

~ Official Document ~

Centax Security - Planet of Centax

CenSec Record #5A69312-B

Subject: Training Acceleration for Trainee X941 – Xander Saros

It is the recommendation of the Centax Security Enhancement Team that the training for security trainee X941, Xander Saros, be accelerated.

The trainee shows physical and mental abilities that far outstrip all security trainees—past and current. His ability to absorb bio-mechanical enhancements has never before been seen.

The trainee is of a much younger age than our protocol for accelerated enhancement allows, and at risk of emotional deadening, but the Enhancement Team believes the reward far outweighs the risks. We recommend he be removed from his family unit into the care of Security. He will truly be the crowning glory of the CenSec program. We cannot allow *anything* to jeopardize his training and abilities.

Chapter One

She loved the smell of starship fuel.

Malin Phoenix grinned to herself and hitched up the well-worn tool belt around her waist. She took another deep breath, breathed in the fuel and the scent of metal and engine grease. *Mmm*. What more could a girl want?

She also loved the salvage yard at Haxx. The capital city of the planet of Centax had *such* good stuff. She spun slowly, eyeing the hulks of retired starships, the engines of smashed planetary transports and...a few wrecks even she couldn't identify.

Ooh. She spotted an intact Centaxian Infiltrator. She crouched and ran a hand over the side of its dark, obsidian hull. It only seated one pilot and was made to go in fast and stealthy. Centax was renowned throughout the galaxy for designing some of the best tech—starships, computer systems, armor and biological enhancements. The Infiltrator was a beauty and she wanted it.

Mal stood and swiped her hands on her coveralls—only to remember she wasn't wearing her coveralls since she wasn't at home in her salvage yard on Khan. She stared at the grease stain on her tan cargo pants. *Oopsie*. With a shrug, she grabbed her personal Sync communicator off her belt. She had a buyer who'd pay top e-cred for the Infiltrator's shield system. She tapped the screen, adding the Infiltrator to her list.

Her long list.

Stars, she loved going on salvage trips. She smiled again. Okay, she also loved being at home in her starship graveyard, stripping parts, tinkering with engines, and arguing with her cousins. But her father had put a love of wandering in her blood. A pang hit under her ribs. It had been four years since he'd died and she still missed him so much. But she also knew he'd be thrilled she'd found a home with her rough-and-tumble, treasure-hunter cousins.

She pictured them now. Her oldest cousin, Niklas would be in his study, hunched over a console studying some sort of ancient historical record. He had astro-archeology running through his blood. Her cousin Dathan and his wife, Eos would be either arguing or locked in their bedroom. And the youngest of the Phoenix brothers, Zayn, was off-world, spending his honeymoon with his bride, Ria, amongst the waves of the beach resort world of Duna.

Mal rubbed a hand between her breasts. A year ago she'd never have guessed that two of her macho cousins would be married. And so in love.

She sighed. Damn it, she envied them. She was so happy for them but—she glanced around the salvage yard, at the silent hulks of ships and engines—it underscored her own aloneness.

“Phoenix.”

The gruff voice made her turn. The salvage yard superintendent, Traxan, was stomping toward her with his young offsider, whose name she'd forgotten.

With a shake of her head, Mal threw off her melancholy. Centaxians were a tall race with dark hair and skin, thanks to the close proximity to their sun. Their skin tone ran the spectrum from Traxan's space-dark ebony to his offsider's deep bronze.

But what interested her most were the circular metal implants visible on both men's necks. The Centaxians intrigued her as much as the scrap around her. Centax was a cyborg planet. Man

and machine, implants and enhancements to increase strength, speed, brain function and who knew what else. Centaxians had made enhancements a way of life.

“You finished deciding what you want?” Traxan growled.

If Traxan were a starship, he’d be a battered starfreighter. An older model. Bulky-looking, full of quirks, but always reliable.

“Yep, Trax.” She held up the Sync. “Got the list here. Hey, how’s Xalla and your son?”

Traxan’s plain face softened for a second. “Pax was accepted into the Xeon Academy here in Haxx. Starship design. Xalla’s proud as a Deltan hen. He’s also just received his first enhancement.”

Malin knew enhancements were a source of pride here. Most kids got their first around sixteen. “Congratulations.”

Trax took the Sync from her and handed it to the younger man without looking at it. “Laxon, get what Ms. Malin wants loaded onto her ship. And make it quick.”

Malin watched the younger man’s face. It was far less expressive than Traxan’s. But Laxon had far more implants and—if she wasn’t mistaken from his gait—mechanical legs. She’d heard that the more enhancements Centaxians had, the less they felt. That all that tech dampened their emotions.

Mal shivered at the horrible thought. Maybe once or twice in her life she’d wished for the ability to not feel, to numb the pain and hurt. She’d had her heart trampled on more times than she liked to admit—but she knew she’d never permanently give up feeling for anything. Without the lows, you couldn’t experience the highs life had to offer.

She focused back on Laxon. If he were a ship, he'd be a newer-model freighter. No quirks for him. Touch the control and he'd do exactly what was asked. As if to prove her right, Laxon spun without a word and went to do his boss's bidding.

"Trax, as always, it's a pleasure doing business with you. I'll transfer the e-creds into your account and—" she wagged her eyebrows "—have your man offload that sweet Argylean scoutship you wanted."

Traxan's lips quirked. "You do know how to tempt a man, Ms. Malin."

If only that were true. Her stomach turned sour. How long had it been since she'd dated, let alone had a good, sweaty session between the sheets? She had zero ability to tempt a man. Aston 'son of a bitch' Granger certainly wouldn't agree with Traxan. The charming, cheating salvage dealer had been only too happy to cheat on her and then dump her. She'd thought he'd loved her.

Boy, had she been wrong.

And before Aston, it had been Ben and before him, Tarr. All of them had taken great pleasure in showing her just how easy it was to walk away from her.

Mal squashed her thoughts. Hard and ruthlessly. She wasn't going to give Aston, or the others, another wasted thought.

But Aston's words echoed in her head. *A man doesn't want a woman with grease under her nails, Malin. No one likes a woman who smells like starship fuel and whose wardrobe is filled with coveralls.*

I don't feel anything for you, Malin.

Snotty bastard. She straightened. *Better off without them, Mal.* She managed another smile for Trax, but inside she wondered if she'd ever find a love like her parents had shared. Her father

had pined for his dead wife until the day he died. Just once, Malin wanted to be the center of someone's universe.

"Trax, I—"

An explosion in the distance had them both spinning. Mal saw a huge, mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke rising above the central part of Haxx.

Her pulse tripped. "What in stars' name—?"

Trax was frowning. "An accident, maybe."

Haxx was a beautiful city. Graceful towers of glass and metal speared into the sky, wide at their bases and tapering to elegant points high above the ground. In between were the lower academy buildings where the planet's designers worked and trained their apprentices. The academies were sprawling structures of gleaming white, with rounded metallic domes.

There was a roar as a formation of black Infiltrators screamed overhead.

"Ms. Malin, something is very wrong. I think you should get back to your ship—"

Another explosion. Not very far away.

The ground beneath them shook and Malin grabbed onto the ruined ship beside her to stay on her feet.

Laser fire sounded. Really close.

Inside the salvage yard.

"Go!" Trax yelled as he sprinted toward the sounds of fighting.

Crap. Mal spun and raced back toward the small landing pad beside the salvage yard where her baby—a Norian starfreighter she'd named the *Firebird*—was waiting. She ducked around the wrecks and engines, running as fast as she could.

She was in good shape—she yanked parts off ships, swung tools and lifted heavy things every day—but she heard the distinctive sound of laser fire getting closer, accompanied by deep shouts of multiple men in a guttural language her lingual implant didn't recognize.

She stopped and pressed her back against the rusting hull of a ship that had obviously been in the yard longer than she'd been alive. Air sawed in and out of her lungs. What the hell was going on? Centax was an orderly planet and they had Centax Security.

No one messed with CenSecs.

Everyone in the galaxy had heard of the deadly, emotionless CenSecs—heavily enhanced cyborgs, they were said to be faster, stronger and more intelligent. The ultimate fighters. Nobody was crazy enough to go up against CenSecs.

Sudden silence. Okay, the laser fire had stopped. *Time to get out of here.*

She took one step and then was jerked backward.

Strong, black-clad arms wrapped around her and she was yanked back against a hard body.

Mal went wild. A childhood spent traveling the galaxy with her father as he collected scrap meant her dad had taught her to protect herself. She shoved an elbow back, which met with a rock-hard abdomen. She dropped her weight, twisting as she did, trying to break his hold.

His arms were unyielding. He was strong. Too strong.

“Be still.”

A quiet, lethal whisper that raised the hairs on her arms. She opened her mouth to scream.

A gloved hand slammed over her mouth. She twisted and struggled, but he dragged her back, inside the hulk of the rusted ship. He pulled her down, his big body surrounding hers to hold her in place. He felt hot, far hotter than a regular man.

With his other hand, he pointed out into the scrapyards.

When she saw what he pointed at, she stopped moving.

A huge man, a fricking giant, stalked into view.

He was at least six foot eight, with shoulders as wide as a planet and legs like starship landing struts. His skin was mottled with dark stripes that made her think of the pelts of the hunting cats on Panthon Prime. His head was bald and when he lifted his face, she saw strong features and...*stars*, fangs.

And he was...sniffing?

The man behind her loosened his grip on her mouth. "Stay silent." A near-soundless murmur against her ear.

The warmth of his breath made her shiver. His other hand rested near her hip, two fingers touching her hip bone. A touch that seared through her. She wasn't sure if he was ordering her or asking her, but when she nodded, he moved his hand away.

Suddenly, the giant stiffened and let out a sound caught between a yell and a roar. Then he looked right at their hiding spot.

The man behind Mal went unearthly still. Her heart thundered in her chest. They were going to die.

Then the man brushed past her and launched himself at the giant. A lean, black bullet moving so fast he was a blur.

Mal gasped, helpless to do anything but watch the deadly fight in front of her.

The man hit the giant with the force of a falling meteor. He was tall, but not as tall as the giant, and far leaner. There was no way he could match the enormous beast-man. Heart lodged in her throat, she glanced around, trying to find an escape route.

A roar from the giant made Mal jerk. The beast-man was going down, the man in black moving, somersaulting over the giant and landing back on his feet.

He straightened and Mal finally got a good look at him.

Holy Stars. He was probably six foot three with wide shoulders narrowing to lean hips, all encased in a space-black uniform. On one shoulder was a silver insignia of a mechanical cog. The circular silver implant set in his temple told her he was Centaxian.

But that face...he was gorgeous with sharp, lean features set off by short black hair and dark-bronze skin that gleamed in the sunlight.

All his focus was on the giant pulling himself to his feet, shaking his head. The Centaxian flexed his gloved hands but was otherwise still.

The giant lowered his head and charged. The Centaxian didn't react.

"Move, damn you," Mal muttered, clenching her hands together.

At the last second, the man sidestepped and the giant raced past. Then the Centaxian turned and the fight started for real.

He was methodical. Kicks and hits landed with precision and all of them hard and unforgiving. The giant staggered, never finding his balance and never once getting a direct hit on the man. Another enraged roar filled the air before the giant charged again.

This time in her direction.

Mal held her breath. *Stars save her.* The giant slammed into the hull of the starship, setting it rocking. Dust and shards of metal rained down on her, but she forced her quivering body to stay where it was. Even though she wanted to run. *Really* wanted to run.

Dazed, the giant shook his head. If he looked up, he'd see her.

Beyond her attacker, the Centaxian leaped into the air, higher than any normal man should be able to. He slammed down on the giant's back.

He looked directly at her and their gazes locked.

His eyes were concentric bands of emerald green and burnished gold. Like nothing she'd ever seen before. Long, dark lashes ringed those amazing eyes.

But his beautiful face was blank. Empty of everything. No emotion. Nothing.

Frighteningly emotionless.

He pressed a palm down on the giant's neck and then the green in the Centaxian's eyes lit up and turned neon. Like the lights on a cockpit control console.

She felt a rush of power fill the air. The giant convulsed, his back arching, a groan of pain ripping from his throat.

The Centaxian landed back on his feet, bending his knees slightly to absorb the impact. He stared at the giant without any expression. The giant collapsed and didn't move.

Then the Centaxian turned and headed in Mal's direction.

She stayed crouched where she was, panic threatening. Why the hell did she feel more frightened now? The Centaxian had saved her.

But he'd just taken out a giant warrior without even breaking a sweat or showing a single emotion on his aristocratic face.

Whatever enhancements he had, it was more than just that deceptively simple silver disc at his temple.

Mal watched him come, barely realizing she'd pulled her multi-tool off her belt and flicked on the laser cutter. Her fingers clenched around it.

The man stopped nearby. "Come out."

His voice was even, calm, not giving anything away. She watched him for a second and realized his eyes were back to normal, the eerie green glow was gone.

Mal ducked out of the wreck and stood. She saw the man's gaze move to the laser cutter, then come back to her face.

She drew in a deep breath. "Thank you. Uh...I'm—"

"Malin Phoenix."

Oh. "You know who I am."

"Yes."

Chatty guy. "You ever speak more than two words?"

"Yes."

Mal waited but he didn't say anything else. *Right.* "I was here—"

"You have a salvage license for Centax."

She saw his eyes flicker, realized he was accessing those records at that very moment.

Amazing. "You have me at a disadvantage. I have no idea who you are."

"Centax Security."

A CenSec. A shiver snaked through her. She'd already guessed as much but had secretly hoped it wasn't true.

No one wanted to run into the galaxy's deadliest killers. "Do you have a name?"

A pause. "Yes."

She waited, suppressed the frustration bubbling in her chest. "Are you going to tell me?"

"Xander Saros."

Xander. Yep, it suited him. He looked like a Xander. "What the hell is going on?"

"A coup."

“A coup?” Shock was a punch to her stomach. “Who the hell would try and take over Centax?” And take on this scary cyborg and the other CenSecs like him?

“No time for explanations. More like him—” a nod at the dead giant “—will be on their way.”

“Right.” She didn’t want to face anymore giants.

“Starfreighter.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Starfreighter. You have one.”

“Yes—”

“I need it.” He wrapped a hand around her bicep and started pulling her toward the landing pads.

“Now hang on! I plan on getting off-planet. Right now.”

“As do I.”

Stars. She was practically jogging to keep up with him. She tried to pull her arm away, but wasn’t surprised she couldn’t budge a single centimeter. “Look, I’d like to help...but don’t you have an entire security force? And far better starships than my freighter?”

Her question hung in the air, unanswered, as another giant stepped into their path from behind another junker.

A nasty grin spread over the giant’s rugged face. He lifted a small pistol that glowed blue along the barrel.

Xander froze for a second. Then he shoved her behind him, so hard she stumbled.

There was a whine of an energy weapon.

Mal saw blue electricity race over Xander Saros's body. He didn't collapse but he dropped heavily to his knees, his arms hanging by his sides.

In front of him, the giant's gaze fixed on Malin, his grin widening, baring his fangs.

The breath left her lungs in a rush.

Oh, shit.