



Quinten's Story

PERDITION #1



KS Augustin

Quinten Tamlan was once the scourge of the Republic. Then he disappeared....

It's been seven long years for Quinten Tamlan. Scarred and bitter, he has lost direction and the spark of idealism that once fired his resolve. But when he is forced to take on a new crewmember, he is once more pulled back into a past that refuses to let go.

Quinten believes he has his own problems. He believes he is alone and forgotten. He is wrong. Quite wrong.

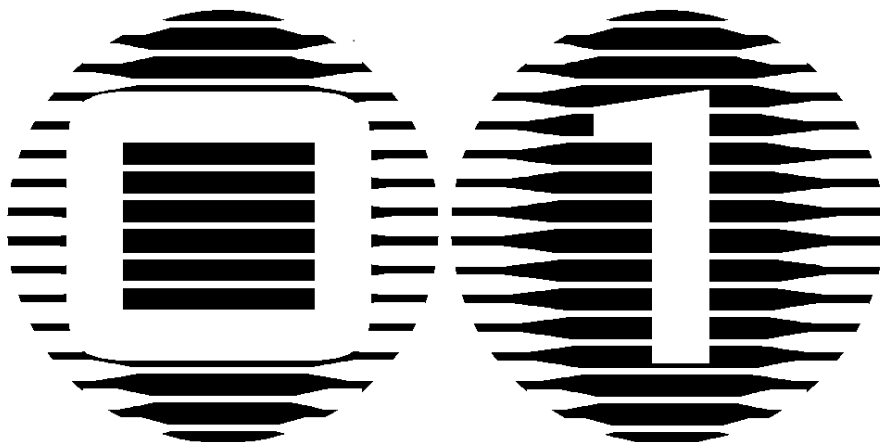
Quinten's Story

by

KS Augustin

Dedication

To the 99%...for we are a multitude



The call was waiting for Quinten in the morning, bounced off his carefully constructed piggyback network of commercial feed points, scientific arrays and even – like a tongue childishly stuck out at the Republic – some military outposts. He might be described by most people as grim but, underneath the scar tissue, Quinten had a sense of humour. And it made him twist his lips in cynical amusement when he read the entire message, pieced together by the bitcrypt spiders while he slept.

“So the pirate kids want to meet.”

He wondered what they wanted. His last trade with the Neon Red cartel had been more than a year ago. He found them a skittish lot in general, too nervous to deal with goods of any real value, and ill-suited to the lifestyle of freewheeling racketeers. At times, he felt that the purchases he made from them amounted to little more than charity, a way of hurling some tiny needles to occasionally prick the Republic's tough hide.

“And maybe that's enough,” he muttered, knowing that – at one time – it hadn't been. Knowing that, when he was young and idealistic, the only goal he had in mind was the complete subjugation of the Republic. But that had been years ago, and that idealist was now gone, leaving behind the shell of a man who had long ago outlived his usefulness and was now reduced to consorting with pirates.

He commanded the ship to prepare the return message, indicating a rendezvous near Port Tertiary in six hours' time. That would barely give the *Perdition* time to get there but, if it was going to be a rush for him, then hopefully it lessened the chances of the Republic staging an ambush. And if the cartel couldn't make it in

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time...well, he wasn't in this for the popularity. Quite the opposite.

With the order received and in processing, there was nothing left to do until the ship entered normal space near the rendezvous point. Quinten looked around the cockpit of his pride and joy. The command centre had been originally created with many more staff in mind – eight, to be exact. In the five years since he'd acquired the *Perdition*, he'd made extensive modifications to the original battle-scout design. He'd installed expensive, black-market AIs, paid handsomely for a string of labour-saving modifications, and incorporated the latest in shielding and sensor technologies. It might still resemble a Republic ship from the outside, but the *Perdition's* innards were pure Quinten Tamlan.

Although officially classed as a "light combat scout", the ship was almost one hundred metres long, a knobbly, clumsy-looking vessel that effortlessly cleaved through the vacuum of deep space and dished out death with ease. Its primary cockpit was just forward of centre, up near the skin, beneath a bump that housed three transparent panels but was normally obscured with metal shielding. A secondary cockpit was situated in the rear, buried deep to minimise the chance of sensor feeds getting cut during an attack.

Other, more bulbous protuberances marred the ship's surface. They previously contained the accommodation quarters, ship's canteen, and two cargo bays. Quinten converted those areas to hydroponics, general storage and used one cargo bay to receive the rare, and then only ever when invited, guest.

As part of his renovations, he had cut through bulkheads, forming a long thoroughfare from the tip of the scout to its stern. The resultant arrow-straight corridor was easier for his crippled body to navigate. He knew it would also enable enemies to quickly barrel through the ship, but if that ever happened, he was in no physical shape to give them much competition. If the Space Fleet, or an ambitious cartel with delusions of

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grandeur, was ever in a position to set an armoured foot on the *Perdition*, then the game was over, and he was probably already dead.

Restless, knowing the time had come for him to exercise, Quinten muttered a quick curse and rose slowly to his feet. Some days were better than others, but this wasn't one of them. He thought he heard his body creak as, aching and already weary, he willed it to move to the back of the cockpit and descend heavily to the ship's main corridor. There was experimental surgery available that – for an astronomical sum – could give him a cyborg body, but the procedure was risky. From time to time, Quinten would re-examine the option, stare at the analysis that concluded an eighty per cent fatality rate, then flick the screen off. He wondered why he still cared about staying alive, but couldn't come up with a reason that made sense.

The rumble beneath his feet changed tempo as the ship executed his commands, heading for a hyperspace crease he knew was only a light-second away. The tenor of the vibrations told him that they were accelerating, the shudders became a jolt, then the jolt disappeared and an unnatural smoothness took its place. The *Perdition* was now in hyperspace. It would take more than five hours, and four jumps, to make it to Port Tertiary. The journey would entail a litany of trembles, judders and the absence of movement completely, leaving him with little to do except trust the navigator to do its job while he worked his body into some semblance of suppleness.

His limbs were stiff, as they were most mornings, and he limped badly. Part of one cargo bay had been turned into an exercise area, and he had deliberately chosen the one closest to the stern so he would need to walk some distance to get there.

It took him almost five minutes to walk the forty-metre distance and enter the gym, but he tried to keep the bitterness out of his thoughts. It could be worse. He could be floating in a bowl somewhere, condemned to a

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half-life peering at the universe through a mist of pastel rejuv-gel. He could be on Bliss, the Republic's hell-hole prison planet, knowing he would never be allowed to leave. Or he could be dead. All those options made the agony of fifty sit-ups insignificant. With gritted teeth, Quinten disrobed, sliding his gaze past the one mirror in the room, and began his regime.

He worked out for an hour, and was shaking and sweating profusely by the end of it. It took effort to lift his body from the exercise chair, and the steps to his quarters were truncated and staggering. He knew he could fall – had done so several times in the past – but he refused to give in to his body's frailties. Not yet. If he couldn't exercise a small degree of self-discipline on his own body, then it was no use being alive.

He turned the shower on as hot as he could stand it, letting the steamy heat massage his aching muscles and wash away the stink of his sweat while he supported himself against the slick wall. The water streamed over a bare chest, criss-crossed with surgery scars, a pale shadow of the muscled bulk he used to carry with pride. His arms, once bulging, were withered remnants, his legs – well, to call them maimed would have been a compliment. The only things that remained in perfect working order were his mind and his damned libido.

His mind, to force his body to do his bidding, and his libido, to remind him of all he had lost.

He remembered an ancient joke. *If you lie on your hand for a while, it'll get numb and feel like somebody else's.* Even without that temporary anaesthesia, the fingers that touched his scarred body – on the rare occasions when he gave in to the itch – didn't feel like his. Nerves at his extremities had been destroyed in the explosion that had almost killed him, and it was more a robot limb that enfolded him and brought him to unsatisfying relief. But who else would have him? An attractive woman, of her own volition? He grinned savagely as he laboriously dried himself. They would run parsecs in the

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opposite direction the moment they saw his unadorned form. He could pay for sex – he appreciated the no-strings aspect of a commercial transaction – but could never be sure that while the women sold one part of their anatomy to him, they weren't using another part to betray him to the Republic. That only left his hand, thin yet loyal.

Moving to his wardrobe, he asked the ship for a progress report. Still three hours to go. He used the time to make sure that the *Perdition* was in full fighting trim. He primed the sensors to operate to their maximum limit, much farther out than that of normal commercial craft, and even a bit farther than most run-of-the mill Republic battle craft. Or, rather, he tried to prime the sensors, and met with only sparse screens, bereft of their usual crowded detail. That indicated another problem, too worryingly close to the last. The solution would be something easy, he had captained the ship for long enough to get an intuition for that kind of thing, but such a lapse could easily spell danger.

The blare of an intercepted transmission cut through the silence.

“—sweep along the sector. Reports are negative.”

Quinten swore and switched to his secondary sensors. They were good but not as sensitive as his primary array. He hoped that would be enough to avoid the Republic patrol he'd just stumbled across.

“Affirmative, Steel Dot Two.” There was an echo shadowing the words, indicating that the answering ship was farther away. “Continue sweep in this direction and rendezvous back at Steel Major in thirty-two hours. Steel Major out.”

The secondary array showed no signs of a nearby vessel. Was Steel Dot Two ahead, or behind, him? He wished he knew. Knowing he was taking a risk, Quinten shaped all sensors into a narrow conic and aimed it straight ahead, directing the *Perdition* to plot an even

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greater parabolic path around the sector and increase speed. That, at least, the ship could do.

He settled back in his chair and frowned, waiting until the next crease was within range and the ship could complete its jump to hyperspace.

The sensors weren't the only problem he had. Only two weeks ago, the missile bay doors had jammed shut. Thankfully, the failure hadn't happened during an actual emergency, only during one of the monthly simulations, but it had still taken him more than a week to laboriously hunt down the problem – an overloaded secondary relay – and only thirty minutes to correct it. Now this. His body wouldn't thank him for putting it through its paces again, so soon after the last bout of bending and crawling, but there was no alternative.

The problem was that the *Perdition* was too big for one person to maintain for any length of time. He had known that when the opportunity arose to capture a battle scout almost whole, more than four and a half years ago, and had still talked himself into claiming it as his own. He had worked hard to get it spaceworthy and modified to his exacting requirements, but the time for continued delusion was gone. If he wanted to continue travelling the galaxy, while staying out of the Republic's ever-alert gaze, he was going to have to either take on crew or...get rid of the ship.

Neither option was attractive. New crewmembers could betray him as easily as making a stealth comm call. And, after getting the *Perdition* in exactly the kind of shape he wanted, he was loath to part with it. It would take almost as much time removing all traces of his modifications as it did installing them. And the thought of trashing such expensive, hard-won equipment was one he couldn't even begin to contemplate.

He ran another diagnostic on the primary sensors and stared at the uninformative screen and large number of warnings it displayed, blinking at him in silent accusation. The front and rear sensors seemed to be

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operational, with standby power below their maximum, but the side, top and bottom arrays appeared totally out of commission. He was hoping that the readings were false. Maybe everything would snap back into peak efficiency once he jumped in and out of hyperspace and had time to properly calibrate them.

Yeah, and the Neon Red cartel might actually have something worth selling for a change.

One hour out from Port Tertiary, the Steel Dot sweep team sectors behind him, Quinten started getting ready. He walked the corridors of the *Perdition* unencumbered when he was by himself but, for guests, he made sure he looked as formidable as possible. And that meant getting into an exoskeleton suit that, five years ago, had cost him the exorbitant figure of twelve and a half kilo-credits.

Once in his quarters, Quinten took the suit off its custom-made frame and stepped into it, pushing his arms through the loose sleeves and fastening the front at three points.

The exoskeleton, graphite grey and gleaming, may have struck a note of ostentation, but only Quinten knew how necessary it was to his wellbeing. Out of the soft armoured suit, he was a limping and crippled man but, once inside, the finely tuned groups of micro-servos ensured that he could lift incredible weights, crush steel in his fist and run faster than a human. It was almost like being a cyborg, without the attendant risks.

Reaching down, he touched a small indented point on his right thigh, and the suit's memory got to work, tightening against his skin and forming a profile of the man he used to be...before the disaster at Gilgan. The suit recreated the bulges of a chest that his body no longer remembered, the ripples of a taut torso, and the strong muscles of proud arms and two evenly-matched legs. He hadn't chosen the full body cover, so the armour reached only up to the top of his neck, fully encasing him in a suit of darkness and forcing his head

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erect. It looked constricting and uncomfortable. It wasn't.

Fortified, he walked to the cargo bay, unable to stop his mind from contrasting the hobble from the exercise room to his current distance-eating stride.

Why am I doing this? Why not just give in and get a cyborg body, 80% failure rate be damned? Kiel wouldn't care. Kiel's past caring.

But he knew he couldn't, coward that he was.

He reached the bay just in time. With a practiced flick, he activated the filtering sensors and lumbered up a concealed ladder to the modified gantry situated near the ceiling. The catwalk's reinforced railing glinted, its edge bristling with rows of lethal firepower. The weaponry would mask a clear view of him, accentuated by a distinct lack of lighting near his position. His suit was programmed to capture his voice and amplify it through different points of the bay, also confusing his exact location. Of course, he could have transacted the entire visit remotely, from the comfort of his own cabin, but Quinten liked the personal touch. He felt it added a note of courtesy, even when dealing with pirates.

"Coming out of hyperspace in ten minutes," his ship told him in masculine tones. He'd had the original, more soothing female voice replaced, almost the minute after he'd gain possession.

"Destination confirmed?" There had been unsettling rumours recently, of ships ending up at different places to their originally logged destinations. Whether commercial, private, or Republic craft seemed to make no difference. There had even been cases - ones he'd been able to confirm - of ships disappearing completely, lost in that chaotic trans-universal plane commonly known as hyperspace. Although he wasn't sure there was anything he could do about it, it still paid to stay alert.

"Port Tertiary trajectory confirmed. Crease operating normally."

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With half his primary sensors out of action, Quinten knew he needed a way to ensure that the Neon Reds hadn't brought along any unwelcome companions to the rendezvous point. He rubbed his cheek, careful to do it softly so he didn't accidentally break his cheekbone.

"Initiate scanning upon insertion," he finally told the ship. "Set up a tumble algorithm, using front and back primary sensors, full coverage attainment, artificial gravity axes calibrated to this position."

"Gravitational continuity cannot be guaranteed. Periodic disorientation probable."

"Acceptable. Scan for all ship signatures while approaching the rendezvous point. Plot and execute an escape route in case of confirmed Republic signatures."

"Destination?"

It didn't bother Quinten to have the ship execute a plan autonomously. His reflexes couldn't match the *Perdition's*, and he knew it.

"Make it Tor Prime."

That was the very heart of the Republic. With any luck, any ambushers lying in wait would be expecting him to jump away from the heart of evil rather than towards it.

"Orders confirmed."

He eased himself into the chair at the far end of the gantry. It ran on a rail so he could choose where, along the length of the metal platform, he wished to greet his guests. This time, he decided to stay in the corner. He strapped himself into the harness and tried to relax, while waiting for the insertion and tumble to begin.

No matter how much stability the *Perdition* attempted to maintain, Quinten knew the short jaunt to the rendezvous point would be uncomfortable and disorienting. But it was either that or be shot into scrap

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through his carelessness.

The ship jolted, then the spinning began, and Quinten felt bile rise in his throat. Grimly, he kept his mouth shut and swallowed hard. Eyes opened or closed, it didn't matter. The cargo bay would settle into familiar lines for a second, then blur into nonsensical diagonals, and the vertigo played havoc with his sense of balance. It seemed to continue for an eternity, a brief reprieve followed by a dance of lines. If there was good news in the vertigo, it was that no ambushers appeared to be close to his position.

"One ship within scanning range." The *Perdition's* voice was smooth and unconcerned, while Quinten's own fingers clenched the alloyed armrests of his chair, the suit's strength almost forming furrows beneath his hand. "Vessel identified as *God's Harness*, belonging to the Neon Red cartel."

So they still have that hulk, he thought, while the world spun around him.

It's probably in better shape than mine.

Then the physical spinning ceased, although the after-effects went on for far too long. Quinten knew he either had to fix the sensor problem soon or resign himself to a constant state of budding nausea.

While he willed his stomach to some semblance of normalcy, the *Perdition* detected and reported on a small pod that had detached itself from the *God's Harness*, traversing the distance between them carefully. This was the human equivalent of a six-person shuttle simulating a slow walk with bare hands reaching into the air, and Quinten grunted with satisfaction. The craft was obviously piloted by someone who knew the routine. Good. He hated breaking in new guests.

As the pod docked at the assigned cargo pane, the clang of the connection echoed through the bay. After another half a minute, the unlocked hatch turned and gingerly opened inwards.

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Quinten's finger was on a hair-trigger, waiting to blast into their component atoms whatever stranger appeared. His touch relaxed fractionally when he recognised the commander of the *Harness*, Setino Shaw. The man looked as he always did, as if he'd woken up to find himself robbed and dumped naked in some spacer alley. The sour look on his face didn't change as his pale gaze scanned the bare bones of the cargo bay.

There was a flash of white – Quinten's finger spasmed – that resolved itself into a woman, stumbling then catching herself as her bare feet touched the cold floor. She was tall, with short white hair and pale skin that looked like it had never been exposed to a planetside sun. Despite her humanoid appearance, however, there was something strange about her, something out of place. Quinten kept quiet and observed her for a moment longer, taking in the jerky hesitation of her movements. Humanoid but not human. Her dark, fathomless eyes looked around, much as Shaw had done, then her gaze narrowed in on Quinten's figure, unerringly finding him amid the high tangle of metal and weaponry.

Only one other person emerged through the hatch after the albino – the cartel's dealmaster, Ifola Breit. He must have pushed the woman through, causing her to trip. A real charmer. But what was Breit doing on the *God's Harness*? It wasn't like him to slum it with Shaw's crew. Somehow, life had just got more interesting.

"Tamlan, you here?" Shaw asked belligerently, but Quinten detected the note of anxiety beneath the bluff.

"I'm here," he answered quietly, and had the satisfaction of seeing both men spin around crazily. He thought they would be used to his amplification system by now. Something else must be making them jittery. "How may I help you gentlemen?"

"We're here to sell something."

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Breit jangled a nerve-chain, a combination restraint and control method for delivering excruciating pain to a captive's skin through their nerve-endings. Quinten's eyes followed it, from the small control pad in Breit's florid hand, down to where the chain's slack curved gracefully, and up to the wide collar that fitted snugly around the woman's neck, a grotesque form of jewellery.

"What is it?" Quinten asked, although he was reasonably sure of the answer.

"Not sure. Type B humanoid, we think."

Yes, that would explain the subtle differences in how she moved. Not fully human, not fully alien, but a hybrid. A Sub-Human.

"So?" he drawled. "Why sell one to me?"

"You're probably the only person we know who can control it." Shaw snickered. "It tried to commandeer the *Redoubt* when we first found it, then did the same again when we transferred it to the *Harness*. Took four of us to restrain it until Ifola grabbed the nerve-chain and latched it round its neck. It hasn't been out of the collar since, and that was a week ago."

"Language?"

The pirate spokesman shrugged. "Don't know. She may be deaf. Stupid. Playing stupid. She's cunning though, like a Republic strike fighter. You know what these Subs are like."

Quinten started assembling the little facts together in his mind.

Perceptive. Female. Strong. Hated.

"Where did you catch her?" He wasn't going to play along with Shaw's petty xenophobic digs.

Shaw shifted his feet, his posture relaxing with each sentence he spoke. He even lifted his hands onto his

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hips and slouched a bit. It was obvious he thought he had this deal sewn up. In the darkness, Quinten's eyes gleamed.

"She was in a small passenger craft near the inner edge of the Chimpect sector. Must've killed the crew - some gentry family joy-riding around the galaxy - before taking control. We didn't find any bodies, but there was enough blood still around to supply a hospital."

Breit chuckled and jiggled the chain again, as if proud of some favoured pet's antics.

Ruthless. Determined.

The Chimpect sector was solidly in Neon Red territory. No surprise that they had caught her. No surprise, too, that they couldn't keep something like her. And something else Shaw said was also true. Quinten was probably the only one, even among the cartel's semi-regular customers, who wouldn't turf them out on their ear the moment they caught sight of the cargo.

"Why would I want a Sub?" Quinten asked, idly. "Don't you think I have enough to worry about without adding one of them to my problems?"

In the back of his mind, however, there was something strangely compelling about the deal he was being offered. If there was any person, or group, more reviled than him in Republic space, with the exception of shapeshifters, it was the damned and unlikely offspring of human and alien.

Shaw put a wheedling tone in his voice. The discussion obviously wasn't going the way he'd imagined.

"Yeah sure, she's a Sub but, after the *Redoubt* captured her, me and Breit got together. We thought of you and how useful she could be to you."

"Useful?" Quinten queried. "How?"

Type B humanoids. They had all the features of humans

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but were not bound by human culture. Their diverse physiologies meant that some of them were better than humans, stronger, faster. The Republic didn't recognise them as citizens and most full-blooded aliens mistrusted them. They were, in a word, trouble. Whenever a Sub community or even a lone individual was found, the Republic saved itself some angst and either killed them or shipped them to Bliss. There was no love lost between any of the three groups – humans, aliens and Subs. Only shapeshifters were treated with equal ruthlessness.

"Oh you know," Shaw replied, "you could set her to do some work."

It occurred to Quinten that the solution to his nagging problems was staring him straight in the face. Literally. The female hadn't shifted her gaze from the moment she pinpointed him high up in one corner of the bay.

How does she know where I am?

"After all, Tamlan," Breit added, "this ship is pretty big for just one person to handle."

So, it was obvious to them as well. That wasn't welcome news.

"As long as you keep her on the nerve-chain," Shaw cut in, "she'll be as passive as a lump of putty, and not likely to betray you. And if you get lonely," he shrugged, "well, with that chain around her neck, she's not going to be too—"

Quinten unlocked his harness in one movement, and vaulted over the gantry's railing, landing hard on the floor. The thick metal vibrated as his boots hit the deck. He had towered over Shaw by a head when he was whole, and he looked down on the pirate now from that height.

"Too *what*, Shaw?" he growled.

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Shaw's eyes tightened and he looked away, but whether it was from the expression in Quinten's eyes, or the remnants of jagged scars that radiated from his right cheek across his entire face, didn't matter. Breit remained as still as a rodent, not drawing attention to himself. Only the Sub dared look him in the face and he was surprised to see that she was taller than he thought, the tip of her head just brushing his bottom lip. Her expression was impassive, detached, as if the men were discussing something other than her life.

"Noisy. I was going to say, she's not going to be too noisy," Shaw muttered.

It was a lie and they both knew it.

Quinten made a show of walking around her. Probably to safeguard their own security, they had dressed her in little more than what was strictly necessary. The tight, short-sleeved suit hugged slight curves, the leggings ending just below her knees. Her toes, like her fingers, were long and lean, tipped with short, colourless cuticles. Everything about her was bland and pale, except for those huge, angled, dark eyes that regarded him as if he were nothing more than an interesting biological specimen.

"We'll throw the nerve-chain in," Shaw added and didn't react to Breit's protesting gasp. "No charge. We reckon you'll need it."

"And what are you asking for in return?" Quinten took a step back and cocked his head, watching her intently.

"Captain Mestoo wants some shield technology," Breit said, easily stepping into his role as the cartel's head negotiator, but he didn't sound happy.

"You can buy your own shield technology," Quinten countered easily.

"Not like what you got."

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"Try one of the Drifts."

"They only have commercial-grade gear."

"You have to pay more for the black-ray stuff, Breit," Quinten told him dryly. "Even *you* know that. Tell Mestoo to pry open those purse-strings."

"You custom-built your screens."

"No I didn't. I bought commercial screens and fine-tuned them."

Sweat began beading on Breit's upper lip. Shaw, silent and watching both of them avidly, shifted from foot to foot. The Sub remained as if frozen.

"Fine-tuned, customised," Breit flicked a wrist, "they still outperform the stuff we can get our hands on. We don't have anything that can evade the military's sensors."

"I can't evade all their sensors."

"But you can evade more than most," Breit insisted, his voice rising.

Quinten considered the deal. Even if he traded an older version of his hand-crafted technology for the Sub, there was a slight chance that somebody could reverse-engineer what he'd done and find a vulnerability they could use against him. It wasn't worth the risk.

He shook his head. "Forget it." And turned to walk away.

"Wait!"

Shaw's frantic voice stopped him in his tracks. He slowly spun around and lifted a dark eyebrow.

"We don't know what to do with her," Shaw admitted with a hunched shrug. "We don't want the entire fucking government after us just because we have *her* with us. It's dangerous enough as it is for the cartel."

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Once word gets out that we have a Sub, one that murdered some fucking *gentry* family with more money than sense, everybody'll be wanting a piece of us."

"But you obviously don't mind if they have a piece of *me*?"

"Anyone with intelligence already knows to stay away from you."

Quinten saw the signs of strain on both pirates' faces. If he'd been them, he would have shoved the Sub back into the passenger craft the moment he'd discovered her, and given her three minutes to either take off or be blown into oblivion. Human-alien hybrids were more trouble than they were worth.

"And it's much harder to just go after the *Perdition* than the five ships that make up the Neon Reds. None of our ships are as fast as yours." Shaw was almost begging by now. "Give us something, Tamlan, and we'll be happy with that."

"You shouldn't have caught her."

"We didn't know there was a fucking *Sub* in that ship! We thought it was easy pickings. Looting, ransom, then a quick escape."

Silence filled the chill of the cargo bay.

"I have two military-grade shield units in storage," Quentin finally told them. "Republic-sourced, version five kernels. They're still working, but I upgraded my systems three years ago, and they're now obsolete.

"If you're prepared to pay for some additional custom work on top of that," he added, holding up a hand to forestall their objections, "you'll get something that'll give you a good chance of escaping a Space Fleet sweep. That's my offer. The two units for the Sub."

Shaw and Breit looked at each other.

"The *Harness* is one of the fastest ships your cartel

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has," Quinten pointed out, "and it can't outrun a Republic striker. Help yourselves. Take the screens. Increase your chances of survival."

"There are *five* ships in the Neon Reds," Breit said.

"I only have two shield units." He waited for three heartbeats. "If that isn't enough for you, then take the Sub back to your ship." The alien shifted at the words, and Quinten wondered how much of the conversation she understood. "Try selling her to someone else."

"We did," Shaw remarked, before Breit could stop him. "Nobody wanted her."

A cruel smile lifted the edges of Quinten's mouth, made even crueller by the pull of scar tissue on the right side of his face.

"Two shield units, Breit," he repeated. "That's my offer. Take it or leave it."

"Damn you, Tamlan."

And that's how Quinten knew the deal was done.



“She doesn’t talk,” Breit threw over his shoulder before they left. He and Shaw each carried one of the bulky screens across the cargo bay and carefully and laboriously lifted them across the hatch into the docked pod. Because the nerve chain was still attached to its control pad, and the control pad was still in Breit’s tight possession, the Sub was forced to walk with them as the units were moved.

When done, Breit straightened, idly rubbing the face of the chain controls with his thumb. The Sub remained on the other side of the hatch’s lip. After some silent deliberation, the pirate tossed the pad to Quinten, who caught it easily. “Don’t turn your back on her.”

Quinten didn’t reply. He watched as the pirates closed the hatch behind them, waited until the locking was complete then directed the *Perdition* to head back in the direction he’d come. Only after he done all that did he shift his gaze to his latest acquisition.

She was as skinny as he was under his suit. But if she could put up a credible fight against the Neon Reds, those pirates of bulk but little brain, then her whip-like body held more strength than was obvious. What was also obvious to him was her intelligence. He hadn’t imagined the small jerk of her body when she thought he was going to spurn the offer to purchase her. Just because she hadn’t said anything while in the cartel’s sweaty clutches didn’t mean she didn’t understand them. There was plenty of thought churning behind the liquid opacity of her eyes.

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She hadn't turned around when Shaw and Breit left, which was a point in her favour. If *he* had been in their hands for more than a week, he doubted he would have given them a second glance either.

"I suppose we have to find you some quarters," he mused aloud.

The whole deal had taken him by surprise. He knew he needed some help, but thought he had time to talk himself into it. Now, he looked at the pale figure at the end of the leash and grimaced. That was the other thing. The leash was effective but crude. He needed something as secure but more elegant.

"Follow me." That was a stupid thing to say, considering the nerve-chain that connected them both, but he wasn't going to tug on it like he saw Breit doing. With luck, he'd just found his newest, and first, crewmember, and he wasn't going to begin the relationship with such a naked display of force.

She followed him out of the cargo bay, pausing as he locked it behind him and initiated the security protocols that would rebuff any unauthorised docking attempts. He turned and continued down the corridor, trying to look at the *Perdition* through her eyes.

He could almost see the curved bow at the far end of the ship, down the straight corridor that ran the *Perdition's* length. The modification was ugly, but functional, cutting almost indiscriminately through every wall and system in its way. Some of the passage's edges were still a bit ragged from the brutal work that had gone on but Quinten didn't care. He was after functionality, not aesthetics. But he knew Kiel wouldn't have liked the black-decked gash that so ruthlessly tore

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through the ship, and he doubted his silent companion did either.

Too bad, he thought irritably. There were lots of things he'd do differently, if he had the time, money and foreknowledge. Life didn't always work to the advantage of the righteous.

His boots reverberated on the dark, springy catwalk but he noticed that she was as silent as a feline. It occurred to him that she could approach him, silently and unnoticed, when he was distracted or asleep, and he had to force himself not to glance backwards to check that she was still behind him. Just what he needed, something else to keep him on his toes.

He stopped a third of the way from the stern, and indicated a short stairway of three steps that led down to a closed door.

"We'll get something from here first."

She followed him into the storage room on those silent, naked feet.

Bare metal racks ran the inside perimeter of the medium-sized room, piled high with boxes of various shapes, all neatly labelled.

There were several storage rooms on the ship, and they each contained things he'd picked up on his travels, all of them useful and the vast majority still in working order. He scanned the labels, looking for something specific, the Sub trailing in his wake.

He found it in the far corner and removed both pieces of a set he'd salvaged at an outpost near the Barrens. It was a nerve-chain, but a more sophisticated design than the one currently around the Sub's neck. And he

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knew for certain that it worked, because he'd used it before. He gathered the components clumsily in his hands, the collar, the control pad and the wired pad he already held and looked at the alien, gesturing her closer.

For five seconds, while he juggled the various pieces of equipment, the Sub was as free as she was going to get – the control pad was swinging on one of his fingers, which meant she could sprint for the door and run the length of the ship before he'd even cleared the room. For a moment, he wondered if she would take that chance.

She didn't. Quinten glanced at the charge on both the collar and remote control while he waited for her to step forward. The units weren't full, not after four years, but there was still enough juice in both to run for another decade.

She approached, not reluctant but not willing either, and he had to admire her self-control. For all she knew, he was going to saddle her with something even worse. Having dealt with the Neon Reds for the past handful of years, Quinten had no doubt that the pirates had used the device on her a few times while she was their captive. Shaw, as the *Harness'* commander, might be focused on searching out the financial angle at every turn, but Breit was a smarmy and sadistic piece of work. Quinten wasn't surprised to know that it was Mestoo's sly dealmaster who had managed to find a nerve-chain so quickly at hand.

Quinten watched as she stepped closer. While alien, there was something lithe and feminine about the Sub's pale body. Quinten thought back to Shaw's careless comment....

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"And if you get lonely, well, with that chain around her neck, she's not going to be too—"

He thought of Breit burying himself in her while the nerve chain was switched on (*bastard!*) and one of his hands spasmed briefly in anger before he could check himself.

Taking a breath, he fastened the more sophisticated collar above the wired version, snapping it into place and pulling at it to test the lock, before he deactivated and removed the other. The old version was only secured with a single code and Breit had whispered it to him before they left. The new one was an encrypted DNA/biometric version with additional pin codes. Nobody would be getting out of it in a hurry. Before he threw Breit's chain onto the shelf, Quinten deactivated it completely, pulling out the small battery module and slipping it into one of the concealed pockets of his suit, just in case his newest acquisition had any idea of turning the tables on him. It's what he would have done in her place.

"Let's go," he told her, and led the way out of the storage room.

She followed, without requiring the length of chain to compel her. So, either she understood what he was saying, or he had damned transparent body language.

"I'm the captain of this ship," he began, conversationally, as they continued walking towards the bow. "And you are my new crewmember." He turned, casting a quick glance at her as she stayed half a step behind and to the right of him. She remained impassive, as if he didn't even exist. He faced forward again.

"The ship is called the *Perdition*. It's not a cheerful

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name, but I like it. It used to belong to the Republic, but it's all mine now and I intend keeping it that way."

He didn't even pause as they swept past the ladder leading up to the cockpit. Time enough for her to know where everything was located...later.

"All the systems on the *Perdition* are keyed to my voice, and include certain keywords so, even if you're a flawless mimic, you won't get very far should you decide to hold a one-alien mutiny. Also, the ship is primed to self-destruct within an hour if it doesn't hear from me, either live voice or comms, for one standard day." He slowed as he reached the front of the ship, and gestured to a small door at the top of a short ladder.

"Your quarters are through there. At the moment, you'll find some bedding, but the room's mostly filled with equipment I haven't had time to label yet, including belongings of the *Perdition's* former occupants. I suggest you search that for some footwear for yourself.

"If you want somewhere comfortable to rest, you'll have to clean out the room and make your own space. You know where one of the storage rooms is. There are four others, two on either side of the one you've been to. I want you to sort the equipment, then move it all out of your cabin and into the various storage rooms. Later on, I'll have a look at what you've done." He held up the small nerve-collar control. "This has quite a long range. Don't make me use it."

He didn't wait but walked away, letting her gaze bore into his back, if that was her wont. His suit was a wonderful piece of technology, but still demanded effort from his maimed body. At the end of two hours' use, despite the sophisticated mechanisms contained within it, it resembled a lead weight pulling him down, making

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him feel as though he could easily sink through the floor.

He kept his back ramrod straight until he reached the stairs down to his own quarters. When he looked back to the bow, it was empty. He didn't know how long she had watched him, or if she had even given him a single glance, before stepping up to what was once a two-person shipman's cabin.

Not that it mattered. He didn't care what anyone thought of him anymore. That was what made him so dangerous. In trying to kill him, the galaxy had only made him stronger.

Quinten let the door of his quarters slide shut, then he locked it. Once secure, he finally let out the sigh he'd been holding in and closed his eyes. Once upon a time, he could have run a ten-kilometre track with something like the exoskeleton on. Now, he could hardly walk two lengths of his ship. He pressed the small indentation by his right thigh again and the armour exhaled, loosening its grip on his body and falling away from him, like the exhausted petals of an over-amorous flower. He stepped out of it and scratched his bare chest. His body always felt itchy after he'd been in the suit, even though the specifications assured him that there was no significant friction against his skin, and that any perspiration he generated was wicked instantly away. At least it didn't recycle his spent fluids into something he could drink afterwards. That had been the "arid-world" option, and Quinten had turned it down with a quick shudder.

He limped to his console, dragging his armour with him, and throwing it onto the floor next to the desk. Before he sat, he reached for the seal-unit, flicking it open and pulling out a weapon. He chose a Corsair-Three, a medium-range hand pistol. It was heavy, which suited

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his psychological frame of mind, and loaded with explosive bio-sensitive rounds. That meant each bullet could penetrate a thin wall intact, exploding only when it met organic material. Like Sub flesh. He checked the load, snapped off the safety and placed it next to his right hand on the desk.

He wasn't going to worry about his alien friend for a while. There wasn't much she could do without tripping an alert. Even if she stuck to porting rubbish from one point to another, the ship would let him know after she'd completed a certain number of trips. If she stood still for too long, he would know that too. So far, he was safe. The real risk came only if he trusted her enough to give her limited access to the more important parts of the *Perdition*. And, judging by the speed with which the systems on the ship seemed to be falling over, like matter into a black hole, that risk might come up sooner than he liked.

The console screen hummed as it came online and Quinten checked the sensors' status again. If he'd hoped that the trip to the rendezvous point and back had shaken anything loose, he was mistaken. The same sensors were offline. It was starting to look as though the readings weren't false negatives after all.

Next, he checked the news nets, both legitimate and black-ray. Together, both sets of intel gave him a good idea of the state of play within the galaxy. Of course, the Republic dominated the news. He was in Republic space, after all, and they were the biggest player around, but he was surprised to hear news from other sectors start to creep in. A treaty had just been signed between two Outsider factions based near the Fodox Stellar Barrens. Why they hadn't thought of that before was beyond Quinten. The Barrens was such a vast,

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empty stretch of space – absent of more than a handful of hyperspace creases – that the Republic could lose half its fleet traversing it and still not have any success tracking down its enemies.

“They should have united decades ago,” he muttered aloud, “instead of fighting each other.”

It made him angry to think of the lost opportunities. There had been moments, he was sure of them, when the Republic had overstretched itself, muscling into new territory with inadequate resources. What a united opposition could have done with such a situation, he marvelled. It just begged for some smart counter-planning and execution. But there had been only him. Him and Kiel and their small group of like-minded rebels, caught between a crushing fist and a gaggle of squabbling idiots. They had done what they could, had achieved more than they'd hoped. And then came Gilgan, and everything had unravelled in a heartbeat.

He stared at the console screen. What the *Perdition* needed was a complete overhaul. There was equipment on some of the refit stations that could nail down a microamp circuit tremor through three hull thicknesses. That was the kind of expertise he needed. Unfortunately, most of the top-grade ship repair stations were run by the Republic. It was their way of controlling interstellar commerce and traffic. However, there were a few hardy outfits that operated independently, skirting legality by taking on a few covert assignments now and then. Quinten wondered if any of them would be interested in giving his ship a thorough going over.

But the search for a cooperative, *trustworthy* refit station would take time and, at the moment, he had

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malfunctioning sensors that required repair as quickly as possible. Not to mention the added responsibility of a new crewmember.

Quinten initiated a search on Type B humanoids and quickly skimmed the displayed results. There was surprisingly little intel available, most of it fable and wild speculation. He sifted through file after file, and managed to piece together what he thought were the relevant details.

Breeding between humans and aliens was an expensive and complicated process for the most part. There was the basic discord between body chemistries to consider. Genetic no-matches of zygotes. Immune defence issues. Body fluid compatibility problems. The huge cost of manufacturing medication to ensure the foetus remained healthy until it reached the end of its incubation period. The ongoing monitoring during childhood for signs of abnormalities and disease. And to what end? The production of beings who may have looked superficially human but who were bound to give themselves away through a physiological, cultural or behavioural misstep? The creation of a sentient creature that was mistrusted by all?

After such an enormous investment, the pay-off was negligible. No alien, hybrid or full, was ever going to sit in the Senate, and everyone in Republic space knew it. And, considering the bewildering mish-mash of biogenetics and chemicals required to keep most Subs alive, the idea of one of them ever having children of its own was ludicrous as well.

No, there was nothing logical about creating a Sub, but that didn't stop people doing it. As a biological experiment? To show that it was possible? Maybe they were motivated by love? A shortsighted delusion, in

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that case. There was no way Quinten would ever have exposed a child of his to the kind of distaste regularly meted out to Subs.

But if Kiel and I had had a child, wouldn't we have done exactly that, and damn the consequences? Wouldn't we have thought that love trumped all?

Quinten shook his head and concentrated on the screen. This wasn't about his past and questions that had never arisen. This was about his future and a very real alien currently moving boxes from one room to another.

After an intensive period of further reading, he sat back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face. His new alien was obviously an adult. So who had nurtured her? Raised her? From her lack of human behaviour characteristics, it must have been one of the alien species. But which one? Where was her community? And what was she doing in the Chimpect sector, which could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be called an isolated sector of the galaxy? The only reason a cartel as amateur in operation as the Neon Reds had survived so long was because their territory was densely populated. That meant they could usually find a customer somewhere willing to buy the scrappy goods they managed to haul in. In a sparser region of space, they would have starved themselves into oblivion within a year.

Why had the Sub been caught in a heavily-populated area? Shouldn't she and her companions have been hiding out in a quieter part of the galaxy? Chimpect. It defied reason.

Quinten looked up at the chrono, startled to see that three hours had flown past. On another screen, little

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blinks of text told him that the alien had been moving continuously from her quarters to the storage rooms while he had been buried in inquiry. It was past time to have a look at her work.

Stepping back into the exoskeleton, Quinten activated it, then reached for the Corsair-Three...and hesitated. Would the alien be in any condition to give him trouble, especially after three hours of labour and with that collar around her neck? But he believed in backup plans to backup plans, so he grabbed the weapon, holstered it on his thigh, and left his quarters to see what she'd been up to.

When Quinten came across the part of the catwalk where she'd been working, he saw four neat piles of equipment on the steps leading down to four of the five storage rooms. Of course, he'd forgotten to give clearance for her to open the doors. The fifth – the one he'd entered originally – was a little bit more packed than during his previous visit. He checked that the obsolete nerve-chain was still where he left it, and saw that his new worker had stowed everything in meticulous order. An organised female, just what he liked.

She came back from her new quarters as he was examining the room, carrying only a transparent panel casing that she carefully placed with the others, running her fingers down their sides to make sure they were stacked neatly in one column.

"Did the Neon Reds give you anything to eat before you left?" he asked, after she finished checking the casings.

She faced him, but said nothing.

"Maybe you only eat once a week," he muttered. The

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intel he'd skimmed had been glaringly uninformative on hybrid eating habits, probably because there was such a variety of them. He raised his voice, trying again. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

Quinten stared at her, unsure what surprised him more – that she could obviously both understand and speak *ingel* – the Republic's *lingua franca* – or that the voice that emerged from that white, alien throat was such a pleasing contralto.

"Can you eat what I eat?" he asked, staring at her through narrowed eyes.

"I don't know," she answered steadily. "What do you eat?"

Her voice was measured, hopping to its own, slower rhythm. Quinten felt like a man on fast-forward just listening to it.

"Manufactured meat," he answered. "Grains. Fruit. Vegetables."

"Some of your food contains acids that are incompatible with my chemistry."

"Such as?"

She paused. "Some organic acids, such as oxalic, can be detrimental to my health over a long term."

Over a long term. So it looked like he didn't have anything to worry about for the present. For now, they could both rely on the food being grown and stored on the ship before he needed to procure alternatives.

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He looked around and pursed his lips in appreciation. "You're very orderly in your work. I like that."

She said nothing.

"Have you finished cleaning out your quarters?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose we should get something to eat."

"Yes."

He lifted his left eyebrow, the one that didn't look like it had been sliced into pieces with a blunt knife. "Follow me, then."

It was early evening, ship-time. Again, Quinten strolled nonchalantly past the ladder leading up to the cockpit, directing his alien companion to an alcove close to his quarters. The alcove led to a small kitchen area, its entirety visible over the short, wide ledge that separated the two areas.

Quinten had originally created the cosy space with a view to cementing strategic relationships over food and drink. He'd been thinking of proposing partnerships to several of the more influential cartels within, and apart from, Republic space. At the time, he had been driven by a fierce need for revenge, coupled with a gut-wrenching sense of loss. It was only now, half a decade later, that he realised that his new crewmember was the first being ever to see it. Somewhere along the way, his grief and the hopelessness of the situation had eaten away at him, eroding his sense of purpose. He had created a place where he could meet, plan and plot, but had never used it.

Unhappy with where his thoughts were leading, Quinten

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indicated an empty chair with a jerk of his hand.

"Have a seat."

He entered the kitchen, scanning the equipment as if he'd never seen it before. In some way, that was true. Food had lost its taste years ago. He only ever entered the kitchen to fix something quick that would kill the pangs of hunger and enable him to continue with his reading and brooding. Most of the time, he had something to read in his hand, only noticing the surroundings if a piece of the machinery gave him any trouble or indicated it was low on a particular ingredient or food. As long as nothing beeped at him, he ignored it.

He glanced quickly across the counter and saw the alien sitting, her head still towering above the table...and able to see every speck of sticky grease and layers of brown-black dirt that he never cared to remove.

Damn, but the place was a mess! He knew he shouldn't care about what some alien – and, moreover, an alien he essentially *owned* – thought of how he kept his living space, but he couldn't hide a sense of embarrassment. After seeing the way she had so carefully and efficiently stacked her cabin's surplus equipment, the obvious grime of the small galley made him feel uncomfortable.

"Here's something else you can start on tomorrow," he told her brusquely, deliberately not meeting those liquid eyes. "I have better things to do than clean up leftovers." Discomfited, he banged around, making more noise than was strictly necessary as he slid open cabinet doors and peered inside.

"You said no oxalic acid?" he asked quickly at one point. She nodded. "Okay, nothing sour, then. And no nuts."

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She watched him as if she had no other worries on her mind, seemingly content to follow the monotonous movements of his hands and arms as he punched up braised meat, boiled grain, mixed a basic sauce, and slopped it all together on two plates. He edged past the counter, placed one plate in front of her, the other at an opposite position, then went back to the kitchen to grab two bulbs of juice, letting them rock a little on the table after putting them down while he rose once more to grab some cutlery. He knew he was out of practice dealing with guests as he made yet a fourth trip to the galley to get some seasonings. He just hoped his lack of hospitality experience didn't show too much.

Quinten didn't wait or say anything to indicate that they should both start eating. He picked up a fork and dug straight in. The alien hesitated, picked up her corresponding piece of cutlery...and Quinten suddenly realised that she could lunge straight across the table and bury that semi-sharp instrument into some sensitive part of his anatomy. Swiftly, he switched his fork to his left hand, letting his right drift down next to the holster at his thigh. She didn't seem to notice his movement. She gazed at the curved silver matte surface of the cutlery for a moment, then delicately scooped some food onto it.

That, more than anything else, showed Quinten that the alien was quintessentially female. She had the same fluid grace, the same particular way of approaching food, that Kiel had. Kiel had been a fighter, a woman of strong opinion and sometime ruthlessness. She had also been the most feminine person Quinten had ever met, only lowering her guard around him, allowing him to see her tenderness and gentle concern. She was—

"Are you Quinten Tamlan?" the alien asked suddenly.

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He stopped in mid-chew, then swallowed leisurely. "I thought you would have known that by now."

"Tamlan is a rare name, but not unique. Are you Quinten Tamlan?"

"What if I am?"

"I was curious." She set her fork down. Her plate was half-full. "The Republic wants you."

He grinned, unabashed. "The Republic wants people like you worse."

She blinked slowly. "That is true."

"Speaking of which, what were you doing in the Chimpect sector? Isn't that a bit far from the usual Sub haunts?"

Truth be told, he had very little idea of where hybrids preferred to congregate. But he figured that they weren't too much into socialising with other species.

Something flickered across her face, momentarily arresting him. So, contrary to much of what he'd recently read, she was capable of emotion. The signs were subtler than with full-blood humans, but not altogether absent. He was cheered by the observation that his latest acquisition was not as unreadable as she initially appeared.

"Yes. We try to stay away from," another flicker, "citizens."

He kept eating, letting the silence draw out, looking up at her expectantly in between mouthfuls.

"My clan was discovered. We lived in the D'Cisnam

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sector. Where exactly doesn't matter. Not anymore."

She picked up her fork and kept eating but, by the way she moved more food around than lifted any to her mouth, Quinten got the feeling she was doing that more to occupy herself.

"Who found you?" he asked. "The Republic?"

"Does anyone else have such capacity?"

"You said 'clan'. So you belonged to a community of people?"

"Yes."

"And did it include your family? Your parents?"

"No." Did he imagine it, or was there a trace of sadness in her voice? Still, that would back up his supposition that the hybrid was an anomaly. He wondered what made one alien community adopt a being from a different species. He couldn't imagine a band of human Republic citizens doing the same thing.

"What did the Republic do when they found your people?"

She looked up at him. "What do you think they did, Quinten Tamlan? Are you that ignorant of the actions of your own government?"

She was either brave or stupid, or both, talking to him like that. With his suit on, he could crush her windpipe with two fingers.

"So they killed your people, but you escaped," he said with a careless drawl. "How?"

"It was my turn for the cleansing meditation. I was

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alone, and away from my clan, when the Space Fleet attacked. I disguised - hid - myself. They didn't find me."

"How did you get offplanet?"

"I waited months. Alone. A group of scientists visited. Biologists, I think. I escaped on their ship."

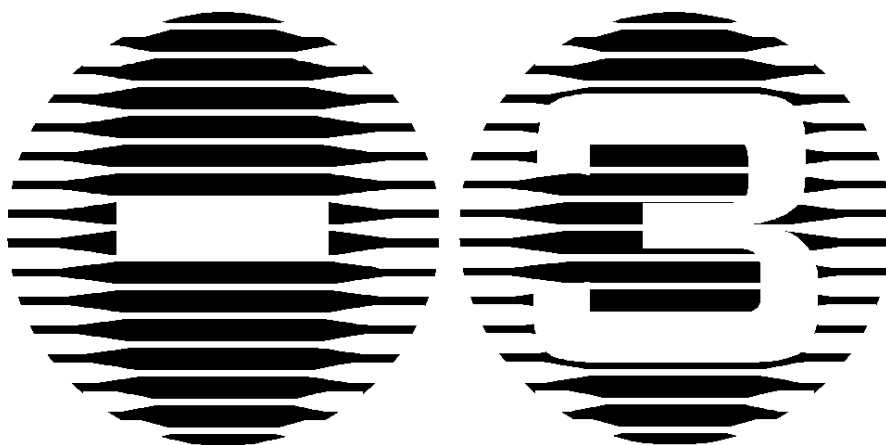
He looked at her for a long moment, and she met his gaze with a steady one of her own. Her story was probable. In fact, he had heard dozens of such stories during his lifetime. Stories of people and property being taken against their will, of a merciless government and its endemic corruption. That was what had propelled him and Kiel to first start up their own resistance to the Republic, to show people that they were far from helpless, to demonstrate to the average person that they could stop the corruption and the carnage. What fools they'd been.

"I'll unlock the doors to the other four storage rooms tomorrow," he finally told her, letting his fork drop to the plate with a noisy clatter. "Finish that, then you can start here on the galley. After lunch, we'll start troubleshooting the sensor arrays."

"Where is your ship going now?"

"You mean, where are we headed? Some place safe. That's all you need to know."

She nodded. "'Safe' is a very good word, Quinten Tamlan. A very good word indeed."



The very first time Quinten saw her moving towards him, he was smitten. It was the totality of her that turned the best of his intentions to ash and the words in his mouth to incoherent mumbles. It was the glowing golden hue of her skin, smooth and unblemished. The startling green eyes that saw far more than they should. The feminine curves that ached to be touched and stroked. The dark hair that gleamed like the smoothest space-black shielding.

She walked towards him, and Quinten swore he saw the eddies of air shift as she moved through them, changing the chaotic swirls in the bar to ripples that mirrored her own sensuality. He felt the heart beating in his chest – a frenzied, excited tattoo – never taking his gaze from her as she walked towards him. Her full lips curved into a smile, dredging a response from him.

Kiel. Kiel Souiad. She came closer, past the groups in the crowded bar, her walk confident and alluring. She was a dozen steps away. Then a handful. His arms almost opened to enfold her gently, but he exerted iron-control instead. He twisted the smile on his face to an understanding, half-amused approbation. And watched as his vision strolled into the arms of the young man standing next to him, Faks Somen.

“This is the enchantress I’ve been telling you about, Ten.” Faks arm was firm and possessive around Kiel’s waist, branding ownership with each casual stroke of his thumb. “Kiel, this is a friend of mine, Quinten Tamlan.”

He wanted her voice to be shrill and lisping, just so he could have some small scrap of pride to hold onto. He needed her to be unattractive, in at least one thing, so he could wrap the tatters of his self-respect around him and stalk off with his head held high. She opened her

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lips and he waited with arrested breath. And the voice that poured from those lips was low, throaty, and a howl of torment tore through his mind.

"So *you're* Quinten," she said. "Faks has told me a lot about you."

"Unfortunately," Quinten replied, trying to be both gallant and offhand at the same time, "he told me too little of *you*."

She laughed and Faks signalled to the bar staff that he was ready. The three of them were directed to a small table in a corner, where they could surreptitiously watch the other patrons come and go. That's what Quinten liked about Faks. His friend had a healthy sense of self-preservation. Not surprising when he was heir to the second-largest pirate band in the sector, the Mitres Raygun cartel.

"How's work?" Quinten asked once they were seated, more to start a topic that didn't have anything to do with Kiel Souiad than through any genuine curiosity.

"The Old Man says he has some nice deals set up."

"Is he ready to retire yet?"

Faks shrugged, after ordering a round of drinks. "He may just hang on till the bitter end. Keeps on threatening to buy a moon and settle there, but it's all talk. It always is with him."

"Well," Quinten said, as he always did at this juncture of the conversation, "if I were you, the first thing I'd do upon inheriting the cartel is change its name."

Faks looked shocked. "You don't like the name?"

"Mitres Raygun?" Quentin kept his voice bland.

"Mitres Raygun was once the most powerful pirate in Republic space. He was the first person who cobbled

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together a sector of little bands into one fist of larcenous intent." Faks mirrored action to words, clenching his own hand into a tight ball of tensed fingers. "If it hadn't been for the dreadful showing at 59 SilverEye, it could well have been *his* descendants ruling the Republic rather than, er, the Republic." His fingers relaxed, making a resigned gesture.

"It's still a strange name, Faks."

The young pirate nudged Kiel, lifting her hand and kissing the delicate fingertips. "Ten's showing his roots. He comes from the thinking class, you know."

Something perked up, deep in the green depths of Kiel's eyes. "Your parents are scientists?" she asked.

"Specialist engineers," Quinten replied shortly. He didn't like talking about his parents, not in a bar in the Tercom sector that was a little further out of his comfort zone than he liked to admit.

But Kiel couldn't be deflected. "Engineers? With real, Republic-endorsed qualifications? Privileged status throughout the known galaxy?" Her eyes sparkled. "What's it like to be the child of engineers?"

Quinten would have shrugged off the question or point-blank refused to answer, but this was Kiel Souiad asking.

"I don't know," he admitted, "not having anything to compare it with."

"Until he met me," Faks interjected with pride.

Quinten nodded. "That's right. I met Faks a year ago, right here in this bar."

Faks shifted, making himself comfortable. "Ten was slumming it from one of the controlled enclaves and I was stopping for a rest before the Old Man ordered us out on another foray. My little naïve Republican stood

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out like a ripe pimple on pale skin."

"Faks came over and tried to talk me into some stupid deal," Quinten picked up the story with a laugh. "Nano bubble chips or something. I refused, we got into a fight and ended up being thrown out of the bar together."

"He's stronger than he looks," the pirate conceded.

"It was only after we became friends that I realised that not everybody had the same upbringing I did." He tortured himself by gazing upon Kiel's beautiful features - her full lips, lively eyes and high cheekbones. "We were moved around a lot, for example, from sector to sector, depending on what work the Republic wanted my parents to do. We've been stationed here for almost three years now, but that's some kind of record." He shook his head. "It's not what you'd call a stable life."

"But you were given accommodation, weren't you?" Faks insisted. "And first schooling preferences?"

Kiel's eyes widened as Quinten nodded. "That was part of the deal. We got moved around, so we got concessions."

"You didn't have to apply to several schools at the same time?" she asked, her eyes wide. "Queue up on enrolment days? Bribe the guards? Pay off the administrators?"

Quinten, ashamed, shook his head.

It was only when he had met Faks, on a trip to a disreputable part of the city that he had carried out as a personal dare, that Quinten realised exactly how sheltered his life had been. The impetuous fight with a pirate cartel's heir-apparent had solidified into a firm friendship, and Faks had used each stopover in the sector to catch up with him. Through their conversations - talks of deals gone wrong, scams gone right, discussions of ship, orbital and planetside

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firepower – Quinten found out exactly what life was like for the majority of Republic citizens.

He found out that education was something that couldn't be taken for granted. Faks, as one example, was mostly self-taught. His father had managed to snatch periods of time when the cartel was laying low to throw money at private tutors for his son, but those times, as Faks himself admitted, were rare and little more than tedious inconveniences. Whatever Faks had made of himself, he had done so without the advantages that Quinten had considered a birthright.

Upon further investigation, Quinten found out that the search for accommodation was also expensive, stressful and fraught with risk. So much so that most so-called galactic citizens had never even toured their own planetary system, much less travelled further abroad. He heard, first-hand, of the grinding poverty that most people lived under, even if the points were made tangentially while Faks was boasting about something else.

At the age of twenty-nine, with a promising plasma mechanics' doctorate within reach, Quinten Tamlan realised that he was one of the fortunate ones, even though he was sensitive to the expressions of worn-down resignation on his parents' faces. On the cusp of his thirtieth birthday, he was swiftly coming to the conclusion that there were no winners in the Republic, except for those at the very top of a corrupt pyramid. And, while he might be further up the pyramid than, say, Faks or Kiel, he was still regarded as one of the drones, existing only to further the ambitions of the very few.

"What a life," Kiel breathed, breaking into his thoughts. "Moving freely from system to system. Not having to worry about where to live or what to eat. Getting *paid* to go places."

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Her eyes took on a faraway look, as if fantasising about another life, before she segued back to the present, her lips curving with a timid embarrassment.

"My parents run a small optimisation shop for propulsion systems," she said. "That's where I met Faks."

She looked at her boyfriend shyly, and Quentin would have gladly killed his friend, just for the chance to have her look at him like that. He gulped at his drink, trying to drown the corrosion searing his throat.

"Kiel's parents do good work," Faks said. "They're under the protection of the Mitres Rayguns."

That's all it took – one sentence from Faks Somen – and the gate clicked shut, effectively barring Quinten from entry. This wasn't his world he was peering into. This was another society altogether, based on patronages and alliances different to what he was used to.

He laughed and joked through the rest of the meal, doing his best to avoid a green-eyed, speculative gaze, but depressingly conceded that the chasm that existed at that very table was far too wide for him to jump. It was like peering into another galaxy, one where Kiel was present...and he was absent.

Well after midnight, Quinten took the tube-car back to his campus. He had never felt so bitter in his life.



"I've been trying to talk to you for weeks now."

Quinten was back at the bar, four weeks after his first introduction to Kiel. Faks and the Mitres Raygun cartel

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were three sectors away, embroiled in their latest caper.

He perched uncomfortably on a stool at one of the restaurant's lower levels, one foot poised, toes pointed to the exit, as if ready for retreat. He had refused the offer of a private table, not wanting any of Faks' friends who might have been present to get the wrong idea about what was going on. He didn't want anyone to think he was trying to ride the Raygun's coattails, jostling in on their territory. Seated next to him, yet far enough away for someone else to comfortably fit in between, Kiel Souiad frowned.

He took a sip of his drink, wondering at the insanity that possessed him to turn up at one of Faks' favourite haunts. He had been avoiding Kiel's comm calls for three weeks now. Three weeks of priding himself on his superior self-control. And yet, after holding out for twenty-four days, here he was, sitting in the bar at her request. Certifiably insane, he told himself. Insane, with a death wish.

"Does Faks want something?" he asked shortly. His friend often asked him to get courses or software to help with his own studies, and Quinten was happy to oblige. He was desperately hoping that this was another such occasion.

"I'm sure he does," she replied evenly, "Faks is always after something. But that's not why I wanted to see you."

She looked at him hopefully.

"Why do you want to see me?" he finally asked, after several silent minutes accumulated between them.

"I wanted to get to know you better." Her green eyes were clear and candid. "I've never met someone from one of the knowledge classes before."

"I'm human, just like you," he joked, knowing the jest

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was limp.

She refused to let him off the hook. "No, you're not. Not really. I mean, of course you're human, but you've had experiences, you've been to places that only the cartels can match. I want to know more about that." Her gaze became bolder. "More about you."

He gulped his drink and put the empty glass back on the counter with a bit more energy than he intended. It clunked noisily on the hard surface. "Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not a databank. And if you want to find out about what it's like in the other sectors, I'm sure Faks will be only too happy to fill you in." He pushed back his chair.

"It's because of Faks that you won't talk to me, isn't it?"

Her husky voice made him hesitate.

"You're afraid that he'll think you're trying to steal me away from him."

He stared at the bar counter for a long moment.

"Yes," he finally admitted. "You're Faks' girlfriend, and it's more than either of our lives are worth to continue this discussion." He dared look at her then, telling himself that it was only for a moment but, in cowardice, focused his eyes on a point past her – so she was just a golden, enticing blur – before sliding his gaze away.

"I'm not his possession," she objected, her voice hot. "I get to make my own decisions." She hesitated, then added, "Within reason."

His lips quirked but his mind was made up. He rose. "Thanks for the drink. Good night."

Her voice accosted him as he walked away. "What if I break it off with Faks? Would you see me then?"

Quinten froze then spun around, pinning her with a narrowed gaze as he damned his suddenly racing heart

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and the feet that were carrying him back to her. "What did you say?"

Her eyes sparked emerald. Not even the dim light in the bar could diminish their brightness. "What if I tell Faks it's over? We could wait a couple of months, just so nobody thinks you put me up to it. Would you tell me about your life then?"

"You would give up Faks? For me?" He knew he sounded desperate and self-pitying. He didn't care. It was only the truth. Faks was the heir to the one of the largest pirate cartels in the sector. He was still a student and only a part-time tutor at the local university.

"I would give up Faks," she corrected him primly, "because I choose to. Not because of you, but because of me."

"But you said yourself that we could wait—"

"Because that's the way you're thinking," she interrupted. "In my mind, the two events are discrete. I'm only offering a gap of two months to make you feel better."

He looked down at her, not fully appreciating until that moment exactly how much spirit Kiel Souiad held in her small, lithe body. He blinked at her a couple of times – she watched him steadily – then he stepped back to the chair, easing himself down into it again.

"Why leave Faks? He's richer than almost anyone else I know. He's richer than me," Quinten admitted.

"Money isn't everything," she told him, and he could have believed, at that moment, that she was older than the twenty-five years he knew her to be. It was another reminder of the distance that yawned between them.

"Everything?" he queried. "What do you think 'everything' is?"

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"‘Everything’ is justice," she said. "Principles. A life lived with honesty."

Her words made him feel uncomfortable, as if taunting him with what he didn't have, didn't know.

"What makes you think I have that?" he bluffed.

She shook her head and smiled at him. "I never said you had it. I merely answered your question. You're a prickly one, aren't you?"

But Quinten refused to be sidetracked. "What will Faks say if you tell him you want to end the relationship?"

"He already knows. It's been coming for a while. He's asked me to marry him on three separate occasions—"

Something painful wrenched in Quinten's gut.

"—but I keep saying no. It's just his stubbornness that keeps him around. Plus he has to stay in my parents' good books. The work we do is very important to his father's business."

She was like a live flame, enticing with its warmth while ready to scorch any unwary soul that ventured too close. She was assured, intelligent, beautiful, and Quinten never wanted another woman as badly as he wanted Kiel Souiad.

"That brings up a good point," he forced himself to say. "What will happen to your parents if you break it off with Faks?"

"Nothing will happen to them. They're good suppliers for the cartel. Faks' father won't let it affect his livelihood. He can't afford to."

He looked at her, and wondered how long she had been thinking this through. Four weeks? Ever since she met

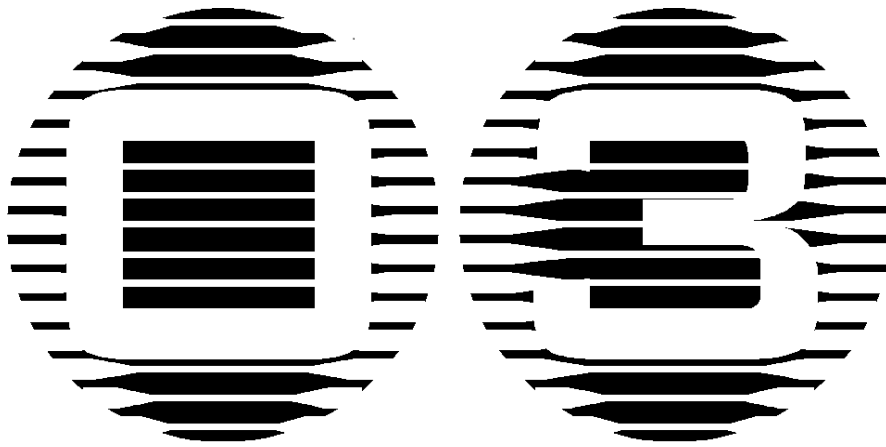
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him? Maybe it was conceit that made him think that, but Quinten thought he could have used a bit of conceit in his life. He had precious little of anything else.

"Two months," he said softly to himself.

"We could make it shorter," she remarked, the mischief obvious in her voice. "One month, or—"

Quinten cleared his throat. "Two months sounds just fine."



It was more than seven years since the disaster that had reshaped his entire world, and what had Quinten done with his life? Considering the living death he had buried himself in, he might have been better off pursuing a career in plasma mechanics the way his parents had wanted. If he'd stuck with the university track, he'd probably be running a lab of his own by now with full Republic funding, exchanging pleasant missives with other scientists ensconced in their own luxurious prisons. Permission would be granted for him to visit with other researchers several times a year, he'd probably be married, and his children enrolled in exclusive, high-calibre schools that only demanded that they follow the same treadmill path of their parents.

To follow such a path would have been a death, a life without meaning. But, in the end, would it have been so different to where he was now? Angry with the direction of his thoughts, Quinten jabbed a button at his console and skimmed the results of the ship's quick surface-scan. The sensors were still out, but the output also indicated intermittent failures in the hydroponic lighting and general life-support systems. He stared at the screen as he mapped out a repair plan in his head.

The Sub – he supposed he would have to either ask for or give it a name soon – was already shifting cargo into the storage rooms. The first thing Quinten had done when he had woken up in the morning was grant her access to the four small bays, but she was still barred from entering any other parts of the ship. Quinten was without his suit and before his morning workout. He wasn't yet up to showing her the extent of his physical disabilities. Neither, he thought, gazing at the screen, was he going to give her access to the life-support systems. He could use the *Perdition's* diagnostics to

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check the work he'd assign her on the sensors and lighting systems, but he would haul his crippled body and sort out any critical issues himself.

Were hybrids generally tougher than humans? Were they capable of sustaining enough alien physiology to, say, survive a partial vacuum? Bitter cold? Quinten thought he knew a little about a lot of things in the galaxy, but Subs was one area about which he knew nothing at all. That made him uncomfortable. In between research, he supposed he'd better spend time extracting information from his new crewmember. Regardless of whether she would turn out to be a friend or enemy, knowledge of beings like her was imperative.

He laboriously got to his feet and winced as his left leg protested. That was another thing he'd neglected over the years. He'd been regularly working out but had to admit that he exercised only enough to maintain his current level of mobility, one that hadn't changed since he'd risen from the black ray med-bunk after he'd almost been killed. Quinten had avoided visiting any organic medical personnel for subsequent check-ups, relying solely on AIs instead. He did this for two reasons. One, because AIs couldn't be bribed; two, and more importantly, because he knew that any sentient doctor would have told him that he should have recovered more fully by now. The scars riddled his face and body like angry seams, but that was because he didn't want to lose them. Physical reconstruction might smooth the scar tissue, but would mean he'd irrevocably lost Kiel – the last traces of the last sight of her at Gilgan – and he couldn't stand that. But, memories aside, his body should certainly be capable of doing more than it did now.

Quinten slapped his leg and massaged it roughly, trying to rub away the cramp that knotted the muscle. What had he done to niggle the Republic for the past half-decade? His fingers dug into the flesh next to a tendon, pushing at it in an effort to ease the spasm. Almost

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nothing. He had nipped at some opportune heels, destroying a couple of research labs that were being constructed in the outlying sectors or hijacking the occasional military transport, but he had not struck a significant blow for years. Not since he'd turned his back on the rest of the Alliance, banishing even Venkat Digby with an unforgiving snarl. He idly wondered where his senior engineer was, then quashed the thought savagely. He hadn't thought of Digby for months. Hadn't thought of the sum of his life for years. And the only reason for his unusual musings now was because of the Sub toiling near the storage rooms.

"The damn woman needs a name," he muttered to himself, limping over to where his exoskeleton was stored. He levered himself into it, activating it and grabbing the small nerve-chain control unit on the way out of his quarters.

By the time he reached the bays, they'd been cleared of the piles of equipment that had littered the front of the doors from the day before. Was she trying to impress him? If she was, she had succeeded. He bounded down the steps into one of the rooms and saw the same methodical result as from the previous day.

It all seemed...too good to be true.

With a frown, Quinten turned and tried the other rooms, finding her in the third one. Her back was to him, and she was bending down, putting what looked like a case of assorted wiring on a rack's bottom shelf.

Quinten wouldn't have been human if he didn't feel the slight kick in his groin at the sight of her slim backside. From behind, he couldn't see the impassivity of her features that marked her as an alien. A Sub. From behind, he couldn't see the startling paleness of her skin, contrasting so dramatically with the liquid obsidian of her eyes. All he could see was a shapely and feminine form on his ship, at his command. It had been

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years since he'd been with a woman. Not since Kiel. At first, because it took every gram of effort merely to keep himself alive. Then, because he considered any lascivious thought a betrayal of her memory. And now, because he just couldn't find anyone he trusted enough to lose himself in, even for a few minutes.

Shaw's words taunted him. She had a nerve chain on after all. What could she possibly do if he—

Quinten cleared his throat noisily, watching as the Sub leisurely straightened. Was she missing the human startle response as well?

She didn't say a word as she turned to face him.

"Have you had any breakfast?" he asked brusquely.

"No."

"Then follow me."

The kitchen was as messy as the day before, but Quinten pretended not to notice. He programmed himself something then paused. "What will you have?"

The alien seated herself. "What I ate yesterday was acceptable."

It wasn't just that Subs looked different or moved differently. They didn't speak like humans either. They were like a construction set put together by a child. The functionality was there, but there were no subtleties.

He requested the dish of braised meat and grains with sauce and set both breakfasts on the table with a thud. If she wanted to eat the same thing, day in and day out, that was fine with him.

"Why are you hybrids so different?" he asked abruptly,

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after several minutes. He took a mouthful of food, chewed, then swallowed. "Didn't your community teach you how to be more human?"

"They weren't human."

That confirmed one supposition. "Have you met other hybrids?"

"Subs, you mean." There was a flicker of something in her eyes.

Quinten dug into the food on his plate with a little more force than necessary. "Yes. Have you met other Subs?"

"A few."

"Why are you so different?"

She stared at him for several moments, unblinking. "I don't understand."

Quinten got up to get himself a drink, but continued talking. "Subs are part human, right? But the way you move and talk is still alien. Is there some kind of genetic component to acting like a human that none of you have?"

He threw a bulb of juice across to her and she caught it in one hand, slowly placing it on the table before she went back to eating.

"Have you met any other Subs, Quinten Tamlan?" she asked.

He settled more comfortably in his chair, slouching into it with his long legs stretched out straight.

"Nope," he replied.

"How do you know?"

Quinten stopped with his drink halfway to his mouth as the question sank in. As he stared at her, she

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continued.

"There are so many variations of humanity that a well-socialised Sub – as you put it – could easily assimilate into your communities. As, I'm sure, many have. You humans have such arrogance. You think only you have the emotions to show full sentience. As if the rest of us are nothing more than performing animals for your pleasure."

Her voice was controlled, but there was a raspiness to it that indicated strong emotion behind her impassive features.

Quinten took a deep swallow and saluted her mockingly. "Yet you're part human yourself, aren't you?"

"Not through choice, Quinten Tamlan."

His temper rose. "So, if there are Subs walking around, masquerading as humans, where did *you* go wrong? Who was your community?"

"You wouldn't know them. As humans don't know many species with which they co-exist. The question is irrelevant."

Stung, Quinten threw the empty juice bulb into his bowl. "I'm just trying to make polite conversation," he drawled. "But I'll be sure to stay away from personal topics next time."

He got to his feet, knowing he sounded curt but unable to help himself. That was the problem with being on his own for seven years. He had lost the ability to give and take in a conversation, to take into account someone else's feelings. Maybe he had become as inhuman as his new crewmember.

"Why don't you clean up here?" he suggested, deliberately softening his voice. "Find out how the meal assistant works. Maybe program some compatible

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dishes for yourself."

She stared at him.

"Once you're done," he doggedly continued, "you can go back to your work at the storage rooms. Or you can finish with the storage units first, and come back here. It's your preference. We'll have our work cut out for us this evening because I'll be sending you to check the sensor arrays."

"I'm not an engineer."

Quinten briefly, wistfully, thought of Digby. "Doesn't matter. We'll make do."

With a curt nod, he left her, remembering to take the nerve-chain unit with him.



If there was one thing Caff had learnt from her people, it was that one shouldn't hate an inanimate object. But Caff couldn't help herself. She hated the nerve-chain and its control unit with a passion, along with the humiliation it entailed.

It had taken another hour to finish with the storage areas, and she was now back in the small kitchen, working to remove several layers of grime. Considering how many functions were automated, she still couldn't believe how filthy the cooking and preparation sections were. It was as though they hadn't been cleaned in years.

Caff paused for a moment. Maybe they hadn't. Maybe Tamlan had moved into the *Perdition* after fleeing whatever disaster had obviously maimed him...and had

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done very little since.

She'd heard about the *Perdition*, of course, but only in relation to its mysterious, reclusive pirate/owner. The name Quinten Tamlan was a semi-legend among the Republic's more detested minority groups. At one time, his group – the "ST Alliance" – was revered as something that could help break the Republic's stranglehold on its part of the galaxy. It may have been a small organisation, but its major gift to other species was hope. And then, suddenly, the Alliance was gone.

Caff didn't know the details and, although the Republic claimed victory for breaking the back of the ST Alliance, they didn't seem to know very much of what had happened either. One moment, it seemed that the Alliance was standing strong, maybe even poised to expand its operations. The next, it was scattered to the sectors. Tamlan's name disappeared into folk history, emerging two years later in association with a jacked prototype, a highly-maneuvrable battle-scout renamed the *Perdition*. Without the backing of the Alliance, there seemed little that Tamlan could achieve, but the people – the downtrodden, the despised of the Republic – started hoping again.

It was all a wasted effort, in Caff's opinion. What could one human do? And why was he still around, if it wasn't to live off past glory, deceiving other species into thinking he had their best interests at heart? Until she stepped on board his ship, Caff had thought of Quinten Tamlan as a selfish, arrogant being. And she still wasn't sure she was completely wrong.

With grim determination, she sprayed some commercial degreaser she had hunted out of one of the storage bays onto the counter and proceeded to clean it.

Her first look at Quinten Tamlan showed an impressive physique. And, even though he was fully human, there was something compelling about his features, twisted

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and drawn as if a solar flare had licked too closely at his face. What Caff liked about him was that he didn't look perfect. Didn't look like the epitome of the Republic Security Force or Space Fleet officers, with their contemptuously curved lips and cold, cold eyes. But as her gaze skimmed his figure, she was aware of his deception. She supposed it was her Transitional blood that made her see through falsehood so clearly. Certainly with more clarity than the pirate scum she had travelled with, apprehensive and jittery over the meeting with Tamlan they'd been paid to set up.

She knew the ripple of muscles on his suit was nothing more than well-designed artifice, and could even make a guess at his real level of musculature. And it shocked her. As did his almost imperceptible limp. In modern times, such a fault indicated a much bigger problem. Had he lost one leg completely and was he now dependent on a substandard bio-prosthetic? It confused her to realise that the man, the hero of the ST Alliance, was a broken human being. If only the Neon Red cartel knew.

The thought of them, the loathsome Breit in particular, made her head jerk, although her features were still schooled to stoicism. The nerve-chain had been Breit's addition to the plan. It had worked, had helped allay Tamlan's suspicion of them – of her – but she couldn't thank the pirate for it. Not when he had “accidentally” activated it twice before they rendezvoused with the *Perdition*. In comparison, being transferred to her enemy's ship was a blessing.

She lifted hesitant fingers and touched the cool metal of the thick band that encircled her neck. The version Tamlan had put on her was more refined than the one Breit fished out of his quarters, but she had no doubt it was just as lethal. Typical humans.

Better not to think of such things. If she wanted to save her people, it was best that she put her musings to one

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side and concentrate on what she had to do. And that was capturing Quinten Tamlan for the Republic.



After not thinking about him for months, Quinten was back to wondering about Venkat Digby twice in the space of a single day. Of course, that might have something to do with where he currently was, jammed up behind one of the inner hull panels, struggling with the bottom sensor array junction box. He had sent the Sub – dammit, he really was going to have to come up with a name for that woman! – to Hydroponics, to check on the lighting problem there, making sure she was appropriately proscribed from meddling with anything important. The food storage bays were next to Hydroponics and he wondered whether Subs could shoot venom through some hidden bio-fangs into his oxalic-acid bearing supplies. Maybe an alien med-scan was warranted. Or would be, if he knew how to operate the more advanced equipment aboard the *Perdition*. After all, he hadn't jacked the ship for its medical technology.

His hand slipped on a strut, gashing the back of his hand open.

"Fuck!"

Quinten would have loved the immature comfort of sucking on his knuckles, but the space was too cramped to allow even that luxury. His exoskeleton was lying in a discarded heap in the corridor, about three metres and one thick metal skin away from him. He had a small white illumination lens on his forehead, with three more trailing down his body, to give him an idea of where he was. The conduits for various ship systems wove through the air above him, zigzagging around struts and hub units like lazy, multi-coloured snakes. In the closed dark environment, he was starting to sweat.

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He had checked six hub units so far, all with negative results, and had the feeling that the Universe was going to make him slither the entire length of the ship, all one hundred metres of it, in order to track down only the first of his sensor problems.

Holding onto his toolkit with one hand, he dragged himself along to the next unit with the other, occasionally stopping to examine the state of the system sheathing. Everything looked fine to his semi-trained eyes, but that was exactly the problem. He was no expert engineer. The only man who had come close to such skill had been thrown out on his ear.

Quinten sighed heavily and stopped opposite the seventh hub unit. Unlike his body, his memory was in fine form today, reminding him of a whole host of things he would rather have forgotten.

With care, he pulled his tools closer, reaching into the bag with his right hand, and feeling around for the distinctive, rod-like shape of the demag-driver. Metal pressed against his arm as he shifted his hand up to the unit, releasing the clamps on each of the box's corners. Moving the tool to the only safe storage area around – between his teeth – Quinten eased off the cover, grunting with satisfaction at what he saw. A dark, non-blinking indicator told him one of the data-capacitors was dead. Tedious to find, easy to rectify. He was reaching back down to his toolkit, ready to search for the small oblong supplies box when his comm chirped.

Quinten hadn't heard the intra-ship signal for years, not since his initial diagnostics, and the shock of the sound made him hit his head on the metal above him.

"Khuck!" he swore, driver still in his mouth. He spat it out and jabbed at his left temple, keeping the unit cover

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from hitting his face with an upturned elbow.

"What is it?" he snarled.

"I have found the fault with the lighting in your Hydroponics section, and fixed it."

Well, congratulations.

"Good."

"Is there any other task you wish me to perform in this section?"

Quinten really didn't want to think about it. All he wanted to do was fix the capacitor and escape into the relatively fresh air of the ship, away from the inexplicable dust that tickled his nostrils and the unrelenting hum that assaulted his ears.

"No, you'll just have to wait there until I'm done."

"Acknowledged."

The comms clicked off.

Quinten started a steady stream of swearing for a few moments as his hand tightened on the box he was after. Then, with a grimace, he relaxed his body. Reaching for his temple again, this time letting the box's front panel rest on his stomach, he activated the comms.

"Yes, Quinten Tamlan." It was as though she didn't know how to ask a question, with its characteristic upward inflection at the end of the sentence. She seemed only capable of making statements.

"I forgot to ask you something this morning," he hesitated. "I mean, I can't keep calling you a Sub, can I?"

Silence.

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"Do you have a name?" he was finally forced to ask.

"I am used to the name 'Caff'," she replied. "It's easy for humans to pronounce."

He tried it out. "Caff." He personally thought it a foul name, more suited to describing a product than a sentient being, but if that's what she was used to, then it would save him some trouble.

"Okay. Caff it is."

Silence again.

"Is there any other information you require?"

"No," he paused. "I, er, found the problem with the bottom sensor array. I should be in Hydroponics in half an hour."

"Acknowledged."

She didn't click off communication and neither did he...until he realised with a start that the little blue blinking light at eye level was an open line. With an abrupt movement, he terminated the dialogue, then took a deep breath.

"Well, that was close," he muttered to nobody in particular, and kept working.



The comm call came through just after three o'clock in the morning, waking him from sleep, but Quinten knew he didn't have any cause for complaints.

After two months on his ship, it appeared that he and Caff had reached a workable relationship. While he still

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didn't trust her completely – a decade-long habit of suspicion was a difficult thing to discard and, besides, he didn't really want to – he had managed to rig the *Perdition* so it automatically cut off access to critical systems while still enabling his crewmember to take some of the administrative load off his shoulders.

It might have seemed strange to other observers, but there was something stimulating in trying to figure out how he was going to pen in Caff and give himself some downtime at the same time. Quinten usually carried out such mental exercise while working out in the gym, and found the combination of physical and intellectual puzzles energising. The time he spent working on his atrophied muscles was also increasing as a result. Maybe he should have taken on a Sub as an indentured worker years ago.

"What is it?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

"Sensors are indicating an anomalous reading. An object was at the edge of our range five minutes ago, but is gaining on us."

"A ship?"

"It would seem so."

Quinten sat up, rubbing his closed eyes with both hands. "Patch it down to my cabin."

With another yawn, he got to his feet and padded over to his desk, in time to see the screen come alive with a mirror of what Caff was observing on the bridge. He became more alert as he watched the monitor.

"Hmm."

The object's velocity was slightly more than the *Perdition's*. Currently four light-seconds away, it was

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due to intercept his ship in less than thirty minutes. It was too slow for a pursuing Republic craft, but too fast for either natural phenomena or one of the usual commercial carriers. Frowning, Quinten called up the propulsion signature of the stranger, and blinked a few times as he scanned the readouts. The object's continuum displacement was small, perhaps not much bigger than a Space Fleet emergency shuttle. But it was fast. A pirate craft perhaps?

As he watched, the shape of the displacement itself changed, turning the smudge of gravity waves into a semi-smooth polygon, before pulsing out into a rough sphere again. As it repeated the manoeuvre twice more, Quinten's face cracked an uncharacteristic grin. He punched the comms.

"Begin peer-to-peer docking protocols," he barked. "How long will it take from handshake to dock?"

There was a small silence as Caff ran the scenario through the navigator. Quinten watched the series of commands she was inputting on the screen in his cabin, and was impressed by how much knowledge she had already picked up.

"Approximately twelve minutes if we alter course and reduce velocity."

"I'm releasing approach controls," Quinten told her, matching his words with quick movements on his console. "Execute and meet me in the cargo bay when you're done."

Was there a slight hesitation in her voice? "Acknowledged."

It had been a while, Quinten acknowledged, as he stepped into his suit, maybe even two years since the *Perdition* had last docked with the *Euphrates Flow*. And

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he knew it was that particular ship from the distinctive greeting it had displayed. Closing up his suit, he made it to the cargo bay with ninety seconds to spare, in time to hear the hiss of air as the docking hatch swung open.

A thick leg emerged first, stepping over the threshold, followed by the rest of an armoured humanoid figure, its right hand holding a lethal-looking energy pistol. Light seemed to disappear into the bitumen grey of its suit, except for the mirrored orb of a helmet, where it reflected with a dark brilliance. The figure looked one way then the other before holstering the pistol in a smooth, practised move. Quinten remained silent and relaxed as he watched.

Finally, evidently mollified, the figure unclicked its helmet, lifting it off to reveal a dusky gamine face. Lots of people had been deceived by that face, Quinten knew. It seemed to tell observers that here was a cheerful, innocent individual, an elfish sprite hidden behind the admittedly severe hair-cut, huge blue eyes, and set of small bow-shaped lips. It was a face, coupled with a lithe body hidden within the armour, that had snuck, cajoled, and bullied its way into a myriad of dangerous situations emerging – almost always – with the wanted prize. It was the face of the best bounty hunter in Republic space. And she was in Quinten's cargo bay.

"Vigo," he greeted, with a slight smile and inclination of his head.

Vigo Halan deliberately looked around the bay. "I see you haven't got around to redecorating since my last visit."

Quinten shrugged. "What can I say? I'm just too lazy."

The door behind him swished open, and Vigo moved. Before the doors finished their action, a newly-arrived Caff found herself the focus of a pair of deadly weapons. Quinten turned back to Vigo. Slowly.

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"I see you've met my latest crewmember," he told her calmly.

Vigo frowned, her gaze – and weapons – still pinned on the figure at the door. "Crewmember?"

"A member of a company of beings that helps maintain and run a spaceship."

"I know what a crewmember is, Ten." Vigo holstered her blasters. "I just didn't know you had one. Isn't it against your religion or something?"

He spread his hands wide. "I'm a recent heretic."

Her chin jerked at his exoskeleton. "Is that why," she paused, obviously aware that what she was about to say might not be common knowledge. "Is that why you took such a long time to dock with the *Euphrates*?"

"Everyone needs training, Vigo," he rebuked. "We don't all spring from our mothers' loins as fully-formed, perfectly-calibrated, completely focused, organic killing machines."

She seemed to consider his statement. "True enough."

"So what brings you to this cold corner of space?"

"I heard some news. Thought you'd be interested."

Quinten knew that tone of voice. "I'm all ears."

05

She was confused. She wished Maz, her father by any other name, was around. He might be able to explain the nuances to her.

She was eating. Because there was nothing else calm or dignified that she could do.

Caff looked from one person to the other. The dining area of the *Perdition*, usually a barren rectangle of infrequent conversation, was now shiny and effervescent with sharp comments lobbed to and fro between the two speakers. Caff felt like a spectator of a game she barely understood.

The person called Vigo Halan was out of her outer armour, but that only meant that Caff could rest her gaze on the inner set. The material looked pliant and supple, like soft black leather, but she was sure it was reinforced with tough alloyed threads and impregnated with semi-autonomous nanotech. Its expensive flexibility hugged the bounty hunter's slight curves which, Caff was happy to note, were no more voluptuous than her own.

Looking at her, Caff was of the opinion that she was taller than Vigo Halan, probably equally intelligent, and certainly had also had a similarly compelling life (if she could ever share it with anyone else). Yet why didn't Quinten Tamlan ever look at her in the same way that he was now regarding Halan? The bounty hunter was insensitive and uncouth, while *she* had only ever spoken to the *Perdition's* captain with respect. It didn't seem to matter. Although Halan was coarse and abrupt, it was starting to look more and more as if Quinten preferred such traits. It didn't make any sense.

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Using her best I'm-nothing-but-a-socially-maladjusted-Sub look, Caff watched the interaction – and Quinten in particular – with unabashed curiosity. The scars on his face pulled at his skin whenever he emphasised a point, grimaced or smiled, but he was still attractive beneath the pale, puckered tissue. There used to be dimples on each side of his mouth, and she saw shadows of them, thinking how strange it was that a simple crease of skin could look so engaging. Perhaps she could try adding dimples to her own face? Without thinking, she lifted a finger to her cheek before quickly lowering it down to her lap again.

“...when business has been this good for you.”

Caff tuned in to Quinten as he finished his remark.

Vigo held a drink bulb away from her face and squirted a steady stream of amber liquid into her open mouth. She was sprawled indolently, her legs resting on the seat of a spare chair.

“Well, far be it from me to comment on the Republic's policy decisions,” she replied, “but this current round of clampdowns is only going to fatten my retirement fund.”

“More criminals?”

“More criminals, more repressions, more money for me.” She threw the empty bulb down on the table, where it rolled around before coming to a rest. “It's going to backfire on them in the end. I'm just hoping that, by the time it does, I'll be well away in some hidden little sector of the galaxy.” She flicked a glance at Caff. “Take this attitude towards Subs, for example. Why hunt them when you can put them to work? I mean, it's not as though they're shapeshifters.”

“What's the matter with shapeshifters?”

Quinten's Story

Caff knew she shouldn't have said anything, but she couldn't help herself. The arrogance of humans was astounding.

A short, electric silence filled the small room.

Halan looked to Quinten, who pursed his lips and lifted his eyebrows. He wasn't going to help the bounty hunter with the question, a fact for which Caff was inordinately glad.

"If you have to ask that question," Halan said shortly, "you don't know anything about history."

"Everyone's history is different." Caff kept her voice even. "What's yours?"

It was stupid goading Halan like that. Caff had looked her up in the databanks soon after the bounty hunter had come on board, and eyed the resultant information with amazement. Vigo's name was known in the galaxy as synonymous with ruthless precision. Once Vigo Halan had a target in her sights, she was as implacable as a metal-seeking shear missile. When she caught sight of her in the cargo bay, Caff hadn't believed that she was facing the most notorious solo killer in known space, until Halan's reflexes and occasional sharp looks convinced her otherwise. The dinner at which the three of them were present was just confirmation of a known fact.

"My. History." To her credit, Vigo Halan seemed to consider the question seriously, instead of blasting Caff where she sat. Quinten remained a watchful observer. "I'll be the first to admit that the history of the Republic is soaked in blood. But it's been good for business, so I can't complain. A lot of it was perpetrated by humans but, from what I read, an equal amount was due to shapeshifters."

"What did they do?"

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Halan glanced at Quinten. "What *didn't* they do, is more the question. They tried to destroy the Republic by sabotaging our installations. They attacked and killed every colony we set up in the outer sectors. They tortured and mutilated crease-finders during the Age of Discovery."

"But there were so few of them," Caff argued. "How is it possible for you to equate the destruction the Republic has wreaked, which you admit to yourself, with the actions of a small community of aliens?"

"I notice you're not denying their crimes, though," Halan countered with a vicious smile.

Caff narrowed her eyes. "It occurs to me that shapeshifters have been blamed for more than they could have possibly committed."

"And how would you know? Met any lately? Would you care to share the coordinates?" Vigo's mouth widened into a wolfish grin. "I promise to make it worth your while."

"Enough, Vigo." Quinten's voice was low but strong. He looked from one woman to the other. "My, crewmember has sensibilities that we perhaps can't understand."

"And who'd want to," Halan muttered under her breath.

Quinten ignored the comment. "And as much as I enjoy the stimulation of your visits," he said, as if coming to a decision, "I'm wondering why you decided to track me down now. I thought we were nearly undetectable."

"It was a lucky guess in a way. But I do have some news for you." She looked Quinten straight in the face. "Rumour has it that the Republic has revived your bounty."

"You're here to collect," Caff said flatly.

Halan snorted. "Don't be an idiot. If I wanted the bounty

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on Ten's head, I could have pulled him in years ago."

Caff noticed that Quinten's eyes gleamed, but he stayed silent.

"I consider Ten to be a friend of mine."

"Or, as close to a friend as you'll ever have," he added.

A flicker passed across Halan's face. "Yeah. Something like that."

"So the bounty's revived. So what?"

"The price has increased to ten kilo-credits."

Quinten whistled. "Impressive."

"And I've heard rumblings that they have some kind of secret weapon to get you."

Caff willed her limbs to remain calm. She eyed the nerve-chain's compact control unit, just nudging the knuckles of Quinten's left hand. If he had an inkling of what was going on, he could activate the chain in a split-second. She wouldn't have enough time to snatch it away from him.

Quinten's voice was laced with amusement. "What kind of secret weapon?"

"I don't know. They're keeping it real hush-hush. Even more so than usual, and that bothers me. Usually, the Republic keeps its intelligence as well as a sieve holds water, but this time it's different. It *feels* different, like there's a real brain behind it all. A small team, but everyone knowing exactly what they've got to do. I think you have to be more careful, starting right now. Maybe even head out to the Barrens for a while, where they can't get you."

"The *Perdition* is just one ship in a very large and crowded galaxy, Vigo. Try as they might, the Republic

Quinten's Story

hasn't been able to find me for years. How could they find me now?"

"I don't know," she repeated. "I'm just passing along what I heard. But you start getting careless, Ten," she flicked a glance over to where Caff sat, her thinking obvious, and Caff felt a spurt of anger build deep in her belly, "and they'll be all over you like whores on a Drift."

Quinten pursed his lips, obviously taken by another thought.

"Ten kilo-credits," he mused. "I wonder whether that's enough to make a cartel like the Neon Reds try their luck?"

Vigo frowned. "The Neon Reds? That's a familiar name."

Caff tensed in her chair and tried to keep her expression neutral, but she must have betrayed some small twitch of reaction because Quinten's gaze arrowed in on her in a second.

"They were responsible for my crewmember here," he said with a nod.

"Well I wouldn't trust them as far as I can spit. All pirates are scum."

"But you're friends with so many of them, Vigo," Quinten chided.

"Agreements of convenience from time to time," she amended. "Nothing more. When a deal's done, they either get lost or get fried. "

Quinten's Story

She looked over to where Caff sat, tense and still. "I'm a simple person like that."



The problem with Vigo Halan was that she was a great friend...so long as she stayed in a different sector of space. Quinten suppressed a sigh as the dinner slowly ran down to a close. His initial enjoyment over her visit had run its course at least an hour ago. His fault for being without company for so long.

Although he still had doubts about the possible outcome, Vigo wasn't far wrong about where her loyalties lay. If she'd wanted to, regardless of his sense of pride, it was exactly as she said – she could have turned Quinten and the *Perdition* in to the Republic years ago. In fact, he wasn't even sure why she hadn't, especially now that the price on his head had risen. Maybe it appealed to her perverse sense of humour, bringing in Republic villain after villain for their hefty bounties, while letting someone like him roam free. He could imagine her, lolling in a chair in some officious environment somewhere – smirking and watching as money got paid into her account, all the while laughing at the government to its face. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. One reason he was still free was because Vigo Halan enjoyed a good joke, and he was the punchline.

They had met up by accident, when Quinten was still numb with grief, and hurting from all the back-room reconstructive surgery he had undergone. In truth, he didn't care whether the Republic found him or not, and wasn't even trying to be discreet. Digby had been jettisoned months before, jacking the *Perdition* was still in the future, and a scarred, post-operative, withered

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husk of a man was trying to start a barroom brawl on a station he couldn't even remember the name of anymore.

As to be expected, things were going badly. In fact, looking back on it, Quinten thought that the reason he hadn't died two minutes into the fight was because nobody else thought he was serious. With his limp, lack of coordination, skinny limbs and more than a desperate gleam in his eyes, the other drinkers probably thought he belonged more in a psychiatric institution than an interstellar bar.

He had been punched. Once. But it was enough to send him reeling against a wall more than two metres away. He remembered how the impact hurt, jarring his bones to their marrow, as if part of the metal panel had somehow penetrated into his skeleton, impacting directly with the fragile remnants of his body. He remembered the fall but not his collapse to the floor, not until he breathed in dust and filth, choking on the vileness. He dragged his body up until he was resting on one elbow, knowing that he should just surrender, but something inside him yelled at him to get to his feet and goad his attacker again. As if he wanted to die.

He looked up briefly, trying to gauge the position of the burly miner who had finally decided that enough was enough, and saw a pair of legs in the way. At first he couldn't figure out what they were doing there, and he blinked, trying to will them away or somehow make them transparent. The voice that belonged to those legs spoke, it contained a thread of laughter, and it was only then that Quinten realised it was a woman standing between him and certain death.

"C'mon, Khinyer, the man can barely *walk* without assistance. What are you doing, pounding him into the floor? All that lack of sex getting you wound up again?"

Quinten, still on the floor, heard the start of a growl

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from the person now identified as Khinyer, but it was drowned out by the laughter of the other drinkers. Obviously, both the brawler and the female speaker were well known to a number of onlookers.

"I'll cut you a deal," she said. "I'll take care of him, and you go find yourself some relief. That way, everyone stays happy."

Even through the tremors of reaction that started coursing through his system, Quinten heard the steel in her voice.

I'd listen to her if I were you, pal.

Tense seconds passed. Suddenly possessed by a sense of self-preservation that hadn't been evident before, Quinten stayed on his belly and tried not to make a sound. A snapping sound clacked beside his ear, and he looked up again to see an open hand.

"You were stupid baiting Khinyer," a voice close to the hand said. "But you're also funny. I like that."

And that was the first time Vigo saved his life. Not that he was grateful. He muttered and groaned as he got to his feet, slapping her hand away. He staggered away from her, glaring at anyone indiscreet enough to meet his searing gaze. He was about to disappear into one of the corridors outside the station's bar when that same voice told him: "Anytime you see a hexagon, or an octagon, pause a second before you open fire. Chances are it'll be me, looking for some payback for saving your life."

He froze, his back to her, long enough to hear the words, before he staggered to the assigned docking bay where he'd paid for some short-term freighter berthing. He had just done everything possible to try and get killed without having to actually commit the deed himself, and it hadn't worked. Quinten wasn't sure which revelation rankled more, the fact that he was still

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alive or the amusement he heard in the woman's voice. He was trying to end his life, and she thought it was funny.

All in all, it was lucky that he remembered Vigo Halan's words the first time the strange coruscation of radiation adorned his sensor screen. By that stage, he'd acquired the *Perdition*, renovations had begun, and Quinten had found some small measure of peace within himself, even if he didn't know what to do with it. He had been drunk, shaking and throbbing with pain the last time she had spoken to him, so there was a more than even chance that he'd shoot first and pause to examine the debris later. But, with his hand on the firing lever, he remembered her strange words, stayed the beams of destruction, and allowed the small, fast ship to dock with his own.

Quinten didn't know what would have happened if he had fired on Vigo that fateful day. Maybe her shielding was strong enough to enable a quick escape. Maybe she would have been crisped in a nanosecond. Chances are she would have fired back. It was strange confronting someone who was more unbalanced than he thought he was. Strange and more than a little frightening. But he never ever told Vigo that. Somehow, he knew she would find it amusing.



"Happy anniversary."

The words were whispered in Kiel's ear and she spun around, a smile of pure delight on her face.

"You remembered!"

"Don't I always?"

"Yes, you do." She pulled Quinten's face down to where she sat at the desk, and kissed him passionately, promising...much. "Has it really been three years?" she asked, finally pulling away. "It seems, so much longer. Like centuries!"

She squealed as she tried to evade Quinten's lunging hands, and managed to slide out of the chair, but he caught her as she jumped across the bed, using his greater weight and reach to topple her onto the mattress. Unrepentant, she looked up at him, her arms reaching up to circle his neck.

"Centuries?" he asked with a frown.

"Nice centuries," she said softly, writhing suggestively under his body, and Quinten felt himself instantly harden.

It was afternoon and he had left work early, surprising Kiel as she knitted strategies together in their apartment on Vivox Two Alpha. Their plans were slowly coming together and would demand enormous amounts of time and energy from him, from both of them. But, for the moment, everything was still in its preliminary stages. For now, there was only the spark of carnal promise arcing between them, and the ability to assuage it.

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He smoothed her hair back from her forehead and slowly lowered his mouth, teasing her by dropping butterfly kisses along the edges of her lips. She groaned, lifting her face, trying to get him to deepen the embrace, but he retreated with each of her aborted advances, lifting an eyebrow in a presumption of arrogance when she focused on his face.

With a growl, Kiel tightened her hands and brought him, his neck stiff and unyielding, down to her mouth again, opening it wide, its heat and her insistent tongue finally shredding his playful self-control.

He relaxed his lips, letting her run the moist tip of her tongue along his teeth, allowing her deeper entrance. While she was occupied, he took his weight on his elbows, the joints digging deeply into the otherwise firm mattress, and sidled between her legs, edging them apart until he was firmly snuggled against her groin. Then, while she was still distracted, he pulled away and flipped onto his back, so she was now above him.

"Ooh, that was sneaky," she told him, but her smile softened the words.

His hands got busy, bunching her tunic untidily while he negotiated layers of clothing to get to her bare, golden flesh.

"That's why you love me."

He found her breasts and marvelled again at how those heavy globes fitted so neatly in his hands. The skin was soft against his fingertips, smooth and sensitive, the nipples puckering delightfully as he kept touching them. Above him, resting on her outstretched palms, Kiel's breathing deepened.

Quinten didn't need to see her naked to know how her back arched in a deep, graceful curve. She was lithe

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agility personified, the goddess of love visiting him from the heavens, her thighs pressing into his while she held her upper torso erect. His hands skimmed her body, moved to her back, and then down, suggesting – through a series of unsubtle tugs – that she get rid of her constricting pants. With a grin, Kiel obliged, shimmying out of them, one leg after another, trousers and underwear discarded at the same time. She liked being efficient.

With a bold look at him, she knelt between his legs, deftly undoing his trouser fastenings, pulling the material down hastily before gently cupping him in her hands. Quinten drew in a sharp breath and let out the air in a long hiss. Her hands were cool on his heated flesh, and he wanted her to do nasty, pleasurable things with him. He wanted her to gently squeeze him in those small slim hands of hers, to take him into her mouth, past those full lips that always promised so much, and into the moist heated passage and softness at the back of her throat.

He gripped the sheets with his hands as she did exactly what he wanted her to do and gasped as she let the edge of her teeth scrape against his ultra-sensitive skin. He would have stopped any other woman, afraid of the intersection of hard dentine with soft flesh, but he trusted Kiel implicitly. She fondled him intimately, and he gave himself up to the pleasure of the moment, his groans floating to the ceiling, bumping against the light from the afternoon sun that lit the room in broad, slanted shards.

Quinten felt his body ready itself for his orgasm, his groin clenching, a constricting feeling behind his sex, then a moment of panic as her hot, suckling engulfment left him, leaving him cool and unfulfilled. He snapped his eyes open, his mouth already forming words of entreaty, but they were unnecessary. In one smooth movement, Kiel mounted him, the gentle scrape of teeth replaced by a hot wall of tight muscle that

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massaged him, milked him, urging him to recapture that feeling of driving pleasure. Quinten needed no encouragement. Grasping her hips with strong fingers, he drove into her. The curtain of her hair caressed the skin of his face as she leant over him, pushing back against his rhythm. He felt the pulse of her impending orgasm squeeze against him.

Kiel came seconds before he did, throwing her head back and gasping into the air. Her convulsions sent Quinten over the edge. His grip on her tightened as he shuddered into an accompanying climax. They remained like that, their bodies locked, until their breathing steadied and thinking once more resumed.

"You should come home early more often," Kiel finally said, her voice huskier than usual. She dipped down and kissed him hard on the lips. "I think I could get used to it."

"Ah, but today's a special occasion," he countered, happy for his hands to continue resting on the curve of her hips. She would get up soon but, for now, he wanted to savour every moment of intimacy.

"Our anniversary?"

"And the start of our new life."

He watched her closely and was gratified by her reaction. She might have had doubts, might have wanted to backtrack on their plan. He felt a wobble of uncertainty himself as he imagined the unpredictable future rolling out in front of them. She frowned, just a second of puzzlement, then her face cleared and she kissed him more enthusiastically.

"You did it!" She pulled away from him and he felt a brief moment of regret before he let her taut form slip from his hands. "Where is it? What does it look like?"

Quinten's Story

"It can wait until we've both had a rest and a quick meal."

"No, it can't. You see," she paused, stopping against the large window, the setting sun making a halo of her hair. "I have something for you too. Or, rather, someone."

"Someone?"

"Our first recruit. He said he'd meet us in an hour, down by Peirce, so we'd better get ready."

"I thought you'd be sleepy," Quinten complained good-naturedly. "I am."

She laughed and tugged him out of bed. "Come on, Ten. From this moment, we start getting famous!"



Peirce was a deceptively safe part of the city, a locale dominated by the kind of industries that Kiel's parents worked in, mostly small businesses specialising in a segment of manually dexterous, high technology industries. When software wasn't the answer – not capable or too expensive – work devolved to the hardware, the working switches and relays of solid things, and Peirce was a microcosm of such galactic enterprise. But beneath the bustling industry of Republic-supervised commerce, lay another, hidden layer of back-room deals, whispered negotiations and concealed bartering.

Kiel led Quinten through the wide alleys of Peirce, her natural enthusiasm carefully subdued. She was more

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chameleon than he. Quinten was Quinten, regardless of the situation – grim, focused, and direct. Kiel adapted to every situation, matching behaviour for behaviour. She was quick when she needed to be quick, serious when contemplating something important. Right now, her eyes stared straight ahead, shifting only when she detected movement that was somehow out of sync with the general mood of the traffic they were moving through. Quinten had seen her like this a few times before, with a look on her face that promised ill to anyone who crossed her. It helped that she was brought up in a place very much like Peirce. She wore her familiarity with the environment with an assuredness Quinten couldn't match.

Walking next to her, he hoped he exuded the air of someone who, while not as closely acquainted with the world of tech-mech, was still dangerous enough not to be trifled with. He might not be as tall as Faks Somen, but he was confident, well-built and light on his feet. He hoped it showed.

He wondered where Kiel was leading him. It was typical of her to get an idea into her head and run with it, regardless of where it led. Unfortunately for his constant admonishments of caution, she usually led him somewhere good and he hoped their present trip wasn't going to be one of her rare failures. If anything went wrong for them in the shadowy streets of Peirce, the authorities would never find them. It was a sobering thought.

The expansive avenues were wide enough to take the largest commercial tech-carriers that carried broken equipment to the shops, and above them, the spire of the spaceport's control tower loomed high. It was smooth and dazzling, a tall spike of unbroken chrome, its point melting into the haze of a setting sun. The effect was purely psychological. The tracking and communications equipment of the control tower worked

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just as well at ground level as it did almost one kilometre into the air, the height to which the spike soared, but there was something about the slim needle that aroused wanderlust in anyone who gazed upon it.

Its mirrored finish beckoned and even Quinten wasn't immune to its pull. Around it, harness nets were stretched for emergency landings, but the tower dominated the landscape. Quinten watched the spike for a few moments more, knowing it was also a monument to massive government power, before dropping his gaze and following Kiel along the increasingly crowded streets. They were heading away from the chop shops and fabrication workshops and into a precinct dominated by smaller industries, such as sensor repairers and shield tuners.

She stopped at a small local...well, "restaurant" seemed too generous a term for it. Quinten wryly labelled it more a "joint", and followed her into its dim depths.

He was engulfed by noise, arguments and laughter. The cacophony enveloped him like smoke, giving him a much-needed sense of anonymity.

"How did you find this place?" he asked, stepping up to her and whispering in her ear.

"I have my contacts, too," she told him, flinging an arched glance backwards. He had to be content with that.

The proprietors of the establishment didn't believe in extensive illumination. Although it was still light outside and the eating-place was open to the street, the back of the shop was in twilight. Kiel stopped at a small metal-topped table, surrounded by four empty stools made of a similar material and lowered herself into one. Quinten noticed that the seats and even the tabletop were dented, as if they'd been used in a fight. Reluctantly, he followed Kiel's lead.

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"This is my anniversary present?" he asked drily, looking around.

She grinned. "This is just the wrapping. The present itself will be along shortly."

Someone stopped by their table. It was female – Quinten could tell that much by the softer curves of her face and the more rounded body – but it wasn't human, only humanoid. A second-class citizen in the human-government Republic. Her hair was long and thinning, the length emphasising the patches of baldness on her head. Her skin was pale. She glared at both of them with light, silvery eyes, as if wishing she could burn them to ashes on the spot. One arm was crippled, hanging withered and inert by her side. The four long fingers of her left hand, resembling the legs of a nervous spider, hugged a small, thick rectangular unit. An order-taker.

If she knew any *ingel*, Quinten didn't find out. Her expression frozen into uncooperative sullenness, she jerked her head at them, the universal gesture for "what do you want?". Kiel ordered two maize-beers and the woman slouched off.

"Can you imagine the potential of someone like that if she wasn't ground down by the Republic?" Kiel mused, watching the back of their lurching waitress. "Training. Physical rehabilitation. A productive life."

"They're not going to be too happy having deliverance forced upon them," he countered.

She turned her gaze to him and, even in the half-darkness of the shop, he saw her devilish grin. "Having second thoughts?"

"No. Just thinking about what happens if we succeed. A lot of the aliens have clawed their way up to some kind of stability. It may not be the kind of stability we'd like,

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but it's more than they've ever had. If things look like changing on them, they're going to be the first to dig their heels in because everything they've worked for will be at risk."

"The fact that they're driven by fear to begin with is enough to motivate change," she countered. "How can we call ourselves civilised when half our citizens are treated no better than slaves?"

"Does that apply to shapeshifters as well?" he joked.

She sobered. "That isn't funny. You know how I feel about them, Ten. We can't attempt to liberate only part of the Republic's population and then say, 'Oh no, not the shapeshifters. Let's leave them on Bliss to rot'."

"They're not like the other Subs," he pointed out. "They can change shape. Assume other identities."

"You've been absorbing too much Republic propaganda," she scoffed.

He shrugged. "There must be a grain of truth in there somewhere, Kiel. *Some* verified cases of shapeshifters infiltrating our bases and killing humans. Why even come up with a ridiculous story like that if it's not at least partly true?"

"Because it suits the Republic's agenda?" She arched an eyebrow delicately at him. "Because the sceptre of an active 'enemy' out there, ready to destroy us, makes controlling the general population easier? Because repression works better in an environment of fear? Take your pick. The sooner it's all blown away, the better."

"You know it may not work out like that?" He picked up her hand and kissed her open palm. "I know you. You'd

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like to change everything in one conflagration, letting societies land where they may, and then begin from there. Real life is a lot messier than that."

She twisted her hand until she had hold of him. "I know. I think that's why I keep you around. To temper my more harebrained instincts. Slow and steady, you keep saying. And I agree." Her grip tightened. "Outward pressure on an internal structure in order to force change. That's the only way it can be done."

He laughed. "It goes against your natural impatience, I know, but that's the only way it'll work."

A figure stopped by their table and it wasn't the waitress. He was dark and skinny with a shock of curly red hair, dressed in the same anonymous overalls as most of the surrounding tech-mech population. He already had a mug of something in his hand. As Quinten rose to challenge him, he sat down, nodding to Kiel as if he knew her.

"Is this him?" he asked.

"Yes."

The stranger took his time, taking a deep mouthful of drink, and letting his gaze roam up and down Quinten's figure as he reseated himself.

"I know Kiel's family from Tercom Seven," he said finally. "My name's Venkat Digby. I hear you need an engineer."

Quinten shot Kiel a quick look, but she remained silent. He turned back to the engineer. Now it was his turn to look the man up and down, noting the long narrow face and prominent chin.

"I may do," he answered cautiously. "What kind of ships have you worked on?"

"If it has a DePaul propulsion system, I've worked on it.

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Also the Mark Three Vipers and some of their offshoots.”

The DePaul was the most common commercial-grade propulsion system available. Quinten nodded. He knew Kiel well enough to know that Digby had passed her scrutiny. All that was left was his final say-so.

“What about fine-tuning?”

“Overwinding, you mean? Coaxing max plus out of a ship's engines?” Venkat grinned quickly. “Yeah, I've done that. You could say that's my speciality.”

Two mugs of beer landed on the table, but Quinten didn't notice. At the periphery of his vision, he saw Kiel pay the waitress. An engineer was exactly the kind of person they needed at that time, and Kiel had found one. Quinten heard the pieces of a puzzle click into place.

“It's dangerous work,” he said.

Venkat shrugged. “More dangerous than re-initiating a refitted engine cluster? I've been doing that for ten years. Figured the odds are starting to pile up against me.”

“Money will be scarce.”

“I know.”

“We might get killed.”

“We might not. Look, *frent*,” Venkat leant forward, “the next ship could come down cold and destroy all of Peirce. The truth of the matter is, we don't know what's going to happen in the next hour or even the next minute. Kiel here told me you needed an engineer, and it sounds interesting enough for me to volunteer my services. I'm not expecting to be coddled, and I'm not expecting a luxury ride to my retirement. If you'd like to treat me as an adult, I'm more than happy to join your

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band of mercenary do-gooders." He took another deep drink and wiped his mouth with his overall sleeve. "Is that good enough for you?"

A quick glance at Kiel showed her wagging her eyebrows frantically.

He smiled. "Okay, you're in. Welcome aboard."

Venkat didn't smile, taking Quentin's statement as if it was his due. "So where's this ship of yours?"

"I was on my way to show it to Kiel. You can come along, if you like."

"After we finish our drinks, eh?"

He lifted his mug and the other two joined him, grinning foolishly at each other.



The plan was simple. And when Quinten said that, he meant the steps themselves looked simple when summarised, but multiplied quickly into several orders of complications when more closely scrutinised.

Both he and Kiel wanted to do something to hurt the Republic and hopefully hasten its downfall. Kiel, because she was sick of seeing the beaten down looks on her parents' faces and the lack of opportunities facing someone not born into an engineering, or higher, class. And Quinten, because he was sick of seeing the beaten down looks on his parents' faces and the rigid schedule that tightly locked every member of one of the so-called knowledge classes into a predetermined and ruthless track from birth to death. They were also both ashamed at how the Republic treated their non-human

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citizens, with policies that - at best - bordered on sanctioned servitude.

It was impossible for either of them to become influential in politics and effect change that way. For a start, there were too many entrenched enemies lined up against their position, and mysterious accidents, or full-blown scandals, seemed to dog anyone who stood up and foolishly declared their support for a more equitable society.

It was also impossible for them to raise an army and start a revolution because the Republic's Space Fleet was one of the most militarily powerful in the galaxy and the Republic itself was too dispersed for a small movement to successfully overwhelm it.

All they could think of doing was setting an example. Their first strategy was to choose areas along the Republic's fringe where government forces could be harried and their facilities destroyed. It was Kiel's thinking that a few quick victories at the limit of Republic space would embolden others to join their cause. Once they had built up what they thought was sufficient mass, they would start infiltrating the very centre of the Republic, sabotaging important events and infrastructure, and forcing the Republic to either negotiate with them, or continue suffering losses that affected them more than it affected Quinten, Kiel, or their followers.

The two conspirators knew their strategy would take time. They weren't hoping for overnight change, but neither were they expecting to continue the fight for generations. They were hoping that, within a decade, the Republic would concede to some demands, and the political battle for a better, more equal society, could then start in earnest.

The plan was simple but huge. It was nothing less than the remaking of a galactic government. And for that

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kind of work, they needed knowledge, hardware, and people.

Quinten had spent the last two years scanning the auction notices, looking for a likely candidate for their first flagship. In many ways, it was like building a pirate cartel, and Kiel's knowledge, gleaned from three years around Faks Somen, was invaluable.

Finally, after losing several possibilities to other bidders, Quinten found what he thought was the perfect founding ship - a decommissioned Space Fleet Tick class recce-striker. After its career in the Fleet was over, the *Cloud Skimmer* had been stripped of all its armament, but only half of its shield technologies. Its engines, old DePauls, but still reliable and capable of high speed, were also retained when it was sold into courier service. That had happened eight years ago. By the time it came up for re-sale, the *Cloud Skimmer* was fifteen years past its prime, but still had so much potential left that Quinten almost slavered over the specifications before he dared put in a bid for the little ship.

The money he and Kiel had saved up, through certain novel and lucrative projects over the past few years, was enough to purchase the ship outright, but not enough to outfit her in the style Quinten wanted. But, if everything went to plan, that wasn't a problem. There were a few juicy transports skimming around that just begged to be offloaded. They were too much trouble for the local cartels to bother with - travelling only when occasion demanded on an *ad hoc* schedule - but they were the perfect size for a small, ambitious crew with nothing but quick gains on their minds. Picking off such transports might pit both the cartels *and* the Republic against them for a while but, being small and quick, they could disappear much more easily than the pirate bands who, themselves, were like swift gazelle next to the grinding machinery of the Republic.

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And now, as he, Kiel and Venkat headed out of Peirce, to the chrome spike that, at once, beckoned and repelled him, Quinten was starting to feel a bubble of optimism well up inside him. It had taken enormous planning and huge luck, but he and Kiel were finally where they wanted to be, in command of their own symbol of revenge against the Republic.

The *Cloud Skimmer* was in one of the cheaper multi-bays on the perimeter of the spaceport. To reach it, the three of them had to take a shuttle to the north-west sector, then walk the two kilometres to the docking sheds. By now, dusk was falling, but the nighttime security protocols had been initiated. High bright beams of light shone down on non-stop industry. There was no darkness near the port boundary at all, except behind some sharp edges where multiple beams of light refused to converge. And there was constant noise, from the whirr of engines and the slap of tyres of the small automated cargo trolleys as they rolled along, to the shouts of organic supervisors as they oversaw the loading and offloading of merchandise into slender storage towers that resembled ancient, upright matchsticks.

Kiel appeared subdued, but she couldn't hide the fire of enthusiasm that buoyed her steps. Quinten knew what she was thinking – her snagging of an engineer, combined with his procurement of their first ship, both events so close together, was like a sign from the galaxy that this was something they were *meant* to do. That they were somehow ordained to harangue the Republic until the old and corrupt dinosaur died, giving birth to something greater and more noble. He knew Kiel felt like that because he felt it himself.

When they finally reached their destination, he tried to act nonchalant, but couldn't resist the flourish as he pressed his keycard against the bay doors before slipping it back into his trouser pocket. The doors creaked open and the lights came on in flickering starts.

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Quinten didn't need the illumination. From previous visits, he knew exactly where the *Cloud Skimmer* was. He led the way past three empty bays, then one that contained little more than two piles of promising-looking salvage. Next to the junk sat the *Cloud Skimmer*.

"She's beautiful," Kiel breathed.

And, despite the scarring that indicated a few too many planetary re-entries in between paint jobs, a bumpy exterior that showed where Space Fleet equipment had been ripped out, and roughly patched pits from the occasional micro-meteoroid shower that had caught it unaware, Quinten agreed.

Its twenty-five metre teardrop shape rested on three spindly-looking extended struts and he had to jump up to reach the first step after extending the landing ramp. Its clearshield was covered in a fine criss-cross of scratches, but it really was the most wondrous thing he had ever owned because it represented the first thing he had bought for his and Kiel's life together. It was all their hopes, promises, and commitment to each other, bundled up into such an incongruous aggregation of metal and technology that Quinten felt like laughing out aloud.

"Here's our ship, Venkat," he said proudly, stretching out a hand, while Kiel danced around it, reaching out to touch the scarred metal with reverent fingers.

Venkat tilted his head to one side and regarded the *Cloud Skimmer*.

"You didn't get tempted by a bigger ship?" he asked casually.

"Tempted," Quinten admitted. "But didn't succumb."

"Smart man."

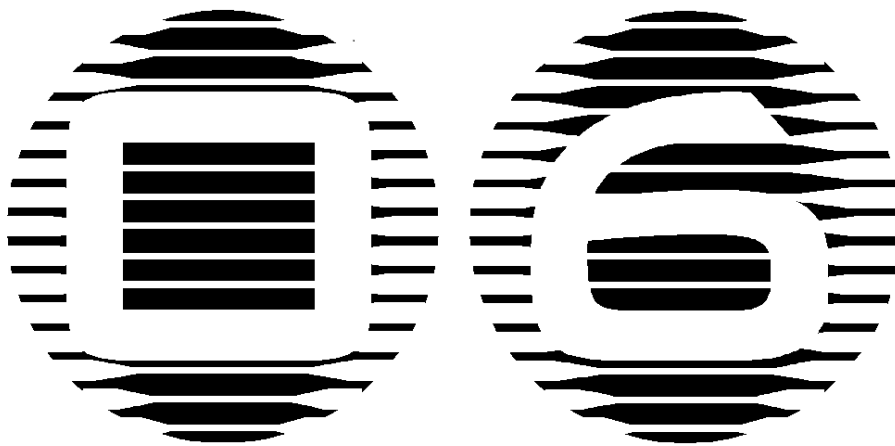
Venkat took a more leisurely tour of the courier, taking

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one round for every three of Kiel's, massaging the metal more thoroughly, as if he could feel the ship's very history etched onto the matte panels, frowning as he did so. But, when he returned to Quinten's side, there was a small smile on his face.

"All the exterior damage indicators seem to be cosmetic. I'll need to do a more thorough examination, but it looks to be a fine, solid vessel. Don't suppose we could have a look inside? Just to see what I'll be working with?"

And the ST Alliance was born.



Caff was still unsettled two weeks after Vigo Halan's departure. It wasn't just because of the bounty hunter, although that was enough to unnerve anyone. The cool glint that seemed permanently etched in Halan's eyes was more than a little intimidating. Caff knew the woman didn't trust her, and her guilt at what she was supposed to do made her uncomfortable and jittery. She was also disconcerted by the fact that Halan had obviously heard some rumour pertaining to her supposedly secret mission. The Security Force colonel – a loathsome, whip-like man with a voice like a razor-edged scalpel, thin and keen – had assured her that their agreement was locked down under security protocols so tight even the Senate would require special approval to access it. And yet, Halan, an itinerant killer and mercenary gatherer of souls, was aware of some secret plot involving the Republic and Quinten Tamlan. Just that one fact was enough to call into question everything Caff believed in. What if Colonel Konsectoh had lied to her about the secrecy of their agreement? Would he lie about something else as well? Like letting her small shapeshifter community go free the moment the Security Force had Quinten Tamlan in its grasp?

Caff paused, halfway through her daily checks of the ship's systems. She wasn't sure what to think any more, her doubts compounded by the unfamiliar emotions

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that coursed through her when she saw Quinten and Halan together. Despite their bickering, there was an easy rapport between them, one that made Caff jealous.

Jealous? Of an alien? She couldn't fathom it. Maybe being trapped in human form for so long meant that she had started to adopt a human perspective. Straining her ears to catch the faintest hint of Quinten's approaching footsteps, she concentrated on a console well out of reach. Extending her hand, she watched as the limbs elongated, from forearm to fingers, stretching out as if they were being swallowed by a wormhole. With a few snaps and pops, her middle finger reached the console and flicked a switch a normal humanoid shouldn't have been able to reach. The shortening of her limb, while still trying to maintain the same proportions as her other arm, was a more lengthy process, needing firm will and constant adjustments to get right. Maz would have been proud to see her do the work so quickly, a contrast to the pathetic, confused wreck she was when they first met. But, like her, Maz was also imprisoned, one of the group she had pledged so desperately to swap for the much wanted Quinten Tamlan. She hoped he was being treated well at the facility. She missed him terribly.

Which brought up thoughts of Quinten Tamlan again, and what she felt for *him*.

He was...different. Engaging. Morose, terse, even rude at times. She thought of the Neon Reds and her eyes narrowed with anger. Unlike them, he wasn't sadistic or mindless. Not even casually ruthless, like the keepers from the Security Force facility she had initially escaped from. Quinten Tamlan was also different in another way. He was vulnerable. It seemed more than a little strange to think of the formidable co-leader of the ST Alliance in such a fashion, but Caff knew he hid more than his weakened figure within a powerful exoskeleton. And the fact he was hiding something was becoming more and

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more obvious in the days since the bounty hunter left.

While true that he was not an intrinsically cruel man, Quinten's temper had grown shorter over the past two weeks. Even Caff, with her limited knowledge of normal human behaviour, thought he was in some kind of mental torment, his default expression one of pain and resignation as he awaited a fate he couldn't seem to outrun. What had caused such a reaction? Was it the reminder from Halan that getting help to run the *Perdition* was inevitable? Or the fact that, despite her humanoid features, Caff still looked too alien for someone like Quinten to feel comfortable around, a point emphasised by the bounty hunter's presence? Or was it something else, something not even associated with her?

Caff didn't know what to think, so she tried hard not to, moving from one assigned task to another, and completing her scheduled activities with a steady thoroughness that Quinten wouldn't be able to fault.

She knew something was definitely wrong when Quinten didn't join her for lunch that day. She didn't realise how much she missed his presence until he wasn't there. Even his wry comments, accompanied by the cynical twist of lips, made her feel more at ease. As if he, too, enjoyed swapping pointed opinions with her. Most such conversations concerned the ship and its various now outmoded systems, but they were still a sharing of experiences. It was the closest she had come to the sense of belonging she'd experienced within her adopted community, before the Security Force tracked her down and imprisoned them all. Innocents had been chained and killed because of her, before she'd been presented with a distasteful choice: do nothing and be tortured with her people...or capture Quinten Tamlan and ensure their freedom.

Every part of the plan had been diseased, even her

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triumph at finding Tamlan's probable location in the first place. The Security Force knew how large the galaxy was. They knew the odds of Caff finding the rebel were almost infinitesimal. Yet what did they have to lose? They could afford to let one mutant experiment loose in the galaxy, this time on *their* terms, to try and hunt down a man they'd been after for years. If she failed, they'd have an entirely new group of shapeshifters to experiment on. If she succeeded, it would be a public relations triumph of immense proportions.

They hated her and she knew it. Even the cold-eyed Konsectoh, with whom she had done the final deal, could barely stand to be within a metre of her while they planned the operation, but they had no choice when she commanded data and immersed herself in it. What most humans didn't know was that, as good as they were at finding patterns in chaos, shapeshifters were better. Caff supposed they had to be in order to mimic so many organic, and inorganic, forms. And maybe it was the human DNA forcibly entwined in her system that focused her mind enough to see the faint pattern in Quinten Tamlan's movements. A pattern he probably wasn't even aware of himself.

Step two of her preparation was tracking down the Neon Reds. Quinten didn't do much business with them, but the small number of congruences between their known respective positions, given the terrible vastness of space, was more than mere coincidence. A fact the pirates were happy enough to confirm for themselves when ambushed by an armada of bristling Space Fleet destroyers. The rest of the plan had been easy, the selling of herself into a kind of slavery once more, the studied cruelty of the pirate Breit. And, finally, purchase by her target.

A target she now missed sharing a meal with. A target who would have been handsome, intimidating and untouchable if whole, but was only beguiling and captivating now that he was shattered. She finished her

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meal in silence, cleared the dishes, and went back to work, unsure what to expect.

It was close to evening, shipboard time, when Caff finally saw Quinten. And nothing prepared her for the sight.

She was contemplating going back to her quarters, taking a small meal with her, when a clatter from somewhere down the corridor brought her head up sharply. It wasn't the sound of something falling, which would have echoed and bounced before fading into short extinction. It was the sound of something impacting, a brief but loud explosive shatter, followed by a deathly silence. Even though Caff knew that there was only her and Quinten on the ship – the sensors would have informed her long before now if anything else was amiss – she felt nervous. Old tales, of shapeshifters stuck and dying as they assimilated themselves into the fabric of walls, their screams of help expiring as their souls did, surfaced in her mind. Of ships that appeared out of dead creases, ramming transports in normal space before disappearing again. Of lost spirits wandering the abyss, occasionally entering a vessel where they tarried, playing mischievous tricks on the crew, before moving on. It was while she was trying to reassure herself that she had nothing to worry about that the silence was punctuated by an unusual scraping sound.

Taking a breath, Caff stepped away from the kitchen area, and looked down the jagged-edge corridor that gutted the *Perdition*. And saw Quinten.

But not a Quinten she recognised.

The semi-regular, rasping sound she heard was his suit, half hanging off his body, as if he had given up the will to finish the task of dressing soon after starting it. The sleeves dragged along the ship's hard corridor as he staggered closer to her. Caff remained rooted to the

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spot. The olive of his skin was criss-crossed by lines of pale scar tissue, like an abstract artist's work, scratchings in a frenzy. Where did he get all those marks? She had heard some disaster had happened, precipitating Quinten's retreat from prominence. Was that tied in with the puckered lines that slashed across his flesh? Had he and the Alliance's co-founder, Kiel Souiad, had a fight? Some kind of battle to the death? Konsectoh seemed to think Souiad was dead, but Caff knew enough not to take him at his word. For all she knew, the woman was probably locked up in a facility in another part of the galaxy, or wasting away on Bliss.

Startled, Caff looked up to see into Quinten's eyes, but he was still too far away for her to read their expression. But she watched the way he walked, stumbling and unsure, and saw pain in every step. It was more than merely physical. There was something ripping him apart. Quickly, Caff scanned the rest of his body, looking for a clue to such behaviour. She found the first obvious cause in his right hand, which held an open demi-bottle of liquid. The clear glass showed that it was still full, sloshing out through the narrow neck with every step Quinten took. He stopped and took a swig from the bottle and Caff watched as his throat, still wide and strong, gulped it down, as if he were a thirsty man in a desert guzzling water. In his left arm, he cradled two things, holding them close. One of those things was another demi-bottle, clearly still sealed and angled precariously against his chest. The other was slim and oblong-shaped.

When he was close enough to finally notice her still, pale figure, he smiled. It was an expression so genuine, so unfeigned, that Caff's breath caught in her throat.

"Caff," he said, his voice not slurring at all. It was a direct contrast to the faintly swaying rhythm his body was moving to. "Thought I might have missed you. Everything normal today?"

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"Everything is functional, Quinten Tamlan," she replied. "All sensor arrays are at full working capacity."

"Good. Good. Were you about to go to your quarters?"

She hesitated. That had been her original plan, but seeing Quinten like this, she wasn't sure anymore. In truth, she was burning up with curiosity. What had happened to him?

Her pause seemed enough of an indication for him. "Come on," he said, gesturing with the open bottle back to the kitchen area. "Join me for a drink. Do you Subs drink?"

"We can," she said carefully. "I choose not to." The drug regime she had been subjected to while incarcerated at the Rannler facility was bad enough. Caff had no desire to willingly subject herself to more disorientation.

His mouth turned down. "Spoilsport."

She followed his stumbling form to the sitting area, trying to catch a better glimpse of that mysterious rectangle he held in his hands, but it was hard up against his flesh.

"Caff! Come on. Sit down."

Caff blinked. Quinten was already seated, sprawled across one of the chairs, looking as though he could quite happily slide under the table at any time. She took a seat across from him, her glance flicking to the thin rectangle of something on the table. A control panel of some sort? A screen?

"Caff, Caff," he recited a couple of times, staring up at the ceiling. "I hate that name."

"It's my name," she said.

He looked at her. "But it isn't, is it? You said I couldn't

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pronounce your real name."

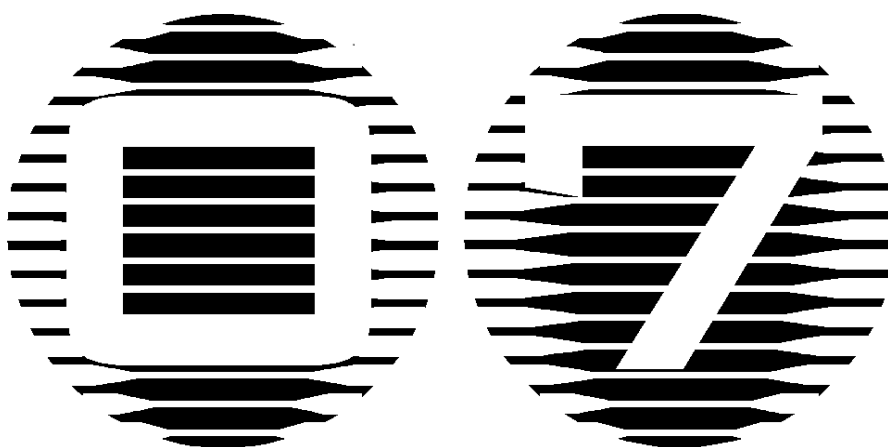
That was only a little lie. In the facility, she had been given an alphanumeric designator. That was easy enough to remember, although she made it a point of trying to forget as much as she could. It was the shapeshifter community that adopted her who gave her a "real" shapeshifter name, a complicated series of syllables and small actions that represented who she was. A complex summation crudely distilled to a single syllable that humans could pronounce.

"That's true," she said. "You are incapable of calling me by my true name."

There was no need to be so abrupt, but Caff needed something to distance herself from the man sitting across the table from her. She could smell his scent, human and male, overlaid with the plummy yet astringent aroma of alcohol. The mix of contrasts called to something deep inside her, a tug of intimacy. His gaze was without its usual cynical wariness, and that, too, was a trap. One that Caff had to guard herself against very carefully.

But Quinten didn't take offence at her words. He looked at her with candid brown eyes the colour of caramel, and a tilt of his head. "If I can't pronounce your real name, then I might as well think of something better I *can* pronounce," he said. "Caff sounds...like a species of mutants."

It was just as well he was on his way to inebriation, or Caff was sure he would have noticed her startled little jump. What would he think if he found out that his drunken ramblings held more truth than he suspected?



"I think I'd prefer something softer," Quinten told her.

"Why?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Because I'm captain of this ship and, as long as you're part of the crew," he said with casual imperiousness, "you'll do as I say. If I want to call you something else," he took another long swig from the bottle, "then I will."

"Where did you get that from?"

"This?" He jiggled the bottle.

Caff nodded.

"Payment for a job once. The, client, didn't have any credits to his name, but he had a couple of freighters of the smoothest nu-vodka this side of the Barrens. I took a container of it as fees due."

"You seem to be working your way through it quite efficiently."

Quinten said nothing, frowning into the middle distance. "I've got it! Saff. What do you think of the name 'Saff'?"

"Is that what you wish to call me?"

"Yes." He paused. "Saff. It's not too different to what you're called now. But it's nicer sounding. More feminine."

And why should that matter to you, Quinten Tamlan? Caff longed to ask the question, but it stuck in her throat. Either way, she didn't think she wanted to hear the answer.

Quinten's Story

"Of course," he said, his voice lowering. He glanced meaningfully at the small rectangle, "you can't always tell from the name if someone will turn out to be feminine or not."

"You are referring to someone in particular," she prompted. She *had* to know what was on that device he kept glancing at.

"Someone. Someone dead. Someone loved. Someone who shouldn't be forgotten but, damn it!" He slapped his free hand on the desk and the sharp report snapped through the room. Caff jumped. "I just can't remember her as well as I should."

When he looked up again, Caff was shocked by the open pain in his eyes, and the filling wetness of half-shed tears. He blinked and two wet trails ran down his cheeks.

"I loved her. And now, I can barely remember the sound of her voice. She saved my life, and now she's turning into nothing but a ghost."

"Kiel Souiad." Who else could it be? The co-founder of the ST Alliance. The woman nobody had heard of in seven years. Had she been dead all that time? Had Quinten been mourning her for this long?

"Today is the eighth anniversary of her death," he said baldly. "And I'm not sure who I'm crying for. Her...or myself."

With a rough movement, he wiped away the tears.

"I thought I'd never forget anything about her. I didn't *want* to forget anything about her. But now, when I look at her picture, it's like looking at a stranger."

With one movement, he flipped over the mysterious rectangle of metal, and Saff saw it was a shot-frame.

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Activated by the movement, the frame started up, slowly segueing through a kaleidoscope of individual frames and vid cuts. Silent, both of them just watched the sequence for long minutes – a window into a time long past.

She was beautiful, Saff thought. Even for a human. She could see why Quinten Tamlan had fallen in love with her, with her smoky green eyes, toffee skin, finely sculpted features and lithely sexual figure. Saff felt like a clunky automaton next to the moving history of Kiel Souiad.

Quinten finally broke the spell by drinking again from his bottle. The crash she had heard earlier, Saff realised, before she had spied him walking unevenly down the corridor, was the sound of an empty bottle smashing into the intersection of wall and floor. So this would make it the second, or even the third, he was consuming. Her gaze slid to the other bottle, still full, its seal unbroken. In his grief, he was obviously going to make a night of it.

It should have put her off, this inability of his to deal with his sorrow in a calm manner. But Saff knew the emotion well enough to know how hard it could ride someone. How many times had she wanted to howl her pain in the cell she had been kept in? How many times had she wanted to hit her head ceaselessly against the strong, impenetrable walls? She had been gripped by an irrational urge to kill Colonel Konsectoh with her bare hands whenever they were in the same room together, and only self-control honed from years of being in Republic captivity stopped her.

“She was beautiful.” Saff was sorry her voice sounded so flat, but she couldn’t allow the bitterness to seep out. Nor the jealousy.

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Quinten looked at her, about to say something, speculation and a trace of something else in his eyes. Saff didn't breathe. His gaze warmed her. No, more than warmed her. Her flesh wanted to combust. Then he looked away and the moment was broken.

"Yes. She was." Another long pause. "So what do you think of your new name?"

"It's, nice."

"Yeah. I think so, too." He took another deep swallow from the open bottle. "You realise you can't ever leave this ship?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't understand."

"The Neon Reds can't keep their mouths shut."

Oh, you'd be surprised, Quinten Tamlan.

"They've probably told half the sector that they sol-that you're a member of my crew. And the Republic won't hesitate to hunt down anybody that's had anything to do with me. Being a Sub, I bet they'd be doubly interested in you." He drained the bottle, set it back on the table and reached for its small and stout companion. "How did you survive growing up?" he asked, cracking the seal. "How have you avoided the Republic up till now?"

"It's a large galaxy," she answered. If she hoped the evasive answer would be enough, she was wrong.

He stifled a yawn and shook his head. When he spoke again, Saff - he was right, she did prefer her new name - noticed a growing slur in his voice. Exactly how long had he been drinking?

"Someone must've tipped you off, sent you somewhere where humans don't rule. The galaxy doesn't protect the innocent. Especially not Subs."

Quinten's Story

"My people are very good at hiding," she lied.

"Then you must've been hiding in a non-Republic sector of space, because somebody, somewhere, would've heard about you. We have Subs in the Republic, course we do, but they're not smart like you. Not mouthy. Not so argumentative. You should have been caught years ago."

Quinten was talking with his eyes closed and, as he spoke, the words came out slower and his head nodded lower. He jerked up once, blinked furiously a couple of times, not seeing her, then slowly slipped into sleep.

Saff watched him. He was still sitting in the chair, but his arm was limp on the table. If he jerked again, he was liable to send the unfinished bottle of spirits crashing to the floor. In truth, he wasn't in as bad a shape as he thought he was. Unless he went for a series of cosmetic surgeries, he would always have that network of jagged scars across his body and face. And Saff was sure that the limp that the exoskeleton almost masked would also be an enduring irritation. But he wasn't as scrawny as he probably thought he was. From the frames of him with Kiel Souiad, Saff knew he wasn't carrying the same amount of musculature as in those early years, but it was still impressive how much he had managed to regain in the past few months. She doubted he would ever be the same magnificent specimen he was, but a normal life wasn't out of the question. At this point, the use of the exoskeleton was actually hampering his progress, and Saff knew *she* was the reason he wore it before every one of their meetings. He didn't trust her and, no matter how much she wished it could be different, he *shouldn't* trust her.

She hadn't thought such a realisation would hurt so much.

Silently, she pushed back her chair and walked over to him.

Quinten's Story

What would he do if he ever found out what his lone crewmember really was?

Without making an effort, Saff grew. Slowly, her limbs and torso lengthened, until she stood a head taller than Quinten. Her own clothes, made of stretch material, accommodated her shifting proportions. Her features melted into something more bland, still present but less prominent, less human. The nerve collar rattled more easily around a much slimmer throat.

Bending down, Saff put her arms under Quinten's unconscious form, lifting him with ease, and grabbing the slim shot-frame as she straightened. Then she walked down the corridor, the man still asleep in her arms.

She had never been in Quinten's private quarters before, her own quarters was at the other end of the ship, but was unsurprised by the neat mix of sleek tech and personal touches that dotted the captain's state room. She walked past the equipment that indicated a fully-functional office that could easily double as a one-person emergency bridge, and through an open doorway into the sleeping cabin.

The wide bed was tidy, with a sheet and blanket stretched tightly across its width. Saff placed Quinten down on the covers and undressed him, pulling the suit off his hips and down his legs. Something thumped to the floor but she ignored it for the time being. When the suit was removed, she dropped it near the doorway, and returned to Quinten.

He was deeply asleep, but still looked troubled. Saff wanted to reach down and smooth the lines of his furrowed brow but knew she didn't have the right. She was his enemy, not his friend. With infinite care, she shifted his bare legs under the blanket and stepped away. It was only then that a hard edge caught her eye. Bending, she lifted the object, half-hidden in shadow. It

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was the nerve-collar control unit.

Saff gazed at it for long seconds, then slowly placed it on a ledge by the bed. And walked out the door.



His head hurt. And that was before he even opened his eyes.

"Damn Ehul," he muttered. The merchant assured him that the nu-vodka was clean and smooth. And it had certainly tasted that way going down. But the thumping in his brain reminded him that there were toxic impurities mixed in with the alcohol.

Sighing, he dropped his hand to the bed. He never learned. He went through this every year around the time of Kiel's death. At first through howling grief, then ritual and now, finally, all that was left was self-pity.

He felt the smooth texture of a sheet under his fingers and frowned. Bed? He had managed to get himself into bed this time? He snapped his eyes open, expecting them to be seared by blinding light, but his cabin was in semi-darkness. With a groan, he sat up and swung his feet over the edge. He only had a pair of underpants on. His exoskeleton, he noticed, was dumped in a heap in a corner of his room. That seemed likely enough. But it still looked too...neat. Where were the empty bottles of nu-vodka he normally tried to kill himself with every year? He faintly remembered throwing one at the wall down the *Perdition's* ugly main corridor, but where were the others?

He scanned the room as quickly as his brain would allow, but everything looked neat and exactly in its place. There wasn't anything on the floor, no traces to

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mark the stumbling zigzags to his bed. He had even managed to rest the Sub's nerve control unit on a nearby ledge before collapsing. Maybe he was finally getting the hang of being mind-numbingly drunk, he thought.

Rising, Quinten closed his eyes again before opening a small cupboard below the bed ledge and popping a couple of tabs into his mouth. That would take care of the hangover. But was there anything he did or said that he also needed to use damage control on? He remembered a conversation with the Sub. Had he told her anything? Said anything he shouldn't have?

The pain in his head was already receding, but Quinten was still confused. Stepping into his suit, he decided the only option was to tackle the situation head-on. With his self-induced foray into temporary oblivion, the *Perdition* had been left in Saff's hands for more than a day. Despite their amicable working relationship, he still didn't trust her. Couldn't afford to. He had to re-establish control, and make sure that the ship was still in recognisable space rather than, say, halfway to some obscure sector that was home to a Sub community. He knew how a lone human among aliens was usually treated.

The thought of being anywhere near danger was enough to make him shrug on his suit in double-time, ignoring the lingering pain in his head. He grabbed the nerve control unit next to his bed – who knew *what* would have happened if he hadn't remembered to carry it back to his quarters last night – and hurried out through the door.

Caff was in the main control room, her back to him. For a moment, just a moment, she was unaware of his presence, concentrating on some task. But that moment contained...recollections? Wishes? There was

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another name associated with her, softer and more feminine. Had he only thought it in his head or had he blurted it out during his amnesia-ridden alcoholic binge?

What exactly had happened last night?

She turned, her opaque eyes pinning him to the spot. There was no expression on her face. Brusquely, as if breaking a spell, Quinten moved forward, trying to quell the tic that made his head jerk like a character in one of the ancient animation vids he sometimes watched as a child.

"Where are we?" he asked, his voice harsh. He stopped by her shoulder and frowned. He had forgotten how tall she was. Or had he shrunk during the night?

She looked down at the spatial representation on the console.

"We're skirting the boundary of the Celex sector," she replied.

Quinten checked her over subtly. The nerve chain was still securely around her neck and she was wearing one of the stretchy suits that she never seemed to run out of. Maybe if they ever got to the situation where he could trust her, he would suggest that she augment her wardrobe with something less practical. Perhaps even more feminine. Then again, maybe he was safer leaving her in the practical one-piece. It clung so closely to her skin that it precluded her being able to hide any kind of weapon.

Skin. Caff's skin was not stark white but more an ivory colour, a dramatic contrast to his...and Kiel's. The thought of Kiel brought Quinten's mind back from where it had wandered, curious as to whether his Sub's skin was warm and smooth, or as chill as an inert thruster unit.

"You remembered our heading," he said, before he

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could think to not say the words.

"You told me that we would be heading for a system within this sector in order to do some trading. I have been navigating a peripheral route since then."

Was there a hint of reproach in her calm voice, or was Quinten reading into her tone something that didn't exist?

"I, ah, was a bit incapacitated last night," he began, trying not to sound as uncomfortable as he felt.

"I believe you started drinking well before shiptime night," she said evenly.

So she'd noticed that?

"It was a personal issue."

She finally turned her head to look at him. "The eighth anniversary of the death of Kiel Souiad. Yes, you mentioned it."

He looked at her with a steely gaze. "What else did I say?"

"Nothing that was easy for me to comprehend." If anything, her expression became even more impassive. No mean feat for someone who didn't show much emotion in the first place. "But you...."

She paused and Quinten saw a flash of something race across her face. It was an emotion, but the cue wasn't anything he recognised.

"You gave me a name," she finished.

"What kind of name?" Although he had the sinking feeling he knew.

"Something that less resembled 'a species of mutants'

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was how you put it."

Quinten winced. He always had the feeling he turned into an insensitive boor when he got drunk, but to have it confirmed so baldly, and by such an inflectionless voice, flayed him to the core.

"So what did I decide on?" he finally asked.

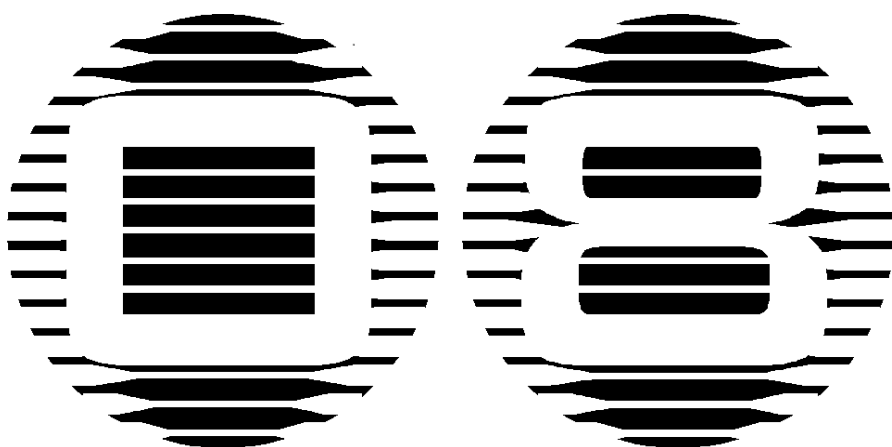
"Saff." She looked at him intently, expecting him to – what? Repudiate what he'd said in a drunken slur? At least he'd had the sense to blurt out the name that had been forming in his brain.

"Saff," he repeated and cleared his throat. "Well, I like it, drunk or sober." His small joke didn't cause her expression to change, making him wonder if Subs had a sense of humour.

Subs.

Now that he got to know her a bit better, Quinten realised that there was probably no more derogatory term for non-humans in Republic space than the appellation of Sub. Sub-human. It was only a small step from that to "savage", "animal", "thing". Not worthy of consideration.

"Exactly what species are you?" he asked abruptly.



There! He saw it that time. Surprise in her dark eyes. It was a muted form of what he was used to, but still there.

"I don't understand your question."

He may have accepted that answer at the start of their relationship (relationship? Was that what they had?), but not any longer. A mocking smile pulled at his lips.

"Don't play coy with me, Saff." He jerked his head, making it obvious he was waiting for a reply.

"My species," she answered slowly, her gaze sliding away from his, "is used to the name."

"Sub?" He didn't have to try very hard to inject scepticism into his voice. "Your people are used to being insulted?"

"You insulted me," she told him, "and didn't seem to think too much of it. Is it so difficult to believe that, in retaliation, my species took up the name as a badge of honour?"

Quinten grimaced. He opened his mouth a couple of times then closed it. That was one of the problems with dealing with a different species, he thought. Especially one that looked superficially human. There was the tendency to impute the same level of knowledge of the culture and traits of humanity to other humanoids. Quinten was nonplussed by her bald statement because no human had ever spoken like that to him. But then again, Saff wasn't human.

"I know," he finally rasped. "And I'm sorry."

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There was a long moment of charged silence.

"There is only one of me," she finally said, her voice a little softer than it had been only moments before. "Within my adopted community, there are not many more of that species left. We're scattered to the ends of the galaxy like atoms on the solar winds. It doesn't matter what we're called."

There was such soft loneliness in her voice that it pulled at him. He knew all about that feeling. They were only a couple of handbreadths apart when she turned her head to look at him. Just for a moment, with the way her eyes were angled, she reminded him.... And if he wanted to, without even shifting much of his body, he could....

And if you get lonely, well - with that chain around her neck, she's not going to be too—

Shaw's words dropped into his brain with the impact of a block of dense matter. What the *hell* was he doing? Abruptly, he stepped away. Around her neck, the nerve collar glinted balefully at him.

"I'm sorry," he bit out with a frown, not sure if she even understood what had transpired a second before. "I don't know what came over me."

Saff remained silent.

"I'll-I'll leave you to the navigation. I'll forward the exact coordinates to you from my cabin."

He didn't wait for her reply but spun on his heel and walked out of the small bridge.



Saff watched him go with a feeling of desperation. Maz would be so ashamed of her if he knew what she had just done. It was all her fault, but the truth was, she couldn't help herself. As a human male, Quinten's scent was strong. And she, being what she was, was particularly attuned to the pheromone trail of humans.

She hadn't meant to subtly change her features to those approaching Kiel Souiad, but he was standing so close...he looked so alluring and, for once, so approachable. The stubble on his chin and the lazy casualness of his gaze indicated he was a bit more relaxed than usual. Added to his proximity, it was a combination Saff couldn't resist.

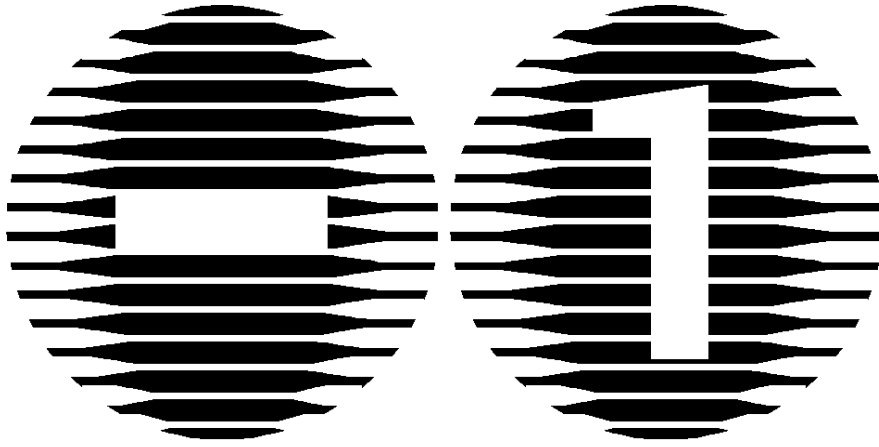
But masquerading as Kiel Souiad, the love of his life? That was a heinous act by Transitional standards.

It didn't matter that she'd only changed a few features, concentrating mostly on making the shape of her eyes approximate that of the dead woman's. Transitionals might mimic someone else as a dare, or an adventure, but to emotionally manipulate another person through such tricks was unconscionable. And the fact that she was only half-Transitional didn't make her actions any more justifiable.

With dull eyes, Saff turned back to the navigation console. It wouldn't surprise her in the least if Quinten Tamlan wanted nothing more to do with her. Ever.



The next morning, Tamlan prowled the *Perdition* as if in a rage. Saff, guilt-ridden, tried to stay out of his way as much as possible. In her brief glimpses of him, she wondered if he was aware of how much physical energy he was exerting, how much his body had healed. He stalked the corridors with loud and impatient boots, while she hid in Life Support, wondering when the storm would pass.



Quinten sat, brooding at the console screen, his mind a jumble of emotions.

So, Radim Somen was dead. That meant control of the Mitres Rayguns now went to the son. Faks Somen.

Quentin squeezed the closed fist of his left hand with the fingers of his right, unsure of what to do. History, like a lapping wave, engulfed him, bringing back memories he thought he'd successfully dealt with. Good times in the smoky, dangerous bar. Images of his exhausted parents. Strange how he'd never consciously connected the two before.

He sighed.

He was happy with his new life, but walking away from his old one hadn't been easy. He remembered the series of painful discussions with his parents before he finally left. The bit that haunted him was that it hadn't even been an acrimonious parting. The final cleaving had been quiet with misery and so much still left unsaid. It had been obvious that his parents loved him deeply and thought the galaxy operated in one way and that, while he loved his parents, he believed the galaxy could operate in a completely different way, if only he stood up and fought for an alternative. That was something they seemed unable to comprehend.

What made him think that it should be *him* to do such a thing? How was he going to live? What was going to happen to his promising career? What if the Republic caught and killed him?

Quinten was prepared for all their questions, but the worst was the knowledge that, once he left them, there

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was no going back. He couldn't contact them without putting their lives at risk, and he cared for them too much to do that. His love demanded that he sever every connection with his biological ascendants, a fact brought to bitter recollection by the death of Radim Somen.

Quinten remembered staring at the door of his parents' home that long ago afternoon. There were irregularities on the surface he hadn't noticed before. He sat in the chair, hearing the words of his disbelieving father and pleading mother wash over him and wished there was some way to reconcile the two halves his life had devolved to – playing the loving son for his parents, and striking out on his own with Kiel. In the end, despite his sadness and misgivings, there was no choice. His parents watched him walk out of their home...and into prominence on the news vids.

That had been four years ago.

The words on the console screen remained solidly real, prompting the question in Quinten's mind – what should he do now?

The door to his cabin slid open and Kiel entered. Four years had changed her massively in some areas, and not at all in others. She was still the exuberant and enchantingly beautiful woman he'd met in a disreputable bar on the crime-ridden edge of a strange city. And he was more in love with her than ever before. No shy scientist or outrageously pampered member of the gentry, Kiel had taken to renegade life with an energy that made Quinten's chest swell with pride. He could mention the almost-debacle on Wong-Li Three, and say, "We were saved from a Republic ambush because Kiel fearlessly brought down a team and personally shot her way through the Tungsten Enclave to get us." And he could tell any interested bystander that the ST Alliance had netted more than a hundred kilo-credits in the past year alone, due to Kiel's innate

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wizardry with figures. The Republic called them pirates because that was the easiest, most emotive label to use, but they were much more than the marauding mercenaries who made it their job to separate people from their money. The Republic didn't - wouldn't - admit that there were citizens unhappy with the way the government operated and that such people, stymied by any avenue of legitimate protest, had decided to take matters into their own hands. Even the idea behind the Alliance was dangerous, so they were called something more innocuous...something the average citizen could understand.

Pirates.

It was only one word and, although he didn't mind it, Quinten knew it weighed heavily on Kiel. Four years ago, she had eagerly embraced the idea of being a role model to disaffected Republic citizens across the known sectors of space. She had thrown herself into Alliance activities with verve. But it hadn't taken long for the Republic to take the wind out of her sails completely by classifying them as space scum.

Quinten watched as Kiel walked into the room. The years of cynicism had pulled her lips downwards and put faint lines on her forehead. But when she smiled - oh, when she smiled - it was the old rambunctious Kiel back again, making Quinten want to grab her and hold her and never let go.

He swivelled in his chair, so he was facing her full on.

"Radim Somen's dead," he said, without embellishment.

She frowned. "Faks' father?"

He nodded.

"That would make Faks the new leader of the Mitres Rayguns."

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What thoughts were swirling behind those gorgeous green eyes, Quinten wondered. Did Kiel ever regret the choice she made, creating a bunch of idealistic rebels rather than continuing her liaison with the heir to one of the largest cartels in that sector of space? If she'd stuck with Faks, he'd now be in a position to shower her with as much stabilised osmiridium as she could ever want. Instead, Quinten could only count two fully-operational ships in the Alliance, and only one of them was combat-ready. Venkat Digby, genius engineer and foundation member, made sure the *Cloud Skimmer* and cargo-carrying *Cumulus* were in tip-top condition, but they still weren't in the Raygun's league.

"I wonder if it's gone to Faks' head yet," she wondered aloud, "commanding his father's fleet."

Quinten barked out a short laugh, caught unawares by the dryness in her voice. He thought he had just fallen in love with her all over again. Then he sobered.

"I'm thinking of contacting him," he remarked.

Kiel looked at him with wide eyes. "Tell me I just imagined what I thought you said."

"It's been four years, Kiel." He held up both hands in a gesture of half-entreaty. "A lot's happened since then. None of us are who we were four years ago. We've changed. Maybe he has too."

She seemed to consider his words then shook her head. "I think I know Faks better than you do, Ten. You've only seen him when he's been playing the superior, worldly compatriot, showing the new *skeeve* around. But I've seen him in other situations, when you weren't around to be impressed. He holds grudges and he's got a mean streak as wide as a system."

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"But what harm could I pose?" Quinten asked, raising his hands for a moment. "As you say, he probably still thinks he's superior to me, more so now than ever before. He's got maybe twelve, fifteen ships by now, while we're slogging along with two. We're not even in the same business. I'm no threat to him. He's got to know that much at least. I never was."

Kiel frowned. "I don't know, Ten. All I'm saying is that Faks is a sly one and I wouldn't trust him as far as I can spit."

"Let me contact him," Quinten suggested. "I'll bounce it off a few arrays in different sectors and route it through some black nets. I guarantee he won't find out where we are."

He saw the doubt in her eyes and shrugged. "It's just...I know how much he loved his father." Quinten briefly thought of his own parents, and quelled a sharp pang of grief. "It only seems right to offer my condolences, considering what a good friend he was."

Kiel eyed him with a sober gaze. "And I hope the galaxy rewards your kindness, Ten. I really do."



"So, it's you."

That may not have been the reaction Quinten was hoping for, but the expression on Faks' face didn't completely preclude reconciliation.

"Yeah, it's me. I wanted to contact you. To tell you I'm sorry about your father."

Faks blinked. Beneath the two-day beard growth and

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concealing, heavy-lidded look, Quinten could see the young man he had befriended, the bluster that covered a hint of vulnerability and a burning desire to prove himself to the galaxy at large. The pirate licked his lips as if weighing each word before he said it.

"Yeah well, at least it was quick. One of the eight-ring fuel valves blew while he was checking engine performance. I don't suppose he knew what hit him."

"I'm still sorry," Quinten repeated. "I know you were close."

"How did you find out?" Faks asked abruptly, after a long pause.

Quinten shrugged. "I have sifter-bots traversing most of the nets, black and white."

Another short and uncomfortable silence fell.

"How's Kiel?" The words were dragged from Faks.

"She's fine."

"Tell her...tell her I said hi."

"Look Faks, I'm really sorry about how things turned out," Quinten said in a rush. "It was never my intention —"

Faks waved a dismissive hand at the screen. "We're both older now, Ten." And Quinten's heart leapt at the use of his old nickname.

"That's not to say things turned out the way I wanted them to," Faks added wryly, "but Kiel is a grown woman. And a headstrong one at that. She knew who she wanted and went for it. I don't know that I can blame her all that much." His gaze searched Quinten's face with unsettling intensity. "You came to offer your condolences on the death of my father, and I appreciate that. Maybe it's time we buried our feud as well."

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"I...." For a moment, Quinten wasn't sure what to say. "I've always wanted to do that, Faks. It's because of you that I started to learn exactly what the Republic stood for." He laughed. "In a way, you're doing a noble thing yourself, thumbing your nose at the Republic, and hitting them where it hurts. If someone were to ask, I'd say we took similar life-paths."

Faks peered off-screen for a brief second. "Yeah. Look, we're in the middle of a big deal, so I need to go. Would you be willing to meet up somewhere? Talk over old times? I'd love to see Kiel as well."

Quinten grinned. "Sure. Name the time and place. We'll be there."

"Great. Catch you soon, Ten. And, thanks for contacting me. It was a pleasant surprise."



"I don't know how someone so smart can be so stupid."

Kiel saw the stricken look on Quinten's face and regretted her impulsive words. Sighing, she ran a hand through her long hair, lifting the tresses away from her head as she wondered how best to reword her disbelief at what she'd just heard. They'd spent a wonderful couple of hours in bed together, a luxury they hadn't been able to resist, and Kiel was still enveloped in post-coital lassitude. Until she heard Ten's words.

She was smart enough to know that he had deliberately timed his revelation for a moment when she would be most receptive, smiling and heavy-lidded after an intense orgasm, but it wasn't enough. Frowning in disbelief, she had thrown his heavy arm off her belly,

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and shot up in bed. And it was only when she saw the momentary hurt in his eyes that she realised how much she had offended him.

"Ten." She stroked his body with long, light touches. "I'm sorry, my words came out all wrong." Her fingers brushed over sensitive skin. "It's just that I know Faks better than you do. If there's one thing he excels at, it's holding grudges."

He grabbed her hand and turned it over, kissing her open palm in his usual gesture. "I saw his eyes, Kiel. I think he's genuinely interested in rekindling our friendship."

She sighed again. "Where did he say he wanted to meet us?"

Quinten frowned. "What was the name of that planet again?" He stared at the cabin wall for a moment. "Gilgan."

Kiel mouthed the word slowly. "Gil-gan. It doesn't sound familiar to me."

"No, me neither, so I looked it up. It's not near any Republic post so we're safe in that regard. But it'll take five crease jumps and almost two weeks to get there."

"Sector?"

"The inner edge of Morhea."

Her eyebrows rose. "That's pretty far away."

"He wanted to make it closer, but he's doing some business with a small, out of the way community there, and says it's always been a safe haven for the Rayguns."

"Out in the Morhea sector?" Kiel was sceptical. "What

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could he possibly want that's way out there?"

"Rare minerals. He swaps Republic-raided goods for some of their high-quality ores, which he then refines before selling them on through other channels."

It surprised Kiel a little to hear that Faks was deviating from straight piracy. He always seemed to *like* it so much. But maybe he had grown up a bit since they last parted. Refining ore? That was the move of a smart man, one who looked beyond short-term gain. And what if the responsibility of his father's cartel had made him further reassess some of his personal foibles? Her rock-solid doubts started to waver.

"I still don't know," she said slowly, but heard the hesitation in her own voice. A hesitation, she knew Quinten would be quick to take advantage of.

"I'll admit he was always a bit highly strung," Quinten conceded, pulling her down so she was, once more, lying beside him. He lowered his voice. "But he sounded genuinely sorry over our break."

Kiel opened her mouth to say something, but he put a finger on her lips. "I'm not saying he was delighted to see me. Not at first. But, whether or not he liked to admit it, we had a good friendship. He taught me a lot, showed me a lot, and I think he remembered that during our conversation."

Kiel kissed his finger briefly then moved it to one side. "And did he also remember that you stole his girlfriend?"

Quinten shrugged. "I think he's big enough to know that was your decision. He even admitted that much to me."

"So you don't think he still holds you responsible?"

She was watching her lover closely and saw no hesitation in his answer. "He was a little chagrined, but I

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didn't see any malice there."

Kiel knew that Quinten was yearning to establish a relationship with anybody outside the Alliance, especially somebody who belonged to what he occasionally termed his "old life". He thought she didn't know, but she was aware that the break with his parents still bit deep. For Kiel, keeping in touch with her family, even if it was one half-cryptic message every ten months or so, was a relatively simple matter. The network of merchants, soldiers and traders that touched down at Tercom Seven made it a relatively easy matter to find a sympathetic hand to pass over a message chip when they were next at the ship-mod yards. It was a more difficult matter getting a message back to her, but even just a casual comment that her family seemed fine, or that business at the yards was good, was enough to reassure her.

For Quinten, it wasn't so easy. Because his parents were highly-regarded members of the Republic, they were given extraordinary concessions...but were also held under tight security. If anything, the invisible walls had probably closed in on them even more once the Republic connected the Tamlan of the ST Alliance with the scientist Tamlans, originally of the Tor sector.

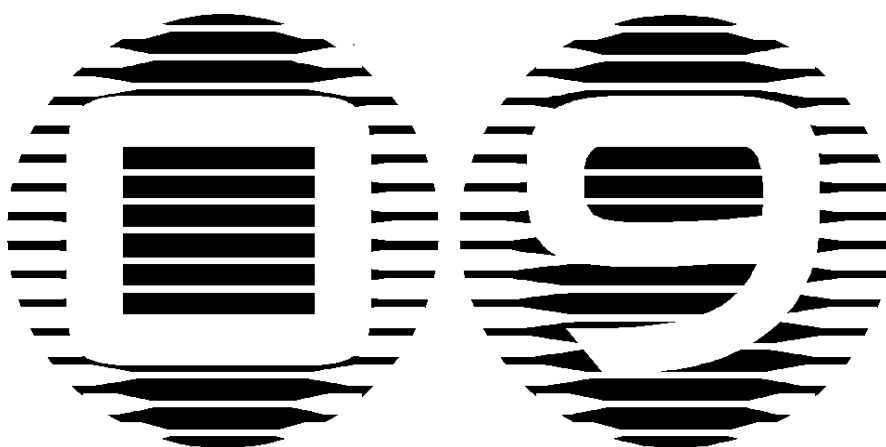
In order to follow her, and pursue their dream of hurting the Republic, Quinten had had to turn his back on two people he dearly loved. No wonder, then, that he was so insistent on patching the relationship with Faks Somen. It was no real substitute, but it was the only thing from his old life that Quinten had.

Her gaze softened as she drank in his beloved features. How could she deny him this, based on nothing more than old, perhaps misguided, feelings on her part? She captured his lips with hers, loving the soft feel of them against her and the musky scent of him that filled her nostrils.

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"Okay," she whispered, pulling away for a moment, "tell Faks that we'll meet him at Gilgan. Both of us."

And that was the last talking either of them did for a while.



She had buried it deep. So deep that Saff herself sometimes doubted she was part-human.

With impatient strides, she paced her room, her eyes darting around from one corner to another as if imagining she was in a cell. Not that the comparison was that outlandish. She had spent years in places like this, some bare, some civil like her current quarters. And all they were meant to do was extract something from her – information, compliance, consent. She kept the door closed for privacy but each time the panel slid into place behind her, she felt as if she had just walked anew into another prison. But she couldn't keep the door open, either. That exposed too much vulnerability. Saff slowly moaned in despair.

What would Maz say? Her shapeshifter mentor. Her substitute father. What would he say to her agreeing to turn Quinten Tamlan in to the Republic? Would he agree that the capture of one human justified his and his community's freedom? She wished she had a chance to speak to him and get his counsel, but she had been kept under strict isolation at Rannler after she'd cut the demon deal with Konsectoh, digging through facts and research, until she narrowed in on the Neon Red pirate cartel. Right now, pacing her quarters on the *Perdition* like a restless animal, her objective in sight, she wanted – *needed* – him by her side, with his gentle, yet pointed, guidance.

"You can't deny what you are," he had told her, soon after they first met. "You must come to terms with the fact that you are neither a full Transitional nor a full human."

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Saff had looked at him with sullen dislike. "They called me a Sub at Rannler."

"And, by their reckoning and your biochemistry, you are."

That was what had bitten her the most. She was intelligent, disciplined, and able to shift her features. And yet, according to the rules of the Republic, she was still considered second-class, no better, perhaps even worse, than the domestic pets that humans sometimes fawned over.

"We welcome you," he had continued, "but you must find a middle path, between the heated emotions of humankind and the serenity of a fulfilled Transitional."

They were words she didn't want to hear. A middle ground would mean admitting to the human genetics that wove through every cell of her body, admitting a kinship to a species she despised and that despised her. She had nodded to Maz at the time but, over the months she had spent with the small hidden band of Transitionals, she watched them carefully, schooling herself to outwardly act as serenely as they did. She remained calm and aloof. It worked. It was still working, if Quinten Tamlan's speculative glances were anything to go by. The problem was, she knew it was only a farce. A veneer. Roiling below the surface was a tempest of emotions, slaving to break free. And not least among them were the searing and conflicting feelings concerning Quinten himself.

During her time within their community, Saff had seen several courtships between Transitionals. They usually started with a display of shape-changing. Saff had watched, spellbound, while one person seamlessly morphed from a humanoid, to a rock, to a reptile of some sort, then a puddle of mercury, before rising up into the bipedal, hairless shape they all seemed to take on as their default. Speed was admirable, but some

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Transitionals took it deliberately slow, changing only a part of themselves at any moment, so it appeared that they were somehow “hatching” out of one form into another. Maz was always a joy to watch in this regard. Although not as seamless in his changes as some others of his age, he burst into and out of more interesting forms, a sequence that appeared to pull totally different species and objects into one pure flow of creation.

“It all depends on experience,” he had told her when she first expressed her admiration at his skill.

Even slow, his transfigurations were poetic, his transitional forms beautiful and balanced, like living sculptures. Watching him, Saff felt admiration and envy at the same time and was proud when he took her as his student, pushing her half-formed abilities to the limit, in an effort to discover exactly what she could, and couldn't, do.

It was a blissful two years. Until the Republic found them and took them into captivity. They discovered Saff, an escaped and valuable experiment, serendipitously soon after that and shipped them all back to the dreaded institution she had escaped from.

Valuable. Considering the number of times it was used, the word ceased to have any meaning, an observation she was quick to point out to the smirking Konsectoh during one of their meetings. He hadn't been at Rannler before. From eavesdropping on conversations, she learnt that he had arrived soon after her re-capture. Not Space Fleet or even a scientist, Konsectoh was from the Republic's Security Force. And he had a plan.

“What do you expect *me* to do that your entire Security Force can't?” She had made her voice deliberately insolent, trying to insinuate nuances she'd overheard into her words, and flicked a glance at the far wall, disguising the fact that she was observing him carefully.

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Konsectoh spread his hands. "Catch Quinten Tamlan of course," he repeated. She had hoped to goad him into thinking she was an imbecile, intractable, useless to his needs, but he sat there, day after day, and patiently repeated his demands. They had been at it for nine days already.

"I don't understand you."

In reality, she was quaking inside. She was scared to be back at Rannler, hidden beneath layers of security. Scared of the Security Force officer who seemed incapable of admitting defeat. Scared of what would happen to her people if she made a single misstep in a game she didn't understand. Guilty at their incarceration through association with her.

Konsectoh picked up a slim narrow yellow chip and tapped it on his desk. It made small clicks with each impact. "Know what this is?"

She shrugged, keeping silent.

"It's your dossier. From the time you were hatched at the Tor Delta labs, to your time being sent to various institutions, to the little time you spent here at Rannler before your escape. I sent for it the moment the message came in about what the Space Fleet had caught."

The distinction - "what" not "who" - didn't escape Saff. She pretended not to notice.

"It makes for interesting reading," the officer continued. "Hybrid species, part shifter, part human. A tendency to take on a human form. Limited shapeshifting ability. And a very organised brain. *Very* organised brain."

His gaze was more curious than malicious and Saff held herself back from squirming in her chair. He looked like a surgeon about to dissect an animal, not caring if it was dead or alive, and she knew she was exactly that

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animal, the nexus of his cold, hard focus.

"The kind of brain," he continued, "that can find patterns where normal humans have difficulty."

She swallowed, once again playing for time. "I still do not understand."

"As I keep telling you, I want to use that exceptional brain of yours to find someone." He paused. "Quinten Tamlan."

She knew that name. Folk-hero to dozens of species within the Republic. He and his partner, Kiel Souiad, were the righteous fighters for equality for all. Stories of them, and their ST Alliance, were the stuff of legend throughout the underground nets. But neither human had been heard from in years. There was the victory at Wong-Li Three, the audacious robbery at the Bankow Shipyards, a string of operations in the Oinnai sector, the Tatfer caper...then nothing. Not for more than six years.

"He might not be alive," she grudgingly said.

"Oh he's alive," Konsectoh assured her. "We've been picking up isolated sightings. Seems he has a ship. A Republic combat scout we thought we lost in a crease-accident years ago." The tightening of his lips told Saff that Konsectoh wasn't happy about the ship's eventual fate. It looked like he would have preferred to toss the ship, and its crew, into damnation rather than let it fall into the hands of a rebel freedom-fighter. But she still couldn't see where she fitted into his grand plan.

"I don't know how I can help you," she said, although she had the dreadful feeling that she was about to find out, and have the jaws of a titanium trap close on her.

He smiled at her, an expression bereft of good cheer, full of bared teeth and a barely restrained snarl. "You're going to find him for us."

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"And how," she asked, keeping her face impassive, "am I going to do that?"

"You're going to find us a common element."

"A common element." Her voice was slow as she repeated his words. "Not Tamlan himself?"

"He seems to have detection software, units ahead of what we have." Konsectoh was back to looking as if he was sucking on a particularly bitter lemon. "We've tried to corner him before and it hasn't worked. We need an edge."

"And this 'common element' of yours will give you an edge?"

"Tamlan must deal with familiar groups of suppliers," Konsectoh insisted. "He has to. The same people over and over again, to the point that he has placed some trust in them. That's our common element."

Saff had wanted to laugh in his face, but that was a human response and she didn't know how to do it properly. "What happens when you find it, this common element, this supplier of yours?" Despite herself, she was curious.

"Then we transfer you across."

Her breath caught and Konsectoh's grin widened.

"Wait!" Her voice was sharp and high with tension. "What do you mean?"

She wasn't faking ignorance this time. She really wanted to know what was going on in the human's head.

"Tamlan has a reputation for never staying in one place for too long," he explained. "The moment we find the common element, it's up to you to somehow use that element to get to his ship. Then signal us. After turning

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off his super-efficient detection software, of course. We'll ambush him...and the Republic will be rid of one meddlesome pirate."

Saff blinked. "You want me to find a pattern in Tamlan's movements. Find a regular element in common with those movements. Get near that element somehow. Transfer to Tamlan's ship. Disable it. Then notify you."

Konsectoh nodded with approval. "See," he let the plastic chip bounce on the tabletop twice, "I knew you'd understand. Eventually."

Saff ignored the comment. "You said I was valuable. Why risk me if I'm valuable? You said the Republic considers me a 'high-value detainee'." She stressed each word carefully.

There might have been an element of smugness in her tone, but it was wiped away by Konsectoh's next words.

"Not anymore."

She stared at him.

"Like I said, I've been reading your file," he told her. "And, while a human-shapeshifter hybrid may have some value to the Republic, now that we have the process well documented, the asset itself, well," he fluttered his fingers, "ceases to be quite so critical. Besides, rather than having just one hybrid engineered from one batch of samples, we now have an entire group of thirty to use as possible source material. We could - oh, I don't know - mix and match to our hearts' content. Maybe even," *tap tap*, "come up with something better than the constituent parts. More pliable. More co-operative. Something like that."

Konsectoh, watching her, let the chip bounce twice on the tabletop again. *Tap. Tap.*

"What we eventually do," he said, "is entirely up to

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you."

Saff lowered her head and stared at the floor between her feet. It didn't take a genius to see where his thoughts were leading. She was torn in two. Quinten Tamlan was the famed leader of the ST Alliance. Could she even contemplate betraying the founder of such a group? On the other hand, the lives of her community, her adopted family, were at stake.

"You would *not* experiment on the prisoners?" she asked, still watching the leaden-coloured floor. "If I agree to your plan?"

She heard the Security Force officer laugh.

"I really don't think I need to explain it any further to something like you, do I?"

Saff didn't miss the pronoun usage, but she refused to take the bait. Silent, she waited.

"The file said you're very intelligent," he finally remarked. "Maybe it's wrong."

She remained in position, head bent, a curtain of star-pale hair hiding her features. After several minutes, he sighed heavily.

"Okay, the deal's this. Get us Tamlan, and maybe I'll let you and your bunch of shapeshifters walk."

She jerked her head up in a spasm of movement.

"Why?" Her voice was harsh.

"Why not?" He shrugged. "Does it offend your sub-human sensibilities to know that there are people we're after that are worth more than a bunch of Subs?" He narrowed his eyes, willing her to keep her gaze on him.

"We already know how to make more like you," he told

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her in deliberate tones. "And if you think your little group of hideaways are the only shifters we have access to, you're wrong. You're just closer, that's all. A convenience. Nothing more."

Saff didn't care how many insults Konsectoh threw at her as long as the core of what he was saying was true.

"How can you let us go?" she challenged, her head jerking up again. "The Security Force will have you disgraced and expelled from the Republic as quick as you draw breath, *human*."

That statement sounded more authentic, full of anger and venom. That was how humans spoke. Saff was only happy that Maz wasn't there to see her debase herself to such a level.

The hint of a snarl curled the edge of Konsectoh's lips.

"Don't push me, Sub, or you'll regret it. There are places in this galaxy that make Bliss look like a holiday camp." He paused to let the words sink in before pushing back in his chair. "The fact of the matter is, thirty individuals here or there can easily get lost in the general bureaucratic tangle. I could say that the group was shipped somewhere by mistake. Or that ten died while trying to escape and the others committed group suicide. I could say that you were all terminated within twenty-four hours of being caught. I could say," he told her coldly, "anything."

"And you'd let us go?"

"Get me Tamlan and his technologies and I might even give you a ship to speed you on your way."

Quinten Tamlan. Or her people.

She had been with the rest of the Transitionals until they'd landed at Rannler. For the past nine days, she'd been separated and kept in an isolated cell. She didn't

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realise how much she missed Maz until he wasn't there to rely upon. How could she live with herself if she didn't do everything possible to save his life?

But Quinten Tamlan? Konsectoh might as well ask her to capture a rogue moon and bring it back to him.

"How long do I have?" she asked.

"How long can your people survive in captivity?" he countered. "How long can I keep them off major Security Force screens? Not long, Sub. Not long at all."

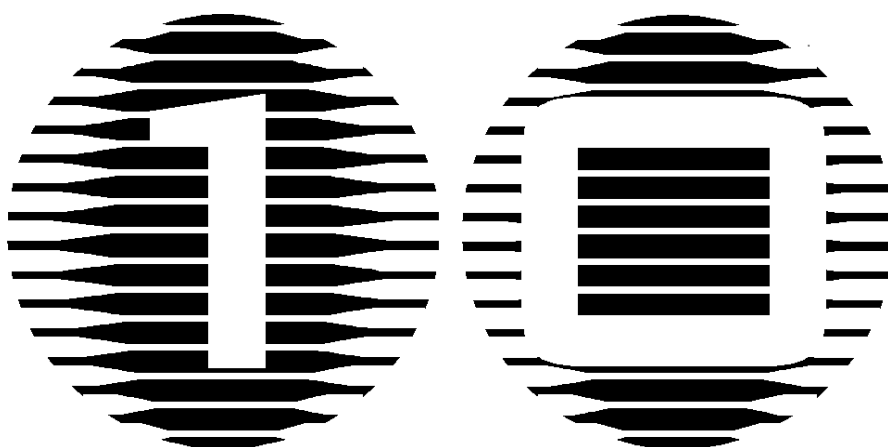
If Konsectoh let her go.... If he let her escape, she could disappear again into the galaxy, perhaps find another community of Transitionals and put in practice everything Maz had tried to teach her.

Saff took a deep breath. Except, she couldn't.

Not while her present community lay in Republic detention. And not while there was a chance that she could get them out.

She wanted to lean her head back and yell like a banshee *woldon*. She wanted to turn into a ravaging beast and rip the smug Security Force officer limb from limb. But all Saff could do was look him straight in the eye.

"Yes," she said. "I'll do it."



Saff didn't know the human expression "bear with a sore head". If she had, she might have used it to describe Quinten's mood. For the past week, ever since that strangely intimate almost-kiss in the cockpit, he had been stomping around the *Perdition*, the heavy thump of his boots reverberating down the slash of corridors. When Saff asked him for instructions, or directives for the day, he snarled his replies at her, and she retreated quickly.

There was so much about humans that she didn't know. Such as, what had she done to evoke such a response from him? Had he detected her subtle change to resemble Kiel Souiad? But she knew he would have said something about it by now if he had.

That thought made Saff wonder what had happened to Souiad in the first place. Nobody had breathed a word about her in years. There were rumours that she was dead, but nothing definite. Then, in a drunken state, Quinten had confirmed the gossip. But how? Did Quinten's scarred body have anything to do with what happened? Maybe the two had had an argument, although that seemed difficult to believe. Quinten wasn't an easy person to get along with, but he wasn't violent.

Saff shuddered as she walked to where the major sensor relays were housed. She hated violence. She thought she had endured enough of it to last several Transitional lifetimes. She especially hated those episodes that relied on psychological coercion. She would've accepted any honest pain over the choice that Konsectoh offered her a few months ago, locked in that tiny, white room where, with restless fingers, he clacked her file up and down on the hard desk.

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Instinctively, her fingers flew over the security keypad at the main sensor room, her mind barely on the tasks she was supposed to perform that day. Had she somehow offended Quinten? Committed some heinous and subtle human crime? Was - the thought alone horrified her - Quinten going to put her off the ship? While there had been a tremendous amount of remedial work to do when she first came on board, the load had gradually lessened then steadied. Saff thought there was still enough work for at least two people, but maybe Quinten didn't see it that way. Maybe he thought he only needed temporary help and, now that the *Perdition's* systems were running smoothly, he was prepared to cut her loose.

Saff's hand convulsed on the panel below the primary sensor outputs. No. She didn't want to leave. Not when....

Not when she'd developed feelings for Quinten Tamlan. Saff sighed and bent down to peer under the console. She wasn't sure if she was "in love" with Quinten or if she just loved him but what was certain was that working with him had roused feelings in her that she'd never encountered before. She cared about him and felt protective towards him. That was love...wasn't it?

She wondered if Konsectoh had factored that outcome into his equations. Probably not. He considered Quinten to be the Republic's Number One enemy, worth barely more than a cockroach. But if Quinten really was thinking of dumping her at the nearest spaceport, then her feelings were the least of her worries. Once off the *Perdition*, how could she save her Transitional community? It wasn't likely that Tamlan would accept her back...unless she sabotaged some systems and he *needed* her help.

She stared at the bundles of cables with a considering

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eye. Maybe if he was going to give some indication of releasing her, she'd have enough time to do a bit of damage. Slowly, she touched the cables, separating the bundles by function. It would take some time, and require her to move to Life Support to do a proper job but, luckily, that was on her worksheet as well.

Preoccupied, she began re-routing the sensor relays.



Saff didn't see Quinten again until the call for dinner came later that evening, ship time. There was a strange hesitancy in his voice that alarmed her. Was this it? The moment to thank then discard her? A part of her cursed her own laxity in contacting Konsectoh. There were a couple of times over the past month alone that she could have called a Space Fleet strike force to encircle them...and hadn't. What had she been waiting for?

At a slower pace than normal, she walked to the ship's canteen. Quinten was already there. He looked up as she entered and gave her a tight smile. They had progressed in that area as well over the past weeks. Or so she thought. Now, to an outside observer, it might appear that they almost liked each other. If she could forget the heavy metal coldness around her neck, she and Quinten might be colleagues, both assigned duties in a hell-hole, bound by circumstance and acknowledgement of the other's private grief.

"Peas tonight," he told her, from the other side of the counter. "That okay with you?"

"That sounds fine."

Saff had assumed that any green vegetable that

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humans ate contained oxalic acid, a low-level poison for Transitionals, but she was wrong. Quinten had shown her charts and she'd discovered that she could eat more human food than she thought. And he'd obviously discovered her particular liking for peas. She found their shape to be comical and liked rolling them around in her mouth before squashing them against the back of her teeth. She wondered if there would come a time when she would be skilled enough to turn into a giant pea herself, round, rolling and green. The idea was amusing.

"I was just thinking," Quinten remarked as he set two plates down. "Do you know how long you've been on this ship?"

Ninety-one days, seven hours and fifteen minutes.

She said nothing and shook her head.

He reached for the two drink bulbs he'd left on the counter and handed one to her. "Three months. A quarter of a standard year."

"Is there something significant about that number?"

Saff knew she was slipping into "alien" mode, pretending not to understand human considerations at all. She had found it a useful shield in the past.

"Well," he shrugged, "three months. That's long enough for us to learn a little about each other, isn't it?"

She remained silent, keeping her head down as she ate.

"To decide whether this arrangement of ours is working out."

She looked up, startled, and he grinned in triumph, as if confirming something to himself. His voice, however, remained calm.

"You're a good worker, Saff. Thorough. Organised. If I was the head of a labour mart, I'd hire every person like

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you I could find." He chewed reflectively as he watched her. "Regardless of how many secrets they appear to keep."

Her fork paused in mid-scoop as it scraped along the plate, then resumed. "You think I have secrets."

"*Everybody* has secrets. But you...I get the feeling your secret is a really big one."

Saff closed her eyes briefly, a long slow blink. "And what would that secret be, Quinten Tamlan?"

"If I knew it," he countered, "it wouldn't be a secret anymore, would it?"

Was this a trap? Was he trying to trick her into confessing her plan for his capture?

"As you say," she told him, dumping a mound of vegetables back on her plate and spearing a pea with the tines of her fork, "everyone has secrets."

He sat, immobile, and watched her eat. Saff found his steady regard unnerving, a failing from the human side of her genes no doubt. She swallowed the pea then put the fork down next to her plate, matching his gaze with one of her own.

"Do you want to leave?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't understand." Surely it wasn't a question of what she wanted. All her life, it had never been a question of what she, Saff, wanted. All that mattered was what others wanted. The scientists in the complexes where she'd grown up, Konsectoh, Quinten and, yes, even Maz.

"You're a sentient being, Saff. I may not totally trust you but, by now, I don't think you're the type to turn me in to the Republic." He paused. "If you'd like to get off this ship, I'm willing to drop you in the Mantial sector next time we're there."

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No please, she pleaded inwardly. Don't be kind. Anything, but not kind.

"Man...", she repeated faintly. "I'm not sure where that is."

"It's past Morhea." He paused. "I trust you to an extent, but I have to protect myself as well."

"You said I was thorough."

"Yes."

"Organised."

"That's right."

"So why get rid of me now? Is it because the *Perdition* is running in better condition than when I first came on board? You don't require an indentured slave anymore?"

"The ship is in good order," he conceded. She knew him well enough to know he was picking his words carefully. "But there are, things about our working relationship that I'm less happy with."

She could guess what the first of those things were by the way his gaze lingered on the collar around her neck.

"The nerve chain." There was no inflection in her voice, no hint of the loathing she held towards the device.

"The nerve chain," he agreed, then had the grace to look abashed. "It...seemed like a good idea at the time. A way of having my cake and eating it too, if you understand me."

"No, I don't." And she didn't. A lot of human sayings sounded like nonsense to her.

Quinten relaxed and stretched his legs beneath the table but his gaze remained sharp. "It's a way of saying

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that I wanted everything my way. I wanted someone to do independent work but, at the same time, I wanted total control over that person."

She nodded once. "I see. A most succinct saying, in that case."

"Yeah, we humans are good at that."

"And what have you decided now, Quinten Tamlan? Does eating your cake mean that it disappears somehow?"

"You could say that."

She swallowed. "You would take this nerve chain off?"

He looked thoughtful and Saff knew, from the long pause before he answered, that there was a lot more going on behind those human eyes than thoughts of the nerve chain.

"You know what's strange?" he asked. "You never once tried to take it off yourself."

"It's a nerve chain," she replied in a flat tone. "I'm well aware of the damage it can do should I attempt to short-circuit it."

He didn't appear to be listening. "There were, how many? Maybe fifteen or twenty people aboard the *God's Harness*?"

"The Neon Red's ship?"

"Yeah, Shaw's little baby. How many people aboard, would you say?"

"I counted eighteen crewmembers in total." Where was he leading with these questions?

"And Breit used the nerve chain on you."

The remembrance of it made Saff's throat convulse. Oh

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yes, Breit had used the nerve chain all right. He claimed it was to keep the entire story "authentic", but Saff knew it for the lie it was.

"He did." Her voice was husky, as if reliving the moments. The pain, the screams, all hers before she mercifully blacked out.

"Several times?"

"Twice."

"So you were collared twice for attempted escapes from a ship of almost twenty crew? That's what Breit told me while we were collecting the sensor units." He paused again. "And yet you didn't try the same thing on a ship containing only one other person." He shook his head. "That doesn't seem very logical to me, and if there's one thing I know about you, Saff, it's that you're a very logical woman."

"Avoiding pain is also logical, Quinten Tamlan."

"And that's the only reason you didn't try the same thing on the *Perdition*?" He tried to raise his eyebrows but the scarred one remained low, giving him a quizzical look. As if he was asking for something besides the answer to his question.

Saff didn't know what to say, what words to use.

"No sentient being willingly subjects itself to great pain," she finally told him. "Make no mistake, Quinten Tamlan, the nerve chain delivers great pain."

He still looked dissatisfied. "And in the past three months, the thought of escaping the ship has never crossed your mind?"

She was more confident answering this question, meeting his gaze squarely. "I have thought many things while I've been on your ship. I've thought of strangling you, poisoning you" - she didn't have to look down to

Quinten's Story

flick the handle of the fork with a long finger, causing it to rattle on the tabletop - "stabbing you with lunch utensils. I have hated every moment of that collar, like a death sentence around my neck. But....

"But I have also learnt much and been treated with a kind of respect that a Sub never expects from a human. The time I've spent on the *Perdition* has been safe. It's a rare thing to be a Sub and feel safe."

"Does that mean you don't want to be let off in the Mantial sector?"

"Yes."

"But you'd like the nerve chain removed?"

"Yes."

He eyed her for a long minute, then got to his feet. "In that case, follow me."



By unspoken agreement, they left the untidy clatter of plates and drinks on the table and Quinten led the way to the storage bays. Part of him wondered if he'd finally gone stark raving mad. Take the nerve chain off a Sub? Everyone knew an alien couldn't be trusted as far as a human could spit. And that went double for a possible Type B, a creature that couldn't decide whether it was one thing or another. But he didn't think he could stand another day of looking at that lump of lethal circuitry around his so-called crewmember's neck without doing something about it.

Kiel would be proud of him.

Kiel is dead.

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And he wondered why the thought didn't hurt as much as it did before.

His boots clattered down the steps to the nearest storage bay and he keyed it open, waving on the illumination at the same time. Bright light outlined military-neat stacks of equipment perched on every shelf, labelled in clear legible *ingel*.

With the toe of one boot, Quinten eased out a squat stool from under the shelves. He stood on it and reached for a half-empty container. The box rattled as he pulled it down and, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Saff stiffen as he looked down and checked that the container still held all the parts of her old nerve-chain.

"Is there anything specific you need from this storage room?" he asked.

She looked around before meeting his gaze again. "No."

"In that case, come here."

This was a significant moment and Quinten knew it. There was something else shimmering in the air, and it wasn't just a sense of oncoming relief at the liberation from the nerve-chain. He didn't quite know what it was, this air of tension and promise, but he knew that what he was doing was more than merely making a statement. Something fundamental was about to change.

He gestured for Saff to hold the box while he pulled a small key from his suit. When he pressed it against the collar, it gave a slight click and a small metal panel adjacent to the key fell inwards then slid back.

Quinten hesitated. This was it. All he had to do was press a finger or thumb against the glass rectangle that was now exposed and key in a pin. And once he did that, the collar would slip open...and she would be free to kill him.

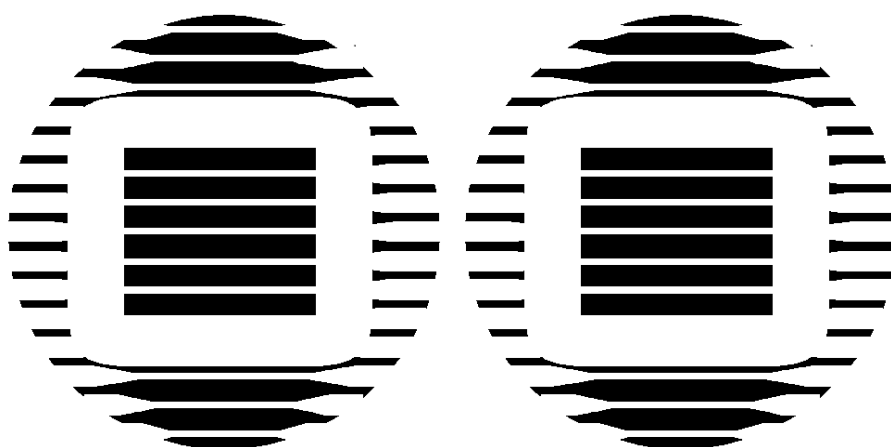
Quinten's Story

He glanced across at her and met her sideways gaze, dark, full and feline. She had never looked so alien as she did at that moment. Was it a warning? A promise? With a muttered oath, he pressed his thumb against the slim verification screen, sketched in the pin and the collar split open. Quinten didn't waste any time removing it. With barely repressed violence, he flung it into the container, along with the control unit, replaced the box on the shelf and brusquely indicated that they should leave.

Outside the storage bay again, Quinten locked the door and put it under his personal seal.

"To keep it out of temptation's way," he told her.

Then he stalked off to his quarters without a backwards glance.



"This seems a bit of a strange place to meet Faks." Kiel's voice was full of doubt.

Quinten took his hand from the controls long enough to give hers a squeeze. "You know Faks. If there's anything he hates, it's being embarrassed in public."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of," she muttered.

The *Cloud Skimmer's* screen showed a large moon. Its surface was cratered and, in some places, gouged out completely, as if a planet-swallowing giant had decided to take little nibbles of the sphere.

"Gilgan," Quinten said to nobody in particular, not looking at her. "Not a planet but a moon. Old mining site, riddled with tunnels, some of which still contain atmosphere."

"Only one crease in at the edge of the system," Kiel countered, consulting her screen, "and the nearest exit one day away at cruise speed."

She looked up suddenly. "I don't like it, Ten. Every alarm in my head is going off at maximum volume. I know Faks. He holds grudges."

Quinten punched in an orbit, let the ship's navigation computer take over and sat back in his chair. "I saw a part of him that you didn't, sweet. You saw him as a friend and sometime lover, but I was like a lame puppy he took in. He opened my eyes to so much in this screwed-up galaxy and he knew it. I was unhappy but I hadn't even *thought* of something like the Alliance before I met him. Before I met you." He met her troubled gaze squarely. "From what I know of him, I trust him to do the right thing."

Quinten's Story

She sighed, conceding the point. "All right. We do it your way, for the moment. So how do we meet the new head of the Mitres Rayguns?"

"I told him we'd be alone. Just the two of us. I've already told Venkat to stay on the *Skimmer* and monitor the spectrum for any incoming Space Fleet traffic. Delee and Slim should be at the rendezvous point with the *Cumulus* in a couple of days' time. Hopefully, they won't get into trouble while they wait for us."

Kiel's expression brightened. "So you *are* expecting trouble?"

"Not from Faks, but that's not to say a patrol won't stumble across us or our cargo ship."

She shook her head and planted a kiss on his cheek. "I just hope your trust is warranted."

Quinten grinned. "Don't worry, it will be."

Kiel led the way down to the hatch.

Four years. That was how long it had been since she'd last seen Faks and he hadn't been pleased with what she had to say to him. She and Quinten had made sure to stay out of the Rayguns' way while they acquired and outfitted the *Cloud Skimmer*. That had taken a year. Then the ST Alliance launched itself into the galaxy and they'd been running on planning, adrenaline and luck ever since.

Kiel reached out and momentarily laid a hand against the inward curve of a bulkhead, spreading her fingers against the cool metal. Venkat may be their engineer, but she knew every plate and rivet of the ship as well as he did. It was her refuge and home and she hoped it would stay that way till the day she died. She, Quinten and the rest of the crew righting wrongs. What more could anyone ask?

Quinten's Story

Venkat met them at the hatch, his expression worried.

"How long are you going to be down there?" he asked, not bothering with preliminaries.

Quinten gave Kiel a quick glance. "Two or three hours should do it. I hope he's brought some liquid refreshments."

"I've redone a sensor scan of the moon," the engineer told them, "and confirmed my initial findings. Almost half the passages are on the verge of collapsing and, as I said two days ago, there's such a maze of shafts below the rendezvous point that I doubt it'll bear the weight of the *Skimmer* landing. Add to that the fact that it's been more than a century since the last maintenance crew left and I'm worried about the force of even one thruster against the surface."

"Why did Faks pick *this* place?" Kiel asked, her disquiet growing again. "It's in the middle of nowhere, far from where the Rayguns usually operate. I know he mentioned his mineral processing ambitions but – as Venkat says – this place has been abandoned for decades."

"He said his grand aunt owned a share in the moon," Quinten explained, slipping into a suit. "She passed the codes to his father fifty years ago and the cartel have been using the place as an ammunitions dump ever since. That way, should the Space Fleet pick up metal and explosive traces on a routine sensor sweep, they won't get alarmed. It was while they were here a few years ago that Faks got the idea of processing minerals, which explains why we're both here now. Him to do some trading, and us...to renew an old friendship."

Kiel twisted her lips. "How convenient."

The plan was for Quinten and Kiel to EVA down to the moon's surface via powered suits. Once at the designated location, they were to use a set of supplied

Quinten's Story

codes to enter the mining complex. Faks assured them that he was in a sector of the mine that still contained breathable atmosphere.

"I'll keep an ultra-low geostationary orbit and a tether down," Venkat assured them through their intercoms as they were cycling through the departure check.

"Shouldn't be necessary," Quinten commented. His voice sounded tinny to Kiel's ear. "We'll power down from the *Skimmer* and power back up again."

Venkat Digby disagreed. "Engineers always believe in double, if not triple, redundancy. Humour me."

"Whatever you say," Kiel told him with a smile. "You're the head engineer."

Venkat looked affronted. "I'm the *only* engineer." But he grinned back.

Kiel and Quinten squeezed into the small docking hatch and watched through a transparent panel as Venkat secured them in. He referred to an out-of-sight panel then counted them down with one hand raised.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

The hatch opened and the brilliance of the system's sun and the moon's light surface momentarily blinded Kiel before her visor compensated. She steadied her breathing, stepped from the *Cloud Skimmer* and gently hit her jets. The power sent her bunny-hopping down to Gilgan's surface in a series of descending jumps. Behind her, she was sure Quinten was using his controls to describe a more graceful decline. He was so much better at the EVA stuff than she was.

She landed softly enough and a small cloud of dust rose quickly then subsided just as fast. Tonguing her intercom open, she waited for her partner's approach.

"I still don't like it," she told him.

Quinten's Story

He took her thickly padded hand in his. "Think of it this way. It's harder to plan an ambush in a vacuum."

"Never stopped anyone before," she muttered, but let herself be led to the doorway that Faks told them was closest to the rendezvous point.

The moon resembled a graveyard. Twenty metres away, and stretching in patches to the curved horizon, heavy machinery was scattered in untidy heaps. They were without their valuable parts, salvaged out of the husks by some careless surgeon, and their functions were barely recognisable from what was left. On a planet with atmosphere, a century of dereliction would have softened the edges of the scrap. Wind would have blown soil against it, plants would have grown on it. In hard vacuum, the metal carcasses were as sharp and stark as the day they'd been abandoned.

"It's not far," Quentin said, as if picking up on her unease.

She turned to face him and he made a movement with his head, the helmet jerking towards some point behind her and to her right. She followed the direction and saw a rock face with a large metal door blasted into it. Wordlessly, she headed towards it.

When they reached the door, Kiel was disappointed to see that it appeared to be still powered. The control panel was covered by a transparent lid that glowed a reassuring green.

"Do you have the codes?" she asked, half-hoping he'd forgotten to bring them.

"Memorised them." She couldn't see his face properly through the mirrored visor but clearly heard the grin in his voice.

Of course he would. Quentin was a perfectionist like that.

Quinten's Story

She took one final look upwards and was gratified to see that Venkat was true to his word. The *Cloud Skimmer* hovered far above them like a metal teardrop and, from the hatch, a long line hung limply to the ground. Suddenly, Kiel was filled with a sense of optimism. Maybe Quinten was right after all. Maybe Faks, now a man wielding considerable influence, only wanted to mend fences. She gave the ship a quick wave and entered the now open doorway after her lover.

Quinten shut the door and watched the inside displays, then indicated that she could take off her helmet. Releasing the catches with two snaps, Kiel lifted the weight off her shoulders and looked around.

"So he was right, there is still some atmosphere here."

"And a bit of gravity too," Quinten added, consulting the displays. "Only point eight but it's better than nothing."

Kiel cast her gaze at the rough-hewn walls. "Where to now?"

"We can leave our helmets here. There's a doorway behind you. Seems to be the only way down."

Kiel was glad to get rid of the bulky hindrance and set her helmet on the floor. As far as she was concerned, she needed both hands free to prepare for every eventuality, whether it was to accept a hug from Faks or dodge a laser.

"What did Gilgan mine anyway?" she asked, leading the way down the metal treads. There was only room on the stairway for two suited figures to walk side by side. The doorway they had entered through was obviously more for administrators, or it might have been an emergency exit. It definitely wasn't made for anyone carrying mining equipment.

Quinten's Story

"Don't know. From the plans I've seen of the mining operations, however, whatever was here, there was a lot of it. I've never seen a moon so extensively tunnelled."

After four flights, the pair finally came to another door.

Kiel was about to pull the lever to open the door when Quinten grabbed her upper arm. She cast him a puzzled glance. "What is it?"

"Faks is through there," he told her. "He's now head of the Mitres Rayguns and his cartel would be a useful ally if we could talk him around."

His accompanying look told her more than the words. One-time friend. Powerful. Proud. She nodded once, agreeing.

"He'd be a good person to have on our side," she conceded.

She smiled and knew he was watching as she reached for the lever.



Quinten liked to think he was a strategist. His decision to contact Faks Somen, on hearing about the death of Somen the elder, had been equal parts warm recollection and cold calculation.

The Mitres Raygun cartel was the most influential pirate cartel in their sector of Republic space. No underhanded deal, except for some petty bartering, occurred without Raygun approval...and the appropriate commission changing hands. Quinten and the Alliance could use some of that leverage. He wasn't expecting charity, but

Quinten's Story

he was expecting the chance to explore a win-win situation with an old friend.

Kiel pulled the lever and the hatch opened into a large underground chamber. At least there were no more steps, Quinten thought with relief, leading the way down a wide ramp. Large empty boxes were strewn around in much the same way as the skeletons of machinery littered the surface. And, at about a third of the length across the uneven floor, Faks stood beaming, his arms open wide.

It had only been a handful of years, but life had obviously been good to the pirate in the time since they'd last seen each other. The person Quinten remembered as a lithe young man had now thickened into a more powerful build, although he was still too far away to know for certain whether that was due to fat or muscle under the pirate's armour.

Armour? Had Faks seriously thought that he, Quinten, was going to come all the way to Gilgan to do him some harm? The thought was ludicrous and it was that emotion that fired the smile on his face...before all hell broke loose.

The first blast came in high and from the right. It must have been fired by a nervous gunner because it missed Faks, Kiel and him, instead scorching the ground behind them. Had the Republic found them? It would be a major coup if they managed to kill or capture the principals of both the ST Alliance *and* the Raygun cartel. Quinten swore under his breath and was about to rush forward in an attempt to get to Faks, when his universe tipped again.

Instead of cowering and running for cover, Faks had turned, angrily gesturing towards the roof of the chamber.

Quinten's Story

"Not yet!" he yelled, his fingers stiff and wide.

Quinten froze. No, the Republic wasn't behind this. It was Faks. His old friend, Faks.

Faks Somen wanted him dead.

A hand pulled roughly at him as Kiel jerked him behind the cover of an overturned metal container.

"I knew the slimy bastard would pull something like this," she grouched. Grabbing her right glove between teeth, she pulled it off, spat it out then reached for her shin-pack. Quinten saw her scrabbling for something, then she pulled out a blaster and handed it to him.

"I say we do some target practice of our own," she remarked, fiddling with her other trouser leg and emerging with a second weapon. "Nothing like a fire-fight to get the blood pumping."

"We need to get out of here," Quinten corrected. "Faks has us at a disadvantage and I'm loath to do him any more favours."

"But we kill the bastard, right?" Kiel's eyes were gleaming.

Quinten wasn't sure whether to groan or kiss her. "Maybe. If we get a chance. But our first priority is to get to the *Skimmer*."

Kiel popped her head out from the side of the metal box, eased off two quick shots then ducked back again. "What if he has another welcome party waiting on the stairs for us?"

"Won't know till we find out. Remember to pick up your glove. We'll be exiting this place hot."

And, he realised, he'd just made another colossal

Quinten's Story

blunder. By leaving his helmet at the mine's entrance, he had also left behind the only way to contact Venkat and prime him for a hasty retreat. Damn, but the day was just getting better and better.

In all the vids Quinten had ever seen in his life, he was now at the point where the hero and villain of the entertainment piece exchanged fire-interrupted questions and answers on their motivations, bravado and parentage. Quinten was having none of it. As well as giving Faks more time to find them, a shouted exchange would also give away their exact position. He allowed himself the luxury of one head-shake, then he and Kiel used the oversized litter in the chamber to work their way back to the ramp.

"On three," Quinten rasped, and they were off.

He wasn't sure who was more surprised by the fact that both of them made it unscathed to the stairs. It seemed incredible, but maybe they were going to get through this in one piece.

"Four flights up," Quinten told her. "Get your helmet on while I punch the doorway. I'll be venting air so be ready to run the moment the coast is clear."

"The same applies to you," she panted, turning to shut the door and blasting the lever into a pile of slag.

Quinten grunted and began sprinting up the stairs. He kept fit but the bulky suit still slowed him down. Casting frequent glances to the stairway above him, he was relieved to see that Kiel was wrong. It looked like Faks had decided to concentrate his shooters in the chamber instead of spreading them out throughout the complex. A stupid mistake.

When he reached the door, Quinten hesitated. Should he use the controls to open it or blast through it

Quinten's Story

instead? If the door was fortified, he'd lose valuable time trying to shoot a big enough hole in it. If it wasn't, he'd lose valuable time waiting for the antechamber to cycle through decompression.

When Quinten thought back to that moment, as he did almost every day for the next eight years, he blamed his preoccupation for what happened next.

Kiel had bent down and was latching on her helmet. The operation required both hands, so her weapon was on the floor. He was debating the best way forward and only caught a flash of movement from the periphery of his vision. As if in slow motion, he turned, already knowing it was too late when he saw the muzzle of a weapon lift, as if part of a graceful ballet, and fire.

Kiel's gaze flew to his the moment he heard the energy discharge and saw an expanding circle of black and red fingers on her chest. Then a second one. He must have yelled at that point, but he didn't remember. He fired at the two, three, four pirates that were pouring out of a side-entrance he hadn't noticed before. Even as Kiel was falling, her body limp with impending death, he turned and fired into the antechamber and at the mine door. Something exploded, instantaneously white and hot as that part of the mine disintegrated.

There was sound and fierce pain racked his body, then there was complete silence as he was sucked out. Helmetless, but remembering his drills, Quinten forcefully exhaled the air in his lungs and took a quick look around.

The blast and decompression had thrown him back along the path he and Kiel had taken and there, not twenty metres ahead of him, was the *Cloud Skimmer*, resting on the ground but with its jets firing.

How had Venkat known?

Quinten knew he had to run, but he couldn't. Stumbling,

Quinten's Story

quaking, numb, he blundered towards his ship. Through quavering vision, he thought he saw something jump from the hatch towards him. Arms caught him and carried him, lifting him into the *Skimmer*. He saw, rather than heard, the hatch close and finally drew in a much-needed breath of air.

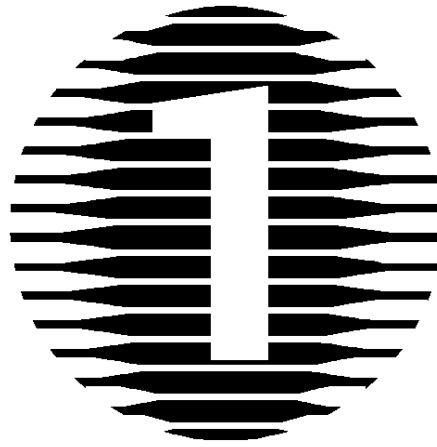
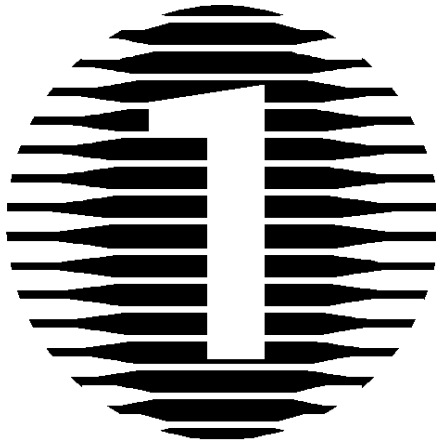
"Kiel," he gasped. "Have to...."

"I saw her get blown out of the mine, Ten. She's dead."

His rescuer shouted commands to the nav system then. "Hatch closed. Lift! Lift!"

The urgency in the voice should have roused him more, but the words were receding, slipping into the void.

As was he.



What was she going to do now?

Saff had heard many things about Quinten Tamlan but his trust in her took her completely by surprise. At the research facility where she'd been created, the humans had been aloof. She'd spent years being moved from one lab to another, before finally finding a kind of home at Rannler, but nothing had changed in terms of her own socialisation. In a way, Saff didn't blame any of the humans she'd interacted with. Being friendly with an inter-species hybrid experiment could be dangerous for a researcher. When she finally escaped Rannler that first time, she had avoided humans as a matter of course, before stumbling across Maz and his fellow shapeshifters.

Saff thought she had finally found paradise – a reward for every punishment she had endured for the past three decades, every insult she had borne – then the Republic found them and it had started all over again. She'd been dragged back to Rannler in shame and had to face their cold regard once more.

The humans in the Tor sector and the various labs she'd been sent to. The humans at Rannler. The humans of the Neon Red cartel. She thought she was past believing that any human in the galaxy could show the slightest bit of compassion or empathy. And then she'd met Quinten, and he'd taken all her ideas of selfish, impervious humans and thrown them down the rubbish chute.

But that still begged the question – what was she to do now? Her community relied on her, even if they didn't see it that way. Fifty individuals who had done no

Quinten's Story

wrong, who only wanted to live out their lives in peace, were imprisoned and under a death sentence, and she *had* to free them. How could she give up so many lives for one human being?

Murder of one versus murder of many. It was an unconscionable equation. And she was in the middle of it.



Quinten Tamlan was still behaving in an uncharacteristically hesitant fashion. Even Saff recognised that.

Ever since he'd taken the nerve collar from her throat, he seemed to be avoiding her. Of course they had to speak in order to go through each day's status reports. With the number of outstanding items on each list, she always wondered how he had kept the *Perdition* going for such a long time by himself. And they had at least one meal together every day. But the past two weeks had a different tenor to the months that had preceded them. She would catch him storming into a section of the ship, stop suddenly as if struck by a sudden thought, then retreat in thoughtful fashion. She could understand it if he did this once or twice, but the frequency of such actions had been growing over the past ten days.

Maybe he wasn't hesitant after all. Maybe he was suffering from some kind of mental disease? There was a lot about humans she found inexplicable. Maybe a brain virus was affecting his behaviour?

Saff checked the sensors and noted that everything was normal. There were no Republic ships anywhere in this part of space. And why should there be, when they were

Quinten's Story

waiting for *her* to bring Quinten to *them*?

So be it, she thought. If the Republic wanted Quinten Tamlan, she was going to make sure they would be getting the man they *thought* he was. Setting up the usual coterie of alerts to give early warning of any approaching Space Fleet vessels, Saff left the control room, in search of her ostensible owner.



“What do you want?”

This was only the second time Saff had ever entered Quinten's quarters. With a quick flick of her eyes, she took in the surroundings and noted that nothing had changed. Everything was in its place, including the armour suit that was enveloping Quinten's body. He was seated at the long desk that hugged half of one wall before turning into a graceful rounded “L”. There was an empty chair closest to her but Saff didn't take it.

Humans liked to segment off so much of their bodies.

Look into my eyes. Have a seat. Shake my hand.

As if they could concentrate a visitor's focus to only one part of themselves while they practised deception with the rest.

Saff didn't want to sit in the chair because it would mean that neither she nor Quinten would be able to see all of their bodies. And, for what she was about to do, she wanted their interaction to be as unambiguous as

Quinten's Story

possible.

She walked over to the bed and sat down on it, making herself comfortable. Her action meant that Quinten had to swivel in his chair to face her, had to present all of his body to her in the same fashion that she was presenting all of hers to his.

She hoped she was not about to make the biggest mistake of her life.

He turned, as she knew he would, his smooth movement a combination of surprise and wariness.

"What is it, Saff?" he asked again. She noted that there was a weapon on his desk next to the monitor and that she had no chance of reaching it before him, then she put it from her mind.

"There is something I need to tell you," she said.

A muscle under his unblemished eye twitched. "Does it have anything to do with the ship?"

"Yes."

Even under the armour, his shoulders sagged with relief. "We've got that leak in one of the cargo bays again?"

"No."

"Do we need new lights for Hydroponics?"

"No."

He snorted with exasperation. "Don't tell me the sensors are playing up?"

She blinked. Once. "No."

"Then what is it?"

"Vigo Halan was right," Saff told him, after a heartbeat.

Quinten's Story

"The Republic still wants you."

"I believe there's a small aboriginal tribe on the outskirts of the Morhea sector that may consider that news," Quinten remarked dryly, "but I'm sure the rest of the galaxy is aware of it already."

"Halan mentioned a secret plot against you."

He looked interested then, sitting straighter in his chair. Saff could almost feel the rise in his heart rate.

He only said one word. "Yes?"

"She's right. There is a plan to deliver you to them."

Quinten frowned. "And how do you know this?"

"I know this because I am that plan."

He didn't believe her. She knew by the way his body went limp, falling back into the contours of the upholstery at his back. But he was also being cautious. His right hand moved to the desktop, a lazy movement followed by a quick muted staccato of fingers hitting the surface. He was thinking...but he was also making sure his hand was closer to his weapon.

"The Republic sent *you* to kill me?"

Saff felt herself move into that "other place" again. A place flensed of humanity where she was nothing more than a cold observer of what was playing out in front of her. She was the analytic, watching for patterns in nature. She was a pure Transitional.

"No," she replied. "They want you alive. They sent me to capture you."

"How?"

"However I chose."

"Are you some kind of hired killer?"

Quinten's Story

"No."

"Then how could they know you could *possibly* succeed?"

There was a small object on the edge of his desk. Flat. Rectangular. Saff realised what it was the moment she saw it. His memories of Kiel Souiad. Wasn't it ironic that she would use the human he loved, the human she had tried so clumsily to imitate, in order to show him just how alien she really was?

Saff stretched out her left hand. The desk was one metre away from her outstretched fingers, a distance at the limit of her abilities, but she had to do this in order to prove to him that she was telling the truth.

Concentrating, she extended the bones of her arm in one, two, three places. The flesh dipped into hollows where muscle tried to catch up with rampant calcium, but the skin stretched obligingly over it all. As if viewing it through a distorted lens, Saff watched as her arm lengthened, ripples distorting her flesh. She heard arrested breathing from the other occupant of the room, but paid it no attention.

In a series of semi-smooth movements, she caressed the edge of the desk, extended her fingers beyond it, scrabbled for a moment before she had the smooth frame in her grasp, then began the painful retreat. Small cracking sounds filled the air but Saff gritted her teeth and continued the shortening. The faster she did it, the more painful it was, but she had to show Quinten exactly how dangerous she could be. Exactly how dangerous she could have *been*.

When she was done, after four long and tense minutes, she looked up and met his gaze, holding the frame up next to her face.

"You're a shapeshifter." His voice was flat.

Quinten's Story

She gave him credit for not reaching for his weapon and killing her the moment she'd started her trick, but she was not prepared to concede everything. If they were going to start working together as equals, Quinten Tamlan was going to have to start showing her some respect.

"We prefer the name Transitionals."

"And Vigo was right."

Saff inclined her head, not answering.

"How did you find me?"

"I was given access to years of reported sightings of your ship," she told him. "I found a regular, common element."

Quinten was silent for a moment, obviously piecing information together.

"The Neon Red cartel," he finally said. He frowned. "Breit and Shaw, they were in on it?"

"They were given an immunity deal by the human who endorsed the plan, although I doubt that has been honoured."

"What about the cover story of you killing the gentry family and jacking their ship?"

"I am capable of doing it, but I didn't."

"So it was all lies?"

"Yes. All lies."

She watched as Quinten sat back. He wasn't afraid but she knew enough about human body language to know that he was wary. Of her, of the situation.

"Once you," he hesitated, "captured me, what were you supposed to do then?"

Quinten's Story

"Colonel Konsectoh of the Security Force is currently based on Rannler."

"Rannler?" He frowned. "Isn't that the shipyard in Shoalter sector?"

"No." Was it even possible for her voice to get flatter? But, even as she spoke, Saff heard the tonelessness in her voice. As if she was nothing more than a reanimated corpse. At least it was better than screaming in pain. "The Republic shipyard in the Shoalter sector is at Raven's Ledge. Rannler is in the Pianvogue sector. It contains a covert research facility."

Quinten eyed her keenly. "And?"

"That's where my people are being kept."

He shook his head. "You're moving too fast. Why are your people on Rannler? Didn't you say they were captured by the Republic? In that case, they would have been sent to Bliss."

"They would have been. If it wasn't for me."

Unable to meet his gaze, Saff looked away, focusing on one of the smaller screens on the far edge of Quinten's desk. Ship diagnostic information scrolled sideways and, for a second, Saff concentrated on that. She had been hoping not to confide all her secrets to the human in front of her but she had no choice. If she wanted his trust – his help – she was going to have to tell him. Everything.

She swallowed, moistening her suddenly dry throat, and looked back to him.

"I was created in an advanced bio-engineering facility in the Tor Delta system more than thirty years ago."

"Created?"

"I am the result of a long line of experiments, Quinten

Quinten's Story

Tamlan. The successful splicing of human with Transitional DNA."

"A human-Transitional hybrid?"

"Our morphologies are too different for natural pairings so the Republic has been working on...artificial genetic manipulation."

"And you're the result?"

"I was the first successful experiment, yes."

"But you escaped? From Tor Delta?"

"No. From that system, I was moved around so that other researchers could experiment on me. Probe my strengths and weaknesses. Humans are very inventive," she added and had the satisfaction of seeing him flinch.

"I was sent to Rannler when the first series of experiments finished and I was transported back there after each new batch was complete. In effect, Rannler was my home base."

"Then when did you escape?"

"I led my human captors to believe that my shifting abilities were not as developed as they were. Because the researchers at Rannler were not the ones who supervised all of the experiments, they were not aware of my true abilities. I also feigned...weakness. During a major review of the facility almost three years ago, I managed to escape."

"And this 'community' you mentioned joining, the beings that adopted you, was that a group of Transitionals as well?"

"Yes. At first they were suspicious of me, knowing that I was not fully one of them. But thanks to the compassion of one of them," Saff thought briefly of Maz and suppressed a spike of grief, "I was finally accepted."

Quinten's Story

"Then the Republic found you."

"It was a routine sweep. I don't believe my body contained a tracer. They didn't think me capable of escaping." She read the question in his eyes. "My identity became obvious during processing. At which point, my entire community was transferred back to Rannler."

"How many are we talking about?"

She noticed he didn't say "people" or "individuals". Just "how many".

"Forty-eight Transitionals," she replied.

He fell silent again, watching her every movement with alert eyes. At one point, his fingers tapped out a fast tattoo on the desk before he became aware of what he was doing and curled the digits into a fist. Saff knew her life, and the lives of her adopted community, were in his hands, but she didn't regret her decision. For the first time ever, the moment had arrived to finally trust a human. She waited.

"Why tell me all this? Have you changed your mind?"

"About what?"

He licked his lips. "Turning me over to the Republic?"

"Yes, I've changed my mind."

"But you'll sacrifice your people for my life?"

"No."

"Then I don't understand what you want from me."

"I want your brain, Quinten Tamlan. You were once the head of the ST Alliance. You brought the Republic to their knees. I want you to help me think a way out of this."

Quinten's Story

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The explosive bark of sardonic laughter filled the room, startling Saff. Her legs twitched and she bounced on the bed before controlling herself again.

"Is that what you believe?" he demanded, his voice harsh. "That we brought the Republic to its knees?"

"It's what we've always been told. What non-humans on dozens of worlds believe."

Quinten laughed again. Or was it a laugh? To Saff, it seemed to resemble a sob. Angling her body, she leant closer, watching his reactions intently.

Putting an elbow on the desk, Quinten buried his face in one open palm, rubbing at his brow ridges. When he looked up at her again, his eyes were clouded and pink-rimmed.

"We didn't bring the Republic to its knees," he told her softly. "We wanted to but, in the years we were together, all we managed to achieve were surprise hit-and-runs. We were building up our allies. We had plans. We were going to smash the Republic to smithereens. But we never got to execute them."

He formed a fist to match his words then looked at it and slowly relaxed his fingers. "We didn't get the chance. Gilgan happened."

"Gilgan?" Was it the name of a ship? A planet? A *disease*?

"I lost everything at Gilgan. My will, my worth...Kiel." He took in a deep breath and exhaled noisily, eyeing her with a cynical twist of his lips. "So you can go back and tell your Security Force masters that they're scanning up the wrong quasar. The Quinten Tamlan they're afraid

Quinten's Story

of hasn't existed for eight years now. Not since Gilgan." He jerked his head. "Tell them that and then *you* think of a way of helping your people escape."

Saff looked at the floor and thought for several minutes. She remembered what it was like at Tor Delta. At the Rannler facility. At dozens of research facilities in Republic space. She remembered the never-ending batteries of tests. And how she was treated.

She looked back up. "No."



What did she just say?

Quinten frowned at her reply. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

She remained quiet, forcing him to continue.

"Look, I'll do the decent thing and let you off the ship somewhere, close to Rannler if you prefer. Maybe a short crease run away. What you do after that is up to you."

She shook her head. "No."

That word was starting to irritate him. "And what the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

Did she forget he had his armour on? Shapeshifter or not, he could still crush her windpipe with one careless flick of his wrist.

"We need each other, Quinten Tamlan," she told him.

He wanted to laugh. He even opened his mouth before her next words cut him short.

Quinten's Story

"You need me to help you run this ship and I need you to help me rescue my people."

Quinten didn't want to do it but he was forced to recall what it was like on the *Perdition* for the past few years, limping from one repair to another, living off his past reputation.

Being predictable.

It had seemed like enough at the time but, lately, the memories had begun to rankle. And it looked like the Republic was onto his game.

Time to change it then.

"What are you saying? That you'll agree to be my crewmember if I rescue fifty shapeshifters from a Republic facility on Rannler? Or were you thinking of taking off, you and forty-eight of them, once I did that favour for you?"

"Neither."

And to think that, at one time, he had been frustrated by *Kiel's* oblique comments. He shook his head slowly.

"I don't understand what you're after, Saff."

"It's simple, Quinten Tamlan. I want you to rebuild the ST Alliance."

He snorted in disbelief. "I thought you said you never took drugs."

She remained silent.

"And how am I supposed to do that?" he continued. "Rebuild the Alliance? Seen any old members around lately?"

"I'm sure we could track down Venkat Digby," she replied in her best toneless alien voice. Quinten didn't

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realise how much she had mellowed over the past few months. Her voice had softened to incorporate greater modulations, her body language was less tightly controlled, giving an indication of what she thought. He didn't realise how much he'd grown accustomed to it all, until she reverted to being fully alien again. He grimaced.

"Say we *do* get Venkat. Even if he agrees to help me, that's only one person. Kiel is dead," he told her flatly. "Slim is probably dead. I don't where Delee is. She's a master of personal camouflage and the galaxy's a big place."

He saw a flicker of a frown shoot across her face. "Was she a Transitional?"

"No, she was...just able to mix in. Disappear. It's a very useful trait."

"I know." She waited for a heartbeat. "And there's Vigo Halan."

"Vigo? You think *Vigo* will help us out? *Vigo hunts* aliens like you for money, or had you forgotten that? That's all she's interested in. Bounties. Cold hard cash."

"She hasn't turned *you* in."

"Yeah well, I keep thinking that *not* turning me in may be her idea of foreplay."

The barest corner of Saff's lips twitched. "She is an unusual human."

Quinten sighed. "What do you really want, Saff?"

"I want to bring the Republic to its knees, in my own way. I want to free my people. I want justice."

He shook his head. "Maybe eight years ago, I could've

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done something about that."

"The problems are still there, Quinten Tamlan. The suffering. The injustice. All that's changed is you."

"Sure," he agreed, feeling suddenly weary. "Instead of believing in something, I've become someone who doesn't believe in anything."

"Then change back."

"It's not so easy—"

"It's not so difficult," she cut in. "You are already in acceptable physical condition. If you were to abandon your armour, I believe your progress would be quicker."

He narrowed his eyes. "What do you know about this armour?"

"I'm a Transitional. I know what is natural and what is artifice."

Quinten never thought of himself as a prude, but her statement disconcerted him. "You can see through the armour?"

"In a way."

"And how long have you been able to do that?" Did he even want to know the answer?

"From the first moment I stepped aboard your ship."

And he remembered how he had positioned himself on the upper gantry, tucked into a corner. And how her gaze had arrowed in on him without the slightest hesitation. It looked as if he'd been underestimating her from Day One.

"What else do you know?" he asked.

"I know how most of the security systems on this ship work. I know you miss too many of your so-called

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workout sessions. I know you are in emotional pain."

"It's a pain no-one else can help with."

"Yes, I believe that's true. But does the pain need to be all-consuming?"

"I—"

Quinten shut his jaws with a snap. Was she right? But how could an alien understand the depth of remorse and grief that consumed him? He looked at her pale, sitting form and the neutral expression on her face. It occurred to him that once, not so long ago, he had thought those features to be opaque and unreadable. Now, as his gaze travelled over her face, he picked up minute signs of stress – a tightening at the edges of her lips, the slight narrowing of her eyes and the imperceptible flaring of her nostrils as she drew breath.

"You want me to put the Alliance back together?" he finally repeated. Why was he even asking the question?

"You turned your back on the galaxy many years ago. The atrocities continue."

Quinten shrugged. "I think you overestimate my importance. All we had were two ships and a network of informants."

"You were once a symbol. Even when you couldn't be everywhere, news of you was. Even at Tor Delta, I had heard of you. And when I escaped, I heard even more about you from my community."

"You mean the shapeshifters who took you in?"

"Yes."

"Shapeshifters...were talking about me? About the Alliance?"

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How could that be true? None of his and Kiel's immediate plans had included shapeshifters although that hadn't been a conscious choice on their part. It was just a matter of priorities although, now that he thought back on it, he was ashamed to admit that his past opinions of shapeshifters had been less than complimentary. He had believed the Republic propaganda, believed that shapeshifters were marauding, soulless fiends. And yet one sat in front of him, neither marauding nor apparently soulless.

"Tell me about your people," he said softly.

He was able to clearly capture the surprise in her eyes that time. Had that been the first time in her life anyone had asked such a question, expressed curiosity about who and what she was?

Shame rose within him anew.

She looked down at the floor for a moment before meeting his gaze once more.

"As I said, I'm not a full-blooded Transitional," she told him. "Only the most successful in a series of human-Transitional hybrids."

He was more open now to what she was saying. Genetic experiments across species. The forced imprisonment and no doubt torture of sentient beings. Kiel would have been a blazing torch of outrage by now, but so many things had slipped past him unawares over the years.

"After escaping from Rannler, I wandered from system to system, hiding myself as best I could."

"How much can you shapeshift?"

"I can change facial features, skin colour and lengthen and shorten limbs to some degree. I cannot completely emulate a different form."

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"So you remain a humanoid, but you can disguise the way you look?"

"There are only subtle differences between most male and female humanoid species. Adopt a different walk, wear different clothing, and the masquerade is complete."

She was starting to sound like Delee, an old Alliance member who had melted into the galaxy's chaos after he'd thrown everybody off the *Cloud Skimmer* in a fit of anger and grief and torched the *Cumulus* in some faraway forgotten star.

"How did you find your community? Or did they find you?"

"Neither. It was one person. An old Transitional. He was part of a group that sheltered in one of the Republic's outer sectors."

Even now, after she'd been captured, processed and sent on her mission to capture him, Quinten could see she was reluctant to divulge the exact location of the shapeshifter hideaway. He said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"As much as the group tried to be self-sufficient, there were occasional supplies they needed. On this particular trip, Maz volunteered to be the person to get them. We met on Lotus Drift."

Quinten hadn't heard of Lotus, but he was aware of how Drifts operated. Sometimes, when a small moon along a major trade route was mined, ships would gather at the satellite to barter and sell goods and services. If the operation was large, and the reserves big enough, the ships wouldn't leave, staying connected to the moon while smaller, faster shuttles were sent to bring in new goods and workers and take away discards. As more

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ships fastened themselves to the moon and each other, routes would form, snaking their way through the variety of vehicles, leveraging empty corridors, enlarged crawlspaces and once occupied cabins. And while this was going on, the moon would continue its orbit, drifting in space with its myriad of hangers on.

If a hunted criminal was trying to evade authorities, she could do worse than hide in a Drift.

"Maz saw straight away that I wasn't fully human. That I had Transitional blood in me. He persuaded me to follow him home."

He persuaded me to follow him home.

There was a story in that one sentence, Quinten knew it. Just as he knew he wasn't going to get it out of her this conversation.

"They didn't want me there at first," she said, shifting position. "After running from the Republic, they thought they'd found a refuge, but who should Maz bring back with him but a precious Republic bio-experiment? They were scared that the Republic would track me down and, by finding me, would find them too."

"How long were you with them?"

"Two years, before the sweep team found us."

Saff lapsed into silence. Quinten didn't know what to say.

"I found a home with those people, Quinten Tamlan," she finally told him. "I was taught about how to live a just life, how to worship the Creator by taking the form of its creations. I learnt what it was like to be part of a family."

He stared at her.

"Maz believes that the Creator is ultimately just but he

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is a full Transitional. I have impatient human blood pumping through my body. I can't wait till the galaxy turns on its axis while I wait for justice. I need it now. And I need you to help me get it."

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In the end, Quinten gave Saff no promises.

"I'll think about it," he said, seeing her to the door of his quarters.

That much was true. His crewmember had managed to open a number of old wounds, from her purpose on the ship, to how the Republic still saw him, to her opinion of the old Alliance and the need to restart it. He needed time to consider what he'd been told.

"I'll give you my answer in the morning," he told her, before heading for the gym.

Knowing that she was already walking the walls with impatience, or doing the Transitional equivalent of it.

Quinten stripped off his suit and began his workout. He found that the physical exertions helped him with his thinking processes.

What she was asking for was...monstrous. Put the Alliance back together when half its members were dead? And to what purpose? To rescue a small group of the galaxy's most hated inhabitants?

Those were his first thoughts. Then he thought of Kiel and what she would say. She hadn't made any bones about who she wanted to help. If any group of beings was oppressed by the Republic, she considered them a worthy cause, to hell with prevailing horror stories.

"But shapeshifters, Kiel?" he muttered to himself, knowing it had been an old argument between them. "You told me a long time ago that it was all propaganda. But it's propaganda that people *believe*. Even *I'm* not sure the Republic is wrong on this point. And no human will thank me for rescuing individuals from that

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species.”

Quinten knew there were worthier candidates in mind, species that were downtrodden and yet didn't pose such an existential threat to humanity. The Sukray people in the Jukad sector, for example, had a similar biochemistry to humans and first contact with the Republic sixty years ago had led to epidemics of human viruses decimating their population. The Sukray even looked vaguely human, a factor in their favour, while shapeshifters....

With their impassive features, snow-white skin and unique abilities, shapeshifters were beyond the comprehension of most Republic citizens. And those prejudices were backed by two centuries of government warnings about the inimical character of the aliens. In fact, rescuing shapeshifters might even cost him and his band of freedom fighters valuable support. Did he want to chance such an outcome with a newly reconstructed Alliance?

Quinten paused as he replayed his last thought. Was he *really* considering putting the Alliance back together?

Rising, he used a towel to wipe his face before flinging it to one side. Forget waiting till the morning, he had something to say to her right now.

Ignoring his armoured suit, he limped to the doorway and down the *Perdition's* main corridor. He found Saff in the control room, running her daily series of diagnostics.

Tightening his lips, he waited for her to notice him, which she did almost immediately. He was well aware that he was only wearing a pair of briefs and that both his chest and feet were bare. It put him in the most vulnerable position he'd assumed for years.

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He watched as his crewmember slowly scanned him from head to foot. From his scarred face, over the pattern of puckered lines that angrily slashed his body and down to his legs, one slightly shorter than the other.

"This is who I am now," he told her, trying hard not to flinch. "If you're looking for a hero, you've come to the wrong place."

"Your suit has become tighter in the past few months, hasn't it?"

He frowned. What did that have to do with anything?

"What?"

"Your suit," she repeated. "It feels tight."

He thought about that for a second. "Yeah okay, it does."

"You will never completely be the man you were, Quinten Tamlan, but life is not static, just as your recovery has not been static. In the months since I've been on this ship, I've noticed an improvement in your strength and agility. You are beginning to regain your former size, which is why your suit feels more confining now."

Was that true? Had all the extra time he'd spent in the gym, trying to outthink his lone crewmember, translated into such a gain? He'd have to check his suit specs when he had some spare time.

"All right," he told her. "Let's say you're right. Why don't we both lay our cards on the table and see what comes of it."

She inclined her head.

"Shapeshifters," he said. "That's what we call you. And we have hated you for two hundred years." He paused.

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"Why?"

He saw her hesitation and knew he'd unsettled her. This wasn't going to be like the conversation with Vigo.

"What's the matter with shapeshifters?"

"If you have to ask that question, you don't know anything about history."

"Everyone's history is different. What's yours?"

"I'll be the first to admit that the history of the Republic is soaked in blood. But it's been good for business, so I can't complain. A lot of it was perpetrated by humans but, from what I read, an equal amount was due to shapeshifters."

"What did they do?"

"What didn't they do, is more the question. They tried to destroy the Republic by sabotaging our installations. They attacked and killed every colony we set up in the outer sectors. They sabotaged crease-finders during the Age of Discovery."

"But there were so few of them. How is it possible for you to equate the destruction the Republic wreaked, which you admit to yourself, with the actions of a small community of aliens?"

"I notice you're not denying their crimes, though."

"It occurs to me that shapeshifters have been blamed for more than they could have possibly committed."

Replaying the conversation in his head, it was now obvious how many clues there were to what Saff was. Clues that had taken him this long to see. Maybe the

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Perdition wasn't the only thing that needed extra brains at its helm.

"You told Vigo quite a bit about your people during her last visit," Quinten added. "More than you intended, I think. So why don't you tell me why the Republic's hated you for two centuries?"

"We are a long-lived species," she finally admitted. "My father Maz even remembers some of the first contacts with your Republic. At first, the humans appeared welcoming and cooperative, he told me. They wanted Transitional technology that, in some ways, was more advanced than their own. They weren't aware of our other abilities at that time. But when they found out, they became anxious, afraid that we would attempt to take over their beloved Republic."

Quinten watched her evenly. "And were you?"

"No!" Her gaze dropped. "Maybe. Some."

"I don't understand. What does that mean?"

"Are all humans perfect, Quinten Tamlan?" She eyed him with something that approximated dislike. "Do they all behave with fairness, dignity and generosity of spirit, without exception?"

He shrugged. "Of course not."

"Then why assume the same of other species?"

His eyes narrowed. "What are you saying? That there was a faction of Transitionals that wanted to take over the Republic?"

"I, we, don't think so. The Republic wanted domination of the galaxy. We Transitionals had that opportunity millennia ago and chose not to take it. Our reasoning remains the same. The stars belong to everyone."

"But you said there were some who disagreed with

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that?"

"I didn't complete my thought. There were some who thought it would be...amusing to 'play' at being human for a while. They were immature, short-sighted but they *were* Transitionals."

"They committed crimes."

"Yes."

"Theft. Sabotage."

"Yes."

"Murder."

She hesitated before conceding, "Yes. Perhaps." Her voice strengthened. "But not all of it. The Republic manufactured events and blamed us for it. They didn't want a competing species in the galaxy with better technology and the ability to physically turn into them, no matter that we weren't interested in doing so."

"So they started rumours about how dangerous you were, and how you wanted all humans dead."

"Humans don't seem to need a reason to begin hating. The emotion sits within you, like a burning ember in an oxygen tank. All it needs is a moment, and it will consume everything."

That changed everything...and nothing.

He believed Saff because they had worked together for several months and he thought he knew the kind of person she was, as much as she tried to hide it. But one person wasn't the Republic.

"I've tracked down Venkat Digby," she told him, while he was still flailing in confusion. "He's four crease-runs

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away, in the Sendakcho sector. The ship can be there in a week."

Alarmed and instantly suspicious, Quinten took a half-step back. He didn't like being manipulated. And he especially didn't like important decisions being taken out of his hands.

"How did you find him?" he asked. He could have added, "when I couldn't", but it wouldn't have been true. Much to Quinten's shame, he hadn't thought of contacting Venkat. Till now.

"You have access to a large range of data nets. And this ship contains archives of everything Venkat Digby did when he was engineer of the *Cloud Skimmer*. We Transitionals are good at finding patterns. The research facility on Rannler considers us the best in the galaxy. Using the available data, I found Venkat Digby's pattern."

"What," Quinten licked suddenly dry lips, "what is he doing?"

"He is working at several jobs. Officially, he's an engineering supervisor for a small Republic parts supplier. But he also takes on unofficial tasks, upgrading ship kernels and off-market sensor systems."

Quinten couldn't help the grin that split his face. Typical Venkat, sticking it to the Republic whichever way he could. But his mirth faded when he tried picturing Venkat's reaction to a reconciliation.

"Venkat might not want to have anything to do with me."

"The outcome is not fixed."

What was that? Alien for "you never know till you try"?

Quinten looked deep into Saff's eyes. Dark, opaque, liquid obsidian...but not filled with disgust.

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"The Sendakcho sector you say?"

"Yes."

"Less than a week to get there?"

"Five and one half days."

He mulled over his options.

"What the hell," he told her. "Punch it in. Let's go visit an old friend."



In the end, because Quinten couldn't be certain that Venkat wouldn't just hand his mutilated arse over to the Republic as payback for the past seven years, Quinten and Saff worked on masking the *Perdition's* energy signature as they hit the edge of Sendakcho. While Saff researched the sector more thoroughly, to get an exact fix on the Alliance's old head engineer, Quinten made small talk with whatever ships he encountered. As far as anyone was concerned, he was a sixty-year old retired miner called Pal Elson, now running cargo on an ex-Republic military transport called *The Lucky Strike*. People like Elson were relatively common in the galaxy and camouflaging the *Perdition* as an old Republic ship would explain away parts of its energy signature.

Now that Quinten knew what Saff wanted, he jacked into more nets, particularly military and black-ray. If he remembered Venkat with any accuracy, the engineer was bound to be connected to both groups. With more and faster net traffic to analyse, it didn't take Saff long to trace Venkat's position within the sector to Tracdol III and, more specifically, Ferncoal Five.

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"It's what you call an overflow facility," Saff told him as they prepared to head down to the planet. "The Ferncoal Five facility handles requests for the Republic that can't be scheduled at the regular Space Fleet dockyards."

"Less important stuff," he remarked.

"Correct."

"But there'll still be security there."

"Correct."

Quinten checked the settings on his suit. Saff had been right. In the past six days, he had checked the specifications and discovered, much to his quiet delight, that he was regaining his former fitness. He would never be the man at the peak of his strength who captured Kiel Souiad's heart, but maybe he had other assets now. Like patience. Experience. A better ship. And an innate sense of caution.

"What did you say to set up the meeting?" Quinten asked, as they walked to a small shuttlecraft in one of the *Perdition's* cargo bays.

"I told Mr. Digby that we were after a full upgrade after purchasing *The Lucky Strike* – core, sensors, life support – and that we wanted a weapons system fitted."

"That's a big job. It could easily run to three or four kilo-credits."

"I was hoping he'd be suitably tempted."

Was there a hint of smugness in her voice?

Quinten turned his head to face Saff and was surprised by what he saw. She was shorter now, the top of her

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head barely reaching his shoulders, and her skin was tanned instead of its characteristic ivory tone. When she lifted her face to meet his gaze, he saw human features – thickish eyebrows, brown eyes, broad lips.

“You look human,” he said.

“Camouflage.”

A thought struck him. “Why didn’t you appear like this when the Neon Reds first brought you on board?”

“That was my idea,” she told him. “You had not established any sustained contact with other humans for years. The Neon Red cartel was the only group you dealt with with any regularity. I surmised that, under such circumstances, you would feel less threatened by an alien.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Smart woman.”

He didn’t mean to say it out aloud but he must have because she replied just as they reached the shuttle’s hatch.

“Thank you, Quinten Tamlan.”

The trip down to Ferncoal Five was conducted in silence. In truth, Quinten couldn’t have made small talk if his life depended on it. His palms were sweaty and contradictorily icy and he thought Saff, next to him in the co-pilot chair, would be able to hear his heart thudding through his armour.

What do you say to the man you threw off your ship seven years ago? he wondered. How could a mere “sorry” encompass a universe of anger, grief and self-protection?

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Part of his brain was on automatic, establishing handshakes with the port authority and confirming landing procedures. The other part was screeching at him to turn tail and run back to the *Perdition* as fast as the shuttle could carry him. While it was true he had been betrayed on Gilgan he, in turn, had betrayed people he had once considered closer than family. And now he was going to meet with one of them.

He knew that the landing field was on the edge of Ferncoal Five, the ship-fitting region encompassing the port like an embracing hand. The shuttle was directed to circle the field for ten minutes before it was cleared to land. Quinten tried hard not to think of a swarm of Republic enforcers waiting for them the minute they stepped from the shuttle.

"Let's get this over with," he growled when they finally touched dirt and the whine of their engines died down to silence. He unclipped his harness with one careless flick and headed for the hatch without looking back.

As with most Republic planets – the Tor system being a notable exception – there were no travel formalities for visitors to complete. As long as a visitor didn't want to find a place to sleep or do business, nothing impeded arrivals. But start to put some credits down for any legitimate reason, and the vetting procedures stacked up. Although he and Saff had forged passes in their possession, Quinten was hoping they wouldn't need to use them. He was here to see Venkat, try to talk him into rejoining a new-fangled Alliance, then get tossed out on his ear. Easy.

They had tracked Venkat down to the "AA F5 Engineering Systems" outfit, headquartered within Ferncoal. It was larger than Quinten had anticipated, taking up an entire warehouse whose length must have stretched a good hundred metres into the distance.

"Some assembly lines and custom skimmer bays," Saff

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told him softly while he hesitated. "Inter-system ship work and larger manufacturing occurs elsewhere."

"And Venkat works here?"

"Yes, under a pseudonym."

Quinten let out a breath. "All right. Let's see what we've got inside."

If "F5 Engineering Systems" looked like a large warehouse from the outside, from the inside it resembled a sleek corporate office. The difference was so stark Quinten was tempted to step outside for a second, just to check that he'd walked into the right building. The floor beneath his feet was plush carpeting. Off to one side was a waiting area, complete with low-slung tables and chairs and five food and beverage auto-servers. On the opposite side, samples of ship parts were exhibited in clear cases, next to brochure vids and a wall of smaller screens playing muted presentations.

"Yes?" A screen asked from in front of them. Beyond the large monitor was a wall of frosted glass. Backlight shone through it, illuminating the framework of three floors. Shadowy figures strode with purpose along each of the floors.

Quinten faced the AI that regarded them with a hint of friendly curiosity. All part of the programming.

"We're here to see Aren Flim," Quinten said. That was Venkat's assumed name.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"My name is Pal Elson. I have spoken to Mister, er, Flim regarding some upgrades. He suggested we call in when we landed."

"Could you please wait in the reception area," the AI told them. "I'll tell Mr. Flim you've arrived."

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"Sure," Quinten agreed affably. He made a show of looking around. "Nice place you have here. Might be a little out of our price range though."

"Thank you Mr. Elson." The AI was still courteous but dismissive. "Someone will be with you shortly."

As they sauntered to the waiting chairs, Quinten leant down.

"Don't get comfortable," he said, behind the cover of a discreet cough.

"I won't." Saff's reply was equally quiet.

"If we're not attended to in three minutes, we leave."

"Understood."

It didn't take that long. They had barely sunk into the furniture when a young man approached them.

"Mr. Elson?"

"That's me," Quinten said in his best old-timer voice. They would know by now that he wasn't near sixty years of age, but Quinten was still prepared to play the cagey ex-miner to the hilt.

"Follow me please."

A door behind the receptionist screen slid open and Quinten and Saff followed their guide further into the building. He took them, via an open elevator, to the third floor, then walked them the width of the building, turned the corner and proceeded for another twenty-five metres. Quinten tried to look casual but every glance was assessing. He was on the look-out for concealed weapon panels, drop-down cage screens, and armed security personnel. He wasn't sure whether he felt better or worse when he couldn't find any.

"Here we are."

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The young man pressed an access panel and the door opened. He stepped aside with a polite smile. "After you."

Quinten allowed himself one glance at Saff before he took a breath and stepped forward.



The sound of weapons cocking almost made Quinten feel at home. Whoever activated them was smart. He, or she, had waited until both Quinten and Saff were in the room, and the door no doubt securely shut behind them, before displaying the security hardware.

There were four weapon panels in the ceiling, and two on each of the side walls. Quinten looked down the barrels of the lethal laser rifles extruded from each opening before shifting his view to the centre of the room and the woman who sat comfortably behind a desk, watching them with a small smile on her face.

Quinten frowned. Who was this? And where was Venkat? He had a sudden vision of trying to shoot his way out of the building before her voice broke his concentration.

"Mr. Elson?"

"Who are you?" Quinten demanded. "I was supposed to meet Mr. Flim."

"And I was supposed to meet Mr. Pal Elson," she countered, her voice still pleasant. "It appears both of us are to be disappointed."

Quinten took a step forward and stopped suddenly as

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four rifles tracked his movement, swivelling with slick precision.

"My sensors detect that you're wearing a battle-ready exoskeleton," the woman continued. "Do you have some criminal purpose in mind, Mr. Elson? Maybe jacking our payroll or some of our prototypes?"

"I came to meet Mr. Flim," Quinten insisted. "I have a ship called—"

"—*The Lucky Strike*. Yes, I know. However, you'll forgive me if I take that with a grain of salt, considering you've already lied about your name."

Quinten didn't know what Saff was doing – she was too far behind for him to even catch a glance of her – but he was hoping she was disappearing into the panelwork, using her shapeshifter abilities to evade the firefight he knew was coming.

Damn, just as he was finally beginning to trust someone again. What a waste.

"So what happens now?" he asked casually. "You don't seem to trust me and I don't trust you. Why don't we call quits on this meeting and each go our separate way?"

"That would be a little too easy, Mr. Elson. Why don't we wait a while?"

Quinten frowned at the woman. "Wait?"

She nodded and her dark bangs swayed, brushing against her chin. "Just for a few minutes. Maybe ten. No more."

That was all right for her to say. It was her office and she was the one with things to do. In fact, even as he watched, the unnamed woman brought up a display

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(obscured on his side but still transparent enough for her to watch what her two guests were doing) and perused something.

"Mr. Elson." The voice was Saff's, pitched low.

Quinten didn't turn around but opened his left hand, hoping his crewmember would correctly interpret it as a "yes, what is it?" gesture.

"The woman. She's not—"

"I didn't say you could talk while we were waiting," the woman cut in. "My Security chief informs me that he'll feel a lot more relaxed if both of you remain quiet and still. I don't think any of us would appreciate an accident occurring."

It was the most surreal experience Quinten ever remembered living through. While the seated businesswoman went through whatever she was paid to go through, he and Saff remained frozen, tracked by an invisible person, or program, sporting eight powerful weapons. Why were they waiting? What was the woman going to do? Turn them in? Kill them? Let them go? He doubted very much it would be the latter. Then again, she hadn't had them killed yet, had she?

The minutes lengthened and, even in the room's cool dry air, Quinten felt a trail of sweat run down his back, tickling his spine. Where the hell was Venkat and who was this woman? His assistant? His boss? Quinten knew that if they tried to escape, they'd never make it out of the room alive. His only hope was that he and Saff would be moved somewhere else. Somewhere they could stack the odds more in their favour.

When the desk comms suddenly buzzed, both Quinten and the woman jumped. Watching him carefully, she shoved an earpiece into her right ear and listened. Her eyes narrowed. She ended the call with a grunt,

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removed the piece and dropped it on the table.

"Maybe I wasn't right after all," she murmured.

Quinten tensed, wondering if he had time to reach for a weapon before his hand got lasered off.

The woman pressed a button that must have been concealed under the edge of her desk and the air before her shimmered. She disappeared...and in her place sat Venkat Digby.

"Venkat!" Quinten's exclamation was one of pure surprise.

"Hi Quinten." The Alliance's head engineer looked older and lines had etched themselves on the sides of his face. His voice was quiet and a bit sad. "What are you doing here?"

"I..." Quinten paused then jerked his head towards the ceiling. There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but one clearly made it to the top of the list. "Could you switch off the weaponry?"

"I'll put it on standby," Venkat conceded after a long moment's consideration. At the same time, the floor opened and two chairs emerged in front of the desk. "Why not take a seat and tell me what brought you to Ferncoal Five?"

The rifles receded into the smooth ceiling and walls.

This wasn't quite playing out the way Quinten had expected. Gesturing to Saff, they walked forward and set themselves gingerly down into the chairs provided.

"Long time no see," Venkat said, his voice even.

"Venkat."

What was he supposed to say now? How have you been? How were the past seven years? Thankfully,

Quinten's Story

Venkat beat him to the punch.

"Why are you here, Quinten?"

"I, ah, thought we could talk."

"I tried doing that seven years ago. Didn't seem to do much good, as I recall."

Quinten, discomfited, shifted in his seat. "I'm sorry about that. About what happened. But I was eaten up with grief. I couldn't think straight." He took a deep breath. "I...did things I regret now."

"You know that Slim is dead, don't you?"

Quinten nodded sharply. "It doesn't surprise me. He always needed someone to watch over him. I always thought, if he was by himself...."

"The Security Force caught up with him soon after he left the *Cumulus*. They didn't waste any time. One, two, three, capture, trial and sentence. Bang! Fifteen years in an internment facility." Venkat's voice contained no emotion. "By the time I found out which one he was being held in, it was too late. He escaped, but the planet the facility was on did him in. Seems Jaguar Four was a world that the Republic tried to terraform. They failed, and set off a kind of environmental reaction that you only read about in horror stories. Flesh-eating bacteria, blood-sucking plants, worms with razor teeth. You name it, it was on Jaguar. The bacteria ate him alive, Quinten, and the worms got what was left."

Ashamed, Quinten looked at his feet. Above his head, Venkat continued.

"Delee disappeared. I've got feelers out for her and, every so often, I seem to get a bite, but she's never in

Quinten's Story

any one place long enough for me to get there."

He breathed out heavily. "And then there's you. If there was one time when we depended on you, Quinten, it was after Kiel was killed, when everything went to shit. Maybe, as adults, we should have taken care of ourselves, but *you* were the Alliance to us. You and Kiel. With one of you gone, we thought we'd band together even tighter. We didn't expect to get kicked out at the nearest planet and to hell with what happened to us."

Quinten looked up. "I won't make that same mistake again."

"What makes you think you'll get the opportunity?" Venkat asked, his lips twisting.

Quinten knew he was pleading for some understanding, but he wasn't getting it. Not yet. He took a deep breath. "I'm putting the Alliance back together."

Venkat blinked a few times. "What?"

"The Alliance. I'm reforming it."

"Why?"

That was the question, wasn't it? Why? Because some shapeshifter hybrid had talked him into it? Because he needed more crew for the *Perdition*?

"Because I'm sick of pissing away my life in a sea of self-pity and nu-vodka," he finally said. His voice sounded unnaturally loud in the room. "Because the last eight years have been like being buried alive and I forgot that there are still people out there who believe in what the Alliance stood for, in what the Alliance can stand for again."

He glanced quickly at Saff before facing Venkat again.

"And I'd like you to be part of it, Venkat. You're still the best damned engineer I know and I need all the help I

Quinten's Story

can get."

The two men stared at each other.

"I thought the Republic had sent you," Venkat admitted softly. "Offered you a deal in return for the remaining members of the Alliance."

"Is that why you masqueraded as a woman and pointed all that hardware at us?"

"I know the Security Force drills. We even handle some of their medium-security jobs. They always arrive within five minutes of their informant fingering the guilty party."

"You made us wait ten," Quinten pointed out.

"Call it making up for lost time."

"So is it a deal? Are you in?"

Venkat shook his head. "You just walk in here after an absence of more than seven years, and expect me to drop everything and come with you?"

A sudden thought hit Quinten. "You're married!"

He didn't mean it to sound accusatory and winced when he realised it did.

Venkat laughed. "No, I'm not married, although I *have* linked up with someone."

Of course. Why did he think the rest of the universe had stalled for eight years? Was it because *he* had?

"Look around, Quinten." Venkat opened his arms wide. "What do you see?"

Quinten's Story

Quinten made a show of eyeing the plush soft floor coverings, sparse yet stylish furniture, smooth walls and blinding white ceiling. Behind Venkat, he recognised the telltale small dots of a high-end viewing panel's controls. The wall colour matched the rest of the room but he was sure it could just as easily show an image of the street outside or even the planet itself from space.

"I see," he gave the room a last cursory glance, "the habitat of a corporate player."

"That's right." Venkat nodded, not looking the least abashed. "That's what I am now. My official title is supervisor but, in reality, I'm co-owner of this place, a corporate player who employs hundreds of corporate drones, doing a decent amount of work for the Republic."

He eyed his old friend and leader. "After you threw us off the *Cloud Skimmer* and trashed the *Cumulus*, we all had ideas on what to do. The problem was, everyone had a different idea. I bummed around with Delee for a while, but she doesn't have what anyone would describe as a lifestyle. She's nothing but a piece of litter, blown this way and that by the solar wind and she seems to like it that way. By the time I realised I didn't, I had landed here and just discovered that Slim was dead.

"All I had were my skills as an engineer and some ideas I'd picked up from working on the *Skimmer*. I found a backer and we started this business together. F5 Engineering Systems. It's come a long way in six years."

"And you don't want to leave it."

"It's my life now, Ten."

"I hear you also do some off-market work."

Venkat shrugged. "Sure. Why not? I guess the time I

Quinten's Story

spent in the Alliance rubbed off on me. I'm careful about which clients I take on and what I do for them. If you like, I can help upgrade your own ship, if the initial request was genuine."

"But you won't come with me." Quinten knew it for a fact, but he had to say it out loud anyway.

The Alliance's ex-engineer shook his head. "But I've got a deal for you. In a way, I'm more valuable to you here than following you around the galaxy, have you thought of that? From time to time, I get access to some pretty juicy intel. I may not want to sign up again as one of your crew, Ten, but there's nothing stopping me from being one of your informants."

Quinten detected the note of finality in Venkat's voice. He managed a smile, but it was edged with disappointment, then got to his feet. "I can't ask any fairer than that, Venkat." He stepped forward and the two men shook hands.

"I know where your shuttle's docked," Venkat told them. "I'll send along an engineer in a couple of hours to look over your specs and see where we can help." He finally faced Saff. "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to talk with you. If you've thrown in with someone like Ten, I bet you have an interesting story of your own to tell."

Saff merely smiled and bowed her head once in acknowledgement.

"Ten, I'd love to invite you and your associate out for dinner but I think the less we're seen together, the better. We'll meet up sometime in the future, I'm sure."

"Thanks for all your help, Venkat," Quinten replied with a rueful tone. "It was more than I deserved."

The other man laughed. "Ain't that the truth?"

14

“What do we do now, Quinten Tamlan?”

Quinten grimaced as he strode down the street, back towards the landing field.

“We wait for Venkat’s engineer.” His voice was tight with anger and disappointment.

“You would trust Digby’s engineer? What if that person double-crosses us? What if Digby himself double-crosses us?”

Quinten stopped and put his hands on his hips. There was little pedestrian traffic around but he pitched his voice low in case surveillance drones were scouting the area.

“If we’re starting up the Alliance, it means trusting people again. Venkat could’ve turned us in at his office. He didn’t. He could have refused to see me. He didn’t. Instead, he’s sending one of his team to help us and is prepared to act as an intel source.” Quinten exhaled heavily. “To be honest, I don’t know what I did to deserve that much.”

“Even after seven years, you trust him?”

He looked down at her and nodded. “Even after seven years.”

“Then I hope you’re right.”

Quinten resumed walking. “So do I.”

He wished he was as confident as he sounded. In truth, Saff had merely voiced what he himself was thinking. Who was this “engineer” that Venkat was sending and could that person be trusted? And, despite their history

Quinten's Story

together, seven years was a long time. Could he trust Venkat to keep his word?

The next two hours passed in a thick swamp of anxiety, impatience and boredom. Quinten knew he had the option to lift off and get the hell out of the system but the truth was that he badly needed a competent engineer to look over the *Perdition's* systems. While he and Saff managed to keep the ship operating, it wasn't running at peak efficiency. All that was saving them from Space Fleet discovery was the fact that they were just one speck in the galaxy...and that it was Saff's mission to turn him in, so the pressure to find him was lessened. But if they stumbled across a patrol, or someone spotted them and took it in their mind to claim a substantial reward, then the best they could hope for was to outrun their captors and wish for a big slice of luck.

"Makes me wonder how I managed to survive," Quinten muttered. He thought back to an image of himself six months ago, mired in self-pity, and flinched.

"We have someone requesting access," Saff informed him. "He says he was sent by Aren Flim. His name is Toy Cenredi."

Quinten eased himself out of the pilot's seat. "Let's go meet him."

Quinten was prepared for anything, he thought. An older, steady-eyed tech who'd seen everything the galaxy saw fit to throw at him. A fresh but keen graduate, straight out of one of the local institutes. Even a phalanx of Security Force soldiers, armed to the teeth. When the hatch slid open, however, Quinten was confronted by...a runt. A runt with attitude on his face and decades of hard living in his young eyes.

"You Elson?" the boy asked belligerently.

Quinten looked him up and down. "Yeah."

Quinten's Story

"Mr. Flim gave me this to give to you." The runt held out a small data disc. He let it go just as Quinten's hand got underneath it, as if not caring whether anybody caught it or not. "Flim says I gotta look over your ship. Give some recs." He stepped onboard and Quinten and Saff were forced to move backwards. "This it? Heap of crap, ain't it? Better off trashing it and starting again, in my opinion."

Quinten looked to Saff for some help, but she appeared equally bewildered.

The boy kept walking around, inspecting the floor, walls and ceiling of their small shuttle. Quinten wiggled the disc in front of Saff's face. "I'll go read this," he told her. "You, er, show our young engineer around."

"The name's Toy Cenredi," the boy interrupted from down the cramped corridor. "But you can call me Mr. Ready." There was a definite smirk in his voice. "Man, this is a heap of *junk*!"

There was only one place on the small vehicle that afforded Quinten the least bit of privacy. With only the slightest of hesitations, he lifted a helmet from the rack and disappeared back to the cockpit. His helmet had been manufactured to fit his armour and he clicked the clasps down as he eased into the pilot's seat. Looking the disc over, he inserted it into a small input slot on the helmet's casing, just below his right jaw.

A picture of Venkat appeared in front of Quinten's eyes. He was still seated at his desk.

"Hi Ten. I bet you were wondering if I'd double-cross you. To be honest, the thought had occurred to me." Venkat grinned quickly. "Maybe I've been a corporate player – as you put it – for too long.

Quinten's Story

"In any case, I'm sending along someone who, I think, will meet your needs.

"He won't tell you about himself, so I guess it's up to me to fill in some details. His name's Toy Cenredi, but that's just one I made up. I found him three years ago trying to make a living around Ferncoal however he could. If your mind starts plumbing the abyss when I say that then, yeah, you get the general idea. He was as feral as they come, Ten, a result of Republic policies coming home to roost in one young boy. Fully human, as you'd guess, but malnourished, abused and alone. Wouldn't talk to me for months after we first met, but I gradually wore him down. Gave him a job and was surprised to find out that he's one of the best natural engineers I've ever come across."

Venkat shifted in his seat. "He's not happy with me, Ten. Considers me 'establishment'. You called me a player to my face. He probably calls me much worse behind my back. In this galaxy, where people can belong to other people like suits of clothing, I give him to you. If you can talk him into adventuring with you, you'll have an engineer worthy of the reborn Alliance. If he's not interested, I'll take him back. It's the best I can offer you both."

Quinten played the disc for a second time, then sat back and exhaled. Did Venkat think he was some kind of babysitter? For a kid with more mouth than sense? All he wanted to do was put the Alliance back together again. The way it was. Venkat. Delee. Maybe Saff. But things weren't working out the way he'd planned and now Venkat had stuck him with some street orphan.

The revelation sparked another unwelcome one in Quinten's head. *Faks* had been something of a street orphan. His father might have been the leader of the Mitres Raygun cartel, but Faks had been left alone a lot while growing up. He had become a streetwise hustler

Quinten's Story

who bore grudges, and it looked like Quinten had another one in the making currently doing the rounds of the shuttle.

"What have you done to me, Venkat?" he muttered, taking off the helmet.

He rose, walking to the cargo rack to return the piece of equipment before hunting down Saff and – what was his name again? – Toy. He found them both at the tiny conference ledge that doubled as a dinner table.

Toy turned his head as Quinten entered. The youngster's lank brown hair obscured a clear look at his face and Quinten wondered if he used it as a disguise of sorts.

"Better tell your honey pie here to get the plans out, grandpa," Toy told him. "There's nothing else to do and I'm close to deadlining here."

Quinten stared at him for a long moment, mulling his options. Finally, he came to a decision.

"Number one," he said, "she's not my 'honey pie'. She's a valuable member of my crew and her name is Saff." He thought he noticed the shapeshifter stand a little straighter at his comment and stifled a smile.

"Number two, I'm not your grandfather and I doubt I would ever want that dubious privilege." Quinten would have wondered how his father's words and mannerisms were now emerging from his mouth, but he couldn't stop. He was on a roll.

"Number three, I'm looking for an engineer for the kind of life that'll probably get you killed inside of six months and, unfortunately for you, you come highly recommended."

Toy's eyes widened as the words penetrated. Quinten doubted the youth had been pitched such an offer

Quinten's Story

before.

"And lastly," he finished with a cocked eyebrow, "what do you think of the Republic?"

Toy looked from Saff towards him. "Is this some kind of *jag*? Are you Republic *skeeves*?"

"Actually, quite the opposite." Quinten looked over at Saff. "Saff, if you please."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

Quinten inhaled a deep breath. "Pretty sure."

While he leant against a wall, he watched Toy. And Toy's reaction to what was going on a metre away from him.

The first thing Saff did was bleach her skin colour back to its original white, followed by her hair. Then her torso lengthened. Finally, her features shrank to more Saff-like proportions. Each of the changes was subtle, but the end result was an indisputable alien.

Toy sidled sideways, never letting his panicked gaze leave Saff, and his hip hit the table ledge.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?" he demanded. "What kind of scam are you *skeeves* trying to pull on me?"

"We have a proposition," Quinten told him smoothly. "Care to take a seat?"



"Are you confident that your actions are the correct ones, Quinten Tamlan?"

The three of them had returned to the *Perdition* less

Quinten's Story

than an hour before. Using every gram of authority that his suit of armour gave him, Quinten had led Toy to the canteen and left him there with a plate of food and a set of high-level ship schematics to look over. After making sure he was hemmed in – or, in other words, unable to access the more sensitive parts of the ship – Quinten had beckoned to Saff to follow him to his quarters. Saff took her now usual position, perched on the edge of Quinten's bed, while he sat in his chair.

"Sure that I'm doing the right thing? As sure as I'll ever be, Saff."

"It took me months to win your trust."

Quinten correctly read the rebuke in her voice and tilted his head.

"I thought we were on a fast schedule here, Saff. You have a community we need to rescue, a ship to get in trim and a crew to man her. We don't have much time to waste."

"Is this why you trust Venkat Digby after an absence of seven years and Toy Cenredi immediately?"

There was a question behind the question and Quinten wasn't so stupid that he missed it.

He frowned. "It's not just because they're human, if that's what you're thinking. Venkat and I have a long history. If the young man in our galley comes recommended by him – and he does, remind me to give you Venkat's disc to play – then that's good enough for me."

He held up a hand as Saff looked to argue the point. "If you're asking why it wasn't good enough for you, remember that you were sold to me by a bunch of pirates. That doesn't buy instant trust."

Quinten's Story

She shifted and Quinten watched her every move. He was becoming better at reading her body language.

She inclined her head, acknowledging his point.

"Do you think Toy Cenredi will help us?" she asked.

"From the little I know, I think he's searching for us as hard as we're searching for him."

"He needs a home."

Quinten nodded. "Something like that."

"This is a dangerous undertaking."

"Of course."

"He's young."

"What are you trying to say, Saff?"

She blinked slowly. "You and I have lived several decades, Quentin Tamlan. We have seen parts of the galaxy that nobody should ever have to. I am...not happy exposing such a life to one as young as Toy Cenredi."

"He's young, but only in years. In terms of life experience, I think you'll find our newest recruit is easily our peer."

Saff eyed him steadily. "That disc from Venkat Digby must have been very informative."

Quinten chuckled. "Your sense of humour's improving. Remind me to share some old jokes with you."

She raised an eyebrow. It was nothing more than a hint of movement, but it was enough. He grinned. "Come on, let's see what our new engineer has to say for himself."

Quinten's Story



“She’s a nice piece of work, but it’s all old tech, know what I mean? Hey, can I have another grain beer? This ain’t half bad. See, now if these schematics are on the level, you’re running a decade behind the mark in a lotta areas and, if the Space Fleet’s after you, that’s one place you don’t want to be.”

“Can you fix it?”

Toy shrugged. “Of course I can fix it. I can fix anything. Why do you think I call myself Mr. Ready? My question is, do you have the liquids?”

“Money?”

“That’s the magic word, grandpa.”

“How much is it going to cost?”

“We can start at two kilo-credits and the Barrens’s the limit.”

Quinten grunted. “And what would you tackle first?”

“The one area where the Space Fleet has improved a *lot* is radiation detection. At the moment, your ship’s running hot. I’d put EM bafflers ‘neath the skin and funnel the scooped radiation to one section for null-processing. Then I’d do a major upgrade of your kernel. Bring the sensors, life support, weaponry, all up to current standards. Maybe a bit over, know what I mean? Once we fine-tune the kernel, we can look at individual interfaces.”

“How long will all this take?”

Quinten's Story

"How long do you want it to take, grandpa?"

"Two weeks."

Toy shrugged. "If you're thick with Digby, I'd say we could do it in a month."

"Digby?" Quinten frowned. "Did you say 'Digby'? I think you're scaling the wrong mountain here, Toy. I spoke to the owner of F5. His name is Aren Flim."

"Let's get something straight here, grandpa. I'm not stupid. Got that? My boss is Venkat Digby, once a part of the ST Alliance and now shackled up with a tough but attractive widow by the name of Datin Stead. She claims links to the gentry but who knows, right? Everyone with money tries to claim that bullshit."

Ah, that explained part of the puzzle. Not married but certainly *involved*, from the sounds of it.

"So, if my boss is Venkat Digby," Toy continued, "that would make *you* the legendary Quinten Tamlan. You're uglier than I expected though." Toy clicked his fingers and pointed at Saff. "And who are you? Saff, is it? Is that another name for Kiel Souiad?"

"Souiad's dead," Quinten cut in shortly. "This is Saff. Got *that*, Cenredi?"

"Hey, no problem, grandpa."

Quinten steered the conversation back on track. "You have a plan that, at the moment, sounds reasonable. Rest assured I've got the money. We can get started on the work but I need to know whether you're in or out."

"Of your little group of freedom fighters you mean? Sure, grandpa, count me in. Can't be any worse than what I've seen so far in my life."

Quinten's Story

That wasn't the ringing endorsement Quinten was hoping for. In fact, it was delivered more with mockery than idealism, and he didn't know how to react. Was Cenredi joking? Serious? If Kiel was here, she'd know what to do, how to break through the young man's shell, but he didn't have a clue. He wondered whether he was making a giant mistake by taking Toy Cenredi aboard but the fact was that they *needed* an engineer.

"You're on probation," Quinten warned, using the only card he could think of. "One wrong move and I'll boot you back to Ferncoal so fast you'll see hyperspace on the way."

Toy shrugged. "Sure. Whatever you say. Does that mean I can finally start working on this ship?"

Quinten noticed that his newest recruit didn't say 'heap' or 'piece of junk'. He hoped that meant the *Perdition* could still be successfully upgraded.

"Prioritise the activities you outlined earlier," he said. "I want time and cost estimates for each of them. If you can, add the equivalent Space Fleet standard so I can see what I'm dealing with. When you have your list together, bring it to either Saff or myself and we'll make the decisions from there."

Toy shrugged again. "It's your credit, grandpa. I'll have the list to you by the end of the day."

"By the end of tomorrow will be fine."

"I said today and I keep my promises," the youngster shot back. "I'm not called Ready for nothing, know what I mean?"

And there was nothing Quinten could think of in reply to that.



Whatever opinions Quinten held of Toy Cenredi, he had to admit that the youth was as good as his word. Venkat's protégé sloped back to the canteen just as dinner preparations were underway. Quinten had prepared different dishes for Saff and himself, considering the Transitional's dietary requirements. Now, with Cenredi as part of the crew, he realised he was going to have to amend his regular provisions order. Again.

"So grandpa, I've been through the ship," Toy began without any preamble. "It can be done. She's a sweet little number under all that *drak*." He paused and licked his lips. "It's gonna cost you though."

"Money?"

"Money. Tech. You can almost quadruple my first figure of two kilo-credits, and that's just for the first round of mods. There's some sweet Space Fleet blinder software I want to get my hands on to go with their new EM bafflers. And there are a few black-ray plug-ins for the kernel I want to install. I have my contacts but they don't sell cheap."

"How long is all this going to take?"

"Oh, I'd say three standard weeks. Still within my initial estimate of a month, in case you're thinking I was pulling a scam."

The thought had occurred to Quinten, but he remained silent.

"There are some testing loops you just can't omit, know what I mean?" the young man added. "This bird doesn't fly without going through some QA cycles. That's the way I work."

Quinten's Story

Quinten nodded. "When can you start?"

Toy waved the plan he held in his hands. "Tomorrow, if you'll okay the expenditures. I'll get a comm down to Ferncoal first thing in the morning."

Quinten glanced at Saff, who silently nodded. Three weeks. It was slightly better than the month the boy had first quoted but Quinten knew he was running out of time. And he still needed to come up with a working strategy on how to infiltrate the Rannler facility.

"Can we move with all the work underway?"

Toy shook his head. "I don't understand you."

Quinten exhaled. "If we have to do a crease-run while you're upgrading our systems, can we?"

Toy jerked his head at the note of irritation in Quinten's voice and snorted. "Only if you've lost your brain," he replied. "Look grandpa, this isn't just a refit of some external panels we're talking about here. Maybe a century ago, back when you were *my* age, that's how they did things and, in the meantime, you could jaunt from old Earth to *skeevin'* Mars and not have to worry about it.

"Well, it ain't like that now. I don't know if you've heard, but there are ships disappearing in the creases. Maybe their engines weren't calibrated right, maybe their shield harmonics were off, who the fuck knows. So I'm telling you this. You hand the ship over to me and it goes *nowhere* until I'm done. The only exception I make is if the Space Fleet itself stumbles across this little cruiser while I'm on it and is about to blow me to atoms."

Quinten *had* been thinking of tracking down another old member of the Alliance. Slim was dead but Delee was still around, subsumed into the background hum of the galaxy like an errant comm signal. He had been

Quinten's Story

thinking of getting Saff, with her incredible mind, looking for the ex-Alliance member while the *Perdition* slowly got the overhaul she should have had years ago. They could cruise along the trajectory of the Transitional's research while the ship was being worked on and, at the end of three weeks, there was the distinct possibility of emerging with both Delee and a revamped *Perdition*. That would have been an efficient use of time...and one that now appeared impossible.

"Want some food?" he asked of his young engineer, knowing his voice was grim and off-putting. He couldn't help it.

Toy shrugged. "Nah. I still have a couple of systems to re-check. I'll grab something when the air isn't so... suffocating."

Quinten again said nothing, watching as the engineer left the canteen.

"You didn't say much," he remarked to the air, as he heard the clank of boots recede.

Saff, who had been in the small kitchen during the exchange, picked up her tray and walked to Quinten's table.

"There appeared to be enough mis-communication occurring without an alien adding to it," she remarked as she seated herself.

"Think we can trust him?"

"But you already trust him. He wouldn't have come on board if—"

"Dammit Saff, you know what I'm asking!" Quinten squeezed his eyes shut then opened them again. "Is he as good as he thinks he is? Will he do the job or do a runner the minute he realises he can jack the shuttle? What if he decides to double-cross both me and Venkat,

Quinten's Story

now that he knows who we all are?"

"I played the communication disc you received from Venkat Digby. He seems to trust Toy Cenredi."

"Yeah, but that was when we all thought the Alliance was dead and shot into a star. Now, though—"

"And I carried out a few searches on him," Saff interrupted quietly.

Quinten raised his eyebrows. "On our young engineer?"

She nodded, eliciting a snort of laughter from him.

"When did you find time to do that?"

"When I planned for it," she told him. "Time management is one of my greatest skills."

Her expression was so unreadable, Quinten wasn't sure if she intended it as a joke. He grinned anyway. "What did you find out?"

"Toy Cenredi had a childhood of few recorded details. However, the details that exist do not tell a happy story, as Venkat Digby correctly surmised. He has been working for Digby's company since its inception. I accessed the records of F5 Engineering Systems and read his evaluation reports."

"You...hold on a minute. You *hacked* into Venkat's systems?"

"It seemed the quickest way to access information we required on which to base a sound decision."

Quinten wasn't comfortable hearing that his crewmember had accessed secured files, especially secured files that belonged to an old friend of his.

"Are Venkat's records that easy to get into?" he asked.

Quinten's Story

He wasn't sure what emotion was paramount, exasperation, embarrassment or anxiety.

"No."

"Can the Republic get in?"

"Of course. The Republic can examine any entity's records." She forked a mouthful of food into her mouth, chewed then swallowed. "But I didn't access the official records."

Quinten felt that he needed a map to navigate Saff's logic. "You're saying Venkat's got *two* sets of records?"

"At least two, that is correct."

"And you read some of his unofficial records?"

"Again, you're correct."

"Saff," he paused, trying to rephrase the question he had in his mind. "Can the Republic access Venkat's *unofficial* records?"

"I doubt it."

"Why not? If *you* could do it, why not a Special Counsel with a team of crackers?"

"Republic Special Counsels and their teams of crackers are not Transitionals."

"And Transitionals are *that* good at getting into systems?"

Saff looked him full in the face. "We're better than any other sentient species in the known galaxy."

"And are you going to tell me how you did it?"

Did he notice the barest hint of a smile on her face when she answered?

Quinten's Story

"No."

15

Quinten thought about it for some time before informing Toy the following morning that he was to report to Saff the moment he'd finished putting together his first requisition order. Then he watched as Saff directed her new charge to clear out two of the officer cabins.

"Two cabins?" he queried, after the young man reluctantly did as he was told.

"As your official second-in-command, I assumed I was entitled to better quarters."

It wasn't the statement that elicited a grin from Quinten but the impassive look she tried to fool him with. He saw the uncertainty underneath the cool exterior and was both amused and impressed by her bravado.

"You're right," he agreed. "And my apologies for not seeing to that before. To be honest, it slipped my mind."

She nodded graciously but Quinten wasn't fooled. Rannler Station was in for a surprise next time they went face-to-face with their hybrid experiment. His part-Transitional crewmember was sculpted from steel.

Which brought him back to The Plan. Quinten made curved shapes on the table top with his finger, tracing invisible lines as he thought. They had a mechanic – a damn good one if Venkat was to be believed. They had the money. They had a little time, but not enough to go searching the known galaxy, looking for Delee. Which meant....

"We need Vigo Halan."

Startled, Quinten shot his gaze up to Saff's. "What did you say?" he asked, frowning.

Quinten's Story

"I presume you were cogitating on the need for further resources. I suggest Vigo Halan. She's the logical choice."

"If you mean the logical choice for crisping you to ash – after she's collected her bounty, of course – then I completely agree."

"Even with the *Perdition* working at optimum efficiency, we are at a disadvantage, Quinten Tamlan. Rannler Station had a contingent of at least seventy-five personnel when I was there. I doubt it has decreased. The planet is also encircled by a military-grade sensor net and a ring of geostationary satellites, armed with high-powered energy beams and space-to-space and space-to-ground missiles." She paused. "When I asked for your assistance, I did not intend it to mean your suicide."

"Nobody said an operation like this was going to be easy, Saff," Quinten countered, "but don't you think Vigo Halan is a bit much, even for the both of us to handle?"

"She knows the Republic. Not the Republic that you or I are familiar with. You have had little contact with others for seven years. I have deliberately eschewed such opportunities. Vigo has done neither. She knows the *current* Republic. The people. The mindset. Their protocols."

"She'd be more likely to turn us in than help us."

"Like she has already?"

Quinten threw his hands up. "Look, I don't *know* why Vigo hasn't traded my arse for a fistful of kilo-credits before now. And that's the other thing. You don't know

Quinten's Story

how that woman thinks. / don't know how that woman thinks. She could be on our side one minute and then," he clicked his fingers, "snap-frozen corpses the next, with her laughing over our cooling innards."

"Then what is your plan?"

That was the mega-credit question, wasn't it? What exactly was his plan?

"This is the way I figure it," he told her slowly, "we have you, with your knowledge of Rannler. Adding a bit of an increase to your recollections, I still think we're dealing with no more than one hundred personnel, more than half of them scientists. I doubt that group would put up any resistance."

"You're estimating fifty Security Force soldiers?"

"I'd say forty. Maybe even thirty. After all, how many do you need to keep a bunch of civilians in line?"

"Assuming you are correct so far, would you agree to thirty-five soldiers?"

"O-kay. Thirty-five. Maybe some automated defences within the facility as well. We'd have to jam their comms to start with, neutralise their planetary defences; that should buy us some time."

"Thirty-five," Saff repeated, "against...."

Quinten licked his lips. "Right. There's you. Me. Cenredi. And let's not forget the *Perdition*."

"I don't understand. What about the *Perdition*?"

"Think about it. She'll be the fastest thing in Republic space, jacked to the event horizon with the latest in tech."

"Tech that is useless without someone directing her actions."

Quinten's Story

That was a good point. "What are you saying?"

"Even if all of us are highly-trained, super-soldiers – which we are not – the current odds are still against us, at more than ten to one."

"Once we get your people out, won't they help us?"

"I don't know what they'd do, Quinten Tamlan. They've been mistreated by your kind for so long, I think their hatred of humans may be the only emotion keeping them alive."

Quinten was incredulous. "They won't help us at all?"

"I don't know."

"So what are *you* suggesting?"

"Vigo Halan," Saff repeated.

He shook his head. "You have lost your mind. Just in case you didn't get it the first time I said it, once Vigo finds out who you are – *what* you are – you'll be shipped to Bliss so fast, you'll die from the deceleration trauma."

"Vigo trusts you." Saff's answering stare was unblinking. "You trust Vigo."

"Only as far as I can see...with my eyes closed," he added with an acidic twist to his lips.

"I'm sure she already suspects."

"That you're a Transitional?" Intrigued, Quinten frowned. "What makes you say so?"

"She is an intelligent woman. Someone with a record of, as you humans say, jumping to the right conclusions. If she wasn't, she'd be dead by now."

"What difference does *that* make? *Thinking* that someone is an enemy is one thing, *confirming* it is

Quinten's Story

something else. I don't know that I'd be too comfortable letting Vigo in on our little secret."

"Toy Cenredi knows."

"Let's be honest here, Saff. Who's going to believe a runt like Cenredi?"

"Nobody," added a third voice. Quinten turned, in time to see the *Perdition's* engineer saunter in. He pulled out a chair at the table and slouched into it, an amused half-grin on his face.

"Nobody in Republic space cares about Toy Cenredi and Toy Cenredi knows it," he elaborated. "But skimming under the sensor nets is also useful."

Quinten shrugged. "How?"

"Means you get to pick up intel, grandpa. Means that people underestimate you. Small, skinny runt walking around with a shield unit in his hands. Too small to make any trouble. Too stupid to understand what's going on. Now that I'm part of your little gang, you're not going to make that same mistake, are you grandpa?"

Quinten looked from one of his crewmembers to the other, from Saff's studied impassivity to Toy's sneering impudence.

"Okay, Mr. Ready," he conceded, "here's the problem. We need to bust out a sizable group of aliens from a secured Republic facility and all we have is this ship and the three of us. Got a plan cooking in that overheated brain of yours?"

They spoke for almost three hours. By the end of it, both Saff and Toy were adamant. They needed at least one other person to even *begin* to come up with a workable plan. If they couldn't quickly find an Alliance

Quinten's Story

ex-member then the next best person was Vigo Halan. It was the only option that made sense.

Quinten finally capitulated. "All right. I'll make the call but I hope you two know what you're asking for."

"One way to find out, grandpa."

Quinten tightened his lips and once again heard his father emerge from his lips. "Indeed."



Quinten had a ship that, even he had to admit, was being rapidly knocked into shape. Not only were the *Perdition's* systems looking sharper every day but the black-edged jagged scar that ran from stem to stern had been softened into a major corridor that almost looked like it had been planned that way. It was more than a cosmetic change. The new bulkheads concealed all the things Quinten had been expecting when visiting Venkat on Ferncoal Five – concealed weapon panels, drop-down cage screens, laser arrays. It made sense to install the equipment now that he had two more crewmembers to worry about.

He had an engineer who appeared to be committed to whatever plan of action he commanded. Roughly.

He had a second-in-command who was alien, yet he thought he understood her better and better every day.

He had an initial objective for the resurrected Alliance; namely, the rescue of Saff's community.

And he had just contacted the person he considered to

Quinten's Story

be the most dangerous human in the known galaxy. Worse still, she'd answered.



“Your call came as a surprise, Ten. You wanting to set up a meet with *me*, when it’s usually the other way around?”

Vigo couldn’t hide the caution in her eyes as she stepped into the *Perdition*. With a lazy gesture, she scanned the cargo bay’s interior. “Colour me intrigued.”

“This isn’t an ambush, Vigo.”

That didn’t stop her appraisal. “Doesn’t hurt to be sure.”

Quinten noticed that her hands never strayed far from her twin blasters. Showy but sharp, that was Vigo Halan.

“What do you want, Ten?”

“Come on. I’ll pour you a drink and make you a proposal.”

“Is it going to cost me?”

Quinten grinned. “You can bet on it.”

He had told Saff and Toy to keep *the hell* out of the way while he spoke to Vigo, and was hoping they were obeying him and keeping themselves occupied in the farthest reaches of the ship. The last thing he needed when he was trying to hold delicate negotiations with a trigger-happy killer were surprise distractions.

Hoping to set her at ease, Quinten walked ahead, trying

Quinten's Story

to ignore the itch in the middle of his back. Behind him, he heard Vigo's footsteps echo his.

"Someone been working on this crate?" she asked.

"Yeah. We got ourselves a new engineer. Got a lot of mouth on him but he seems to know his stuff."

"Where did you get him? Ferncoal?"

That was an easy guess, considering they were in the sector and dead in the water till Toy was done. "Something like that."

"Probably the best place for black-ray ship engineers. The Republic doesn't come around too often. But I hear they're due for a tour within the next month or so. If I were you, I'd be thinking of moving on pretty quickly."

"Yeah. That's the plan."

They reached the canteen.

"I have some nu-vodka," Quinten offered. "It's chilled."

"Put it in ice and I'll have one."

Quinten fixed their drinks, reaming two fist-sized frozen blocks of water into drinking vessels, then bringing the glasses, and the vodka, to the table. He set each item down with deliberation before pulling out a chair for himself.

"Vigo," he began, "I've been thinking...."



"You think I hadn't guessed half of this myself?"

Quinten's Story

Vigo questioned, downing the dregs of her drink. The ice had partially melted, leaving a wide shallow puddle on the matte surface and making the sides of the glass slippery, but she didn't seem to mind.

Quinten had been a good host, refilling both their glasses when they were empty, but he was under no illusion that Vigo was even partially inebriated. Now, three drinks and a wet table later, the time had come for Vigo's decision. And she was taking her sweet time about voicing it.

"I always knew there was something different about your crewmember. Your first crewmember," she amended. "Part-shapeshifter, you say?"

"The term she prefers is 'Transitional'."

Vigo snorted. "Getting sensitive and tolerant in your old age, Ten?"

"I was always like this, Vigo." There was bite in Quinten's voice. "You just hadn't noticed before."

"What I noticed," she told him with an arched brow, "was a drunk cripple who couldn't even stand up straight."

Was Vigo trying to remind him of what he had been, what she had rescued?

"You're right," he conceded, not rising to the bait. "I owe you a lot. Even my life."

"Don't you forget that," she said pointedly. "And now you're coming to me with this ridiculous sob-story from a Sub?" She eyed him angrily. "What do you expect me to do, Ten? Jump for joy and help take on the entire Security Force with you? What if word leaks that I even *had* this kind of talk with you? Did you think about *that*? Even if I refuse, that's my entire life shot straight into a

Quinten's Story

black hole. I'd be labelled a terrorist and sent to Bliss on a super-fast express."

"This is bigger than you or me, Vigo. This is about correcting a huge injustice."

"The only injustice I'm worried about," she interrupted, "is not getting paid for my bounties."

Quinten rubbed his forehead with stiff fingers. "I'm useless at this," he conceded. "If Kiel was here, she'd be able to make you see sense. She'd know how to put things so you'd understand what I'm trying to say."

Vigo's voice softened. "Look, Ten, I think you're getting the wrong idea about who I am. *What* I am. I save your worthless arse in a backroom bar a few years ago, we trade some war stories, and now you get to thinking that I'm some kind of bosom buddy."

"Aren't you, Vigo?" Quinten's voice rose as the significance of what he was about to say hit him. "Aren't you the best friend I have in this entire galaxy?"

Vigo put up a hand and shook her head. "Now Ten, don't start—"

"When I jacked this Republic ship, you knew about it. Did you turn me in? How about when I refitted it? The meet-ups where we coordinated my first few food shipments? The advice you gave me about black-ray engineering shops? The tip-offs when Republic ships were about to tour a nearby sector? Dammit, Vigo, the tip-off you gave me while we were walking here less than an hour ago?"

He stared hard into her pale eyes, forcing her to look away as if struck.

"Don't tell me you're not a friend of mine," Quinten told her. "Don't tell me you don't give a damn about what happens to me and my ship. I told you about Rannler

Quinten's Story

because I trust you and because I think you trust me. Sure, you can say no and sail off into the vacuum, but don't try to make it appear that this is just business, because I think both of us know that's not true."

Vigo was quiet for several minutes. She flicked at the melting ice glass with a fingernail, sending the vessel sliding across the table on a film of water.

"Finished having your say?" she finally asked.

Quinten watched the glass as it moved between the two of them, tapped this way and that by an indolent finger. "Yeah," he said.

"You call us friends." She shrugged. "Sure, you can call me that and maybe you're just as right about you being my closest friend as I am about being yours."

She paused for a moment. "And you're right about me having opportunity to turn you in and not doing it. I don't know, maybe at the time I thought it was a bit of fun. Catch some guys but let one go, just to prove to myself that the Republic didn't own me body and soul."

She lifted her finger and her gaze at the same time.

"But the truth is, you're like an investment, Ten. Over the years, I've seen the value the Republic puts on you slowly rise. Keeping you on the loose in the galaxy, but still close enough to maintain contact, is like money in the bank to me. And, up till now, I haven't had to touch that nest egg because I've been doing okay without it."

Quinten stilled. "And now?"

"Now? With Quinten Tamlan on the Republic's hot list again? A runaway Sub. A stolen Republic ship that looks like it's getting a major refit with illegal tech." Her hand dropped casually to her thigh, hidden by the table top. "Now, the outlook is beginning to change."

Quinten's Story

Quinten's mind skittered in several directions at once. How had he misread everything so badly? Damn it, why wasn't he wearing his armour? Could he reach the intercom in time to call for help from Saff and Toy? What if he shoved the table – hard – straight at Vigo's torso?

"I'm sorry, Ten," Vigo told him, her voice full of regret, "but all I can think of at this moment is the fact that I really need to take you in."

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Quinten looked up, his face dark and foreboding.

He was dressed in a loose long-sleeved shirt and baggy trousers, his hands secured behind his back. Standing next to him in the cockpit, Saff was similarly dressed and restrained, with the addition of a nerve collar around her neck.

"This isn't going to work, Vigo," he growled.

Vigo Halan turned from the controls and threw him a twisted grin. "Allow me to be the judge of that, Ten. I've brought in more criminals than you can count. I know what I'm doing."

She turned back to the controls and her fingers flew across the comms console. "This is Vigo Halan of the *Euphrates Flow*. Contacting Rannler administration."

The voice that replied was loud and clear, making Quinten jump.

"This is Rannler. Who are you and what are you doing in our navigation space?"

Vigo sighed dramatically. "I told you, Rannler. My name's Vigo Halan. Here, sending my credentials to you now. I'm a Republic-endorsed bounty hunter and I have a couple of presents for you."

There was a slight pause. "We haven't received orders of incoming passengers."

Vigo clicked the comms off. "No senior personnel on the rock then," she muttered to herself, before flicking the switch back on again.

Quinten's Story

"They are not passengers," she explained patiently.
"They are prisoners."

"We haven't received orders of incoming prisoners," the voice insisted.

Vigo looked back at the two people standing behind her and to her right.

"You'll want these. One is the galaxy's most wanted terrorist, Quinten Tamlan. The other is a Sub who escaped your facility a few months ago, I believe."

The tone in the voice changed. "A female?"

"That's how it appears to me."

"Stand by."

"How much do you stand to make from this deal, Vigo?"
Quinten asked in the ensuing silence.

Vigo turned, leaning against the edge of the console.
"For you and the Sub? I figure fifteen kilo-credits. Rannler will no doubt take a small 'commission' before the deal's finalised but I'll still have more than enough to buy a secluded cabin I've been eyeing in the Panolin sector."

"Then I hope—"

"Halan." The voice from Rannler interrupted them.
"You're cleared for docking. Please turn over controls to our navigation server. Weapons will be locked on your position until your vehicle is docked and secured. Any deviation will be construed as an aggressive act."

"Affirmative. Halan out."

Quinten watched as Vigo ended the call and switched full access of her ship's navigation controls to Rannler. He had always acknowledged the possibility of falling into Republic hands, but had imagined a drawn-out

Quinten's Story

battle, flashing down creases and skirting stars, ambushes, strikes and counter-strikes. He had not expected to be handcuffed and handed over so casually.

Not like this.

Never like this.



“You’re going to have to turn over all your weapons.”

Vigo eyed the young security officer standing just inside Rannler’s dock doors with disdain. “Do you know who I am?” she asked coldly.

His gaze flicked down to the readout at his station. “Yeah, you’re a bounty hunter. My orders are clear. All weaponry must be removed before entering the facility.”

“I have two rules, son. I don’t take off my weapons and I don’t let anyone else touch them.”

The young officer drew himself up to his full, imposing height. He was the tallest in the small group and, by the look on his face, he knew it.

“Then,” he said, “I’m authorised to relieve you of them however I can.”

He blinked. Quinten, watching from the back, was sure that was all he had time for. By the time the young officer’s eyes opened again, he was facing two blasters pointed square at his body.

Quinten's Story

Quinten had forgotten how quick Vigo was. The exhibition was a sobering one.

"Care to make me?" the bounty hunter asked, her voice syrupy sweet. One of her blasters twitched and Quinten saw the end of the barrel point to the security officer's console. "Why don't you drill down on my name? You'll see that I have...special dispensation to do a lot of things. And one of them is to keep my weapons with me on Republic stations."

Was that true? Quinten had known Vigo was one of the best hunters in Republic space, but he wasn't aware of any special privileges she might have held. What else hadn't he known during their erratic friendship?

The young man gulped and he carefully stepped to the console. When he was through interrogating the security system, he looked as if he'd been sucking on a particularly sour Civran berry. "Your prisoners then."

"What about them?" Vigo stepped to one side. "They're both restrained. Picked 'em up like that myself. The Sub even has a nerve chain on." Vigo removed something from a side pocket and tossed it to the security officer. "Here, that's the control unit. Feel free to use it whenever you like."

The officer caught the small block reflexively and frowned at it. With an abrupt movement, he turned. "Follow me."

Vigo gestured with her weapon before walking in the officer's wake. "Come on, you two. My cabin in the mountains beckons."

Quinten followed, but at a slower pace. He nudged Saff with an elbow. "Does this place look the same to you?" he whispered.

"So far," she replied, her voice equally low.

Quinten's Story

"Where are the detention cells again?"

"Three levels down. Just below the lab facilities."

"Is that where they'll take us?"

"No. We'll probably be kept in the holding cells for now. This level."

"Hey!" Vigo's voice was sharp. "Keep up and stop talking."

The corridor led in a broad arc to what appeared to be a central hub. The space opened up and, behind a series of curved desks, Quinten saw doors leading off to the left and right. Meeting rooms? Entrances to the lower levels?

"Take us to a meeting room," Vigo instructed the young man, just as they reached the desks. Only one other security guard was present. "I interrogated the Sub and she mentioned a Konsectoh?"

"That would be *Colonel* Konsectoh," her escort replied stiffly. "He's not here at the moment, but I'll get someone else to talk to you."

The second officer didn't even look up from his post as the four of them trooped past.

"What is this?" Vigo asked as she scanned the bare furniture, a bite in her voice. "Holiday season at Rannler or something?"

"We *were*," his gaze flicked across them in rebuke, "a secret facility. There's plenty of security around. It's just not obvious to you."

He palmed open a door and gestured them in. "If you'd care to wait in here," he told them, his voice equally sarcastic, "I'll get someone to *debrief* you shortly."

The room was small, square and completely white, but

Quinten's Story

Quinten wasn't fooled. He was sure that, at the very least, there were pinhole cameras embedded in the walls.

Vigo went back to the door as it slid shut behind them and touched it. It remained closed.

"Locked in," she remarked.

She turned around. "So this is it, Tamlan. The end of an era for you."

"That's right, Vigo," Quinten replied evenly. "And I hope you get what's coming to you."

"I don't think either of us needs to worry about that."

Quinten didn't know how long they stood in that frozen tableau. His hands were starting to get sweaty in their restraints and he didn't miss the small twitches of Vigo's fingers as they hovered close to her holsters.

He always thought the way she wore her weapons was some kind of antiquated eccentricity but, having watched their effect on the young security officer, he wasn't so sure anymore.

He felt, more than saw, Saff slowly move behind him and knew she was scanning the walls. There was no reason for her to do that - their future lay in another room, levels below their feet - and all he could think was that it was an outlet for her own nervous energy. A nervous alien. Now he really *had* seen everything in the galaxy.

The door slid open.

"Watch out!" Vigo yelled.

Saff moved, a blur that shot past on Quinten's left, just as Vigo reached for her blaster. Quinten would have

Quinten's Story

stayed to watch – his crewmember up against the most notorious bounty hunter in known space – but he had other things on his mind. Two people were coming in through the door. With Vigo's shouted warning, they hesitated.

Quinten moved. He barrelled into the first figure, shoving him hard into the wall with one shoulder. His heart was pounding hard in his chest but he thought he heard the sound of a body impacting a room panel, then the sizzle of a blaster. That would be Saff, taking care of the cameras in the room.

"Done," she said, her voice raised.

At the signal, Quinten twisted his wrists, breaking the cuffs. He reached forward with both hands to grab the second newcomer by his ears, snapping the man's head down to meet an upcoming knee. There was the moist crunch of a broken nose. The Space Fleet officer staggered on his feet for a moment, then collapsed to the floor.

Meanwhile, Saff moved to the first man Quinten had hit. There was another blur of movement, two more crashes against walls, then he was down too.

Breathing heavily, Quinten looked at the three prone figures decorating the floor. From the corner of his eye, he saw Saff throw him something and he caught the blaster with one hand.

"Right. Let's strip Vigo down, disable the satellites then we go get your people. With any luck, Toy is on our tail and jamming the space with enough interference that a phased neutrino can't get through."

In the seconds while he waited for Saff, Quinten ripped the loose clothing free, exposing an ultra-light armour exoskeleton that hugged his body in roughly finished metal. Their young engineer had crafted two such suits, bitching about it all the time, but still with a proud grin

Quinten's Story

on his face when he presented them for the first fitting. As he told them, they wouldn't withstand multiple point-blank shots from enemy fire, but they'd deflect a lot of what they received...before they melted into slag. Quinten hoped it wouldn't get that far.

Saff stripped off the grenades that Vigo was wearing along the side seams of her own suit, handed half of them to Quinten and squeezed the other blaster with her free hand.

"It's your show now, Saff," Quinten told her. The alien was showing signs of stress - muted but still visible to his eye - and he pitched his voice deliberately low in an effort to boost her confidence and keep her on track. If she was going to be his second-in-command, she was going to have to start acting like one. "Lead the way. I'll follow."

"They keep the security systems on this level," she said crisply.

They strode out of the room confidently and dispensed with the lone guard still at the hub of desks. Saff was unsure where to go after that. A door they tried to the left of the hub led into another corridor and they walked it, side by side, casually picking off personnel who opened any of the side doors.

"I would have expected the alarms to be going off by now," Quinten muttered.

"Vigo mentioned this during our planning," Saff reminded him. "Only military installations have internal sensors connected to the alarm systems and Rannler is classified as a scientific base."

Quinten grunted. They wouldn't have made it this far without Vigo's knowledge of Security Force protocols... or her daring plan of taking them straight to Rannler as

Quinten's Story

supposed prisoners. He only hoped he wasn't going to have to rescue *her* from a Republic facility sometime in the near future.

They found the security area at the end of the corridor, shot the two men stationed there and Quinten stood guard while Saff disabled Rannler's offensive systems.

"Toy Cenredi should not have any problems on his approach," she commented, straightening.

"Good. Let's move. Downstairs, didn't you say?"

"Yes."

Her movements were more certain this time. They retreated down the corridor and she chose another anonymous-looking door without hesitation. They stood on a landing that joined a descending ramp.

"We don't have identifying passes. The moment we start down—"

"There's no time," he interrupted.

They took one step on the ramp, and a blare of alarms erupted around them.

"It doesn't matter," Quinten shouted. "Keep moving."

Despite the noise, he was loose and relaxed. This was going to be a relatively easy operation because anyone that moved was automatically an enemy, and it would stay that way until they reached the holding cells. And the clamouring alarms provided the extra benefit of warning all non-security personnel to stay in their quarters. He remembered that much from living with his parents.

Saff hesitated at the laboratory level, its large door shut and no doubt protected by several layers of security. "Here's where.... I was kept here for many years. There were experiments...."

Quinten's Story

"There's no time," Quinten reminded her as gently as he could. "We'll come back if we can, but we can't afford to destroy everything, Saff. We don't have enough people for that. Not yet."

Her dark eyes snapped to his. For a moment, he saw such rage flaring in their depths that he rocked back on his feet. Then she was back to being the aloof Transitional he had first met in the *Perdition's* cargo bay.

"Yes," she said, then turned away. "We go down another level."

Quinten was mentally ticking away the minutes in the back of his head as they forged ahead. Four minutes. Twenty Rannler personnel so far. His frequent checks backwards hadn't indicated anybody following them.

"It's through here."

Saff stood at the entrance to another heavy door, the metal dull from years of use. Quinten recognised her hesitation and knew they couldn't afford it.

"Get the door open," he growled. "Now."



Why was she wavering? This should be her moment of triumph, the second when she had come, not as the willing plaything to a callous Republic but as a victorious redeemer. She had done what few Transitionals before had thought possible – outthink the Republic. But that didn't mean she wasn't terrified of what lay behind the thick, closed door.

Quinten's Story

She knew these cells. Knew the configuration of each square of humiliation. The darkness. The isolation. Was she fooling herself by hoping that her adopted people were still alive? Did she want an answer to that question?

Then a human male voice startled her out of her nightmare.

"Get the door open. Now."

And she knew she had to do it. Because she needed to know the truth. But also because she had learnt to trust a human and knew he was right.

With nimble fingers, Saff tapped out a code she had memorised years ago. She had several in her memory, but was hoping that the scientist who owned the one she was now using had been too lazy to change it after her initial escape. After all, hadn't they brought her back? And with thirty other testing specimens as a bonus? What could a drugged Sub memorise, despite the human DNA forcibly injected into her system?

With barely a pause, the giant door slid open.

Saff stepped inside.

The first thing that hit her was the smell. It was the familiar muskiness of stressed Transitionals, intensified by their number and the close quarters in which they were held. On the floor, angling away, Saff saw the stark silhouette of the door, backlight accentuating its straight lines and, between the converging tangents, two fuzzier, more organic outlines. Her. Quinten Tamlan.

How long had her people been kept in total darkness? A day? A week? Longer?

Saff's left hand searched the bare wall, hitting the illumination panel with barely repressed anger. The

Quinten's Story

lights – banks of them, set high in the ceiling – flooded the cells with harsh intensity.

The cells had been deliberately modelled on ancient zoo systems, Saff had once been told. Essentially cages, they were large cubes that sat within a space, viewable from all four sides. In one corner was a basic toilet facility, but it wasn't partitioned off for privacy. Bars ran upwards from the floor, connecting with each other via struts that lay half a metre below ceiling height. Five of the six cage walls were electrified, leaving only the floor to shuffle on or lie against. Sometimes, when someone slept, they accidentally rolled against the bars. Saff remembered the feeling of suffocation in the cells – tensing up to avoid the charged metal, waking to the sounds of agonised screaming. Then Konsectoh pulled her out and offered her a deal.

The Transitionals were divided into three cells and their number looked smaller. Some of them must have already died, but how was a question she would need to save for another time.

Quickly, she scanned the occupants, striding to the first cell on her right when she recognised a pair of old, wise eyes.

"Maz," she said softly. She wanted to reach through and touch his hand, squeeze it and convey her hope and optimism, but he didn't look well and she was afraid he would touch the electrified metal bars in his zeal.

He smiled as a Transitional smiled, more a pucker of the lips than the full human curve she had grown used to over the past few months.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "This is a dangerous place for us all, child. Flee."

She shook her head and couldn't keep the note of pride from her voice. "No," she said. "I'm here to rescue you. All of you."

Quinten's Story

Maz blinked at her. "Rescue? But how?"

Behind her, she heard Quinten's voice again, fast and harsh. "Saff, I'm going to start blowing the cells. Tell them to stand back."

"Please stand back," she echoed. "We're going to use grenades to create an opening. It should also stop the electrification."

"But—"

Saff shook her head as she retreated, allowing Quinten to set the parameters of the grenade charges before laying each down at a cell corners. She couldn't believe she had come this far, managed to talk the head of the ST Alliance into helping her. The entire scene was surreal – a human squatting before groups of caged Transitionals, both species concentrating on a common goal.

"Back!" she told the other Transitionals, making hand signals to indicate that they should move as far away from the small blinking ovoid as possible. "Turn away! Now!"

As she did the same, she heard three percussive thunks. Drops of hot metal hit her unprotected hands, the sharp stings still unable to dampen her pride.

When she looked back, she saw three jagged holes burnt into each of the cells. They weren't big holes but, if her people crouched and shuffled forward, they'd be able to get through without any problem.

"You must come with us," she said urgently as they crept out of the cages and straightened. Thirty. From an original fifty, there were only a few more than thirty of her people left. "We have a ship docking at this Station but we must get away as soon as possible."

To her astonishment, nobody moved.

Quinten's Story

"Go," she repeated. "We have a ship on its way. It will take us all to safety."

They merely stood there, watching her impassively. Quinten, who had stepped up to her side, flicked her a glance. "Saff?"

She didn't need an interpreter to know what he was thinking.

What the hell is going on?

She hurried back to the first cell, directing her gaze towards someone who was still behind the bars. "Maz?" It was a question, an entreaty.

The old Transitional finally stepped out of the cage, his limbs moving fluidly through the gap. He straightened and gazed at Quinten, but Saff knew that his question was directed at her.

"Who is this?"

"This," she said, "is Quinten Tamlan. The head of the reborn ST Alliance."

Maz's gaze never left the human. "And why does he wish to help us?"

Saff wondered if it was the human DNA in her that wanted to scream at that moment.

"Because I asked him to," she explained in a rush.

"That's all? You ask a human and the human accedes to your wishes?"

Maz! Please!

"Maybe we can discuss this when we are somewhere safe," she suggested in a low voice. In the frenzy of their rescue planning, she had forgotten how much of Transitional life depended on courtesy and formalities.

Quinten's Story

Now, when all she wanted to do was take the remnants of her community and run from Rannler as fast as the *Perdition* could carry them, Maz was treating the situation like a reception ceremony.

As if to ratchet up the tension in an already unbearable situation, Quinten's comms chirped.

"Hey grandpa, you there?"

Quinten, Saff noted, hadn't taken his gaze from Maz either. She saw him thumb the switch at his collar. "What is it?"

"I'm jamming all ways to Tor Prime here, but we have a problem. I'm picking up a pod and it's travelling away from us. Fast."

Something flickered in Quinten's eyes. "Manned?"

"One life-form."

"Can you get to it?"

"I have a choice, grandpa. I can get to *it* or I can get to *you*. I can't do both."

Saff thought she could hear each second pound away, hitting the floor with a dreadful finality.

"Come and get us," Quinten told him. "Now."

"On my way."

Quinten raised his voice. "As Saff has told you, I have a ship on its way to pick us up. You can come with us, and have a chance of life. Or stay, and die by Republic hands. You have two standard minutes."

He swung around, hesitating for a second when his gaze intersected Saff's. "I'll be in the second docking bay," he said with a terse voice. "Remember what

Quinten's Story

we've already sacrificed. Two minutes."

Not giving her time to acknowledge him, he strode off.

Saff didn't know what to say. In all her daydreams, she had never anticipated the reaction she was now facing, the unmoving *inertia* of it all.

"Maz—"

"You wish us to trust a human, little one?"

"Quinten Tamlan deserves our trust."

"It is true that the name is familiar to us. We have heard stories of his bravery. I have even told you some. But, at his heart, he is a human. And we have trusted before and been betrayed."

"Yes, we have trusted and been betrayed," she conceded. "You taught me that. I learnt that myself within these very walls. But sometimes...sometimes, when you're given the chance to trust again, you have to take it."

Nobody moved. In fact, Saff realised, she was the only being in motion, swaying slightly as emotions battered at her.

"Why won't you come?" she finally asked.

"What's the difference between being in servitude to one human and being in servitude to another?"

"Come with me," she pleaded. "Find out."

She must have less than a minute left. With agonising slowness, Maz turned to the rest of the Transitionals. They had used the time to group themselves in a loose semi-circle around him. It was always Maz, she knew. Even after two years, there were still some that regarded her – with her mixed heritage – as a pariah.

Quinten's Story

"Maz," she said softly, when she thought she was out of time and the *Perdition* was already undocking and speeding away to safety.

"Some of us will come," he told her.

"And what about the others?"

"That is not your concern."

"Very well. Then follow me. But quickly."

Saff didn't turn around. She didn't want to see how many still didn't trust the escape she had offered them. Quickly, she led the way up two levels, gripping Vigo's blaster tight in one hand. To her relief, Quinten was still waiting at the docking bay, even though she was sure that almost five minutes had elapsed.

He gave her a long look, before casting a quick glance behind her, to the ones who'd decided to follow her.

"We need to leave now, Quinten Tamlan," she told him, forestalling the questions.

"All right," he beckoned to the open hatch. "Let's go."

She led the group inside, only turning around when she had no choice. As the *Perdition's* hatch was secured behind them, she met Maz's gaze, read the sad regard in them, then skimmed the other eight who had decided to follow her.

Nine. Out of thirty.

"Grandpa." She heard the tinny voice as it emerged from Quinten's collar comm. "I'm spotting movement along the crease."

Movement?

"Saff."

Saff nodded. "I have to go," she told Maz, touching his

Quinten's Story

sleeve. There was so much she wanted to say....

"We're still in danger, aren't we?" he asked.

"Yes."

Not waiting for an answer, she turned and followed Quinten's figure towards the cockpit.



"Report," Quinten barked, the moment the doors slid open.

"My guess is, our runaway pod managed to alert someone." Toy swung his gaze towards the newcomers. "They're sending ships after us. More than one, by the look of the displacement readings. The activity's still up at the other end of the crease, but they'll be here sooner than we like."

Quinten ran a distracted hand through his dark hair. What were they going to do now? There was only one crease into Rannler...and only one crease out of it. While the incoming crease was almost on top of Rannler's system, the outgoing one - their escape - was days away.

If there was a single Republic ship bearing down on them in the crease, there was a chance that the *Perdition* could outrun it. But if there were several ships, and if the escaping pod had managed to alert the Space Fleet in time to send ships into the incoming crease, then it was smart enough to alert the Space Fleet to send ships to the mouth of the *outgoing* one as well.

"Saff, what do you know about the creases in this sector?"

Quinten's Story

She moved past him to the navigation console. "Outgoing creases are few. The next one is one week away, at maximum speed."

"One week," Quinten mused. "That would give the Space Fleet more than enough time to cover every possible outgoing crease from this sector."

"That is correct."

"Can we hide? Lie low for a month or so?"

"That is a possibility."

"I wouldn't bet on it, pops," Toy cut in. "I didn't have time to get all the EM bafflers installed. Sure, we could try evading the Fleet, but if they throw some serious *skeevin'* ships at us in this bare vacuum of a sector, it'll only be a matter of time before we're found."

And if they were found, he could say good-bye to everything – the rescue, the lives of the escapees, the reborn Alliance...his reborn self.

"I need possibilities," he demanded.

"Bury ourselves in one of Rannler's seas," Toy suggested immediately. "That could buy us a week. Maybe two."

"Turn ourselves in," Saff said. "Then plan our escape."

"A repeat of this attempt, you mean?" Quinten shook his head. "There'd be no second *Perdition* coming to rescue us again and I doubt the Security Force will make the same mistakes twice. Cenredi, get us out of here. Head for that outgoing crease. How long do you think before the Republic will be on top of us?"

"I don't know the variances of this crease but I'd say an hour before they emerge. If the crease is playing up, maybe an hour and a half."

Quinten's Story

"Right. We have forty-five minutes to come up with a plan. So far we've got running and we've got hiding. We're not giving ourselves up. Anybody got anything else?"

"Vigo," Saff said softly.

Quinten disagreed. "Vigo put it all on the line to help us out. The only way she can walk free is if she convinces the Security Force that she was as duped by us as they were. I'm not going to call on her to do anything that jeopardises her escape plan."

Silence.

Venkat would be able to come up with something, Quinten thought. Something better than burying themselves beneath kilometres of seawater. Something along the lines of what he came up with at—

"Hey grandpa," Toy's voice broke into his reverie. "Think I may have something here."

"A new type of shield?" Quinten asked dryly.

"What about a new crease?"

The breath stopped in Quinten's chest. A new *crease*?

"Well, not exactly new," Toy added. "It's got a designation but I don't know what the codes mean. 'NABX'. Fire any neurons?"

"Where is it?"

"Well, that's the thing. I can only find references to it in the Rannler database slurp I downloaded, but there are no beacons anywhere in that section of space."

"Saff." *Find out more.*

"Yes, Quinten Tamlan."

It took no more than two minutes for his second-in-

Quinten's Story

command to come back with the necessary information.

"Mr. Cenredi is correct," Saff began, "but still wrong. The crease he mentions was abandoned fifteen years ago."

That was what was known in the trade as a "rusty crease". There were several reasons for a crease to fall into disuse – it was unstable, it led to an unstable destination, or there were no close creases heading back into Republic space. In recent years, it appeared that more and more creases were becoming rusty. Quinten wondered what that would eventually mean for the Republic.

"How far away is it?" he barked.

"One day's travel."

"Any reason why it was abandoned?"

"It leads to a black hole. No access, black hole, fatalities. 'NABX'."

"So what you're saying is that we have three creases within travel distance. One is incoming, with at least one Republic ship in the funnel, the other is a week away and probably attracting a Republic armada to its mouth as we speak...and the third is a rusty crease a day away that leads to a black hole."

"That is correct."

"Is the crease beacon-marked?"

"No."

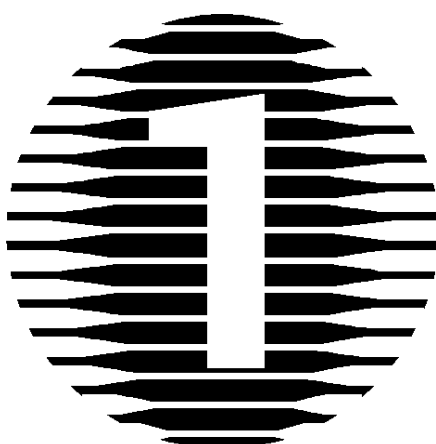
That meant that, even if he *did* decide to take a chance on the third crease, they might not be able to find it. Maybe the idea of burying himself under metres of ocean rock wasn't such a bad one after all.

"May I speak?"

Quinten's Story

They all spun at the strange voice, unaware up till now that Saff's mentor had silently followed them to the control room.

When Maz was sure he had their attention, his gaze resting on each of them in turn, he said: "I know how to find that crease."



“We Transitionals believe we are the favoured of the Creator,” Maz told them, as if explaining an abstract concept to a group of children. “And that the Creator gave us a special gift that no other species in the galaxy has.”

Quinten wanted to tap his foot in frustration but if there was the slightest chance the old alien could get them out of this mess, he was willing to bite his tongue and keep his errant limb still.

“It is *not* the gift of shapeshifting,” Maz added, “but it *leads* to that ability.” He paused. “It is the gift of discerning patterns.”

“Patterns,” Quinten repeated in a flat voice. That wasn’t what he expected to hear and he wasn’t sure it was going to lead to *any* kind of solution for his ship. “You can solve puzzles.”

“Puzzles are a type of pattern.”

Quinten shook his head. “I don’t understand, old man. What are you getting at?”

“Everything in the universe is made according to a pattern, Quinten Tamlan. You, me, the stars.” His dark gaze sharpened. “The boundary between normal and hyperspace.”

That made him blink. “You can see where a crease begins in normal space?”

Quinten's Story

From somewhere to his right, Toy snorted. "I'm sorry, but that's just some kind of A-grade *drakin'* bullshit. If my systems can't pick it up, it's not there and - believe me, grandpa - I've been running constant sweeps ever since I found the crease reference in Rannler's database. There's *nothing* within a day of this ship."

Quinten stared at Maz and licked his lips. "Convince me."

"Oh c'mon," Toy interrupted, "you can't seriously be—"

Quinten silenced him with a sideways chop of his hand, his attention still on the pale Transitional in front of him. "I'm listening, but make it quick. We don't have much time."

"The young human is correct, in his own limited fashion. I have no doubt that your instruments can detect any object in normal space. But hyperspace is not normal space. That's why you depend on beacons to guide you into creases. Beacons that Transitionals don't need."

"Cenredi, change course. Head for the approximate location of the rusty crease."

"You believe him?" Toy's voice was incredulous.

"Just do it. We'll argue about it later." Quinten took a deep breath. "All right, go on."

"There are many more creases in the galaxy than you think," Maz gently remonstrated. "We believe they were put there by the Creator to enable my people to travel between systems, so we could meditate on the galaxy's diverse wonders and give thanks."

"That's why you're spread throughout the galaxy," Quinten added. "You discovered the secret of interstellar travel before the Republic."

Quinten's Story

Saff's old mentor nodded. "Our civilisation had risen and fallen twice before your kind ventured beyond your own star system. We have been exploring the galaxy for thousands of your years."

Under different circumstances, Quinten would have been delighted with the history lesson. Now, he chafed with impatience.

"So now we know that there's another crease somewhere close, you'll be able to find it?" he insisted.

"Yes."

"All right." The old alien spoke slowly and Quinten's own brain started feeling like it was mired in a swamp. He shook his head quickly, trying to get his neurons firing again. "If you can find the crease for us, then that's the first problem solved. The second is the black hole that's waiting for us when we come out. Do you have some way of getting us out of the crease earlier?"

Maz looked at him steadily. "No."

Quinten clenched a fist at his side. "Are you trying to kill us, old man?"

"I'm trying to repay a favour, Quinten Tamlan. I don't like owing debts, especially to a human."

With his peripheral vision, Quinten saw Saff stiffen, but thought he understood more clearly than her what was being discussed – a purely commercial deal, with no sentiment on either side. Just the way he liked it.

"The black hole," he prompted.

"Experienced Transitionals can see where hyperspace intersects normal space...and we can see where normal space intersects hyperspace."

"You can see when we're approaching the crease destination."

Quinten's Story

"And fire braking thrusters accordingly, although I may need," he hesitated, "Saff's help for that."

This was turning out to be a novel experience for Quinten – rescuing beings who apparently didn't want to be rescued, and placing the fate of his ship in the hands of the most mistrusted species in the known galaxy.

"How much time do we have left, Toy?" he asked quietly.

"Anything from thirty to sixty minutes. But, grandpa, you can't be—"

"What do I need to do?" Quinten turned his attention back to Maz, his voice tense.

Maz's large eyes narrowed. "You need to trust me."



"I missed you when you left the station," Maz said.

They had fled, hot and fast, towards the region of the disused crease. Quinten wasn't worried about hiding their tracks. His primary aim was to put as much distance between the *Perdition* and the pursuing ships as possible, in case Maz didn't come through.

"I missed you too," Saff replied. "It was...difficult, putting myself in the hands of humans again."

Toy had informed them that three ships had emerged from the Rannler crease, two strikers and a battleship. It

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had been a dogged pursuit ever since.

"Nobody forced you into that decision. It pained us when you decided to speak with the Konsectoh human."

Now, the *Perdition* was readying itself for insertion into hyperspace. The two humans were told to go to the accommodation section and switch off all monitoring equipment. They acquiesced. Reluctantly.

"I felt that the deal with Konsectoh was the only way to free ourselves."

"And, instead of bringing Quinten Tamlan to Rannler as a fugitive, you brought him to Rannler as an avenger." Maz gazed at her steadily and Saff was forced to drop her own. She fiddled with the controls, pretending to be busy when, in fact, everything had already been checked and re-checked half a dozen times.

"That's not our way," Maz rebuked her.

"You would have been killed if I didn't agree," Saff objected. "All of you."

"And what did you bring to us instead? A human who has no understanding of how we live? A human-sounding *name* that is a travesty of who you really are? I know you are angry with those of us who didn't follow you to this ship, but you must understand their position and honour their principles. To have followed you -- followed a *human* -- would have been accepting a philosophy that is not our own."

He paused. "I see now where I have erred."

"You?" Saff breathed. "I was like dust on the solar wind before you found me and taught me."

"But I committed a grievous sin of arrogance. I tried to mould you into being a Transitional. When you are not."

The words bit deep. If she didn't belong on Rannler --

Quinten's Story

which, as an experiment, she didn't – and she didn't belong with Maz, her adopted father, where *did* she belong? And how could he even say such a thing? She had sat at his feet for two years, drinking in every drop of knowledge he cared to share with her. Was he abandoning her now?

"You are part human," he told her. "Their impulsive blood is yours. Their impatience. Their simplicity."

"Maz, I—"

"Let me discharge my debt to your human. Then we'll talk again."

Unsettled, Saff nonetheless shot a quick call down to Quinten's cabin.

"We're here," he replied, his voice terse. "How long is this going to take?"

"I don't know. Perhaps three hours." That was nothing but a wild guess.

A heavy sigh echoed down the line. "All right. We'll sit tight." Pause. "Call me if you need any help." Then he clicked off.

"I need to see space," Maz told her.

"Normal parameters? Other filtering?"

"No. No monitoring. No filtering. Just space."

Saff accessed the panel on a little-used part of her console. The large viewscreen that normally dominated the cockpit slid up and out of the way and, with a juddering start, two panels moved away from each other, exposing...black.

Maz squinted as he scanned the area, his head moving

Quinten's Story

methodically from one part of the window to the next.

"There," he said, pointing to an area in the upper-right quadrant. "Can you see it?"

Saff followed the direction of his hand. The black was all encompassing, sucking every bit of illumination. She couldn't see - no, wait!

"A flicker," she said quietly. "I saw a flicker."

"A flicker to you, who sees with a child's eyes. To me, it is a gushing fountain. Our way in."

Maz directed her to the exact coordinates and, as she manoeuvred, Saff swore she could see a few more features coalesce out of the abyss.

"Let's enter before our pursuers catch us," he directed her.

The *Perdition* took off smoothly, accelerating as it hit the crease. And was swallowed.



Hyperspace was beautiful, a dazzling symphony of energy and light that beckoned and yet warned with its terrible power and magnificence. With Maz commenting on its characteristics, Saff began to appreciate both its complexity and utility.

"We have always believed that the realm called 'hyperspace' is a universe compressed between its neighbours. As part of the compressive forces, conduits have opened between it and our own plane."

Quinten's Story

"The creases."

"Yes. A gift from the Creator to help us understand the complexity of all creation, providing a means of travel within our universe."

Saff gazed out on the vividly clashing colours and patterns, spinning by almost too fast for comprehension. It was like being engulfed within the genesis of a tremendous lightning storm that was itself being swallowed by a cyclone.

"You will also notice small irregularities." Maz pointed them out where he could, areas that Saff's brain interpreted as tiny areas of grey amid the electric flashes.

"Sometimes the irregularities disappear. Other times, they grow. And swallow ships. This is the reason why the humans are losing their vessels."

"What are they? How are they formed?"

"Only the Creator knows that. Classical Transitional science has its theories of course. Perhaps another universe is pressing on this one at that point. Maybe these are the birth-pangs of another plane of existence. Maybe the passage is collapsing through overuse or exhaustion. We have always been mindful when using the passages the Creator gave us, recognising it as a gift and nothing more, but the humans have no such respect. They exploit such bounty with faithlessness, and this is the inevitable punishment."

"It is difficult to be mindful of something they are ignorant of," Saff countered slowly. Had Maz always been so implacable in his beliefs? It had not seemed that way when he'd first taken her on as a student.

"And why are they ignorant? Did they choose to come to us, to ask to share our knowledge? Or did they begin to massacre us the moment they recognised our

Quinten's Story

difference?"

"Not all humans are like that."

He turned his head and looked at her and Saff felt as if he was peering into the very essence of her.

"No. I know you believe this. And, for your sake, daughter, I hope it remains true."

They made the rest of the journey in silence, Maz only calling out small course corrections when occasion demanded. They coasted past one small oval of grey, skirting it neatly, and continued on their way.

"We're approaching the termination," he finally remarked, after seventy minutes of gazing upon one of the most glorious panoramas Saff had seen in her life. There had been no pursuit down the crease. "I suggest you begin braking now."

"How long till we reach the crease's mouth?"

"Begin braking first. I will tell you as we near the point."

Saff knew her own perception of normal space wasn't as finely tuned as her mentor's but she thought she could see where the crease ended, an increasing dilation of dark amid the overwhelming colours of the current universe.

"Slower now," he warned. "We are close, and I can see swirls of energy waiting for us beyond the portal."

The black hole.

The *Perdition* eased reluctantly out of the crease, perched precariously on its lip, then began backing

Quinten's Story

away.

Twice, it was grabbed by the insatiable maw of a collapsed star – and Saff saw racing mists of yellow and red flash into existence before disappearing again – but, each time, the shears that Toy Cenredi had installed to deflect Space Fleet tractors instead deflected solar energies and moved the ship further out of danger.

After forty minutes, Maz stepped back and directed Saff to close the panels and bring the viewscreen down again.

“I have discharged my debt,” he told her, “and the debt of all who decided to follow you. We now request that you let us go on our way to seek sanctuary once more.”



“Are you sure you want to be let off here?”

Even through the breathing apparatus he wore, the disbelief in Quinten's voice was clear.

Saff looked around. She could understand his concern. The place that the rescued Transitionals had chosen as their drop-off point was a habitable moon circling a gas giant in a quiet part of the Kiarandow sector. Of course Quinten couldn't see it – he hadn't even met Saff during her two years with Maz – but the similarities to the moon where they had been captured were obvious. There was the lesser gravity, the atmosphere that was borderline compatible with humans, the long nights when the moon was hidden from the system's sun by the large giant planet it encircled in a lazy, parabolic

Quinten's Story

orbit.

"You will not tell anyone where you have left us." Maz crafted it as a statement.

"I think it would be doing you a favour if I did," Quinten remarked with a dry voice, "but no, your secret's safe with me. I owe you for what you did at Rannler. How you're going to get *off* this rock, however, is another matter."

"That is not your concern."

Quinten nodded in agreement.

This was it. The time to say farewell. Saff felt she and Maz had barely enough time to get reacquainted before they were being torn apart again.

Quinten gestured to her. "If you.... Your people are here.... If you feel the need...."

Suddenly, she didn't want to hear his stumbling *alien* phrases. She spun and followed Maz, tracking in his wake as he walked towards where the other escapees were waiting, small caches of *Perdition*-supplied provisions and materiel at their feet.

"You have something to say?" Maz asked her, when they were both out of earshot of the human. A quick glance back showed Saff that Quinten was watching them, his mouth set in a grim, straight line. Whatever answer Saff gave him regarding her future, she knew she would have to deliver it to his face.

"Will you stay here?" Saff asked. It wasn't what she wanted to say, but it was what emerged from her mouth.

"Can Quinten Tamlan be trusted?"

Her answer was instant. "Yes."

Quinten's Story

"Then we'll stay, for a time. But what about you?" Maz regarded her steadily. "I have been meditating on our recent conversations. Although you have heated human blood pounding through your veins, there is still a chance to teach you how to tame their impulses. Join us and we'll continue where we were interrupted, but I shall teach with more sensitivity for your...unique situation."

"Quinten offered you the opportunity to join us on his ship, be one of the crew." She thought that part of the offer was based on Maz's remark that there were many more creases in the galaxy than humans realised. That was exactly the kind of revelation that would spark Quinten's curiosity.

"You could continue your teaching on the *Perdition*," she prompted.

"And be a pawn to humans? That is not my way."

Saff hesitated. Her gaze swept over the small group of escapees, the supplies Quinten had given them, then beyond to the foreshortened horizon. "What if it's *my* way?" she finally asked.

Maz didn't shift his gaze. "You must decide your own path."

"The way you were able to detect creases," Saff persisted, "see them in hyperspace—"

"I will not be used as a tool to help humans." His voice softened. "But I will tell you that this may be something you can learn yourself, despite your heritage. You just need to open yourself up to the Creator."

"You are abandoning me then," she accused, a sob in her voice.

Quinten's Story

"Daughter, it's more like you're abandoning *us*."

There was nothing more to say after that. Maz gave her a blessing, pronouncing her name in Transitional fashion, moving parts of his body into shapes that represented her life's journey so far, before melting back into his original form. He didn't say anything else but Saff knew he didn't have to.

When she turned and walked away, hot human tears were streaming down her face.



Quinten was out of his depth, and he knew it. Their spectacular escape from Rannler had been followed by seven monotonous days of having the Transitionals underfoot while they plotted a course to a destination that Maz considered safe, the gas giant moon where he currently stood. In the meantime, it had been seven days of having their large dark eyes following every movement he made. It got to the point that he spent more and more time in his quarters, away from the disconcerting directness of their regard.

"It's like being a specimen under a fucking microscope," Toy had complained during their one communal mealtime each day.

With the exception of that brief daily face-to-face interaction, the young engineer had also decided that retreat was the better path to sanity, decamping to live almost entirely among the thruster units. Quinten didn't blame him. As for Saff, neither of the humans had shared a meal with her since Maz and the band of

Quinten's Story

Rannler escapees stepped aboard.

Quinten didn't need to hear Saff's stories to know that the Transitionals were an ancient race. He could tell by observing the way they communicated, the depth of their silences. It was unnerving.

And Saff was one of them.

Quinten didn't want to lose his contrary, opaque, alien second-in-command, but what could he offer her that was better than the intimacy of a species to which she belonged? He appreciated her logical mind and her sly wit, but that was only thinking of his own needs. What about hers?

When he saw her walk back to him across the wet chill of the small moon, his heart sank into his boots.

She was crying. He had enough experience to know that that meant only one thing. He gritted his teeth and clenched the fists at his sides.

"My father and I had a discussion," she told him. Her voice wavered only slightly and she met his questioning gaze fully.

Here it comes, he thought.

"If you still require crew on the *Perdition*, I would be happy to remain one of that number."

"Saff, I just want to say that it's been an honour—what?"

"I am ready to leave any time you are, Quinten Tamlan."

He looked over her head, at the small group of Transitionals who watched him, Maz at the forefront.

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"Just like that?" he asked, puzzled.

The tears continued running down her cheeks. "No."

He waited but she didn't seem inclined to say anything else.

"There's nothing else you want to tell them before we go?" he prompted.

She wiped the wetness from her face. "No."

He turned and with steps that began hesitantly, but that built in speed and energy as they progressed, they walked back to the shuttle.

"I'm glad you decided to stay."

Saff said nothing, staring straight ahead.

"I need all the help with Cenredi that I can get," Quinten continued, shooting her a sideways glance.

"We all need guidance," was all she'd say.

"And we've still got to thank Vigo for helping us out. Knowing her, she'll end up flying free with both our bounties as well." Quinten paused. "You didn't hit her too hard back at Rannler, did you?"

"Not hard enough to hurt her," Saff replied, "but hard enough for her to remember."

She fell into silence once they reached the shuttle, strapped themselves in and shot back to the *Perdition*. Then, as if some kind of weight had been lifted from her shoulders, Saff turned to him, her old cocky self once more, her voice that irritating mixture of inquiry and alien smugness. "What next, Quinten Tamlan?"

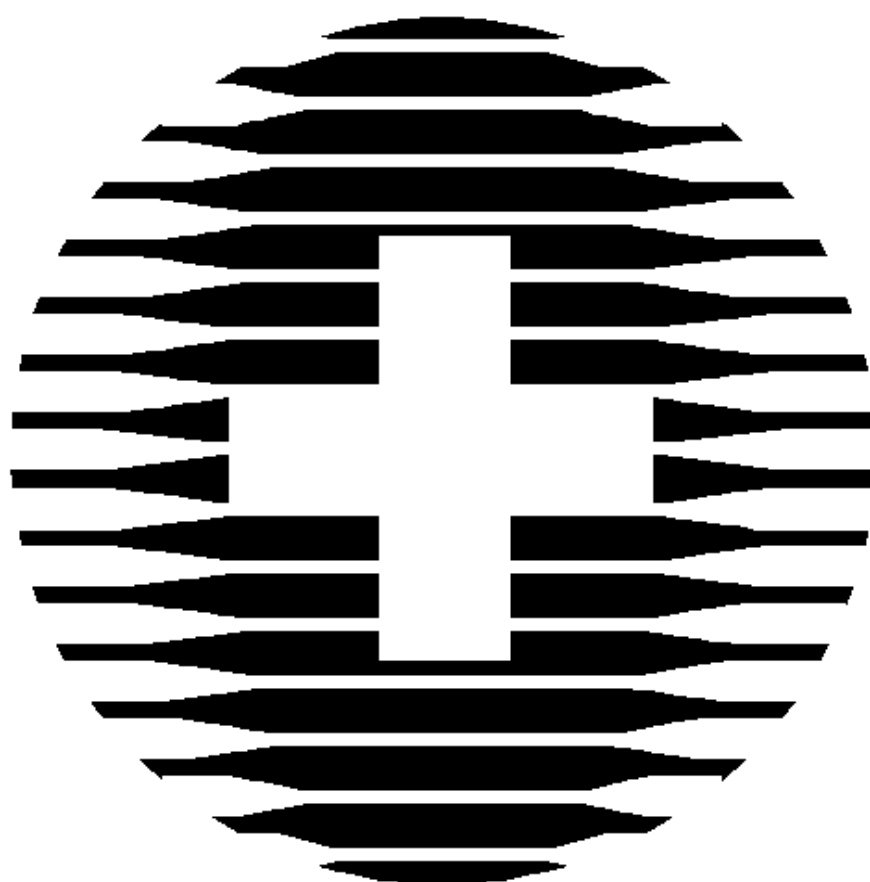
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Quinten made it appear that he was thinking hard on the question, but he had figured it out days ago.

"Remember that pirate I told you about once? Faks Somen of the Mitres Raygun cartel?" An evil grin slashed across his face. "I want the bastard's head on a plate."

He looked at her. "Will you help me?"

The slightest of smiles danced across her lips. "Of course."



Special Counsel Deusin Plam adjudicating. Case against journalist Coal Oztoco. Excerpt:

PROSECUTOR: In closing then, Coal Oztoco, didn't you release a report on shapeshifters as the second in your news series, entitled, "What's wrong with the Republic?"?

OZTOCO: Er, yes, I did.

PROSECUTOR: Special Counsel Plam, we have an excerpt from that report. May I play it?

SPECIAL COUNSEL PLAM: At your convenience.

[Video plays]

The species the Republic knows as shapeshifters prefer to call themselves Transitionals. They believe that changing, or transitioning, from one form to another, makes them appreciate the diverse universal design of the Creator, and that the more such experiences a Transitional accumulates during its long life, the closer they get to understanding the Creator's intent.

Until two centuries ago, knowledge of Transitionals was mostly limited to essays and papers in the fields of xeno-biology, -engineering and -sociology, and that information was dry but nonetheless informative. We know from those studies, for example, that Transitionals can't turn themselves into anything of significantly greater or smaller mass, and that the limitations of their biology mean that they can best – though not always – imitate forms with a similar bipedal structure. We also learnt that, in some respects, their technological prowess

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exceeded our own.

With their small population, metaphysical outlook and advanced technical knowledge, Transitionals seemed doomed to be the oddities of the galaxy, perhaps finding a place in the galaxy as skilled engineers, but not much more. However, two centuries ago, everything changed, as more items appeared on the mainstream nets. The tone was shocking, titillating and spread like wildfire throughout Republic space. The species we originally recognised as Transitionals were renamed "shapeshifters" and, along with their name change, strange new accusations were bandied about.

Shapeshifters were part of a conspiracy to bring down humanity, they considered life-forms incapable of changing shape to be inferior, they were a danger to the peace and security of the Republic, they were infiltrating key installations in order to sow chaos. Less than fifteen years after the start of reports such as these, the criminalisation and systematic slaughter of Transitionals began.

Now, two hundred years later, what few Transitionals are left live in small, huddled communities in remote parts of the galaxy, hidden from the view of humans. When found, they are usually exterminated like vermin. Sometimes, a more merciful Republic Space Fleet captain may send one or two of them to the Republic's prison planet of Bliss, but that is a rare event.

[Video ends]

Coal Oztoco, is that you we have just seen in the vid?

OZTOCO: You know it is.

PROSECUTOR: Your vid goes on, does it not, to interview two *shapeshifters*, even though it is against the law to do so?

OZTOCO: Everyone sitting here must concede that

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there are *at least* two sides to every story. The concept we bandy about in our history about a singular narrative is nothing but a myth. While children may swallow such lies, I'm sure that the Special Counsel and everyone present at this hearing are aware of the deeper truth?

PROSECUTOR: Not when one side – the side that is against the Republic – is known to be lying.

OZTOCO: And how do we know this if we never talk to them?

PROSECUTOR: So you would countenance opening dialogue with a sworn enemy of our government?

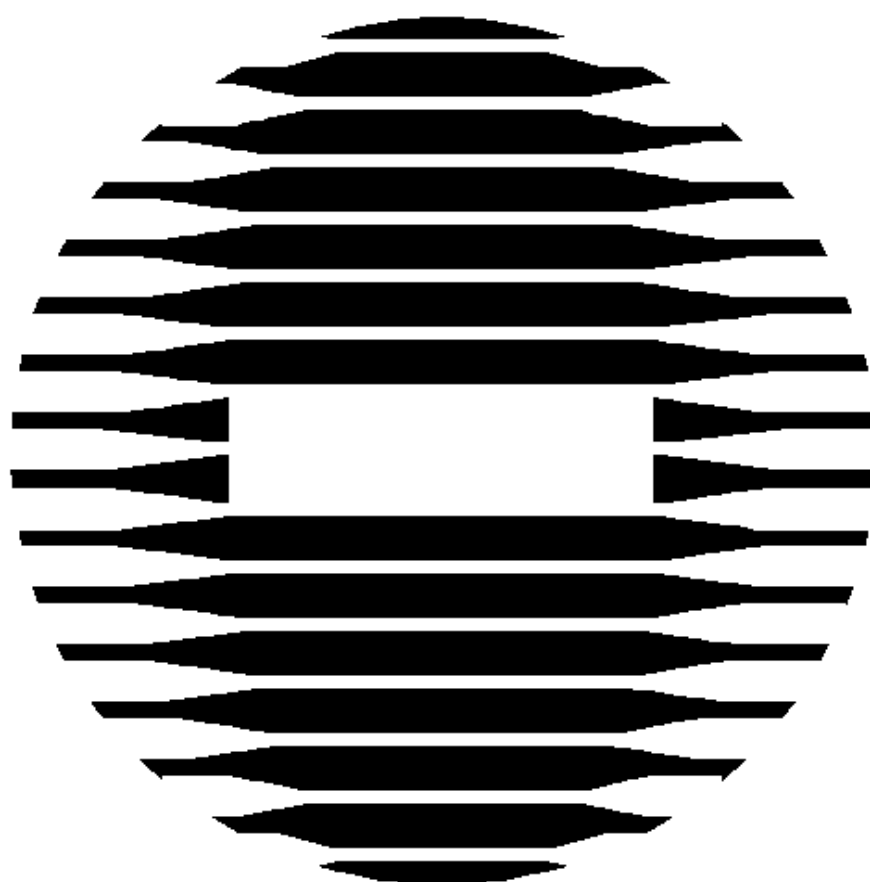
OZTOCO: If it means a better understanding of both sides of the conflict, then yes.

PROSECUTOR: And you don't regret either speaking with those shapeshifters or televising your subversive news series?

OZTOCO: I don't see anything subversive in trying to get at the truth!

PROSECUTOR: Special Counsel, I could continue, but I think we've reached the point where anything more I could say would only delay the inevitable. Coal Oztoco is condemned by the vids communicated and the words spoken at this hearing, in your very presence.

SPECIAL COUNSEL PLAM: I fear you are right, Case Prosecutor. Coal Oztoco, I have no choice but to find you guilty of treason against the Republic. Before I go on to make a formal statement, itemising each and every one of your crimes, I will tell you that the largest shapeshifter population in the Republic exists on the prison planet of Bliss. Rest assured you'll have a lifetime of extracting sympathy from the likes of them.



I think the question most technically-leaning people will have on their minds is the scene where Quinten survives the vacuum on Gilgan for a stagger of twenty metres before Venkat rescues him. We all know that vacuum is the almost total absence of matter and so we assume that, the moment we're exposed to it, we'll burst like over-ripe pumpkins. In fact, this is not the case.

You can survive in a vacuum. The amount of time depends on several factors, none of which anyone seems to categorically agree upon, but risks include asphyxiation, freezing and decompression. The general consensus, backed up by NASA's *Bioastronautics Data Book*, is that you can survive in a vacuum as long as you're only exposed for ninety seconds or less. And Quinten did exactly the right thing by **exhaling** when he exited onto Gilgan's surface because holding in breath accelerates explosive decompression. All in all, I estimated it took him no more than thirty seconds to stagger to the *Cloud Skimmer* and into Venkat's arms. Ideally, he should have lost consciousness halfway to the ship but the human body is capable of extraordinary feats under extreme circumstances and I'm sure even an injured Quinten would have been up to the task. □

So bear that in mind. If you're ever abducted by aliens and find a way of escaping by throwing yourself into their equivalent of a garbage chute, you'll survive longer if you're fit, you exhale...and you have a rescue ship less than a minute and a half behind you.

Kaz Augustin

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