrieve were fragments, and the technology...our best minds are *still* trying to understand it. We think that there was an accident of some kind, that the alien ship collided with an asteroid shortly after it entered the system, when it was still traveling at speed, but we aren't even entirely certain about that. There were no survivors...but one of the larger fragments did contain bodies. Because of that, we finally knew what was attacking us, killing our people. Unfortunately, the truth was far more horrific than any terrorist weapon."

"The aliens are telepaths, aren't they?" Neva asked. Juanita, Marcus, and Jason all gave her startled looks, but Mirra only nodded.

"Yes. As far as we can tell, telepathy is their sole means of communication. We found ourselves under sporadic attack by beings we didn't understand, whose origins we didn't know, and with whom we couldn't even talk. The pattern of attacks seemed senseless, with large gaps of time in between each. There was no way of knowing what they wanted, or even why they had suddenly decided to kill us. What we needed above all else was a way to communicate with them."

"Project Zero."

"Yes. We assembled our best neuroscientists, and turned over the alien bodies to them. Although the creatures are vastly different from us, the scientists eventually thought they had a handle on how telepathy was achieved. Once that was done, they began to work on ways to modify it so that human brains might be capable of the same ability. At that stage of the project, we opened up an opportunity for the scientists of hostile systems to join in our work."

Mel snorted. Her eyes were dark and hard when she looked at Mirra, and Rat could all but taste her hatred. "You mean you kidnapped us and made us prisoners."

Mirra shrugged again. "If you want to play games with semantics, have it your way. The existence of the aliens was only revealed to those with the highest clearance, so our guest scientists were only given the data, with no hint as to where it had come from."

Rat felt odd, as if he had missed a step in the dark. "So we...myself, and Mouse, and all the rest...we were experimented on so that we could communicate telepathically with aliens?"

"That's right." Mirra's blue eyes sought his. "It was a great honor—a chance to help save the Cooperative. But it was also a great responsibility, which is why it was offered to the Obsidian Blades. I remember you laughing, saying that you were going to find out how to kill the aliens and teach them a lesson for messing with the Cooperative."

Rat shook his head. "Xian was a damned fool."

"Perhaps." Mirra returned her gaze to her hands. "It doesn't matter now. The project failed. We ended up with five powerful telepaths with the minds of newborns, too dangerous to be trainable. And a single one missing, presumed dead. Until I saw you in the vid log on Gethesemane."

"Do you understand, Xi—Rat? Do you understand how desperate I was to get you back? The attacks didn't stop. We've lost more ships to the aliens, and we're no closer to figuring out how to fight them. We created the blockers using principles we discovered from the wreckage of the alien ship." She pulled the crystal-strung clip from her hair and tossed it wearily onto the table. "But they're difficult to make correctly, and they don't work reliably, as you discovered during our reunion at Prospero. When I discovered that you were alive...you're our last hope. You, and now Mouse. You're the only ones who might be able communicate with the aliens. The only ones who can offer our unconditional surrender."

Rat froze, staring. "Surrender?"

Mirra's mouth tightened, and she nodded. "Yes. I received word when we arrived in this system. The aliens have come to Zatvia. Command is presumed dead. We only know what happened because a courier ship outbound from the system happened to be far enough away from the alien ship that it couldn't harm them. Its crew saw the aliens and kept going so that they could carry the word. It is a good possibility that everyone in the Zatvian system, the heart of the Cooperative, is dead. The aliens have never been seen near a planet before, but I can't afford to hope that the inhabitants were spared."

"Your people didn't spare Harvest," Neva said quietly. "I suppose it's true after all, that you get back what you send out."

A look of venomous hatred flashed across Mirra's features. The whispers grew louder, voices clamoring of anger and pain and rage. "This isn't some second-rate world we're talking about. This is the heart of civilization. The center of the greatest hope for humanity, and now it's gone. We have no choice but to surrender to the aliens and pray they will spare the rest of us. Rat and Mouse, you are the only ones who can do it. So...will you?"

Rat blinked, feeling odd. Overwhelmed. Shocked. There didn't seem to be any one word big enough to encompass it. *Goddess and God...this is too much...how can we hope to succeed?* "I don't know," he said at last, through numb lips. "I have to think about it."

"What is there to think about?" Mirra exclaimed, coming to her feet. "Damn you—"

She stopped, staring at the guns leveled at her chest. Her upper lip curled slowly into a look of contempt. "Of course. We're talking about the fate of the Cooperative—of humanity—and yet you bunch of pirates still can't think of anything beyond yourselves. How typical."

"Shut up, Mirra," Rat told her bluntly. "I said I would consider it. I will. I'll meet you here with my answer in fourteen hours. Until then, get the hell out of my sight."

She glared at him, then nodded jerkily and started towards the door.

"Oh, and Mirra?" he called after her. She stopped and turned back to him expectantly. "If I think you're planning anything sneaky, I'll turn Mouse loose on the Blades. You won't like that."

You see, even though she learned how to control her disability from me...I'm the broken one. She has the full range of her powers, and now that she has some control over them, she can use them a great deal more effectively than I ever could. So trust me when I say that you really don't want me to send her to see you."

The expression on Mirra's ice-white face was impossible for him to interpret. Without speaking, she nodded again, and left.

* * *

Rat leaned against the doorframe, staring at the hospital bed. Iluka looked small amidst the white sheets, her long dreads spread across the pillow like a gray halo. The lines seemed more deeply engraved on her face, and even though the only whispers that came from her were the foggy images of dreams, and even those were filled with sorrow and darkness.

"You won't let yourself rest, will you?" he asked softly.

Even though he'd kept his voice quiet, she stirred in her sleep, and he felt her rising back towards consciousness. She blinked groggily a few times, then turned her head to the side and saw him. Despite the muzziness induced by painkillers, her anguish cut him like a knife.

everything, I've lost everything, my home, my family, Drake, my crew, my ship, nothing is left, nothing

"And whose fault is that, Iluka?" he asked, taking a step closer. "Some of it you can lay at the Zats' feet, but they didn't make you abandon love and compassion."

"Someone had to make the hard choices," she whispered. Her voice scraped coming out, as if she hadn't spoken in years.

"There's a difference between making necessary decisions and turning your back on every possibility except for the worst. You didn't have to strand Drake. You didn't have to turn the *Exile* into a bomb, or decide to blow us all up with you. You were the one who made those choices."

"You knew about them, and you didn't say a damned thing to anyone else," she spat back. "At least, not until you were in the position to profit from it."

"I told you not to do it. When you didn't listen, I hoped that you wouldn't have to push the trigger on that detonator." Rat shrugged. "When you decided that you had no choice, it left *me* with no choice. Or did you really think I was going to let you blow up everyone in the world that I care about? That includes you, by the way."

"Like hell." She closed her eyes, defeated. "Are we prisoners? I'm in a lab on a damned Zat station, and although Neva says it's all right, I don't think she really believes it."

"She's worried about you." *And me.* "So was I. That's why I came to see you."

"Go to hell."

Rat sighed. "There's a good chance I'll be headed there soon enough. Good-bye, Iluka."

He stepped back, then stared at the door as it slid closed between them. *If I do what Mirra wants...I might never see Iluka again. That was it. The last time.*

He hadn't expected her forgiveness, but maybe a small part of him had hoped to get it anyway. That had been a foolish hope, he acknowledged ruefully, at least for the present. Maybe someday Iluka would get to the point where she could see his side of things. *Or maybe she won't. Maybe she'll hate me forever.*

Maybe none of us will live long enough for it to matter.

The com unit in his pocket crackled, startling him. "Rat here."

“Captain,” said Juanita, and the title still came as a surprise. “Got some news. A courier ship entered the system a little while ago and hailed us instead of the Zats.”

What the hell? “Who is it?”

“Drake. Says he’s been chasing our tails all the way from Waga Chun. The Zats have given him permission to dock, but he’s asking for your okay before he risks it.”

Rat felt a grin stretch his face, despite everything. “Tell him to come on in, and that I’ll be damned glad to see him.”

Chapter 43: Choices

"I don't want you to go," Neva said quietly.

She and Rat sat together on the bed in their room on the *Exile*. Technically, Neva supposed they could have taken the captain's quarters, but she had the feeling that Rat wasn't yet to the point where he would be agree to such a move. They could also have tried to sleep in one of the many beds in the lab complex, but even though the truce with the Zats seemed to be holding, neither of them would have been comfortable there. If nothing else, Jasmine had seemed thrilled to be back on board, and was now gleefully racing up and down the hall.

"I don't want to go either," Rat said ruefully. He looked tired, she thought, worn down by responsibility. "I'm just not sure that I have any choice."

It was what she'd expected from him, but her heart still flinched at the words. "It might be a suicide mission. Just because you could get close to Mouse without getting killed doesn't mean that it will be the same with these aliens."

"I know." He gently took her hand. For a long moment, he stared down at their joined hands, as if fascinated by the contrast in their skin, in the size and shape of their fingers. "It's what I was made for."

Anger flared beside the pain at the words. "Rat, you don't owe Hunter anything. You're a human being, not a tool, not a thing. If you'd found out that you'd been made to kill the Zats' enemies, would you have shot me?"

"Of course not. But this is different." Rat sighed and looked up at her, his amber eyes dark with grief. "I have to try. Not for people like Mirra, but for people like your mother and father, your little brother. If the aliens have attacked Zatvia...I don't give a damn about Command. I hope they're all dead. But Zatvia had a civilian population as well. What about those people? What about the children? Maybe the aliens didn't get close enough to hurt them, but what if they did? And if not there, then what about the next planet? Do they even know the difference between us and the Zats? Would they care if they did? What if they go to Waga Chun next? What if we come out of jump some day and find an alien ship there in front of us? I'm not going to hold you while you die, knowing I might have been able to prevent it and didn't. Don't ask me to do that."

"I'm not asking you." She swallowed hard against the tightness in her throat, fighting to hold in tears that burned her eyes. "I don't want you to go, but I know why you have to."

But, Goddess, a part of her wanted to beg him to not go anyway. She wanted to scream, to cry, to let out all the fear and the pain. *I can't do this. I can't. I lost everything once, and now that I've rebuilt my life, I can't start over again. I'm not strong enough.*

"Oh, sweetheart," he whispered, and pulled her to him. It broke her control, and she buried her face in his shoulder and cried softly, while he rocked her gently back and forth. "I'm sorry. If

I saw another way...but there isn't. Mouse and I are the only ones who have any chance at all of surviving this."

She sniffled. "I wish I was a telepath, too. Then at least I could go with you."

"You don't wish that." He kissed her forehead, his scraggly goatee brushing against her nose. "Don't forget the price. If you were a telepath, then Neva Whitestone wouldn't be here with me now. Bad enough even if you'd turned out like me, but if things had gone the way they did with Mouse...much worse."

Neva shivered, remembering how they had spoken in sync, how they had moved as if one mind controlled them. "She frightens me."

"I know. She knows. It's breaking her heart."

Startled, she pulled back and searched his face. "What?"

Rat's mouth tightened, grim and sad. "Mouse has my memories now. Other than her time here at the hospital, they're the only memories she possesses at all. To her, it feels as if *she* was the one who did all the things she took from my head. She's the one who hid out on Muldar, who saved Jasmine, who snuck aboard the *Exile*, who took a walk in hyperspace. Who was friends with Tarak, who fought with Anusha. Who fell in love with you. Her head knows that it wasn't her at all, but her heart doesn't understand that. She listens to the thoughts of people that she *knows* in her gut should be her friends, her lover, and hears only fear and distrust. It hurts."

Neva wiped tears from her eyes, trying to imagine what that might be like. "That's horrible. Tragic."

"It gets worse." Rat hesitated, as if trying to figure out how to explain. "I think...I might be wrong, but I think that if Mouse spent any amount of extended time with someone else in close quarters, constantly hearing their thoughts, feeling their feelings, that she would start to take on *their* personality. Not intentionally, but subconsciously."

"Are you sure it would have that much of an effect? If it's just subconscious—"

"Remember what happened with Tarak? Two-thirds of everything that goes on in our heads is below the level of conscious thought. It would affect her, yes. It *will*." He sighed and stroked Neva's upper arms gently, although she wasn't certain which of them he meant to comfort. "Mouse is just a mirror, reflecting what's around her. A mirror might reflect the image of a person...but there isn't really anyone there at all."

* * *

As Rat walked down the dock, Mouse emerged from the shadows where she'd been hiding and fell into step with him. He'd known she was there, of course, just as she knew he was coming long before he actually passed by. Tears pricked his eyes; it was hard to remember that the pain was hers, not his.

I don't want Neva's pity.

Why not? It's better than fear, isn't it?

She pitied me...you...when you first met. I thought we'd moved past that.

Marcus and Juanita were waiting for them near the lock where the courier ship was even now finishing docking procedures. Bandages peeked out from under Marcus' shirt, and Rat gave him a nod. "Good to see you on your feet."

Marcus scowled. "I was bullied into it. Damn woman won't give me a second's peace."

Juanita shrugged amicably. "Can't have you lying around like a big baby."

Mouse dropped back, not wanting to draw too close, as if it would somehow change the

edge of suspicion and worry that filled the whispers. Trying to distract them all, Rat said, "Juanita, you told Drake everything that happened, right?"

Told him that I'm the captain now, and not Iluka?

Juanita nodded. "Yes."

"How did he take it?"

She shrugged, which wasn't the most helpful response. Trying not to look nervous, Rat watched as the light above the lock turned from yellow to green. The more paranoid part of him imagined Drake stalking down the boarding tube and slugging him in the face. A more realistic part imagined harsh words, or bitter glares. Much of Drake's identity had been wrapped up in being Iluka's first mate, in following the woman who had brought him back to the land of the living at a time when he'd been interested in nothing but drowning himself in a bottle.

Now that Iluka was no longer captain, how would he feel? Drake had done his best to keep her grounded, to stop her from her destructive path. *But Iluka was determined to walk off into the darkness, and to do it alone, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop her.*

He could tell Drake that, but somehow he doubted it would make much difference.

The airlock cycled open, revealing two figures. Drake tramped down the boarding tube, looking about expectantly, followed by a man that Rat belatedly recognized as Nathan Crow Wing. Rat was a little surprised that Joshua had sent one of his own crew with Drake, but then again, Nathan certainly had experience flying courier ships.

The Zats were not going to be happy over discovering that yet another of their courier ships had been co-opted, let alone the codes that had allowed Nathan and Drake to pass themselves off as legitimate to the beacons along the way. If he had any sense of Mirra's personality at all, there would be heads rolling, no matter how far she had to go to find them.

Drake stopped a few feet away, and Rat tensed. But Drake's hazel eyes only held sorrow, and the whispers murmured of grief and guilt, with nothing of anger.

"Welcome to the Core," Rat said with a weak smile. "I'm afraid the Zats are otherwise occupied, or I'm sure they'd be here to greet you themselves."

Drake attempted a smile back, but it was even more transparent than Rat's. "Captain."

never thought I'd say that to anyone other than Iluka, God, why didn't she listen, I should have done more, how did it come to this

"It's good to see you." Rat wished that he could say something that would make it all easier, but there was nothing. *Being a telepath is really no damned good for anything, is it?* "Thanks for coming."

Drake shook his head regretfully. "It wasn't my decision to stay behind."

"I know. Come on—I'm sure you'd like to see Iluka."

Drake fell in beside him, and they walked toward the lifts, with Marcus, Juanita, and Nathan chatting behind them. Mouse drifted after them all like a shadow. "Does Iluka know I'm here?" Drake asked quietly, so that no one else could hear.

"No. She would have just said that she didn't want to see you, and I didn't feel like calling her a liar." Rat stuffed his hands into his pockets and started to hunch his shoulders, before remembering that a captain really ought to look a little more confident. "She hates me as it is, so it hardly matters if she hates me a little more for surprising her with your presence."

Drake cast him an assessing look. "She's angry with you, then?"

"Of course she is. She's furious with Marcus as well, for calling the vote, but she's angrier with me. I didn't ask for this, Drake. I didn't expect it. I tried to refuse it, but there was no one else who had the leverage to dictate terms to the Zats."

"I know." Drake sighed heavily. **(guilt)** "And, from what Juanita told me on my way in, I would probably have voted with the rest."

"Don't tell Iluka that."

"I'm going to be honest with her." Drake's mouth tightened. "No matter how badly the truth hurts."

Rat put his hand to Drake's shoulder; the muscles beneath were so tense they felt like wires. "It wasn't your fault, Drake. No one made Iluka's choices for her."

"I know."

"You don't. Not in your gut. But it's true." He tapped his forehead lightly with his free hand. "I *know*, remember?"

The knot of guilt eased, just a little. "I suppose."

Maybe there is some use in being a telepath. Not much, but some. "Good luck, Drake. Don't forget that we need you. Iluka needs you most of all, no matter what she might try to tell you."

* * *

Iluka looked up when Drake entered the room unannounced, and he felt his heart give a painful twist at the sight of her. God, she looked...worn. Hurt. Diminished. He'd never expected to see her like that, and wished desperately that he never had.

This is the way things are, Drake. Deal with what's in front of you, not with dreams of what might have been.

"Drake?" For an instant, something that might have been hope, or joy, or even relief, flashed over her face. Then it was gone, and her grizzled brows beetled together. "What the hell are you doing here?"

There was a hard chair by the bed, and he wondered if all hospitals everywhere had such chairs by policy, just to keep visitors from getting too comfortable. He settled into it, drawing it up so that he was just out of arm's reach of the bed. "Following you, what do you think?"

Confusion showed in her eyes, and her mouth hardened. "Joshua had a hand in this, didn't he? Damn his eyes! I ought to go back there and shoot him myself."

"Joshua did as you asked, even though he didn't agree with it, because he respected you," Drake said. "And he did as I asked, because he knew I was right."

"And you! You should have stayed put! Don't you know when you aren't wanted?"

The words hurt, and he didn't bother to hide it. Leaning back, he folded his arms over his chest and deliberately looked down at the covers, where the lumps showed one full leg, and half of another. "Maybe I know when I'm *needed*, whether I'm wanted or not. You haven't done so well, Iluka. Anusha's dead, Rat's the captain, and you're in a Zatvian lab with a leg gone to the knee. Maybe if you'd listened to your conscience, you wouldn't be here."

"I did what I had to."

"No. You didn't. You did what you *wanted* to, and to hell with the rest of us."

He'd expected a fight. To his surprise, she looked away, as if unable to meet his gaze anymore. "I knew you'd say that." Her voice was quiet. Subdued. And that was far, far worse than any shouting.

"Then you should have had enough respect for me to listen." Drake swallowed hard against a sudden obstruction in his throat. "I loved you, Iluka. I would have done anything for you. I would even have stood up to you."

She jerked slightly, as if he'd stabbed her. Strong brown fingers tangled in the covers,

crushing the cloth.

"But that's all beside the point now, isn't it?" he went on. "We'll never know what might have been."

She looked at him again, and he thought there were tears in her eyes that she would never allow herself to shed. "What do you mean?"

"Dying is easy, Iluka. Living with the consequences of your actions, that's the hard part, isn't it?" Drake stood up and looked down at her. "I still love you, Iluka. But I don't trust you."

Iluka bowed her head, so that her long dreads hid her face. "So. You came all the way from Waga Chun just to tell me that."

"No." Uncertain if he was doing the right thing—the smart thing—he moved a step closer and touched her shoulder. "I'm here because I think you still need me. If you agree...then I'm here. I'll do whatever I can for you, whether that's finding a hospital somewhere to regrow your leg, or helping you learn to use a prosthetic. I'm still your friend."

He let his hand drop. "I'm also still a member of the crew of the *Exile*. And right now, my captain needs me. I wish like hell that captain was still you, but I can't say that I disagree with Marcus' decision."

He turned away, expecting her to let him leave in silence. But as the door opened, Iluka called after him. "Drake?"

He paused. "Yes?"

"Come back. When you can."

Somehow, he found that he could still smile. "I will," he promised. And let the door close behind him.

* * *

At the appointed hour, Rat went to his meeting with Mirra, feeling as though he were a condemned man taking his last, long walk to the place of his execution.

Drake strode beside him, silent and grim. They had just finished a brief memorial service for Anusha, whose body now resided in a morgue unit aboard the *Exile*. Rat wished that they could have done more, not just for the dead Star Rider, but for the crew as a whole. But there had been no time.

Perhaps she can go back to her people, eventually. Drake might take her.

Rat glanced at Mouse, who walked on his other side. She had wept during the memorial service, and although she might have not seen the startled looks from the rest of the crew, she had to have heard their surprise. What right did she have to cry for a woman she'd never met?

They don't understand. It isn't their fault.

That doesn't make it easier.

The station felt eerily silent around them, as if its abandonment was somehow changing the nature of the structure. The lack of voices, of people hurrying to and fro, made the place seem like a mausoleum. Or maybe like a living thing, slowly slipping into death.

I'm getting maudlin.

Of course we are. We're afraid.

Two Obsidian Blades stood outside the conference room, neither of them looking particularly happy to see Rat. At least one was a fighter pilot; Rat caught fragmented images, memories of battles where they had fought together. The other couldn't meet Mouse's eyes, couldn't even look at her, and his pain was a scream in Rat's head. Mouse stumbled slightly,

looking startled and uncertain, so Rat reached out to put a hand on her shoulder.

Don't pay any attention. Whatever he remembers, it doesn't have anything to do with you.

"Quit gawking and open the damned door," Drake barked at the Blades. They cast him a nasty look, but did as asked, and the three of them swept past the guards and inside.

Mirra sat on the other side of the long conference table. Dark circles ringed her eyes, and she looked as if she hadn't slept well in a long time. The blocker was gone from her hair, and he guessed she'd never bothered to put it back after their last confrontation.

"Are they there to enforce our cooperation?" Rat asked, with a nod towards the door and the guards on the other side.

"Just for appearances." Mirra shrugged. "I'm the ranking officer now. I'm not supposed to be wandering about on my own. Just as you aren't." She indicated Rat's own escort with a nod.

Rat sat down, and Mouse and Drake took the chairs to either side of him. "This is Drake Morgenstern. My first mate." Goddess, that sounded bizarre. "He'll have command of the *Exile* until I get back."

(RELIEF) oh thank the gods, maybe we still have a chance Mirra's face relaxed into a smile. "You'll do it, then?"

For a moment, the words stuck in his throat. He didn't want to do this. He wanted to leave, to go somewhere far away, and never think about aliens or Zats again.

But that wasn't an option.

"Yes," he said quietly, and Mouse spoke in sync with him.

Mirra's confidence was returning before his eyes. "I knew you would. I can give you the coordinates—"

"I want some assurances from you, first," he interrupted. "I'm not heading off on this mission, only to come back and find that you've killed my crew and confiscated my ship."

My ship. I'll never get used to that.

We probably won't have the chance.

He shot Mouse a glare. She shrugged innocently. "Well, it's true."

You aren't helping.

"Drake will be in command of the *Exile*, as I mentioned," he said, trying to pick up the threads of the conversation, as if there had been no interruption. "You're going to give him anything he asks for, and you're going to leave him and the rest of my crew alone. If he wants fuel, you give it to him. If he wants to undock and just sit there in space, away from your grasp, then that's what happens."

Mirra nodded. "Agreed."

"She's telling the truth," Mouse said. **Am I being helpful now?**

I could have done that myself.

"All right, then." Rat ran his hands back through his hair, scraping his dreadlocks out of his eyes. "Here's the plan. Mouse and I will take the courier ship that Drake came in on. I'm not the greatest navigator that ever flew, but the jump to Zatvia looks pretty straightforward, and Nathan Crow Wing assures me that it's easy enough even for a beginner. In the meantime, it might not be a bad idea to evacuate this system completely, in case they decide to come through."

"No. The Core is my responsibility. I'm not leaving."

Rat wasn't certain if Mirra was stupid, brave, or just very devoted to her duty. *Maybe that's what Xian saw in her. Assuming the bastard cared about her at all, of course.*

What do you think Rebecca was like?

I have no idea.

“Your choice,” he told Mirra, shrugging. “But I’ll tell you now that I’m ordering Drake to get the hell out of here if anything comes through from Zatvia that isn’t flown by Mouse or me. And no, I’m not worried that Drake is going to seize power and leave the moment I’m gone, so don’t even bother saying it out loud.”

Mirra frowned slightly, as if only just realizing that he could hear her thoughts. “As you said: your choice. When are you leaving?”

And here it was: the point of no return. Rat took a deep breath against the sudden bands of fear constricting his chest. “As soon as we can get our course laid in. The longer we wait, the more likely it is that the aliens will get bored with Zatvia and come this way.”

Mirra nodded. Then, suddenly, she reached across the table and took his hand. Her skin was pale against his, and the image reminded him uncomfortably of Neva. Their eyes met, and he realized that she was genuinely grateful. “Thank you, Xian,” she said. “Unlike that fool Hsin, I know that there’s no way to force you to do this. I’ve always known that. So thank you for making the right choice.”

“I’m not doing this for the Cooperative. I’ll never be a Zatvian again, Mirra.”

She released his hand and sat back. “I know.” Sadness there, in her eyes, in the whispers. Sadness...and resignation. Perhaps she had finally come to terms with the fact that her lover was dead, was never coming back again, no matter how badly she wanted him.

“You’d think I’d get a little appreciation, after being drugged for three years,” Mouse muttered under her breath.

* * *

“There isn’t enough time,” Neva whispered.

She lay with her head pillowed against Rat’s shoulder, their arms wrapped securely around on another. *This might be the last time I ever hold him.* She breathed deeply, trying to memorize his scent, the exact shade of his golden skin, the way his arms felt around her.

“There never will be,” he answered. “A thousand years would be too short.” He turned his head to the side, dreads brushing her face. Then he sighed, and something seemed to go out of him. “It’s time.”

They spoke only of small things as they dressed; everything important that could be said had been. Neva’s hands brushed her pentagram necklace as she tugged on her shirt, and on impulse she undid the clasp. “Here. I’d like you to take this.”

“Thank you.” He bent down a little, so that she could fasten it around his neck. The five-pointed star flashed in the light when he straightened. *Spirit, earth, wind, fire, and water. Mother of the universe, protect him. These aliens must be Your children as well. Let them know compassion, please. Please.*

Jasmine made small, uneasy noises, no doubt sensing that Rat was troubled. He picked her up, cuddled her gently against his chest. “Thank you for taking care of her, while I’m gone.”

“Of course.” Neva stroked Jasmine gently, then watched while Rat put her in her carrier.

“Good-bye, little one,” he whispered as he shut the door. “Be good.”

He doesn’t think he’s coming back. Goddess, he thinks he’s going to his death.

“Not for certain,” Rat said, turning to her as he pulled on his jacket. “But I’m not going to lie to myself, or to Mouse, or to you. Everyone else who has come near these aliens has died. Maybe what the Zats did to me will protect me from them, just as it protected me from Mouse...or maybe it won’t. For all I know, we might be *more* vulnerable, not less. It’s a chance

we have to take.”

“I know.” Her voice cracked, and she wiped away tears.

“If things do go badly...I had Marcus and Jason remove Iluka’s bomb from the *Exile* and strap it to the courier. That way, we might have a chance of hurting the aliens, or at least slowing them down.”

Neva was silent a moment, taking his words in. “That would mean blowing yourself and Mouse up as well,” she said at last, carefully, as if the words might break her.

“It’s a last resort.” He reached out and tenderly brushed the tears from her face. “Come on. They’re waiting for us.”

* * *

They walked hand-and-hand down to the docks. The rest of the crew was already waiting near the boarding tube for the courier ship, along with Mouse, Nathan, and Mel. Iluka of course was still in the hospital, and Rat wondered if he should have tried to say good-bye. There were no Zats present, per his request, and he hoped their absence signaled that Mirra would continue to honor their agreements once he’d left the system.

Juanita gave him a hug, puffing on a cigar the whole time. Apparently, she didn’t care about clogging Zatvian filters. “You be careful, Rat-man. You’re a scrawny little thing, but I guess that doesn’t matter with these aliens, yes?”

“Thanks, Juanita,” he said wryly. “I think.”

Jason shook his hand solemnly. Marcus glared at him, looking as though he were trying to think of something sufficiently insulting to say. Finally, he shrugged. “I didn’t go to all the trouble of making you captain just to have to go through the whole thing again. You get your crazy ass back here in one piece.”

“I’ll do my best.” He started to turn away, but Marcus managed to surprise him again by suddenly sticking out his hand. Rat clasped it warily, but the gesture was genuine. “Thanks, Marcus.”

“Whatever,” Marcus said, and left him to go stand by Juanita.

Rat shook his head, bemused, and turned to Drake. “Good luck, Drake. Do what you have to in order to keep the crew safe.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Good luck with Iluka.”

Drake gave him a rueful smile. “Thanks. I’ll need it.”

And that’s almost it. Rat swallowed, and glanced at the boarding tube, which loomed far too close. He wanted to put off this moment, wanted...

But none of that mattered.

Neva looked up at him, tears running silently down her face, despite the fact that he knew she was trying to be strong. He pulled her into his arms, felt tears prick his own eyes. She clung to him with desperate strength, as if she would never let go, as if she wanted to meld their bodies into one being and keep him safe forever.

“I love you,” he whispered, and kissed her with a desperation of his own. “More than anything in this universe.”

“Rat,” she whispered, but her voice broke on a sob.

“I know.” He kissed her again. “You don’t have to say it. I know. Good-bye, sweetheart. Merry meet, and merry part.”

Somehow, she managed a smile. "And merry meet again."

Then he had let go of her and was walking to the boarding tube, with Mouse beside him. For an instant, he paused, looking back, and their eyes met. Then the airlock swished closed, hiding Neva from his sight.

Chapter 44: A Meeting of the Minds

"We're leaving dock," Drake declared as they strode back towards the *Exile's* berth. "I don't trust Hunter to behave herself with Rat gone. I also don't want to get caught sitting here if the aliens do decide to come through from Zatvia."

"Do you think there's really much of a chance of running if they show?" Marcus asked.

Drake shook his head grimly. The red of his beard stood out against his pale skin, and Neva thought that he'd lost weight. "No way of knowing. Given the logs from the *New Beginning*, any window we've got is damned short. It seems like distance makes a difference, just as it does with Rat and Mouse, but how far is far enough for safety...God alone knows. Neva, is Iluka stable enough to move to the *Exile*?"

If she isn't, will you leave her behind? But that wasn't a fair question. "Yes. I recommend that she remain in the infirmary, though."

"See to it. Marcus, Juanita, give Neva a hand. Bring Mel back with you as well. Jason, Nathan, you're with me. Let's get those engines warmed up."

Neva peeled off towards the labs, Juanita and Marcus following. They piled into a lift together; Neva stared determinedly at the display as the levels ticked past. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, she felt a light touch on her arm, accompanied by the brush of Juanita's colorful shawl.

"You okay?"

I've just watched the man I love go to what is likely to be his doom. "Fine."

"It's a hard thing." Juanita sighed. "I remember when I left home with Bernard. Saying goodbye to Carlos..."

"You're making that up," Marcus broke in.

"Hmph. Shows what you know. Carlos had the biggest alpaca herd in the village. Quite the catch."

Marcus rolled his eyes. "Oh, well then, your grief must have been unbearable. Alpacas."

"You don't even know what an alpaca is."

"Something that one herds, obviously."

"Do you ever wish that you'd stayed home?" Neva interrupted. *Not that I had that option.*

Juanita rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Hmm. Stay home, haul water and stones up the mountainside, marry some alpaca farmer. Nice, quiet life. Leave home, get shot at, almost blown up, and now have to worry about aliens killing me with their brains. No question, I'd pick this again."

"That's because you're insane," Marcus informed her.

* * *

Although Neva had expected Iluka to be happy at the prospect of leaving the Zat station, instead the former captain was less-than-pleased about returning to the *Exile*.

"I don't belong there anymore," Iluka said doggedly, crossing her arms and glaring at Neva and Marcus. Juanita and Mel were off trying to find a motorized chair or some other transport for her. "You lot saw to that."

"Leave off with the self pity," Marcus growled.

"No, no—she wants to stay here, I say we let her," Neva said with a shrug. "I'm sure Mirra Hunter will be happy to keep her company. They'll have plenty to say to one another."

Iluka scowled. "Seems to me that *you're* the ones friendly with the Zats these days."

Neva's temper finally broke. "That's it. We don't have time for this. You're not the only one here who is in pain; you're not the only one who's suffered. I don't have the patience to listen to this any longer, so either shut up and come with us, or stay here with the Zats. I don't care which."

"That's some bedside manner you've got there. Fine," Iluka added hurriedly, holding up a hand when Neva would have started in again. "Let's go."

* * *

After installing Iluka safely in the infirmary aboard the *Exile*, Neva reported to the bridge, to sit scan. Her eyes went from station to station as she crossed the room to her own board. Drake sat his usual station at com, even though he was acting captain while Rat was gone; beside him were Jason and Nathan, with Marcus still on the guns. *Not a lot of the original crew left*, she thought with a shiver. Of course, she herself had been brought in to replace her dead aunt; the original crew had long vanished by the time she came on board.

And who will replace Rat?

As she pulled the safety web into place and powered up her boards, she listened to the operational chatter. "We're taking up position a short distance from the station," Drake was saying, presumably to whichever Zat monitored them from Control. "Far enough away that you don't have to worry about us suddenly deciding to turn our guns on you. No, we don't trust you. Put me through to Colonel Hunter, please. I don't care if she's resting."

Unease touched Neva's belly, and she turned her attention to scan. The Zats were short-handed, with nothing in the way of large ships other than the two Kleggers. In an attempt to make up for it, fighters swarmed the system, most of them far enough out not to be an immediate danger. The two Kleggers were also patrolling the reaches of the system, moving at opposite ends of the solar plane. A flashing green icon caught her eye—the courier ship, still gathering speed for its trip out of the system. *Rat*.

Her heart clenched. A part of her had always felt that their time together had been borrowed, stolen away from the death that would have claimed her on Mabon, had some chance of physics not spared her. *There's nothing between us and the Summerlands but a step. I can almost see them from here.*

Stop being so morose, or else you'll miss something, and we will end up dead.

"Yes, Colonel Hunter," Drake was saying. "As per our agreement, I am undocking and taking up the position whose coordinates I have sent." He listened from a moment. "Thank you."

"So, are we going to have to shoot our way free?" Marcus asked, not sounding worried about the prospect.

“Not yet, anyway.” Drake sighed and ran a hand distractedly through his hair, pulling loose his ponytail. “Let’s get underway before they change their minds.”

“Don’t trust them, Drake.”

“No worries about that.”

* * *

The Exile has left dock. Taking up position far enough out to run, if it becomes necessary.

Mouse’s eyes watched the scan, but what she knew, Rat knew. With no one else on board, there was no point in struggling to keep themselves separated anymore.

Scared them (Marcus, Neva, Juanita) Goddess feels like I(we)’ve come back to where we(I) started.

Not true.

Rat’s hands moved over the controls, checking distance and speed. Nathan had laid in the course before they left, and swore this was a simple enough jump for even a novice navigator, but Rat had his doubts. He—and Mouse, perhaps—was a fighter pilot, someone who flew in-system crafts, not a jump-jock. *Wouldn’t that be the perfect end to this mission? Coming out in the wrong place, or getting lost in hyperspace until we starve.*

No time for that now. Coming up on jump.

Mouse’s head snapped up suddenly. A shiver washed from her to him, raising the hair on the back of his neck. *What is it? What are you feeling?*

I don’t know (fear), but—

Scan turned into static, at the same moment that a collision alarm began to sound. Rat slammed into the safety web as the ship bucked, its autos kicking in to save them. *What’s happening, what—*

Then scan cleared, and he saw it.

“No,” Mouse whispered. “No, no, no...”

Rat slapped blindly at the com. “Courier ship to—to everyone. Alert! Alert! Alert! We’ve got a ship coming in on a vector from Zatvia. The aliens are here.”

* * *

The *Exile* had gone first law, moving smoothly away from the station. Even so, Neva walked carefully, making sure that she never got too far away from a take-hold. After all, if the Zats did decide to renege on their deal and attack, they wouldn’t be polite enough to give a warning beforehand.

She went down to the infirmary first, to check on Iluka, who had ridden through maneuvers and acceleration with an extra dose of pain meds. The meds were starting to wear off, leaving Iluka grumpy. She hadn’t spoken much since coming on board, instead spending the time staring obdurately at the wall, refusing conversation, books, or any other sort of distraction from her brooding.

After insisting that Iluka eat the bowl of soup she’d brought from the galley, Neva left the infirmary in search of her own lunch. If nothing else, she could understand Iluka’s desire to be left alone—she felt it herself, at the moment. Juanita’s sympathy had been hard enough to bear; the idea of sitting down to a meal with everyone else giving her pitying looks wasn’t appealing. Maybe it would be better to just take a sandwich to her quarters, let Jasmine out for a while, and

try to pretend that everything didn't constantly remind her of Rat.

I'm so scared.

The door to the rec room stood open, and Neva heard Juanita's voice come from inside, the words too muffled to make out. She wondered if Juanita had been serious about Carlos the alpaca herder earlier, or if she'd only said it to annoy Marcus. Probably the latter, but still, it might be nice to have someone to talk to about things, and the list of potential confidantes on board was short indeed. As she drew closer, however, she heard Marcus' voice.

“Shall I compare thee to a’—oh, for Christ’s sake!”

The last exclamation came in response to the sudden shrilling of an alarm. Neva automatically grabbed for the nearest take-hold, in case the ship moved suddenly.

“Alert, alert, alert,” came Drake’s voice over the com. “We have a ship entering the system on Zatvia vector, unknown configuration. All hands to stations.”

Neva’s heart lurched. *Unknown configuration. The aliens?*

Goddess, protect us all.

Neva broke into a run for the lift. “Marcus!” she called back over her shoulder. “Come on!”

Marcus stormed into the hall. “God damn it! Can’t I get a fucking break here?” he yelled at no one in particular.

Juanita followed him, and put a hand to his shoulder. “Later, yes? If we survive the next fifteen minutes.”

He started toward Neva, who was holding the lift for him, then stopped and went back. Grabbing Juanita by the shoulders, he pulled her close, and kissed her soundly. “That’s in case we don’t survive,” he said.

“Marcus! Get your ass in this lift!” Neva shouted.

He made a dash for the lift, barely squeezing through as she let the doors close. The lift began to descend to bridge level immediately, causing him to stumble.

“You’ve got lousy timing,” she told him.

Marcus glowered at her. “Yeah, big words from the woman who confessed her love for our resident crazy over an open com.”

The doors to the bridge opened, and they raced out, heading for their separate stations. Drake, Jason, and Nathan were already in place, having remained on shift after the last maneuvers.

“We’ve received a transmission from Rat,” Drake said as Neva dropped into her seat, snapped the safety web into position, and powered up her boards. “Neva, I want every sensor we’ve got on that thing.”

Neva searched scan frantically. “It’s not showing on beacon, Drake. Either they’re running without a transponder, or they use a signal our beacons don’t recognize. We’re too far away to ping them—that’s probably the only reason we’re still alive.”

Drake swore. “Jason, any chance of making jump?”

“Impossible to say, since we don’t have much information on the aliens’ position. If they’re far enough away, we might make it, if we disregard safety protocols.”

Com crackled, and Iluka’s voice came over. “Drake! Listen to me! Get us the hell out of this system. Someone needs to spread the word. The Zats have been sitting on this secret for years, trying to solve the problem themselves, and to hell with anyone who might get killed in the meantime. They haven’t even told the other arms of their own military. We’ve got to try to warn people.”

“We can’t just abandon Rat and Mouse,” Neva argued. She could feel her heart pounding,

and her mouth had gone dry.

“Abandon them? Weren't they the ones supposed to be going to meet this thing in the first place?” Marcus asked incredulously.

“Yes, but—”

“If I could raise the captain on com, I'm sure he'd tell us to go himself,” Drake said.

Neva felt cold. “You can't?”

“No.”

“Keep trying.”

“Don't worry.” Drake looked grim as he pressed the bud more firmly into his ear. “Jason, Nathan, let's get this bucket moving. I don't care where we jump to, so long as it gets us the hell away from here.”

* * *

No one said it was going to be so big, Rat thought as he stared frozen at the monitor. The proximity alarm was still screaming in his ear, but his hands hovered uselessly over the boards, overawed by the sheer *size* of the thing in front of them.

The behemoth's skin was a grayish-green, made of some substance he had never seen before. It was studded with sensor arrays, but nothing that looked like any sort of com mast. *Not that we would necessarily recognize it*. The configuration matched nothing human; Rat couldn't even imagine fitting the normal rooms and sections of a ship into it.

Mouse reached out blindly, and he took her hand for comfort, primate instincts overriding even their telepathic link.

Now what?

I don't know. I guess...we have to try to contact them...have to try to get them to leave—

Light exploded in his skull. Rat screamed, his body jackknifing as his muscles spasmed. Dimly he was aware of the safety web holding him into the seat, but the rush of information into his brain made it seem distant, like something happening to a puppet rather than a real person.

Images crashed into him, a flood of sensory input that made no sense, as if his brain were equipped only to receive part of it. Tastes, smells, colors, and emotions roared through him like a cataract forced through a straw, sweeping everything away before it. He struggled to cling to some sense of himself, but it was too much, too much...

No! No stop don't no no no no no

(curiosity)

Amidst the onslaught, he caught the stirrings of an emotion he recognized, and grabbed on to it with all that he could. All control was gone; he was screaming mentally, louder than he had ever done before, loud enough to kill a normal had there been anyone nearby to harm.

DON'T DO THIS please please please hurts STOP

(curiosity)

The emotion grew stronger, giving focus to the tumult...but not lessening its force. *The bomb*, Rat thought dimly. *We have to detonate—we're close enough that we might take them with us...*

He reached for the controls, but everything seemed too far away, and when the taste of blood filled his mouth, he realized that he was too late. Instinctively, he flung both arms up in front of him, trying to ward off something that knew no barrier but distance.

And then it touched him, and the world turned inside out.

* * *

“Alert, alert, alert!” Neva shouted, as a huge splotch of bloody red appeared on scan. “We’re getting sensor feed relayed from the station.”

“On screen!”

It appeared on the main screens, glaring out like the angry eye of some terrible deity. “Look at the size of that thing,” Marcus whispered.

“It’s moving fast,” Neva reported, feeling fear gather in her belly. “Close proximity to the courier.” *Goddess, please, let Rat still be alive.*

“The courier has changed vector to match it,” Jason said, frowning at the scan. “That could be a good thing.”

Drake swore at something he heard over com. “I’m putting this on allship.”

Com crackled, a burst of static, and Mirra Hunter’s voice filled the room. “...lost contact with our ships in closest proximity to the alien craft. All personnel with jump capability, abandon the system. I repeat, abandon the system.”

As she spoke, some of the Zat fighters on scan changed from red to gray, indicating those lost. The grayness moved out in a wave from the alien vessel; even as Neva stared in horror, more ships fell within the zone of death. *Goddess, no.*

“The station will be within the aliens’ range soon,” she said through lips that felt numb.

“So will we, if we don’t reach jump speed soon enough!” Marcus struck the edge of his boards with a fist. “Why the hell hasn’t Rat set off the damned bomb?”

“He would have, if he could,” Drake said grimly. “As of right now, we have to consider the captain lost.”

The courier ship’s symbol turned gray.

The surviving Zat ships were scattering, in response to Mirra’s orders, although Neva knew that the fighters were simply fleeing blindly, since there was no way for them to make it out of the system on their own. More and more turned gray, as the alien ship passed by, and with a sick feeling Neva realized that it wouldn’t be long before the *Exile* was in range. “We aren’t going to make it, are we?” she asked quietly.

“We’re still moving too slow to engage the Savvies,” Jason said regretfully.

On scan, the alien ship drew closer, broadcasting death before it.

* * *

Sliding through gravity, through dark, seeking, seeking, seeking. Patterns of radiation, some dim, some bright, but no match. The last stopping point was closer, but still not right—go back, go forward?

stop stop stop hurting killing stop please

This is not right, must let the others know, reach out through the space of light not here not here not here.

no no stop please hurting killing death death

Confusion/curiosity. Alive? Like/not like.

pull back pull back we can’t survive this pull back pull back

Others. Aliens. Something new? Think/feel/comprehend?

please you’re killing them stop

Yes.

* * *

Neva relaxed into the safety web, an odd feeling of calm sweeping over her. *So this is it, then.*

The alien ship drew its curtain of death over the system, the tiny gray blip of the courier ship flanking it. There was no escape; even if the *Exile* changed vector, they would inevitably fall within its sphere of destruction. The laws of physics and the limitations of their own bodies and of the ship saw to that.

Goddess, guide us all to the Summerland in peace. Let us rest in the arms of those who have gone before. All that falls shall rise again.

Drake said something in Hebrew. Nathan sang softly in his own language, as though going into battle.

Marcus swore. "Damn well should have figured it would turn out like this."

The gray wave crept to the station.

A long moment passed...and then Neva frowned. "Drake? Are we still getting transmissions from the station?"

He started, then punched through. "Hunter? Are you still there?"

"We...we are." Mirra sounded as shocked as the rest of them. "All personnel, continue reporting! What the hell is going on?"

The alien ship was still moving...but the ships that should have been in range stayed live. Neva's heart leapt into her mouth. "Rat and Mouse. They did something. Somehow."

As the crew watched in silence, the ship drew nearer and nearer...then passed by. They were still alive.

* * *

Gradually, Rat became aware that he existed.

He was lying on his back, on the floor of the courier's bridge, wedged in between two seats with no idea how he had gotten there. The world swam before him, unfocused, and when he tried to push himself up, he found that his arms and legs didn't want to work correctly.

"Rat."

Something leaned over him, and after a long moment he realized that it was Mouse. She was dressed in a 'suit, with the helmet cradled in her arms. Her eyes looked enormous in her thin face, and he felt as though he were falling upwards into them.

"I can't hear the whispers," he managed to say, his voice no more than a thread.

"No. They don't want to hurt you any more than you've already been hurt."

He wracked his brain, trying to remember where he was, why he was. "They...the aliens?"

"Yes."

"What about you?"

She smiled, the skin around her eyes crinkling. "The procedure worked on me, remember? You were always the broken one. They can communicate with me without causing harm."

The room spun, so he closed his eyes. He remembered...bits and pieces. Impressions. Fragments of understanding, as though he had overheard only the tiniest part of some immense chorus. "They've...accepted our surrender?"

"There was no need. We weren't at war."

Startled, he opened his eyes and looked at her again. He felt horrible, sick, and it was everything he could do to hold onto the thread of the conversation. "Not...at war? But they've killed so many."

Mouse nodded. "Think about what you experienced with them, Rat, before they became quiet. They're here because they're searching for...something. I'm still not sure what. They didn't realize that they were hurting us. They didn't even realize that we existed at all until you and I caught their attention." Her eyes took on a far-off look. "Their perceptions are...different...than ours."

"So...what will they do?"

"Move on. I'm taking a copy of the navigational charts from the courier with me. I'll interpret for them, which will allow them to avoid human space. They don't think that what they're looking for could be in our territory without us noticing."

It took him a moment to understand. "You're...going with them?"

"Yes. They're different from us...but they do have what we would understand as curiosity. They want to learn more about us, even if we aren't sentient."

"Not sentient?"

Mouse laughed softly. "Don't you remember what you said to Neva? Or to Iluka? Two-thirds of the human mind is below our level of consciousness. We're aware of less than half of what goes on in our own brains. As far as the aliens are concerned, that isn't nearly enough to qualify as sentience. Human space has nothing to interest them."

Rat shook his head, then stopped when it increased his dizziness. "You don't have to go."

"No. I don't. But I'm choosing to, anyway. Don't be angry with me." She gently touched her gloved fingers to his face. "You said that I'm nothing but a mirror, that there is no real me at all."

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did. I'm not mad. You were right." Her hand fell away. "This way...maybe I will discover myself again. Perhaps I'll even become sentient." Very slowly, she climbed to her feet and stood staring down at him. Either the light was growing dim, or he was losing consciousness again, because he could barely see her. "And who knows—maybe I'll see you again, someday. Good-bye, Rat."

And then there was nothing but darkness.

* * *

On screen, the alien ship suddenly changed vector, leaving behind the gray dot that represented the courier ship.

Jason whistled low. "Would you look at that? Either they have one hell of a pilot, or their ships are centuries ahead of ours."

"You sound jealous," Marcus said, and only the slight tremor in his voice betrayed how relieved he was.

The dot accelerated suddenly—then vanished. "Alien ship has left the system," Neva reported in bewilderment.

"That far down the gravity well? Damn!"

Drake punched the com. "Exile to the courier ship. Come in, Rat. Mouse? Anyone? Damn." He frowned, and glanced at the display, as if it could tell him why they failed to answer.

Neva swallowed. There was one obvious reason she could think of, and it filled her gut with

fear. "We should try to link up with them. They...they might need medical attention." *Or a morgue unit.*

No. Don't think like that. Not until there's no other choice.

"Agreed. Jason, change course and sync us with the courier. I'll let the Zats know what's going on." Drake frowned slightly. "Not that I understand it myself."

The closer the *Exile* drew to the courier, the more Neva's stomach tied itself into knots. Drake continued hailing the little ship at regular intervals, but no response ever came. Once they had matched speeds with the other vessel, all the maneuvering to link up was done on Jason's part. Whatever had happened on board the courier, no one was piloting it now.

Eventually, a deep clang resounded through the ship. "Connection established, Drake," Jason reported.

"It looks like life support is still functioning," Neva said, not bothering to keep the relief out of her voice. It didn't mean that anyone on board was still alive...but at least it meant she could cling to hope a little longer.

Drake nodded and unfastened his safety web. "All right. Juanita, report to the bridge to sit scan. Neva, Marcus, you're with me."

Neva retrieved a medical kit from the infirmary, running all the way down the corridor and back to the lift. It seemed to take forever to navigate the zero-g of the *Exile's* spine, and twice that for Drake to convince the courier ship's airlock to open for them. By the time they made it to the small bridge, her nerves were stretched to the breaking point.

Only the soft glow of the boards illuminated the bridge. Marcus flicked on a flashlight and swept it across the floor; the beam caught on a crumpled figure lying wedged between the navigator and pilot chairs. Neva ran to the figure, shoved one of the chairs away on its short track, and dropped to her knees.

Rat lay on his back, unmoving. His golden skin had taken on a yellowish hue, and thin traceries of blood painted his face. But his chest moved with slow, even breaths, and when she touched him on the shoulder, his eyes fluttered opened. For a moment, he seemed disoriented; then, his amber eyes found her face, and he managed a weak smile.

"Hey there," he said, in a husk of a voice. "I was worried about you."

It made her want to laugh. Instead, she gently brushed his dreadlocks from his eyes. "I'm fine. The ship is fine."

"Where's Mouse?" Marcus asked.

"Gone. Willingly." Rat swallowed, and pushed himself into a sitting position. "I'll explain everything later. For now...I think I'd like to find a bed. The floor isn't very comfortable."

Grinning with relief, Drake reached down and caught one of Rat's arms, helping him to his feet. "Aye, aye, Captain. Let's get you home."

Chapter 45: End Game

“You look like hell,” Iluka said bluntly, from where she reclined on the infirmary’s only bed.

Neva and Mel had insisted on examining Rat the second he was back on board the *Exile*. Now, he sat on a chair in the center of the room, while Mel held some sort of sophisticated scanner against his head, and Neva examined his vitals.

“Then it matches how I feel,” Rat said wryly. He’d caught a glimpse of himself from Neva’s mind: his eyes ringed in bruises, his hair hanging unkempt around a haggard face. At least the pounding headache had receded after the application of a painpatch, but in its wake it had left a sense of desperate weariness.

“I suppose you did a good job, though,” Iluka went on grudgingly, which he supposed was high praise indeed given that she was still furious with him.

Already the memory of his communication with the aliens was fading, as if it had been nothing but some exceedingly strange nightmare. He suspected that his brain hadn’t been equipped to comprehend most of what had gone on in the first place, and wondered if Mouse would have any better luck.

I miss her, he realized. He hadn’t known her long, but it had been nice not being the only freak.

Neva put a hand to his bare shoulder; she’d had him take off his bloody shirt as soon as they’d entered the infirmary. The whispers sharpened at the contact; he could taste her overwhelming relief, accompanied by a desire to prove to herself that he was still alive and hers. Unfortunately, he didn’t think he was in any shape to satisfy that desire at the moment.

Mel stepped back, frowning absently at her results. “For anyone else, these brain scans would be abnormal. Based on the previous scans taken by Neva, however, they appear to be ordinary for you. It looks like you suffered a mild concussion, but nothing lasting. With a little rest, you should be fine.”

thank you, Goddess (love/gratitude/relief) “Thanks for your assistance, Mel,” Neva said.

“Yes. Thank you.” Rat put his fingers over Neva’s for a moment, wanting...well, sleep, mostly, but sleep with her curled up against him. “I’m afraid rest isn’t in the picture, though. Neva, can you give me a stimulant?”

Neva frowned. “What? Why?”

“Someone has to fly the courier back to the station. It’s too much of a navigation hazard to just leave sitting there. The only pilots on board are Iluka, Jason, and I. Iluka can’t fly anything right now, and Jason has to pilot the *Exile*. That leaves the courier to me.”

(disappointment) just got him back don’t want to let him go again (memory of fear/grief)

“It won’t be long,” he promised her. “I swear.”

“All right.” Her fingers tightened momentarily on his shoulder, then let go. “Let me get you a stim patch.”

“Thanks.”

Iluka laid back. “Bloody damned fool,” she told the ceiling.

* * *

“The *Exile* is requesting permission to dock, to take on fuel and supplies,” reported the com officer. “Their captain would also like to confer with you, Colonel Hunter, once they’re in.”

Mirra stared at the main monitors, which showed a view of the system. The red dots of the *Exile* and the courier were in the midst of maneuvers that would bring them back into the lanes; otherwise, almost nothing moved. In ordinary times, scan would have shown swarms of ships, all of them on orderly courses in or out of the Core, heading to Zatvia or to the Protected Worlds, carrying out the vital business of the Cooperative.

Now this is all that remains. One Klegger, a handful of fighters, a lone courier, and a pirate ship.

She felt as if a hollow place had opened up inside her. *I should be overjoyed. The aliens are gone. We’re safe.* Instead she felt bereft. Adrift.

The Cooperative had been everything to her. Now, it was gutted, its heart ripped out. How could she—how could anyone—salvage what had been the greatest hope, the finest dream, of humanity?

We should have a fleet of Kleggers here. Xian should be returning in triumph in a prismatic fighter, or aboard a warship. Instead, I have a bunch of filthy pirates asking to dock, while the creature that wears Xian’s corpse wants to talk to me.

It had been hard to face the fact that Xian was dead, had *been* dead in any way that mattered for the last three years. But the bitter betrayal on the docks had proved it beyond all doubt, even as Rat revealed he had taken advantage of her hope. She remembered his smile, the grin of a ghoulish creature dressed in borrowed skin.

Well, he had served his purpose now, hadn’t he?

Mirra straightened, feeling a sudden stirring of resolve. She was an Obsidian Blade, an officer of the Zatvian Cooperative, and it was past time that she remembered that. So long as true believers remained, the dream of the Cooperative could still be saved. She wouldn’t fail, even if she had to kill every terrorist and pirate in the universe.

The blocker lay tucked deep into a pocket of her uniform. Mirra pulled it out, then drew her hair back severely from her face and attached the clip. “Send a reply,” she ordered the com officer. “Give them permission to dock, and tell their captain that I would love to meet with him, as soon as possible.”

* * *

The return trip to the Core was uneventful, for which Neva was fervently thankful. Most of the Zat fighters and one Klegger had been wiped out by the alien ship. The remaining fighters were returning to the station for refueling; the other Klegger remained on patrol. The passenger ships and the freighter that had been at dock when they first entered the system had jumped, on their way to Zatvia to discover if there was anything remaining to salvage. A part of Neva hoped not, but the idea that an entire planet might have succumbed to the aliens made her deeply ill.

It's the perfect revenge...and now I find that I don't want any part of it, she acknowledged bitterly. *There are too many innocents, too much life, on a planet. The debt for Harvest wasn't theirs to pay.*

The courier docked beside them when they put in, even though the part of the ring they were on was normally reserved for larger ships.

"We've got a welcoming party," Jason reported as soon as the umbilicals were in place. "Dock cam is showing some of the Blades waiting for us."

"Maybe it's that hero's welcome Hunter promised Rat," Neva suggested wryly.

"Not much of a parade, if that's so," Marcus observed.

"Maybe." Drake stood up and stretched. "But we're going in there armed anyway. Jason, Mel, Nathan—you stay here and keep an eye on things. The rest of you are with me."

When they emerged from the boarding tube onto the cold expanse of the nearly-deserted dock, Neva saw Rat approaching from the direction of the courier's berth. He looked a bit better than he had, and she wondered if he'd managed to catch any sleep on the ride in, after the stims had worn off.

Are you all right? she thought, as hard as she could, not wanting to ask in front of the watching Zats. Rat cast her a wan smile, accompanied by a short nod.

As they approached the Zats, one of them stiffened to attention. "Colonel Hunter is waiting for you in conference room D-2, Sir," she barked. She didn't look very happy about the situation, as if she thought that her commanding officer shouldn't be talking to pirate scum, no matter what they'd done.

They fell in behind their Zat escort. Fortunately, it was only a short walk to the small room where Hunter waited. As they stepped inside, Neva saw the Zativian colonel sat at the head of a table, which displayed what appeared to be a small-scale map, with various systems coded in different colors. A tray with a pot of coffee and a single cup sat at her elbow. *I guess we aren't going to be invited to sit down and relax.*

The guards left, shutting the door behind them. Mirra turned off the map she had been studying and sat back, regarding them thoughtfully. With a sudden tingle of unease, Neva saw that the colonel was once again wearing the blocker that would prevent Rat from hearing her thoughts.

They seated themselves at the table; Neva took the chair by Mirra, the tray in between them. Rat cast her a questioning look, and she shrugged. *I don't like her near you.*

"You wanted to speak with me," Mirra said, her blue eyes fixed on Rat, as if he were the only other person in the room. "But first, I have to ask you something. Is it true? Are the aliens really gone?"

He nodded. "Yes. They...Mouse went with them. She could communicate with them better than I could. She didn't think they were coming back."

Mirra closed her eyes in a gesture of relief, then opened them again. "Thank the gods."

Juanita had remained near the door, leaning casually against the wall, as if she weren't toting a rifle slung over her back. "Don't think the gods had much to do with it."

Rat motioned her to silence. "There are some things I wanted to ask you, Mirra," he said, watching her carefully. "I've got something that I need to do, and I thought you might help."

She stared him for a moment, giving no clue to her thoughts. "You know, *Rat*, I would have helped Xian. I would have done anything for him. As it is, I don't think I owe a thing to the traitorous puppet wearing his corpse."

Out of the corner of her eye, Neva saw Mirra's hand move towards one of the controls inset

into the display table. Whether she meant to call for reinforcements, or spring some other ugly surprise on them, Neva didn't wait to find out. Instead, she grabbed the coffee tray and swung it with all her might straight into Mirra's face.

Scalding coffee flew everywhere. Mirra crashed sideways to the floor, blood streaming down her face, her nose flattened against one cheek. There came the rattle of weaponry, and Rat grabbed Neva's arm, pulling her back.

"Good one!" Marcus called, from where he had gone to take up position at the door across from Juanita.

"Go! Before they realize what's happened!" Rat shouted. The door flew open, and Juanita and Marcus charged out, firing as they went. Neva fumbled her gun out of the holster as Rat pulled her after him. They had barely cleared the door when he dropped sharply, dragging her down. Something hot whined close by Neva's face, and her heart lurched when she saw that the end of one of his dreads was smoking and melted. He returned fire, and was rewarded by a hoarse scream.

"We're clear!" Marcus shouted from somewhere ahead.

"Come on," Rat said grimly. They jogged down the corridor after the rest of the crew. The bodies of the Zats who had escorted them sprawled on the floor, leaking blood, and the air was full of smoke and the smell of scorched paint.

"Hunter double-crossed us," Neva panted as they ran.

"I noticed. Stay with Drake." Letting go of her arm, Rat plunged after Juanita and Marcus.

Somehow, they made it to the docks. The floor was slick with blood, and Neva had to step over a man who moaned and twitched. Drake herded her toward the nearest cover, which proved to be a skeletal gantry within sight of the *Exile's* boarding tube. Juanita, Marcus, and Rat were already there.

"Good work, Captain," Marcus snapped as weapons fire spattered on the wall above their heads. "You couldn't just play along, could you? Oh no, you had to convince the homicidal maniac that you really *aren't* anyone she cares about hurting."

"Sorry." Rat squeezed off a quick shot. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Drake's face was pale and grim. "You didn't pick up anything from the soldiers who escorted us in?"

"No. Mirra's too smart for that. They didn't know—they thought she was going to negotiate with us."

Juanita grinned, even though Neva didn't think there was anything in their situation to smile about. "Didn't expect to get hit in the face by our medic, though, did she? Maybe she's not so smart after all."

Neva laughed shakily. Her brain wanted to replay the feel of the tray smashing into Mirra's face, the sickening crunch of bone against metal, but she pushed it aside roughly. *I've done worse things. Just not so... up close and personal, I guess.*

"We've got to get to the boarding tube," Rat said, ducking reflexively as the Zats returned fire.

Marcus rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Captain Obvious. I would never have thought of that myself."

Rat ignored the jibe. "I'll make a run for it."

"No." Marcus shook his head. "You're the best shot—you lay down cover fire, and I'll get the access open."

"All right."

"Be careful," Juanita added. Neva suspected that she was far more anxious than she looked.

Marcus nodded, and shifted into a crouch. Rat checked the charge on his gun, then glanced at Marcus. "Go."

Marcus burst out of cover, running full-tilt towards the access. Rat swung out from behind the gantry, followed by Juanita, both of them laying down a blistering hail of fire. The Zats returned the shots, and for a moment Neva was certain that Marcus would be hit. Somehow, he made it across the open space, and his hand slapped the panel by the access to open it.

Nothing happened.

Marcus swore, and ducked behind the berth's console; weapons fire slammed into the wall just below the panel mere seconds after he moved. Rat and Juanita ducked back behind the gantry.

"They've over-ridden the access," Drake said grimly. "Damn it! What now?"

Rat grimaced. "We wait, and hope we don't get overrun before Jason can do something about it."

"Jason?" Neva started to ask, puzzled. Even as she did, the access whisked open, revealing the cold hollow of the boarding tube.

Rat grinned fiercely. "Good work, Jason. All right, everyone aboard, now!"

Juanita, Drake, and Neva broke cover and ran for the tube, while Marcus and Rat lay down crossfire to keep the Zats occupied. Neva's heart pounded; she expected to feel a shot burn into her flesh at any moment. Somehow, they made it across the scorched expanse of decking to the cover of the tube.

"Come on, Captain!" Marcus yelled.

"Kill him!" screamed another voice, almost lost in the vastness of the docks. Neva risked a look past the access, and to her horror saw Mirra Hunter. The Zats' white face was masked with blood from her shattered nose, and she didn't look very steady on her feet, but her eyes gleamed with a hatred that could be seen even at a distance.

As Rat broke cover, Mirra lifted her gun and fired. Neva heard herself scream his name, felt Drake's arms wrap around her, keeping her from running out to help, but it all seemed distant, unreal. Her world shrank to the sight of Rat stumbling and going down, sprawling hard across the decking.

"No!"

He kept rolling, and at first she thought it was just momentum carrying him along. But then he got his legs under him, lurching up and in their direction, and her heart felt as though it had been turned inside out. Marcus yelled and leveled a shot in Mirra's direction, forcing her to duck back, giving Rat a few precious seconds to stagger within reach.

Juanita ran out and bodily dragged Rat the last few meters into the access, Marcus close on their heels. The instant they passed the hatch, it slammed shut decisively, cutting them off from the Zats on the docks.

Juanita let go of Rat, and he stumbled a little. His left arm hung limply by his side, and there was a blackened hole in his jacket. The smell of burnt flesh hung around him in a cloud in the ice-cold air.

Moving quickly to assess the damage, Neva pulled a utility knife from one of her copious pockets, and slit the jacket away from the wound, revealed seared flesh. "It's not bleeding, at least," she said, and heard her voice shaking.

"I'm fine," Rat said, wincing. "But I'm not going to be piloting the *Cuchulainn* today. Damn it." He straightened and shook his hair back out of his eyes. "Let's move."

"I hope you have a brilliant plan," Marcus said as they emerged into the spine.

"Maybe not brilliant, but a plan." Rat went to the lift. "Juanita, we don't have time to get you settled below—ride out maneuvers with us on the bridge."

"Yes."

When the lift disgorged them onto the bridge, it was odd to see Rat make for the captain's station, where Iluka had sat for so long. Although his face was tight with pain, he managed to web himself in one-handed. "Good work, Jason," he told the pilot.

"Thank you, Captain."

Marcus uncapped the firing controls. "Weapons live. Give the word, and we'll shoot our way free."

"Not yet. Jason, can you get those docking clamps loose?"

Marcus snarled impatiently. "What's he going to do, ask Control nicely to let us go?"

Jason laughed. "Come now, Marcus, we're roommates—I thought you would know better than that. I spent a lot of time on station in the lab with Mel, who had already gotten a toehold in the Zats' systems. You don't really think we were just reminiscing, do you?"

Realization dawned on Neva. "You cracked the Zats' operation systems?"

"And stole all the data we could while we were at it." Jason grinned. "Mel should get most of the credit, though. Clamps are free, Captain."

"Then let's get out of here. Neva, where's that Klegger?"

She bent all her attention on scan, even as they broke free from the Core. "It's turned in towards the station, but if we move fast, we might still be able to outrun it. We've got fighters headed our way, though."

"Don't worry about them," Marcus said with a feral grin.

"These are Obsidian Blades," Rat reminded him. "We don't want to fight them if we don't have to."

"Priority, Captain," Drake interrupted. "I've got an incoming transmission from the Core."

"Put it on com."

Mirra's voice came over the speakers, the words slightly muffled, as if she held something over her nose to staunch the bleeding. Even so, there was no mistaking her rage. "You think you've won, *Rat*, but you haven't. You can't escape. I've already shown that I can follow you anywhere—do you really think that there's any safe haven you can run to? Cut engines and surrender, and maybe I'll be merciful."

Neva glanced automatically in Rat's direction. He looked unhappy, his face drawn, whether from pain or some emotion, she didn't know. *Mirra hates him. She wanted him to be Xian, and when he wasn't, she still had to rely on him to stop the aliens. She wants him dead, and she isn't one to stop until she gets what she wants.*

"Don't do this, Mirra," Rat said at last. "I don't want it to be like this. Just call off the Klegger and the fighters and let us go."

"You seem to have misunderstood. I'm not negotiating with scum like you."

He glanced at Drake, who seemed to understand something from the look. "I'm sorry, then, Mirra. Good-bye."

"This is far from over."

"No. You've forgotten something."

"Oh really? And what is that?"

"You forgot about the bomb on the courier. Drake, send the detonation code."

Fire bloomed where the courier had been berthed. Part of the docking ring crumpled, and for

an instant Neva thought that was all the damage done—and then the skin of the station abruptly split open, disgorging flame. Bits of the structure tore free, flying outwards and trailing debris: shrapnel, furniture, bodies. The glare of the fireball flung everything into sharp relief, until the oxygen was either consumed or lost to space, leaving the shattered station nothing more than a burned-out hulk.

Something screamed down the side of the hull. “We’re getting some shrapnel, but the biggest parts are going to miss us,” Neva reported, half numb from shock.

“Good,” Rat said in a subdued voice. “What about the Klegger and the fighters?”

She tore her eyes away from the spectacle of the dying station. Scan projected the course of the Zatvian ships, and her heart lifted. “They...they’re backing off. The fighters are making for the Klegger.”

“Whoever is captaining the Klegger must know a lost cause when he sees it,” Drake remarked.

Marcus shook his head regretfully. “And I didn’t even get to shoot any of them.”

Neva stared at the receding husk of the gutted station. *I can’t believe it. Hunter’s dead. We’re done with her forever.* It didn’t feel real.

“Captain?” Nathan asked. “What’s our heading?”

Rat sighed and rubbed at his eyes with his good hand. “Waga Chun. If they need our help with the Zats there, we’ll give it. And if not...I, for one, could use a rest.”

Nathan smiled. “Aye, Captain. Laying in our course.”

* * *

A few shifts into hyperspace transit, Rat called a meeting in the galley. Everyone came, except for Iluka, who was still confined to the infirmary. As for his wound, it still hurt when he tried to lift anything heavy, but was nonetheless healing quickly. The peace of transit had given the crew a chance to rest, and the whispers were quieter than they had been for a long time. Everyone was in a good mood...except for him.

He wished, desperately, that Mirra hadn’t forced his hand. When they’d gone back to the Core, he’d hoped that the truce he’d forged with her would hold, that she would believe his help with the aliens balanced out his status as an enemy of the Zatvian Cooperative. But his hope had been futile, and she was dead on his orders.

My last tie to Xian Jackson. Gone. That shouldn’t make me sad—I ought to be happy. But all I feel is regret.

Marcus had pulled galley duty this shift, and Rat waited until everyone had the opportunity to enjoy their meal and relax with cups of coffee or tea before speaking.

“I wanted to talk about what we might do, after we reach Waga Chun,” he said awkwardly. All of this captain stuff still felt odd, and he’d expected someone else to step forward after they’d left the Zats behind. After all, with Mirra dead, wasn’t his usefulness over? No one had, though, and none of the whispers suggested that they were unhappy with the way things were going, so he’d decided to simply let it lie for now.

“Fight the Zats,” Marcus suggested, from where he sat beside Juanita. “What else?”

“That depends on how things are going in the system. Captain Ten Bears and the others seemed to have things pretty well in hand when we left. Between the rebellion on the planet and the warships in space, the Zats might not be much of a problem anymore. And if we come with the news that Zatvia and the Core are lost...that could be enough to convince any Zats that are

left to surrender.”

“If they believe us,” Drake put in.

Rat smiled ruefully. “True. Eventually, though, word will spread. I don’t know what will happen when it does. Someone might try to grab power, I guess, and attempt to keep the Cooperative going—but not every Zat is going to go along with that. It would take an exceptional person to rebuild anything like the old Cooperative. Mirra might have been able to do it, but she’s dead.”

Neva watched him, a look of hope on her face. “Then this might be it. The end.” **Goddess please (hope) can't be this easy can it?**

“Don’t count your Zats before they’re shot,” Marcus growled. “I’ve heard predictions that the Cooperative was going down before, and it hasn’t happened yet.”

“They haven’t lost this much at once before,” Jason pointed out reasonably. “History shows that large-scale empires are difficult to maintain, especially when they outgrow their ability to communicate effectively with their provinces.”

“Maybe, but that usually takes generations to happen, which is too long to do us any good.”

Rat stroked Jasmine, who was napping on his shoulder, as he tried to gather his thoughts. “I think both of you are right. Marcus, there are things you don’t know. Over the last few shifts, Jason, Mel, Drake, and I have been going over the data we stole from the Core. There’s a lot of it, and not much order, so finding anything useful takes a while. But from what we have reviewed, we’re starting to get a picture of how things are going in the Cooperative.

“Waga Chun isn’t the only system where the Zats are having trouble. Other rebellions have broken out, although most aren’t as well-armed. According to the records, there are even systems on the far side of the Cooperative that never surrendered to begin with, and have been fighting ever since. The Zats have taken more losses than we’ve been aware of, maybe more than the rank and file Zats themselves have been aware of.”

“Combine that with the loss of Zatvia and the Core, and it seems more likely that the Cooperative will fragment,” Drake suggested.

More of the whispers began to speak of hope. “That doesn’t mean our troubles are over,” Rat cautioned. “Like Marcus said, it’s going to take time for things to come apart. The Zats still have a lot of guns and ships. Parts of the Cooperative might be around for a long time to come. Others might mutate, turn into smaller fiefdoms where they still rule the locals. Other systems might overthrow them and go back to the way things were before the war.”

“So what does this mean for us?” Neva asked softly.

“It means that what I want to do might not be easy. It might mean more fighting, and more pirating, and more hardship. I don’t even know if it’s a good idea, or if it will work, or if we’ll all just end up getting killed.”

Marcus rolled his eyes. “For God’s sake, what the hell kind of crazy idea have you come up with now?”

Rat folded his hands in front of him on the table. “The reason I asked Jason and Mel to grab all the data they could from the Zats’ files, the reason that we’ve been looking through it all over the last few shifts, is that I wanted to find the service records of the Furies. Some of it is probably out of date by now, but we have the last recorded locations of each of them—at least, I’m hoping we do.” He glanced up, and met Marcus’ eyes down the table. “It seems likely that one of them is your daughter. I want to find her and save her if we can.”

For a long moment, no one spoke. The whispers rose sharply, though, murmuring of surprise, and admiration, and uncertainty. Above them all, though, was a single voice, mingling

fear and despair and a hope so unexpected that it cut deep as a knife. Marcus stared at him for a long moment, as if he half-suspected that the suggestion was some sort of cruel joke. Then he abruptly covered his eyes with a hand, hiding emotion.

"We'll go to Waga Chun, and if they don't need us, and things are stable enough, we'll drop off Iluka at a hospital there. With any luck, they'll be able to fix her leg," Rat said uncertainly into the silence.

"I'd like to stay with her, Captain," Drake put in.

It wasn't unexpected, but it still made Rat sad. He could have used Drake as a first officer; without that voice of experience, he felt more lost than ever. "Of course. Mel will be getting off at Waga Chun as well. Jason has agreed to go with us, as long as we need a pilot and a navigator." He paused, glancing about at the ring of faces all staring at him. "So. Who's with me?"

Juanita's hand clasped Marcus' shoulder, offering silent support. "I am," she said. "Wouldn't mind being part of a family again."

Neva had been watching Rat with her beautiful eyes. "Do you even have to ask?" she said with a smile. **so proud of him**

"I think it's important for me to ask things out loud—maybe more important than it would be if I was someone else," he replied wryly.

Her smile grew broader. "Then, yes. I'm in."

"Marcus?"

Marcus lowered his hands slowly. **God can't believe this, what if she isn't my girl anymore, been brainwashed by the Zats, what if she's been turned into a monster, (love), doesn't matter she's still my baby**

"Sure," he said gruffly. He hesitated, then ran his hand back through his short-cropped hair. "Thanks."

"Well then," Nathan said with a gleam in his eye, "I'll just start plotting courses, shall I?"

Epilogue

The wind off the ocean blew Neva's hair back, kissing her face lightly with a salty spray, and raising chills on her arms beneath the light sweater she wore. A seabird screamed once, dipping above the heaving swells, and she watched it fly towards a horizon whose downward curvature still seemed odd after so long on ships and stations. She didn't know the name of the beach, or even if it had one; Jason had recommended it to her, when they'd made a trip planetside so that he and Mel could reconnect with the members of their family who'd survived the Zatvian occupation.

The sky over the ocean was a blaze of red and gold. Thick dust filled Waga Chun's atmosphere, kicked up by the wide-scale mining the Zats had instituted. Planetary temperatures had dropped, and it would be a long time before things could be put right, but in the meantime the dust made for the most spectacular sunsets Neva had ever seen.

The incoming tide tossed foam over her bare feet, and she smiled, delighting in the feel of the sand and the cold water. A simple skirt whipped around her calves, the sensation odd after so long in trousers. Earlier, she and Rat had planted thick white candles in the sand; their flames flickered wildly in the breeze. A small fire of driftwood added the scent of smoke to the wind, mingling with the smell of salt and water.

She turned her back to the ocean, watching Rat as he dug in their backpack. He had refused her offer of help as he laid out a colorful blanket and the small meal they had packed, saying that this was her moment, and he wanted her to relax enjoy. The pentagram necklace swung from his neck, flashing in the last light of the sun, as he pulled out two glasses and filled them.

When he was done, he came over to her, smiling. "Here you go," he said, handing her a glass of rum. His contained nothing but water.

"Thanks." She returned his smile. "You didn't have to do this for me, you know."

"I wanted to. I know how much you've missed being on a living world, and after so much time on ships, I thought a celebration would be more special this way. Once we leave to look for Genevieve...there's no telling how long it will be before we set foot on a planet again."

"I know." She kissed him lightly. "Thank you."

He clinked his glass lightly against hers. "A toast. To *Doctor* Whitestone."

Neva touched the beaded sash wrapped around her waist, which Michael Shot With an Arrow had presented to her after their return from the Core. Apparently, he had spoken to some of the faculty of Waga Chun's main university while she was away; hers was the first degree issued after the occupation. Even though the physical buildings of the university were in ruins, the teachers who had survived were already holding classes once again, and Michael assured her that her degree was only the first of many to come.

"I couldn't have done it with out you," she said, slipping her arm around Rat's waist and leaning against him. "When I first came on board the *Exile*...I didn't know what I wanted or

where to go. You helped me find myself again.”

“That was your doing, not mine.” He kissed her forehead gently. “But I’m glad I picked the right ship to stow away on.”

“I’m glad, too.”

They drank their toast, then settled down on the blanket. She sat by him, leaning her head on his shoulder as they watched the sun go down. It wasn’t the sun of Harvest, just as it wasn’t the sand and water of Harvest, but a part of her felt that she had come home nonetheless.

If you enjoyed reading this ebook, please share it with a friend!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elaine Corvidae holds degrees in anthropology and biology, and has worked as an archaeologist, office assistant, and wildlife rehabilitator. She lives in Charlotte, NC, with her husband and several cats. In her spare time, Elaine enjoys listening to music and drinking (and occasionally brewing) good beer. Fortunately for her, the voices in her head all seem to belong to characters.

For more books, short stories, and other goodies, please visit her website at <http://www.onecrow.net> .