

PERDITION



QUINTEN TAMLAN #1
KS AUGUSTIN



Series: Quinten Tamlan #1

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 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.



2016 update: This book, previous titled QUINTEN'S STORY, has been re-edited for this edition. Additionally, a compact list of people, places and things is included.



Perdition

(Quinten Tamlan #1)

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People

Quinten Tamlan / Kiel Souiad / Ifola Breit / Setino Shaw / Mestoo / Faks Somen / Venkat Digby / Caff / Maz / Khinyer / Konsectoh / Saff / Ehul / Radim Somen / Slim / Delee / Pal Elson / Aren Flim / Toy Cenredi / Datin Stead / Deusin Plam / Coal Oztoco

Places

Port Tertiary / Bliss / Gilgan / Tor Prime / Chimpect sector / Fodox Stellar Barrens / D'Cisnam sector / Vivox Two Alpha / Peirce / Tercom Seven / Rannler / Celex sector / Tungsten Enclave / Wong-Li Three / Morhea sector / Tor Delta / Bankow Shipyards / Ornnai sector / Mantial sector / Shoalter sector / Raven's Ledge / Pianvogue sector / Lotus Drift / Sendakcho sector / Ferncoal Five / Jaguar Four / Panolin sector / Kiarandow sector

Things

bitcrypt spiders / Neon Red cartel / Perdition / Space Fleet / rejuv-gel / Steel Dot Two / Steel Major God's Harness / Redoubt / black-ray / Drifts / Corsair-Three / Sub / ingel / Mitres Raygun cartel / 59 Silvereye / nano bubble chips / ST Alliance / data-capacitor / Euphrates Flow / Vigo Halan / maize-beer / DePaul propulsion / Mark Three Viper / frent / Tick class recce-striker / Cloud Skimmer / nu-vodka / skeeve / sifter-bot / Tatfer caper / Transitional / Cumulus / The Lucky Strike / AA F5 Engineering Systems / jag / drak / EM baffler / blinder software / Civian berry

Chapter One

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 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 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 only ever invited, guest.

As part of his renovations, he had cut through bulkheads, forming two long thoroughfares 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 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 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 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 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 further 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.

“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 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 in 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 loathe 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 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 two 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 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."

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 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 had 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.

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 can I help you gentlemen?”

“We’re here to sell something.”

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 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. “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 we captured her, me and Breit got together. We thought of you and how useful she could be to you.”

“Useful? How?”

Type B humanoids. They had all the features of humans 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 said, “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 said, “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?”

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.”

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 said. “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.

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

“Not like what you got.”

“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. “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.

“Finetuned, 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 said 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. 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 said. "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 held 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 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 said, 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. That’s my offer. Take it or leave it.”

“Damn you, Tamlan.”

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

Two

“**S**he 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.

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 said 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 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 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 Breit's careless comment...

"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 said, leading 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." 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 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 at him down, making 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 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 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, empty stretch of space – absent of more than a handful of hyperspace creases – that the Republic could lose half its fleet traversing that region of space and still not have any success tracking down its enemies.

"They should have united decades ago," he muttered, "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 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 their 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 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 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 said. The 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. "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 said. "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.

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 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.”

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?” she asked suddenly.

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 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 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.”

Minus Three

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 it 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 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 very 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, 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 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 said 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 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 said.

“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 enrollment 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 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." 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 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. His friend often asked him to get short 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. 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."

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.”

“Yes,” he admitted, settling back in his seat. “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. “Within reason.”

His lips quirked but his mind was made up. He rose again. “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 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, "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. 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."

"Money isn't everything," she said, 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 picked up on that one word. "What do you think 'everything' is?"

"'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?"

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 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.

"We could make it shorter." The mischief in her voice was obvious. "One month, or—"

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

Three

It was 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 scanned 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 check the work he'd assign her on the sensors and lighting systems, but he would haul 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 market 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 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 said to himself, limping over to where his exoskeleton was stored. With practiced hands, 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 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.

Breit'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.

"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. 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 his bowl 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.”

“How do you know?”

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

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

Four

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.

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 from hitting his face with an upturned elbow.

"What is it?" His voice was little more than a snarl.

"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.

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

“I am used to the name ‘Caff’,” she said. “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 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 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, Quentin's face cracked an uncharacteristic grin. He punched the comms.

"Begin peer-to-peer docking protocols," he said. "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 matched 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 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 severely short 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 said, 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 in an eyeblink. Before the doors had even finished their action, a newly-arrived Caff was the focus of a pair of deadly weapons. Quinten turned back to Vigo. Slowly.

"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. 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."

Five

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 to 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. Yet 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.

Using her best I'm-nothing-but-a-socially-maladjusted-Sub look, she 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 for me to comment on the Republic’s policy decisions,” she said, “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?”

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 has 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?”

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 said. “How is it possible for you to equate the destruction the Republic has wreaked, which you admit to yourself, to the actions of a small community of aliens?”

“I notice you’re not denying their crimes, though.” Halan’s smile was vicious.

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."

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

"I don't know. 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 shore leave."

Quinten pursed his lips, obviously taken by another thought.

"Ten kilo-credits," he said. "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."

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

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, he supposed. It was a completely emotional response.

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* into 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 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 yeled 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 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 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.

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