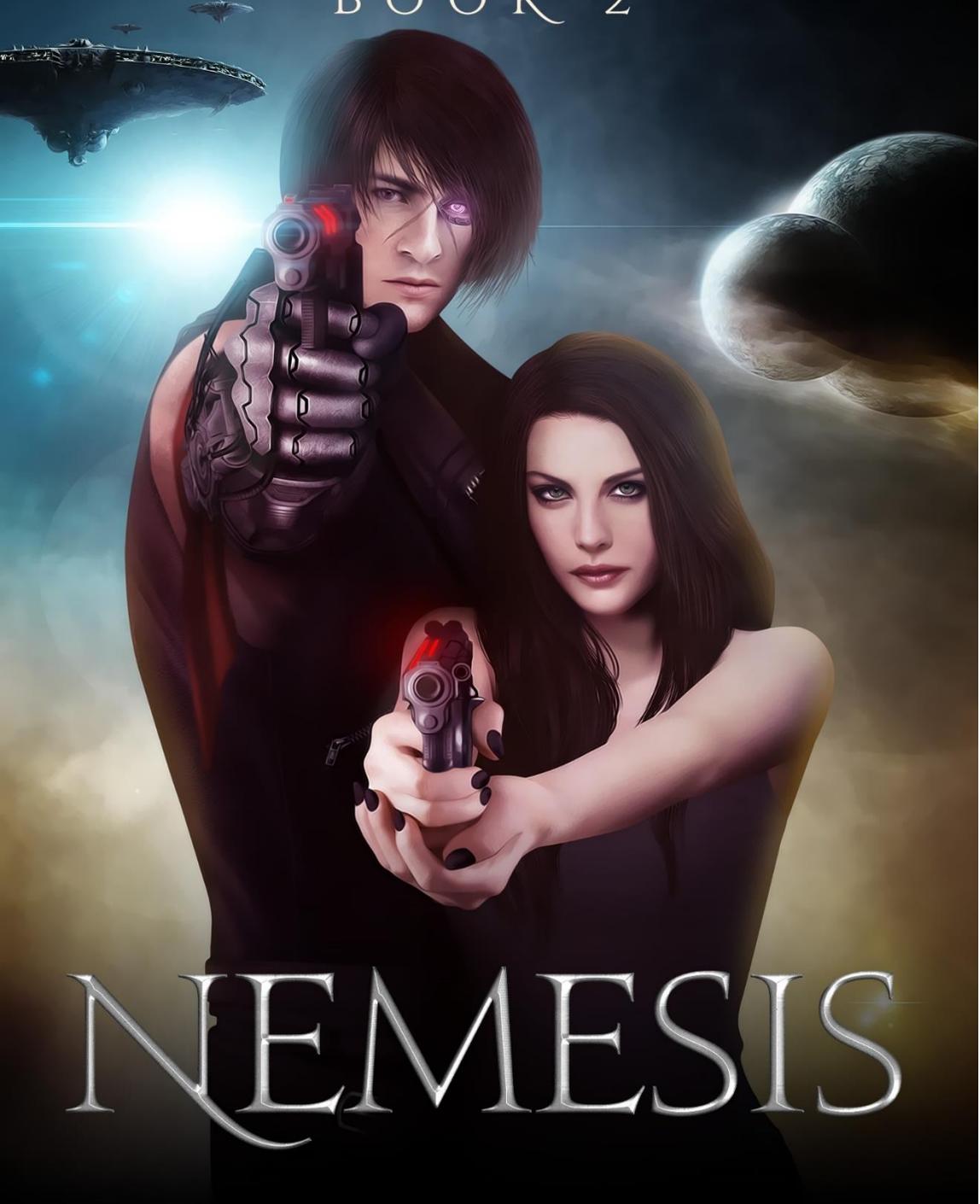


K . A . F i n n

NOMAD SERIES  
BOOK 2



NEMESIS



NEMESIS

Also by K.A. Finn

# ARES

Book 1 in the Nomad series

K.A. FINN grew up on the south east coast of Ireland before moving to a rural smallholding on the Welsh marches. After studying media production, KA Finn enjoyed a working career in veterinary nursing, financial services and, most recently, in the electrical and engineering industries. Opportunity offered KA Finn the chance to write and publish the first book of the Nomad Series, Ares; a concept that had been written and re-written (and re-written again) for more than 20 years, evolving, and developing with each year. KA Finns' writing incorporates science fiction with elements from past and present, and hints of Celtic mythology.

KA Finn's passion for writing science fiction integrates with a busy family life, freelance proofreading and agricultural interests.

Any free time is spent reading Stephen Leather, Andy McNab, J.R. Ward, Lee Child, James Rollins, and J.D. Robb.

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Coming next

# PERSES

Book 3 in the Nomad series

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# NEMESIS

NOMAD SERIES BOOK 2

K.A. FINN



*To my best friend Cooper  
Thank you for 16 years of friendship.  
It won't be the same without you lying at my feet*

# NEMESIS

NOMAD SERIES BOOK 2

# I

Terra ducks to avoid Bray's attack. 'I thought you said you've been practising?'

Bray snorts and twirls the sticks in his hands. 'Not as much as you, clearly.'

She smiles and slowly circles her adversary. The lone fan bolted to the stone wall does little to ease the stifling heat of the underground training room. Readjusting the bandanna controlling her unruly dark locks, she launches a counterattack. The Hunter curses loudly as the wood makes contact with his upper arm. Not stopping her attack, she spins on her toes to land another blow on the back of his shoulder before finishing with a strike to his chest. 'Too much time in the company of Ultaran ale is slowing you down, Commander.'

Massaging his shoulder, Bray closes the distance between them. He pulls her body close against his as he leans down to kiss her. Laughing, she pushes him back playfully.

‘Hey, I was enjoying that,’ Bray complains.

‘You can’t get around me that easily. Training was your idea.’

Bray smirks and the skin around the small metal crescent beside his eye crinkles. ‘I can think of other ways to train.’

Turning away from him she prepares to fight again. ‘Not going to work, Bray.’

‘You’re no fun.’ He takes up a defensive stance, then nods indicating he’s ready.

They duel, ignoring the other crew milling around the area. The small alcove they’re dancing around sits just off the main corridor leading to the underground hangar. In the ten months since the Port was destroyed, the training room has become like a second home to Terra. When not at work, she can be found here or jogging around the large lake to the west of the base. The lake is one of the few places she can be alone. With the destruction of the Port, colonists are obviously wary of retaliation by the Foundation, and had flocked to Ultar for protection. The underground tunnels have become home to hundreds of refugees and empty space was quickly becoming a rarity. With the imminent threat of the Foundation hanging over everyone, Ultar provides the security that many off-world colonists need.

So far, Sayber and his Hunters have kept other rogue groups from taking control, but they are struggling. And they’re not the only ones. Morale is at an all time low. Terra hasn’t found the transition to Outer Sector life a chore, but many of the Foundation crew are struggling with their new luxury-free living. She’s lost count of the amount of times Roman and Aleena have been called away to settle disputes between the locals and ex-Foundation. While on *Infinity*, Roman would always find time for her. Even if it was only ten minutes a day to see how she is, quiz her on ship information or novels he forced her to read. Between dealing with the unhappy colonists and gathering intel on the Foundation, he barely has time to eat, let alone have a deep and meaningful conversation with her.

As they train, she feels the tension roll off her shoulders. Sparring is the only way she has found to unwind and switch off from her new day-to-day life. With a base full of Nomad and some Hunters, she isn't short of training partners.

The intercom crackles, calling an end to their session. 'Commander Rush and Commander Bray to the conference room.'

'Saved by the bell, Commander. Guess I'll have to postpone winning until later.'

He laughs and shakes his head. 'You've got a very different view of this competition than I do. What do you think it's about?'

Terra shrugs. 'Only one way to find out.' She throws her towel at him and walks out the door ignoring his verbal protests.

∞

A guttural scream from the adjoining cell drags Gryffin back to consciousness. Forcing his eye open he takes in the same view he's had for the last few months — rusted metal bars and bare concrete floor. Very different to the lakeside he visits in his dreams. Using the chains attaching him to the wall as leverage, he manages to pull himself upright with his flesh arm. He leans back against the solid metal wall of the cell and looks over at the man in the cell next to him. His lifeless eyes stare at Gryffin as blood pours out of his mouth. Judging by the state of him, he only has minutes left. The man came back from surgery a few days ago with a large metal plate screwed to the side of his head, covering the internal implant in his brain. He's not the first to have the procedure and he won't be the last. Even after months of being examined, the Scientist is no closer to figuring out how to replicate what he did with Gryffin. He managed to get working models, but the men die horribly soon after surgery.

Gryffin's neighbour makes a strange gurgling sound before taking his last breath. If Gryffin knew what the hell made him different to every other man here, he'd tell the Scientist, just to stop the experiments. He turns away from the man's lifeless eyes and watches

the water slowly drip from the ceiling to gather in a puddle opposite him. Anything, even watching water drip, is better than looking at the death he'd indirectly caused.

He presses his hand to his face as a surge of pain spears through his left eye socket. Having the crowbar shoved into his eye on the freighter didn't hurt as much as his new, state of the art eyepiece does. A few months ago, losing another piece of himself would have bothered him. Now he couldn't care less. He'd already lost an arm, a leg, some of his chest, and a portion of his face — what's an eye on top of all that? Absently, he scratches the raw skin under his collar. The metal ring hangs loosely around his neck — the one advantage of not being fed regularly.

A door bangs at the end of the corridor and Gryffin's stomach clenches. Hopefully they're not coming for him again. It must have been at least a few days since the Scientist last worked on him. Time doesn't exist down here so it's making it difficult to keep track. Time is judged by the condition of his wounds. The most recent incision on his chest has only just started to seal. It can't be time yet.

Pulling himself to his feet, he leans heavily on the wall and waits. One of the newer cyborgs marches past his cell and opens the one next to him. The cyborg pulls the dead man out, drags him past Gryffin and disappears down the dark corridor. Gryffin slumps to the ground and lays his head back against the rough metal.

He massages the tender flesh on his upper right arm. The large chain welded to his metal stump is irritating the hell out of him. He never thought he'd miss his metal arm, but he does. Anything would be better than having a chain permanently welded to him, securing his arm to the wall. He can barely stand, but his captors aren't taking any chances with him. Even if he managed to tear the chain from his arm, he'd never break the one securing his collar to the wall.

He closes his eye and waits while his other eye shuts down. Alone in the safety of his head, his thoughts wander to the battle at the Port.

He's tried to figure out how he ended up here, but he can't remember. He knows that Sayber knocked Terra out and took her from the ship. He knows that he tethered the freighter to Balfe's ship. But that's it. The injury from landing on the corner of the console should have killed him. The trail of blood he left across the floor of the freighter confirmed his fate, but instead of dying, he lost consciousness and woke up here.

He can handle the examinations and the pain — he's well used to it. The thing slowly driving him crazy is not knowing. He doesn't know if Sayber and Terra got away in time. He doesn't know if Chayse and Aleena managed to launch *Nemesis*. He doesn't know if *Ares* was destroyed. He doesn't know a damn thing. The Scientist and his pet cyborgs don't talk about anything of that nature while he's on the operating table.

If he knew for a fact that everyone was still alive and fighting the Foundation, it would somehow make all of this worth it. It would make leaving Terra worth it.

Screams erupt to his left. Gryffin lies on the floor and puts his arm over his head. He squeezes his eye shut and forces an image of Terra to the forefront of his mind. In the false safety of his head, he puts himself beside her at the edge of the Ultaran lake. It's the only place he goes. He spent so many hours there when he was on the surface. It was one of the few places he could shut off and just be himself. He concentrates hard, trying to remember every single detail on Terra's face. Her sharp green eyes look at him as she brushes some hair from his face. He'll wait here in his head. Stay with Terra until he's dragged back to reality again.

∞

Terra takes a long drink of water and places the glass back on the wooden table in front of her. Bray winks at her from the seat opposite and she can't help but smile back. She dreads to think how her life would be if she hadn't let him close to her. In the months following

Gryffin's death, she had withdrawn into herself. She had even pulled away from Roman and Milla. Everyone wanted her to talk, but it hurt too much. Just saying his name tore at her heart. Strangely, the only person she could spend time with was Bray. He may be Gryffin's brother, but he wasn't in the slightest bit interested in reminiscing about him.

Their friendship grew over time, but it wasn't until nearly six months after the fight at the Port that she finally took the next step with him. Initially, kissing him felt wrong. It felt like she betrayed Gryffin. But he'd died and she needed to move on.

She glances up at the Hunter Commander. There's no escaping the fact he looks a lot like his older brother. Bray may have more of his mother's facial characteristics, while Gryffin inherited his from Roman, but the more she sees Bray, the more the similarities stand out to her. If that isn't enough, some of his mannerisms also remind her of Gryffin. He's strong willed, stubborn, and a little hot-headed, but it's something he can control. Bray certainly wouldn't do something stupid or reckless like sacrificing himself without a second thought.

Her stomach tightens as her anger builds. For months, she's replayed the final events over and over in her head and is convinced Gryffin could have done it differently. She has no doubt he could have found another way of destroying the Port. If she had only known about the collar being rigged to blow if he left the ship, she could have found a way to take it off him. But he didn't give his own life a second thought. He charged into a dangerous situation without thinking about how his actions would affect the people that cared about him. Like the Nomad. Like her. Compared to Gryffin's 'act first-think later' attitude, Bray is a breath of fresh air. He's safe, unlike his emotionally and physically dangerous brother.

His hazel eyes narrow and he tilts his head to the side. 'You okay?' he mouths across the table.

She is. She never thought she'd be able to recover from what happened, but she has. Bray may never fully repair the hole left by Gryffin. She will probably never feel the same intense emotions that Gryffin gave her, but she does feel something. It's too early for love, but not for hope. She can hope for a future with him. With Bray, she can have what was impossible with Gryffin — the possibility of a future together. He's still staring at her with a worried expression on his face. Terra smiles widely and nods. His face lights up as a large grin takes over.

The smile is quickly extinguished as Roman and Aleena enter the small conference room. They close the door to the meeting room, blocking *Ares* from their view. The line of cargo containers take up the right wall of the cavern and provide a private area in the main hub of the base. The hangar serves as the brain of the facility. Most of the main computers are set up in an area to the back of the space while the transport and any ships undergoing repairs take up the rest of the area. At the moment, the hangar is home to *Ares*. It took nearly a year, but the Nomad flagship is back in one piece again.

'Thank you all for coming at such short notice.' Roman sits down and turns on the screen at the front of the room. 'I'll let Chayse explain what he found.' Chayse's handsome face fills the large screen. Milla instantly brightens when she sees the young Nomad captain. Terra envies her friend and the innocent and happy look on her face. In the space of a few seconds, just seeing Chayse has transformed her. Terra had forgotten the way another person could make you forget there was anyone else in the room.

She glances at the Hunter commander. He's staring intently at the screen, one elbow on the table. His head is resting on his raised hand and disappears behind the lock of thick brown hair that hides the side of his face. Even without seeing his hand, she knows he's running his finger over the small implant beside his eye.

'Terra?'

She blinks and the colour races to her cheeks as everyone in the room looks at her. ‘Sir?’

‘You with us?’

‘Of course,’ she replies. Bray hides a smile behind his hand and shakes his head. It seems he can make her forget there are other people in the room — much to her embarrassment.

‘What did you find?’ Roman asks.

Chayse leans forward to bring himself closer to the screen. His blue eyes search the room and he winks when he sees Milla. ‘We’ve been getting some strange energy readings from an area two days travel from the site of the old Port. *Nemesis* has patrolled the area with some Hunter ships, but we haven’t been able to figure out what’s causing the readings. Until today.’ He pulls information from another screen onto the main display causing the atmosphere in the room to grow instantly serious.

Bray frowns at the screen. ‘That looks like a Port.’

Chayse nods solemnly.

‘So, the Foundation set up a new Port right under your nose and you knew nothing about it?’

‘Hunter ships are patrolling the area with *Nemesis*, Commander. You got a problem, maybe you should talk to them.’

Roman slams his hand on the table. ‘Give it a rest! Chayse, please continue.’

Chayse clenches his jaw and glares at Bray. This isn’t the first time the Nomad and Hunter have gone head-to-head. Relations are strained between all the groups and unless something changes, the situation will only get worse. For some reason, Bray and Chayse seem intent on beating their chests at every opportunity. She’s tried to talk to Bray about it, but he won’t back down. The Nomad and Hunters have been enemies since Sayber split from Gryffin. It will take a lot to change what has been part of normal life until very recently.

‘The new Port is roughly half the size of the original one Gryffin

destroyed. However, it is big enough to transport the fighters we battled a few months ago.'

Roman manoeuvres in his chair. 'I knew they'd send ships here, but I never thought they'd go so far as to build another Port. The expense alone must be incredible.'

Milla tucks her blonde hair behind her ear. 'We stole a shiny new ship, Captain, and then blew up the Port. I'm guessing they are annoyed.'

Roman scoffs. 'We should be flattered they're investing so much to find us. Chayse, how strong are the Port defenses?'

'Five patrol ships so far and more artillery on the Port itself.'

'Send over all data you have on the new site. Knowing the Foundation, there'll be more ships watching than you can see. There's no way they will take any risks. Loosing the main Port will have been a massive financial hit. I guarantee they won't make the same mistake twice.'

'So, we just sit back and do nothing?' Bray asks.

'We go in now, we'll lose any advantage we may have.'

Desyl steps out from the corner to join in the conversation. 'Can't believe I'm saying this, but I agree with the Hunter. It's time we stop hiding in the shadows and take some Foundation out of the picture.'

Bray nods. 'We've been stagnating here for months. Every day we sit and do nothing, the Foundation gains more ground. We have to fight back.'

Roman pushes to his feet. 'Enough!' He puts his hands on his hips as he faces the mismatched group. 'Hasn't there been enough deaths already without wanting to race headlong into another battle? I understand the need for revenge, the need for retribution, but without all the facts, they will destroy us!'

'You know you'll have to fight them at some point, right?'

Roman visibly tenses at Bray's remark. The Hunter hit the nail on the head, and everyone in the room knows it. None of the Foundation

personnel are eager to go up against their former comrades. The people they'll be fighting — killing — could be friends. They've had no contact with Earth since the Port was destroyed and have no current intel about the Foundation. Terra can't imagine doing harm to any of her old classmates. Roman feels the same. It's natural and understandable, but detrimental to the group. If Roman doesn't give the go ahead soon, the uneasy reconciliation among the groups will suffer.

Roman clears his throat and nods slowly. 'I know that, Bray. Trust me — I know.' He clasps his hands on the old wooden door that serves as the desk. 'I can't force you to work with me on this. I can't force any of you to work with me at all. The only thing I can do is ask all of you to wait until we get more information from Chayse to make an informed decision. If... when we make the move against the Foundation, I want as many of us to come back as possible. Too many lives have already been lost to them. I refuse to hand any more over to them on a platter. When we fight them — I want us to win.'

A few minutes of grumbling follows, but one by one, they agree to his terms.

'Good. I'll make sure everyone gets a copy of the data within the next thirty minutes. Thank you.'

The room empties, leaving Roman alone with Terra. Roman turns off the telecommunication screen when Chayse signs off. Terra leans back against the table beside Roman. 'What's going through your mind?'

Roman sits down beside her and runs a hand through his cropped hair. 'We brought this on everyone.'

Terra brushes her braid off her shoulder. 'Sir, *Infinity* was sent here in the first place to colonise. That was the decision of the Foundation Council. We were just following orders. It wasn't our decision.'

'Yes, and we dutifully obeyed those orders without hesitation.'

‘We didn’t have a choice.’

He looks at the ground and sighs. ‘I know. I’m just thankful we realised the truth before it was too late. So, Commander, if you were me, what would you do?’

Terra shuffles back to sit on the table top. She swings her legs as she looks at the map of the Sector on the far wall. ‘We have two options. We can do nothing as the Foundation sends ships here to destroy us all, or we fight back.’

He smirks and shakes his head. ‘It sounds like you’ve taken a leaf from the Nomad or Hunter book. I never thought I’d say that about you.’

She shrugs. ‘Times change. People have to adapt. The Foundation brought this on themselves.’

He focuses on the screen in front of him and nods. ‘I know.’ They sit in silence until he eventually speaks. ‘So, we haven’t had a chance to speak recently. How are you?’

She looks at the screen and shrugs again. ‘Busy. *Ares* is taking most of my time.’

‘I mean you, not your workload.’

‘I’m good.’

He turns to face her and frowns. ‘Try that again.’

‘I’m good, really.’

He smiles. ‘A certain Hunter have anything to do with that?’

Terra winces. She really doesn’t want to discuss Bray with Roman. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Ah, so we’re back to sir. Not comfortable talking to me about it?’

She gapes at him. ‘What? How...’

He laughs and wraps his arm around her shoulder. ‘I know you, Terra. I’m happy that you’ve found someone. Really, I am.’

‘So you’re not angry with me?’

He turns to looks at her. ‘What made you think that?’

‘Gryffin.’

He nods in understanding. ‘Firstly, who you socialise with has nothing to do with me. Secondly, my son is gone, Terra. Not for one minute did I expect or want you to stop living your life. I’m not going to pretend to know Gryffin, but I doubt he’d want you miserable either.’

‘Yeah, but his brother?’

Roman grimaces and shrugs. ‘They’re brothers by blood — apart from that, they’re strangers.’ He squeezes her shoulder. ‘Just be happy, Terra.’

‘What about you? How are you doing?’

He wipes a hand over his face. ‘This is a big bloody mess and I can’t find a way out of any of it. Until this is dealt with, it has to be my main priority.’ He sighs as he examines the map of the Sector. ‘There’s just so much to do.’

She squeezes his hand. ‘One thing at a time.’

He laughs and looks back at the map of the Sector opposite him. Red dots are scattered over the map, detailing Foundation sightings. ‘Those dots are growing in number. Each day more are appearing. At this rate, I don’t have time to deal with each problem individually. We’ve got to come up with something before they take over and we all end up on a one way trip back to Earth.’

# 2

Gryffin jumps from his unsettled, nightmare filled sleep as someone pulls sharply on the chain attached to his arm. The unfamiliar cyborg guard unlocks his limb then roughly drags him to his feet by his collar and out of the small cell. Gryffin's legs struggle to keep him upright and moving forward, but the guard clearly couldn't give a damn. Every time he stumbles, the guard seems to increase his pace, which in turn, forces Gryffin's weakened legs to move faster.

They wind through the dark facility, past row after row of small cells — some are empty, but compared to the last time he was dragged this way, there seems to be more occupied. He doesn't know where the hell the Scientist is finding all these people, but there seems to be a never-ending supply. At least this time they're all adults. Not that it makes what the Foundation is doing here any easier to stomach.

Gryffin leans heavily against the railing for support as they climb the metal stairs and turn the corner into the room the Scientist uses

as his makeshift lab. The guard slams Gryffin against the edge of the table and he grunts in pain as his tender ribs clash with the metal. The guard grabs the base of Gryffin's top and tugs the stained material over his head. Gryffin hisses in pain as it drags along the fresh wounds on his chest. He is pushed back against the surface by his neck and held in place as the portly technician gingerly approaches the two men.

Gryffin concentrates on the small circular lights embedded in the ceiling as the man secures him to the table. As usual, he works in nervous silence as he bolts the chains to the table. Gryffin watches them work in the polished metal ceiling above him. He doesn't recognise the reflection staring back at him. The blood stained, painfully thin man looks like something you'd find in a morgue. The thick black sutures holding his chest together stand out in stark contrast to his dirty and pale skin. He closes his eye and swallows back the scream that desperately wants to be released. It would be a futile act that would just waste the little energy he has left.

Once he's satisfied Gryffin isn't going anywhere, he reaches over to attach the monitors to his ocular implant. Gryffin ignores him and focuses on slowing his breathing down. The man fixes a mask over Gryffin's face and turns on the anaesthetic. The drug won't knock him out, but it will help keep him drowsy and less likely to put up a fight. As soon as the mask is fitted, the guard turns and leaves the room.

Gryffin wills the technician to work faster, but the stupid man continues to fumble with cables and adjust the monitors. He can feel some of the anaesthetic work into his system. It won't be long before he succumbs to its effects. If the technician doesn't leave soon, he's going to be worse than useless and another day will be lost in this hell. Gryffin forces the panic away. If he's going to get out of here, he needs to keep calm.

The technician eventually stops adjusting the monitors and wires and leaves him alone while he gets the Scientist. If the man sticks to

the same route as every other time, Gryffin will be alone for about ten minutes. Hopefully it will be long enough.

Using the connector going into his ocular implant, he connects with the computer controlling the anaesthetic. He gains access and after shutting off the alarms, turns off the machine. He then works his way around the system to link with the internal sensors. After dodging the firewall he finally breaks through. According to the system, the Scientist is still in the lab at the far end of the facility. It's now or never.

The last few months have been leading up to this moment. Initially, he would force himself to drift off while the Scientist was operating on him, but after a few weeks he realised he could access the main system through the monitoring connectors. He had never connected with something so large and initially the effort was too much for him. He'd had a few close calls, but luckily the Scientist thought it was his procedures that almost killed him — not hooking into the system.

Once he figured out how to control the link, the next problem was moving through the system while keeping his readings the same. If the Scientist got wind of what he was doing, he'd be screwed.

But he didn't find out. Instead of dreading the procedures, Gryffin would plan what to explore the next time they hooked him up. Having something to work on, to fight for, had kept him sane through the months of being repeatedly cut open. He knew everything he needed to know to escape — security numbers and locations, defences, transport types and their key codes, and the layout of the facility.

Gryffin shuts down the power going to the locks on the table and clenches his fist. He pulls back hard and is rewarded by the sound of chain snapping. He firmly grips the chain locking his collar to the table, takes a deep breath and pulls. The chain breaks, but the collar won't budge. Without the Scientist's code, he won't be able to get it off. He releases his torso and then leans over to deal with the remains

of his right arm. Once free, he rolls off the table and lands in a heap on the ground. Pain shoots through his chest and blood seeps from the barely closed wound. At this rate he'll bleed to death before he even leaves the room.

He pushes up onto his knees and reaches up to use the table to pull him upright. As soon as he puts pressure on his right leg, the pain drives him to his knees again. He pulls up his trouser leg and grimaces when he sees his metal thigh. The damn thing has been nothing but trouble since he was given it on the freighter. It was supposed to make him faster, but he can barely walk, let alone run. The Scientist replaced a perfectly good thigh with a piece of scrap metal.

He bites back a curse as he forces his metal leg to support some of his weight. He fumbles in the drawers beside the table and finally finds a roll of bandage, which he hastily wraps around his torso. It'll have to do for now. He pulls on his filthy scrub top taking care not to disturb his patch-up job on his chest. He needs to leave, but he's not going anywhere without his arm.

Moving as fast as he can, he pulls open cupboards and drawers but there's no sign it. 'Damn it! Where did you put it?' It's then he spots a metal case on the floor under a storage unit. He throws the lid open and smiles when he sees his arm. His elation is short lived though. His arm is damn all use to him. Even if he could get the chain off his upper arm, the welding has damaged the connectors. He's going to have to carry it. His metal leg protests as he rises to his feet again. He swallows deeply as the room spins. Forcing one foot in front of the other, he limps over to the instrument table.

He rests his metal arm on the table and examines the collection of knives. Two large knives slide into the waistband of his scrubs before he stumbles towards the door with a third in his hand and his metal arm stuffed under his upper arm. He leans heavily against the doorframe and squeezes his eye shut. The drug is still affecting his vision. It will take another few minutes before his implants neutralise

it completely, but he doesn't have time to wait. The Scientist will be on his way.

Gryffin carefully peers around the open door before he moves out into the corridor. He'd be a hell of a lot happier if he had his gun or his arm attached. He misses the feeling of additional power in his arm, but a prisoner that can electrocute his torturers is a bit too risky.

He reaches the end of the corridor and pauses. Footsteps approach his location so he presses his body tight against the wall. A man passes by, but doesn't see Gryffin until it's too late. The knife is lodged deep into his heart before he realises what's happening. Gryffin lowers him to the ground and relieves him of his gun and belt. He would have liked to take his boots too, but the man's feet are ridiculously small. He uses the belt to strap his metal arm to his leg before leaving the safety of the corridor. There's nowhere to hide the body and time is definitely against him.

Using the map he downloaded from the system, he stumbles along the corridors, each painful step taking him closer to the transport bay. As he nears the location, alarms scream to life. Seems he's been missed. He quickly locates the control panel in the wall outside the bay. Gryffin hooks up to the panel and loads the program he designed. It has remained dormant and hidden on the system but now it's time to let it do its job. He shuts down all lighting to the bay. The cyborgs will probably be able to see in the dark like he can, but the humans will struggle.

He rolls his shoulders and takes a deep breath. There's no time to hide in the shadows. If he's going to get out alive he has to move now. He steps out of the corridor and into the transport bay. Quickly he scans the chaotic bay. Humans stumble in the dark, but it's the cyborgs that get his attention. They stand motionless at their posts. Gryffin watches as one of them roughly pushes a human aside when he wanders too close. So, they can see in the dark. Not ideal, but

there's nothing he can do about it. They're in his way — that's all he needs to focus on.

He zooms in on a small transport in the far corner. He recognises the model, but more importantly, he also knows how to deactivate the tracker on it. That's his target.

He's come this far. There's no way he's going to turn around and go back to his cell. Whatever happens in the next minute or so, he knows one thing for sure. The Scientist will not be cutting him open again. He'll die before that happens. He's beyond caring if this is the battle that finishes him off for good. There will be no more cages for him.

He raises the gun and hopes the adrenaline coursing through his body will keep him upright. His vision keeps swimming, everything hurts and his damn feet won't move in the same direction as each other.

His use of the main control implant in his brain has been carefully monitored and controlled while he's been here. He doesn't even know if he can access it on his own anymore, but there's no way in hell he's getting out of here without help. The added strength might just keep him and his feet heading in the right direction. He closes his eye briefly and tries to link, but nothing happens. He clenches his jaw and tries again. Finally, the familiar buzzing feeling builds at the base of his skull. It slowly spreads up his head and along his new eyepiece. He bites back a groan of pain when the new eyepiece throbs as power surges through it. Gryffin opens his eye and breathes a sigh of relief as his vision sharpens.

Before he loses the connection, he steps out of the corridor and walks purposefully towards the transport. That ship is more than just his escape. It's his lifeline. It's the thing that can bring him back to the Nomad and back to Terra. The thought of possibly seeing her again gives him a new strength. One of the cyborgs notices him and shouts the alert. Before his cyborg friends have turned to face him, Gryffin

shoots him in the head. One down. He doesn't feel guilty for the death. At least the man isn't suffering anymore. Gryffin targets the next cyborg as they near him. A small smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. For the first time in months, he actually feels in control of his future. With an image of Terra firmly in his mind, he roars and charges into the group of cyborgs blocking his way.

# 3

Aleena stands at the edge of the hangar and watches Jensen Roman as he speaks to a group of Foundation personnel. Not for the first time, she is grateful she allowed *Infinity* to land on Ultar all those months ago. If not for her decision, she may never have met Jensen. He is unlike any man she has encountered previously. Perhaps it is his strict Foundation upbringing, but his dedication and devotion to their cause is unending. She's had to physically pull him away from the base many times just to get some rest.

The last few months have been particularly difficult on him. The grey has crept further into his dark hair and his piercing blue eyes have earned a few more lines. Instead of weakening him, the betrayal by the Foundation has only made him stronger and more determined than ever to stop them from taking over the Sector. She can't help but smile. Jensen and Gryffin are similar in that regard. Neither father nor son has allowed the Foundation to control them. Aleena bites the inside of her cheek to stop the tears. Gryffin's absence is like a gaping

hole in her chest. She tries to remain strong for Jensen and Terra. They lost a son and a lover, but she lost a dear friend. Aleena straightens her shoulders and takes a deep breath. Gryffin would want them to fight, not cry.

She weaves through the crates of supplies surrounding the large Foundation ship. *Infinity* will be leaving in an hour to collect some refugees from a neighbouring world. A Rogue group has just attacked and destroyed the small town. The population of the once small farming community had increased tenfold in the last few months. The defences Gryffin put around the planet keep it safe from any attackers and means it is one of the best protected places in the Sector... for the moment. She is under no illusions that the Foundation will find a way to break through — it is only a matter of time.

Jensen smiles as she approaches. ‘Come to see me off?’

‘I always do.’

He brushes her long blonde hair back and drapes his arm across her shoulder. ‘Don’t think I’ll ever get used to deciding where *Infinity* goes without checking with a superior.’

‘As I said when we first met — Nomad don’t have to answer to anyone.’

He laughs and looks down at her, his eye brows raised. ‘You’re saying that I’m a Nomad?’

‘Perhaps. Would you call yourself Foundation?’

Roman sighs and looks out the cargo doors at *Infinity*. The large vessel sits in the field beside the base with transports and personnel milling around her. ‘Can’t say that appeals to me. I may sound a little naive when I say this, but I’d like to think that the Council are the exception, rather than the rule. I refuse to believe everyone on Earth thinks the same way they do.’

‘So, perhaps you and your crew are New Foundation. You have certainly brought about a new era for the sector.’

He smiles and nods. 'You know, I like that.' He straightens his shoulders. 'Anything is better than being associated with the current Council.'

'Are you worried about this new Port?'

'I'd be crazy not to take it as a serious threat. *Nemesis* and *Epsilon* are on their way to meet with us. Once Chayse and Lucan get here, we'll decide what to do.'

Aleena can't help but smile. She misses her old security detail leader. After the trouble at the Port, Admiral Avoca had withdrawn into himself for many weeks. The truth of what he'd been involved in affected him deeply. Initially, he spent every hour next to Bray's bedside. It took a week for the young Hunter to wake up after what the Scientist did to him. He may have recovered from the procedure, but Sayber commented that Bray had lost some of his previous light-heartedness.

Even though Gryffin probably would not have approved, Lucan agreed to captain *Epsilon* when Avoca stepped down. Her Nomad security detail leader was the best candidate for the role and surprisingly, the crew of *Epsilon* agreed and have eagerly followed his command. She cannot help but smile at the thought of what Gryffin would say if he knew one of his men was the captain of a Foundation ship.

'How is Terra?'

Roman blows out a breath, which speaks volumes to her. 'I'm worried about her, Aleena, and I haven't got a clue how to help her.'

'She appears to be happy.'

'She is. Bray has a lot to do with that. Don't get me wrong, I'm delighted she has someone. For a while, not even Milla could get through to her.' He purses his lips and looks at the ground.

Aleena gently squeezes his arm. 'You are more concerned about who is helping her.'

He nods. ‘Got it in one. Bray’s his brother. You have to admit the two even look alike. I guess I’m worried she’s...’ He looks up at the stone roof and sighs. ‘I don’t know.’

Aleena understands what is troubling Jensen. She has had the same concerns. ‘Perhaps we should trust Terra to know her own mind. Bray is a good man. I truly believe he would do nothing to hurt her. You have said it yourself — she is happy.’

‘It’s the anger I’m worried about. Bray hates his brother. I don’t know why, but that much is clear as day. I just hope they have more to talk about than their hatred or disappointment or whatever they’re feeling towards Gryffin.’

‘Has she spoken about her father yet?’

He shakes his head. ‘That’s a banned subject. She flat out refuses to discuss him. It’s not healthy to bottle everything up like she is.’

‘And you?’

‘What about me?’

‘Your childhood friend faked his own death so he could work with the Foundation on this secret project. The same project that tortured your son and changed him forever. Your friend and your son are connected in a way you could never have imagined. Surely, you are affected also?’

‘I can’t afford to give it much thought. It could easily consume me if I let it. Until I’m face to face with him, until I can ask him what possessed him to do what he did, I’m at a dead end.’ He straightens his shoulders and shakes his head. ‘At the moment, my personal feelings will have to be ignored.’

∞

Gryffin growls and raises his gun as Forty-Three steps out from behind the transport to his left. The man’s red eye locks on to him and Forty-Three smiles as he raises his weapon to point it at Gryffin. He hates Forty-Three almost as much as he hates the Scientist. In a way, having the cyborg work on him was worse. Forty-Three went through

similar procedures in the past thanks to the Scientist. Having him now help the man who changed them both against their will is messed up. The only thing Gryffin wants to do when he's around the Scientist is rip the man's spine out through his chest. Being his dutiful assistant would never cross his mind.

'You're not leaving here, brother.'

Gryffin's jaw pops as he clenches it tightly. Every time the man calls him 'brother', he feels like he's going to throw up. The word sounds unnatural coming from his mouth.

'It's clear you're malfunctioning.'

'He tortured you and you're helping him. Ever think you're malfunctioning?' Gryffin tries to keep his outstretched arm steady, but the damn thing trembles with the exertion.

'He made me stronger. That is all that matters.' He walks around Gryffin, slowly turning him so his back nears the wall. 'There's nowhere for you to go. I've been watching. You have no bullets left. This is where you belong.'

'Damn that.' Gryffin drops the gun and throws a knife at Forty-Three. The blade embeds itself in the centre of the optic implant. Sparks dance across his head as he roars in pain. Gryffin stumbles away from the downed man and hones in on the transport again. His legs don't feel like they belong to him anymore and his chest is on fire so he allows the implant a little more control. The added power helps his torso and legs connect again.

The distance between him and salvation shortens. Forty-Three's screams still echo behind him. He risks a quick glance over his shoulder. The other cyborgs are standing in a circle around Forty-Three.

The first punch glances off Gryffin's chin. The second punch doubles him over and expels the air from his struggling lungs. He drops to his knees and screams as the impact jars his metal leg. He looks up at the large cyborg in front of him. Definitely an ex-prison

inmate. This one is huge, all pumped up muscles and snaking veins. He clenches his massive fists and smiles down at Gryffin.

He has every reason to smile. It was one hell of a shot. Outside of having the wind knocked from him, which he always hated, Gryffin notices a fair amount of pain. The cyborg is strong. Not exactly something that's going to do him any favours in his current state. Usually, he'd be a match for the man, but months of torture has weakened him. However, he has something on the large cyborg — experience. He's been operating with his mods a hell of a lot longer than his opponent has.

He pushes the pain to the back of his mind. Living in this shithole has conditioned him against it. Even being out of air is something Gryffin knows how to deal with.

He ignores the protests from his body and stands up straight. His purple eyes glow with rage as he stares at his opponent. In those brief few seconds, Gryffin sees everything he needs to. Fear. His opponent didn't expect him to get up again. The cyborg tries to stand tall, but it's too late to redeem himself. Gryffin has him where he wants him.

'You're... in... my—' Gryffin takes a lurching step forward with each word, striking the cyborg wherever he can hit. On the forth step, he swings his fist at the man's face. 'Way!'

The blow is going to miss. Gryffin knows it the second he launches his fist. The large, smirking cyborg ducks under it. Before Gryffin can even register the dodge, however, another body shot, this one to his ribs, sends fresh ripples of pain through his already damaged torso. He plants his feet to make sure he doesn't fall, but it's not easy and uses too much energy. Usually his reputation ensures hand to hand combat is avoided by anyone that crosses him. If they saw him now, his reputation will have already taken a beating.

The cyborg goes in for another shot. Gryffin shoves him off. Seeing the man crash back against the wall gives him a much needed second wind. He quickly covers the distance between them and throws three

more punches that do land. The man falls to the ground in a heap. He pulls the gun from the man's belt and turns towards the transport again. The few seconds it takes to run to the ship feels like hours to him. He drags himself up the small cargo hatch and slams his palm against the door control. Using the walls as support, he pushes himself up to the cockpit and drops heavily into the pilot's seat.

He looks out the window and notices the cyborgs are getting themselves together. The ship shudders to life as he starts the ignition sequence. Gryffin keys in the code for the transport bay door and holds his breath. He spent weeks memorising the code. Each of the numbers and letters will be permanently burned into this brain. He can't read, so he doesn't know what the numbers and letters are. Growing up in the lab taught him about pain and how to survive — reading was a luxury well above his entitlement as a test subject. The large red light over the door flashes and he releases his breath.

He lifts the transport off the ground and turns to face the door. The craft shudders as it is hit again and again by whatever weapons the remaining guards can find. Gryffin ignores everything except the ever-increasing gap in the door that will lead to his freedom. Men race towards the transports. He can't tell if they're human or cyborg. It doesn't matter. They all work for the Scientist so he has no regrets about what's about to happen.

As soon as he can, he forces the ship out the door, scraping the sides as he squeezes through. Just as the craft clears the doors, he sends a four-digit code to the station, pushing the trigger on the final piece of his plan. The inside of the transport bay lights up as the remaining transports explode one by one. Gryffin smiles to himself and accelerates away from the destruction. He can't believe it actually worked. Overloading the power cells on the ships was a lot easier than he thought it would be. But even though his plan worked, he can't relax. He's bought himself a couple of days at the most.

He enters the coordinates for Ultar into the system and closes his eyes. There's a bench seat and a med kit in the main compartment, but he doubts he can even make it that far. Without the strength to hook to the system, he can't figure out where he is or how long it will take to get to Ultar. Aleena's patching-up skills are just what he needs right now — he never thought he'd feel like that.

Whether through sleep or unconsciousness, he allows the calm blackness to carry him back to Ultar — he hopes.

# 4

Terra packs her tool kit away and wipes her hands on an old rag sticking out of her pocket. She stretches her arms above her head to loosen her weary muscles. The morning was spent under a console on *Ares...* again. It's how every day seems to go for her at the moment. She slaps the Nomad working with her on the back and grins. 'I'm off for lunch.'

He wipes the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. 'No problem. Give the Hunter a kick from me.'

She doesn't bother replying to his remark. The feud between the Nomad and Hunters is a part of life in the Sector. It's a given, just like day and night. Luckily, Desyl and Lucan ensure her relationship with Bray doesn't cause any problems for her. She pauses as she gets to the top of the loading ramp. A group of Nomad and colonists are gathered at the bottom, engrossed in conversation.

As she approaches, they stop talking. They always seem to do that when she's around. She smiles and greets them as she walks past.

Once they think she's out of earshot, the murmur of conversation continues. She knows they're talking about Gryffin — wondering where he is, whether he's coming back, what happened to him? They don't fall silent to disrespect her, quite the opposite. They're respecting her need to distance herself from the memories.

Gryffin is the topic of many conversations around the base. Bar a select few, most of the inhabitants have never actually seen him. To them, he was this entity that arrived in his ship, did what had to be done, and then left again. They all knew the stories. They all knew what he was like and what he was capable of. He was like a mystery figure — a myth. The silent threat of him was always there. You stepped out of line, attacked a colony, did something someone didn't like, you knew there was a possibility he would be sent after you. It helped to forge his reputation and the myth surrounding him, which in turn helped to ensure the safety of the colonies he protected.

She's heard the stories about him. Apart from a few embellishments, she fully believes most of them. It's not difficult to think of Gryffin being able to fight his way out of any situation he was in.

As a result, a lot of people don't believe he's actually dead. Someone like that, with that myth, that reputation — they don't just die. They don't think of him as a flesh and blood man, but as an indestructible cyborg. They hadn't seen what Terra had on the freighter though.

She squeezes her eyes shut as the image of his torn, bloody body hits her. They didn't see the large hole in his chest. They didn't see the blood pouring out of his body, to gather in a puddle on the floor. They didn't see the grey hue of his skin as he lost more and more blood. They didn't see his eye dull as death called to him.

If they knew all that, they'd lose the hope his reputation kept alive. For the moment, they're happy to bury their heads in the sand. Even though the freighter exploded, they still couldn't believe he was dead.

Terra knew there's no way he could have survived his injuries, let alone the explosion. His human side couldn't come through that.

She steps out of the cool base into the Ultaran sun. The warmth is a pleasant relief to the chill deep in her bones. Thinking about what happened on the freighter always left her cold. The sun helps to warm her a little, but the chill still remains deep within her.

For a while, the truth of his demise threatened to overwhelm her. She fought against the attraction to Bray, against the connection between them, the comfort he offered. But she could only fight for so long. Over time, she realised she needed him and she wanted to be with him. He was the one ray of light that managed to break through the crippling grief constantly surrounding her. He never pushed her — he was just there for her. He would stop by her room regularly with a tray of food, with a drink, or just to have a chat. Apart from Milla and Roman, she couldn't talk to anyone like she could talk to him

He was easy, uncomplicated. Unlike his brother. But they were very similar in other ways. Both are... were strong, imposing, unyielding men that could more than take care of themselves. But unlike Gryffin, Bray is not afraid or unable to express his emotions. Terra knows he cares about her. He's told her he does enough times. And she's told him the same. They talk like normal people do. He'd ask her a question, she'd answer, ask him one in return and he'd answer. There was no dodging questions, no abrupt and aggressive attempt to stop the conversation. She knows about his childhood. She knows where he grew up. About the death of his parents. About living with his grandparents on one of the border colonies. She knows how he felt when they died. How he took the wrong path in life and ended up in the prison where Avoca eventually found him. She knows about his life on *Perses* and how much he loves being a Hunter. She knows every detail.

She could never have that with Gryffin. Apart from her father, no one knows what happened to him when he was a child. How did he

vanish from Earth and reappear out here? People have asked, but he never answered. She laughs and shakes her head. She doesn't actually know anything about Gryffin — not really. It sounds silly when she admits it to herself. Bray shared more with her in one day than Gryffin ever did with her. It doesn't make sense for him to have this affect on her.

She nods to herself and walks through the trees towards the village. When put like that, it's hard to justify her extreme reaction. Clinging to the weak reasoning, she picks up the pace — her boyfriend is waiting for her.

∞

'What's the problem?'

Desyl points to an unknown signal on the screen. 'We picked it up about ten minutes ago. It's a small craft, heavily damaged and only operating on ten-percent power. There may not be anyone still alive in there. Could explain why there's no response.'

Roman examines the small craft on the screen. 'Don't suppose you recognise the design?'

Desyl shakes his head. 'There's no such thing as 'designs' out here.'

Roman grunts. It was a stupid question. He looks at the large clock on the wall. '*Nemesis* is due within the hour. Get Chayse to pick it up on the way here. He's not to take any chances though. This could be a trap.'

Desyl contacts Chayse and relays the order while Roman organises security teams to meet the ships when they arrive.

'Contact Aleena and tell her to get everyone inside, just in case.' Desyl nods and activates his radio. Roman hopes there will be no need for all the security, but with things the way there are in the Sector, caution is certainly advised. Over the last few months, many transports and larger ships have come to Ultar. Some were seeking refuge, but more than a few seemed intent on destroying the colony. It didn't help that there are ridiculous rumours that Gryffin is being

hidden on the surface. Many colonies put a bounty on his head after what he did. Unfortunately, with the situation so unstable, there are many groups eager to either destroy Gryffin once and for all or to cash in on the bounty.

Everything is ready when they get word the battleship and the mysterious craft have arrived. Roman and a security detail consisting of Nomad, Hunters, Foundation and Ultrans, arm themselves and make their way to the surface. The large steel doors slide open and he squints as the sunlight hits his eyes. The team makes their way to the large field to the South of the base. A year ago, the field was used to graze cattle, now it serves as a landing zone for the ever growing fleet of ships gathering on Ultar.

He glances up as the sound of engines disturbs the otherwise peaceful surroundings. *Nemesis* breaks the cloud cover and hovers over the field. The sun glints off her hull, highlighting the large purple griffin marking her as a Nomad vessel. Roman activates his radio. ‘Chayse, welcome back. We’re in position.’

The thick steel tethers extend from under *Nemesis* and slowly lowers the smaller craft onto the ground. The large locks release the transport and withdraw back into the ship. Roman gestures to the team and they surround the ship. He shields his eyes from the dust and debris thrown up by *Nemesis*’ powerful engines as she comes in to land at the far side of the field. Her engines shut down and the sudden silence is strange after the roar of her engines.

The ramp lowers and Chayse steps on to the surface. He jogs up to Roman with a team from *Nemesis*. Roman shakes his hand and nods towards the battered transport. ‘No need to bring a gift, Chayse.’

The young Nomad smiles. ‘Yeah, well we don’t know if it’s a gift yet. Probably best to hold off thanking me.’ He pulls out a gun from his belt. ‘Ready?’

Once everyone is in place, Desyl opens the back of the transport. The hatch shudders and slowly lowers to the ground. The ship’s

internal alarms sound as the back opens. Lucan and Chayse slowly move into the ship, constantly scanning the interior for any signs of trouble, while Desyl and Roman remain outside. Lucan covers Chayse as he approaches the cockpit. He spins around the corner, his gun raised in front of him. ‘What the hell?’

Roman, Desyl and Lucan cautiously approach to join Chayse at the front of the vessel. Roman’s breath catches in his throat when he sees the pilot slumped in the seat. ‘Gryffin?’

Chayse holds him back as he tries to get closer. ‘Don’t go near him.’

Roman pulls his arm from Chayse’s grip. ‘What are you talking about? He’s hurt.’

Chayse pushes Roman back into the main body of the ship. His pale blue eyes lock with Roman’s. ‘Think for one minute. Nearly a year with no sightings, no intel. Not a damn thing. Then out of the blue he arrives here by himself, all wrapped up in a neat ship — a little convenient, don’t you think?’

Lucan joins them in the back of the ship. He drapes an arm over a seat and gestures towards the cockpit. ‘Chayse is right,’ Lucan says. ‘He’s in a bad way. Can’t see how he’d pilot this ship like that. No harm in checking his programming just to be sure — for everyone’s sake. The Foundation have already programmed him to kill us once. Not a stretch to think they’d do the same again.’

Roman looks over Lucan’s shoulder at the cockpit. The unnerving and unfamiliar emotional pull towards his son is powerful, but common sense is breaking through. It is a little too convenient. ‘Very well. Take whatever resources you need. If his programming is clear, I want him off this ship and with Milla as soon as possible.’

Even though every fibre of his being is telling him that he needs to stay on the ship, he forces himself to turn and walk down the ramp, leaving Gryffin with Chayse and Lucan. These Nomad are two of Gryffin’s most trusted men. He’s in safe hands.

Milla pushes through the gathering crowd. News of Gryffin's apparent rising from the dead has flown through the village faster than she thought possible. Not gaining much ground, Milla stops. 'Would you all get out of my way!' Her outburst has the desired effect. The crowd divides to allow her a clear path to the ship. 'Thank you.' She locates Roman at the bottom of the ramp. His usual confident presence is gone leaving him looking lost. She rushes over to him and places a hand on his arm to get his attention. 'Sir, I just got word. Is it him?'

Roman nods solemnly. 'Chayse and Lucan want to be sure he's not... I don't know... booby trapped I guess.'

'Is he awake? Is he in one piece? How did he get here?'

Roman holds up his hands to stop her rapid-fire questions. 'All I know is that he's badly injured and unconscious — at least I hope he's unconscious and not...I don't even know if he's alive. The life support in the ship failed. I know his implants can keep him alive, but we have no way of knowing how long he's been in there. There's so much blood, Milla. Can the implants help with blood loss?'

'I honestly don't know, sir. Without examining him, I really can't say.' She looks over his shoulder and sees Aleena hurrying towards them. 'Stay with Aleena. I'll see what's going on.' She steps into the ship, but Chayse jumps up from the floor of the cockpit and stops her from getting near. 'Stop right there, Milla'

'Let me help.'

'You're not going anywhere near him until I know he's safe to be around.'

She squeezes his hand. 'I'm a big girl, Chayse. Please let me be here for you, for him.'

His cool blue eyes bore into her, but she stands her ground. He finally looks away and shakes his head. 'Fine. I know I'm wasting my breath.' He kisses her briefly. 'Hi, by the way.'

She smiles at him. 'Hi back.' He takes her hand and leads her into

the cockpit. If not for the recognisable implants, she wouldn't have known the pilot is Gryffin. He is slumped in the pilot seat, leaning against the side wall of the ship. Blood soaked, dirty, once white scrubs hang off his painfully thin body. Wires snake out from the centre of a new eyepiece and disappear into his matted hair. Every bit of exposed skin is discoloured with heavy bruising and large cuts, and his metal arm is missing. 'My God. Where is the blood coming from?'

Instead of answering, Chayse leans over and slowly peels Gryffin's top up. Milla swallows deeply at the sight of sodden bandages struggling to keep his chest together. 'He piloted the ship like that? I need him in theatre. Now, Chayse.'

He holds on to the back of the chair to block her path. 'No, Milla. Lucan is nearly finished.'

'Look at him, Chayse. He'll die before that. Gryffin is unconscious. What exactly is he going to do in that state?'

'Look around you! You've seen what he can do first hand. The Ultrans have suffered enough. Until we know for sure that he hasn't been programmed to finish what he started here, he doesn't move from this ship. Understood?'

"Understood?" Seriously? You're even starting to sound like Gryffin. Well, at least let me bandage his chest and try to stem the blood flow. Or would you prefer to kneel in it while you test him.'

Chayse lets go of the chair and allows Milla to squeeze by him. She removes all the bandages from her kit and opens the packages. Ideally, she'd remove his top and clean the wound first but it would be a futile act. He needs surgery, not a flimsy bandage. Instead, she instructs Chayse to support his weight while she places all the padding she has with her over his chest and wraps the bandage around his upper torso. Within seconds of laying him back in the chair, the blood seeps through the fresh bandages. 'This is ridiculous. He's going to bleed dry at this rate.'

'Almost there,' Lucan replies. He rises to his feet and hands the

tablet to Chayse. 'From what I can see, his programming has been altered a lot, but nothing that's going to stab us in the back. I hope.'

'Not filling me with confidence,' Chayse grumbles.

Lucan wipes his bloody hands on his trousers. 'It's the best I can do in here and right now. Milla's right, it's time to get him patched up.'

Chayse stares down at his former captain for a minute, saying nothing.

Milla stands in front of him and attempts her best stern face. She understands his hesitation but that's not going to do Gryffin any good. He's alive, but that can all change in the space of a few minutes unless they act now. 'Chayse, he's going to die. He's back after what... ten months! Are you really going to let him bleed out?'

She can see his internal battle written clearly on his face, but he nods once. 'Bring him in. Take his implants offline as soon as you get him in the med bay. Use an isolated system to support him until we can do a full systems check.'

Milla calls for a gurney as Chayse and Lucan carry Gryffin into the back of the shuttle. Milla drapes a sheet over Gryffin to hide him from the onlookers before her team hurries towards the underground tunnels with their precious cargo.

She can't quite get her head around Gryffin's sudden appearance. They spent months wishing he would come back. And suddenly here he is — like the miracle they all need. It's all a little too convenient.

# 5

The Scientist slowly walks around the examination table. He picks up the anaesthetic mask and squeezes it in his hand. ‘How did he get out of the state of the art restraints?’

The technician fidgets with the cuff of his lab coat and swallows deeply. ‘I secured him well. The catches seem to have been broken.’

‘But how did he break them if they were strengthened by the power to the table? He either wasn’t secured sufficiently or he somehow managed to break the restraints when he was suddenly overcome by a surge of strength. Now, considering the procedures he’s been through over the last few months, I find that incredibly difficult to believe. Was the table powered?’

‘Of course!’

‘So, he wasn’t sufficiently restrained.’

‘I... I don’t know how—’

The Scientist places a hand on the man’s trembling shoulder. ‘Well, how about I give you thirty minutes to find out how my most

prized possession escaped on your watch.’ He leaves the technician and slowly strolls through the prison. Years ago, the facility was the main prison used by the Foundation, but concerns about prisoner wellbeing had forced them to shut it down and build a newer one in Foundation space. Prisoner wellbeing. The Scientist nearly laughs out loud at that. The notion is ridiculous.

He enters what’s left of the transport bay and steps over the body of one of the security guards.

‘How many test subjects were destroyed?’

Forty-Three climbs off a mound of rubble and approaches his creator. ‘Twenty-one.’

The Scientist can feel the anger build in his body, but pushes it aside. Losing his temper will do nothing to help the situation. ‘How long will it take to repair what the prototype did?’

‘Unknown at the moment. There is extensive damage. I estimate a month.’

‘Pack up. We’ll move to the new facility. We’ll just have to make do while the building work is being finished. Any remaining subjects are to be there within the day. We cannot afford to lose any time because of this. I doubt the Foundation will appreciate a delay of any kind — no matter how valid. Once you’ve organised everything, I want you down in the lab. You’re no good to me with a damaged eye.’

Forty-Three nods once and then turns to carry out his orders. The Scientist leaves the transport bay and the carnage behind. This whole situation is laughable. The prototype was weakened considerably by the examinations, yet he still succeeded in breaking his bonds, killing twelve security personnel, twenty-one cyborgs and stealing a craft. It is a setback, but it’s also a great achievement. The modifications he made to Thirty-Five clearly helped him in his escape. While a regular man would have died or accepted their fate at some stage during the examinations, Thirty-Five fought back and won. This round anyway.

There is too much at stake for him just to walk away and let his

main project have a happy life. He enters his personal quarters and sits down on his bed. He picks a picture of Maggie off his bedside table and runs his finger tenderly down her cheek. She is going to be so disappointed in him. He let her son escape. He places the picture back on the table and removes his glasses.

He's so close to saving her. So close to having her with him again, but time is running out. A person can only survive in a stasis pod for so long. Eventually, they will succumb to death. If he can't figure out how to incorporate an implant with an organic brain, he won't be able to help her. He rises to his feet and walks across the concrete floor to his personal computer on the desk. The situation is infuriating him.

He closely studied Maggie's son for months. Every single implant was scanned and tested — whether outside his body or inside. He knows every intimate detail of the prototype's body. The position of all his implants, the colour and length of every piece of wiring, the locations of each of his scars. He knows it all except for one valuable detail. How he has survived all the procedures. Physically, there's nothing special about the young man. He was a late addition to the project and he was just used to test the implants before they were fitted to the main subjects. There was no anaesthetic used, no fancy stitching or aftercare of any kind. He should have died after the first operation.

He calls up the project files and scans through the lists of test subjects. Dozens of healthy young prisoners were tested and all of them failed. What is it about the prototype that makes him different? The other men are the same age group, they're all strong and fit, but it doesn't make the slightest difference. They all die after having the control implant fitted. It's the one critical piece of the technology and he can't get it to work without killing the subject. There's no way he can risk fitting it to Maggie if he keeps getting results like this.

He examines Thirty-Five's file and comes to an uneasy conclusion. He is going to have to disappoint Maggie. He can't save her without

sacrificing her son. If he is to succeed, he needs to remove the control implant from the prototype. It's the only sure way of replicating and improving on his original design. The procedure will kill the prototype, but it will also bring him closer to saving her.

His mood lightens slightly. He checks his watch. Thirty minutes have passed since he left the lab. Time to speak to his technician again.

∞

Terra slides out from under the console and wipes her hands on the hem of her shirt. 'Try it again.'

The Nomad working on the comms system with her nods and activates the computer. 'Still no power, Commander.'

'Seriously?' She pulls herself to her feet and examines the readings on the monitor. Terra rubs her tired eyes and leans closer to the screen. *Ares* is the bane of her life. Even though she spends every spare minute on the ship, there always seems to be something else that needs attention. If they were in a Foundation space dock, the ship would have been finished months ago, but with little resources and antiquated diagnostic equipment, the process is painfully slow. It also doesn't help that *Ares* is a mix of so many different systems and modified parts from countless ships. It's a hard enough job just figuring out what everything does let alone try to fix it.

She ignores her Nomad companion and stares at the screen. She hates being here. Hates the feelings that stir to the surface whenever she's on board. When the decision was made to rebuild *Ares*, she thought she'd be safe. The Nomad don't let women on their ships, so naturally she assumed that also included having woman on the repair team. Unfortunately, Aleena convinced Desyl otherwise. *Ares* has to be in the air as soon as possible. In order to do that, they had to drop the 'no woman' rule. That decision placed her in command of the repair crew. Just her luck.

Terra traces her finger along the path of the connection and taps

the screen. 'There. I must have missed something on this path. I can't think of anywhere else the issue can be.' She lowers to the floor and slides back under the unit. 'Next time Desyl feels like crashing *Ares* into the ground, tell him to do it with a little less force.'

The Nomad officer laughs. 'Will do. Never thought we'd get her flying again. When I saw her buried in the field, I was sure that was the end for her.'

'So did I. If she was in Foundation space, we wouldn't even have bothered stripping her for scrap.'

He shakes his head. 'Never an option. The Nomad would never scrap *Ares*. She's Gryffin's ship.'

Terra flinches at the mention of his name, but recovers quickly. 'Yeah, well you're lucky she was salvageable. Might not have had a choice.' Terra holds out her hand. 'Pass me the hammer.' He places it in her hand and she beats it against the underside of the console a few times.

'Gentle female touch, huh?'

'Whatever works. Try it again.'

There is silence for a moment then the ship's intercom system crackles to life. 'At long last. Good work, Commander.'

She slides out and takes his offered hand. 'Right, mark that one off the list. If anyone breaks the system again I don't want to know about it. How long is the repair list now?'

He flicks through page after page on the screen. 'Just one or two... pages. Next on the list is the comms panel in the captain's quarters. Your team mentioned a time delay on incoming messages.'

Great, Gryffin's quarters. Just where she wants to be right now. Terra pushes her shoulders back, but her reaction hasn't been missed. His eyes soften. 'You know what, I can handle that myself.'

'No. Let's go.'

They pack up their gear and step out of the room and straight into Desyl. 'There you are, Commander.'

‘Everything all right?’

‘He’s here. Gryffin’s here.’

∞

‘How is he?’

Milla closes the door behind her and turns to face Roman. Chayse leans against the closed door and drapes an arm over Milla’s shoulder. Milla takes a deep breath. ‘Well, the good news is that he’s alive. That in itself is a pretty big miracle. I honestly can’t begin to imagine how he did it, but he piloted the shuttle with a full neck to waist incision. They cut him right through his muscle, and only put one quick line of sutures in. We had to go in and put him back together.’

Roman swallows deeply and clears his throat. ‘Do you know what else they did to him?’

She consults her unit and sighs. ‘He’s malnourished, dehydrated, has numerous surgical incisions and newly healed fractures to three ribs, his left arm and left eye socket. He has deep lesions on his wrist and ankles from presumably being restrained. The collar Terra described is still around his neck, but the explosive side has been deactivated. We’re still figuring out a way to remove it. There’s also severe tissue damage to the flesh above and below the new metal thigh. From what I can tell, his body is rejecting the modification, but I really need to examine it in more detail once he’s cleaned up. Add all that to the trauma of numerous operations, including what we had to do to him today and he’s in serious condition.’

Roman licks his dry lips and crosses his arms to stop them from shaking. He has never felt more ashamed and disgusted to be associated with the group responsible for those injuries. ‘And his implants?’

Chayse examines his boots. ‘It’s still early in our testing.’ When he looks back up at Roman, he can clearly see the anger in the Nomad’s eyes. Some of that is directed at him. Chayse has never fully moved

on from the fact that Roman was the one to physically hand Gryffin over. Not that he can blame Chayse. It's not something he will ever forgive himself for. In his own eyes, he's as responsible for what's happened as the Foundation is. 'His arm was removed a while ago. Probably after he disappeared. Luckily Lucan found it under the seat in the shuttle.'

'Can you reattach it?'

Chayse shakes his head. 'Not yet. There's a chain welded to the connectors. Until that's removed and the arm is tested and repaired, we can't do anything. Your people clearly examined him regularly and aggressively.'

'They're not my people anymore.'

Anger flashes in Chayse's eyes. 'That doesn't wipe your slate clean.'

Milla stands in front of Chayse and places a hand at either side of his face. She forces him to look at her instead of Roman. 'Hey, blame won't help Gryffin. We have enough to do already without wasting energy on things we can do nothing to change.' He slowly nods before Milla releases him.

'As I was saying, he's had some alterations. His eye is the noticeable one. They replaced the eye that was destroyed on the freighter with a plate that fits inside the original implant. It looks like the optic on the centre works like an eye. Until he wakes up there's not much more I can tell you about it. Like Milla said, there's a lot going wrong with his metal leg. Don't know what they were thinking, but it's really messed up. We should be able to make some adjustments, but it may be a lost cause. As for the internal components, the Foundation did him a few favours.'

Roman frowns. 'Excuse me?'

'When I joined *Ares* as Gryffin's aide, I was given access to some of his medical records. According to these reports, Gryffin has always suffered episodes of severe pain in the tissue surrounding his implants. He'd get a searing burst that would last for a minute or so.'

It was random and usually affected his head, but he got them in all the implants occasionally. Klay couldn't figure out a way to help.' Chayse snorts and shakes his head. 'Can't say if he was actually trying or not though. Anyway, after checking the scan data over the last few months, we were able to figure out that the pain was caused by overloads in the old implants. They weren't designed with the... host body taken into account. From what I can tell, everything except the main control implant in his head has been upgraded. Hopefully, that will reduce the pain. Lucan is still checking his programming, but it's a mess. Our initial examination doesn't show any changes that will cause problems, but there have been upgrades.'

Roman runs a hand over his hair. 'I don't understand? I thought they wanted to — what did Avoca say? — finish him. Apart from minor alterations, what exactly did they take him for?'

Chayse shakes his head. 'Looks like he was just examined.'

'Examined?'

Milla nods. 'There's severe damage to his chest around his implant. He was definitely opened quite a few times. I agree with Chayse. There was a lot of poking around inside him, but not a lot actually done.' She shakes her head. 'A whole lot of pain and suffering, and for what? I know I'm a doctor and I shouldn't say this, but they deserve a taste of their own medicine.'

Roman grunts. 'Couldn't agree more. Will he wake up?'

Milla sighs. 'I really can't say, sir. His body has had to depend on the implants over the last few months just to keep him going. They weren't designed for that, so I have no idea what it's done to his body.'

'Can I see him?'

'Of course.'

She leads Roman into the room and waits at the door as he steps closer to his son. He pauses beside the bed and his shoulders slump. 'Why do you need all these monitors?'

'Just a precaution,' Chayse explains. 'We've hooked Gryffin up to

the system temporarily. The computer at the head of the bed is supporting and running his internal implants. I'm bypassing the main programming in his brain until I can properly examine the implants. After what happened last year, it's for our safety as much as Gryffin's.'

'How long will it take him to check his programing?'

'I'm working through it with Lucan. The system won't be able to support Gryffin for too long. We've probably got about twenty-four hours until we have to unhook him.'

'What about the implant mod?' Roman asks Chayse. 'Will you be able to fit it?'

He shrugs. 'Technically yes. We don't quite have a working model yet, but with him actually here, it should speed things along.' Chayse nods towards Gryffin. 'I have to get back to his programming. He needs to come off those computers ASAP so we don't damage him.'

Roman nods, dismissing him. Before he leaves, Chayse kisses Milla. 'See you in a bit.'

Once he's gone, Milla steps up to Roman. 'With the greatest respect, sir, no one is cutting my patient's head open. Do you hear me?'

'Doctor—'

Milla holds up her hand. 'Don't you doctor me, Captain. It's far too early to even consider that. We have no way of sedating him. Do you really want to put him through that while he's conscious?'

'He's not conscious, Doctor, that's my point. Surely it's best to fit it now while he's still out. It's not something we can ignore, Milla. As long as that control implant is open to new programming, he's a threat. Anyone can take control of him and use him as a weapon. Chayse's mod needs to be fitted — for Gryffin's safety as much as ours.'

'I understand that, sir, but there's no way he'd survive brain surgery in his current state. He's been tortured for months. Is he not entitled to a break? I'm not going to put him through that, not yet.'

Roman makes a non-committal grunt. 'I understand what you're saying, Doctor, but this has to happen. He doesn't leave here until that procedure is carried out. It's going to be difficult enough to integrate him back into the fold after what's happened. At least if the mod is fitted, people may be more inclined to trust him.'

'So, he has to have brain surgery in order for ex-Foundation members to trust him.' She mutters a curse under her breath. 'Excuse me, sir, but that's pretty shite if you ask me.'

Roman wants to respond to her harsh comment, but he doesn't disagree with her. She's hit the nail on the head in her own unique way. It's not fair, but neither is the alternative. At the moment, Gryffin's future isn't secure. As impersonal as it sounds, without that mod, he is a weapon. Plain and simple. 'After seeing first-hand what he's capable of, what someone in control of him is capable of, we can't risk not fitting it.' He steps closer to Gryffin's bed. 'I don't want this any more than you do, but it's happening. That's an order, Doctor.'

Milla glares at him but slowly nods. 'Yes, sir.'

'Thank you. Chayse is leaving in a couple of days. You'll need to fit the mod while he's still here. Keep me posted.' He looks at his son one last time then leaves before he changes his mind.

# 6

Terra lifts her head into the spray, hoping the hot water will wash away some of the unwelcome feelings threatening to consume her. After she ran from *Ares*, she had picked the first person she saw in the training room and worked out until she could barely stand any longer.

He can't be alive — not really. Not after all this time. She increases the water temperature. The freighter had exploded. She watched the footage often enough to know it was true. Even Gryffin couldn't have removed the explosive collar and made it to a transport in time to escape. He had a gaping hole in his chest from the fight. Without medical attention he wouldn't have had a hope. Gryffin still being alive doesn't make sense. It must be a mistake. It has to be.

Strong arms circle her waist. 'You okay?'

She turns to face Bray and smiles. She wraps her arms around him then reaches up to kiss him while dragging him into the cubicle with her.

'Hold on, Terra, we need to talk.'

She runs her hand along the side of his face to trace the line of the small piece of metal from the corner of his eye to his ear. 'No.' She pulls at his shirt, but he takes her wrists in his hands.

'I'm serious, Terra.'

She wrestles her hands free and grabs a towel off the rail beside the stall. 'We don't need to talk.'

Bray leans against the sink and crosses his arms. 'You just found out Gryffin's still alive. Of course we damn well need to talk.'

Terra slips into her robe and roughly ties the belt. She pushes past Bray and stands in front of the mirror to brush her hair. After a few minutes of silence, he sits on the edge of the bed and clasps his hands on his knees. 'He's alive, Terra.'

'Yeah, I heard. The news is all over the base. You'd swear the Foundation had disappeared overnight.'

'You can't blame people for talking. He was dead.'

She angrily pulls the brush through her hair. 'I know that!'

'I'm worried about you, okay? You've had to deal with a lot over the last few months. What with your father, being trapped in the Sector, the Foundation, Gryffin dying and now this. I'd be surprised if you aren't a little, I don't know... off. I mean you were in love with him. This has to—'

'We don't talk about my father. Ever,' she addresses his reflection in the mirror. 'As for Gryffin, it was a one-way thing. I've told you enough times that there was never anything tangible with him. I'm with you Bray. You. The fact that he's now alive doesn't change a

thing.’

He looks down at the worn wooden floor and sighs. ‘Listen, I know you and my brother have a history. I get that. Whatever there was between you... it ended abruptly. It’s only normal for some feelings to resurface now that he’s back.’

She throws her brush on the bed and searches for a pair of trousers. ‘Normal? What’s normal about any of this? He died, Bray. We all mourned him and moved on with our lives.’ She stuffs her feet into the legs and pulls on a pair of black combat boots. ‘What about you?’

Bray frowns. ‘Me?’

‘Gryffin is your long-lost big brother. You got him back for what, a few hours, before he died... again. Surely you must have some feelings about his return?’

Bray scowls and crosses his arms. ‘We’re not talking about me. As far as I’m concerned he’s a stranger. Nothing has changed for me either way.’

Terra randomly picks a shirt from the drawer and ties her hair back in a messy bun. ‘Yeah, well it’s the same answer for me. He made his decision when he stayed on the freighter. As far as I’m concerned, he can stay dead.’

She slams the door behind her, ending the conversation.

∞

‘Roman just told me you’re leaving. When were you going to tell me?’

Chayse excuses the three Nomad with him at the bottom of the loading ramp leading to *Nemesis* and turns to face Milla. ‘Can you try to be professional when my crew are around? It’s hard enough trying to keep everything together without you speaking to me like that.’

Milla crosses her arms and glares up at him. ‘Professional? Forget

that! We're supposed to be in a relationship. Do you know what that means?'

He turns from her and climbs the ramp. 'I don't have time for this, Milla.'

She races up the ramp and stops in his path. 'With the greatest respect, Captain, make the time. What in the blazes is going on with you?'

His icy blue eyes refuse to meet hers. '*Nemesis* is needed along the border.'

She jabs her finger in his chest. 'You're running away! Why?'

Chayse glances around the cargo bay at his men. She couldn't care less about his reputation at the moment. 'Forget them and talk to me. Gryffin's back. That's a pretty big deal. I don't understand why you want to leave as soon as you can. I don't get it.'

He finally locks on to her eyes. 'Just because he's back doesn't mean I get to relax. It'll be weeks, months before he'll be any use to us. Until then, *Nemesis* has a job to do.'

Milla frowns and shakes her head. 'Any use to us? He's your friend not a computer. What's changed in the last few days?'

'Nothing. I have work to do.'

She grabs his arm and leads him to the corner away from prying eyes. 'I don't buy that for one minute. You don't go from practically idolising someone to turning your back on them at the first opportunity. Do you not think you should fill him in on what's been going on? Tell him about Klay and how he was behind the mysterious attacks and malfunctions. He deserves to hear that from you.'

Chayse looks towards *Nemesis* and shakes his head. 'Everything is recorded on the system for him.'

'Heaven forbid you actually talk to him. That would just be too much,' she replies sarcastically. She turns away from him and looks

up at the ceiling. ‘You and Terra are as bad as each other.’ She faces him again and steps closer. ‘If it didn’t go against my oath as a doctor, I’d quite happily beat some sense into the two of you. The way you’re behaving is bloody ridiculous. Yes, he’s indirectly responsible for a lot of deaths, but you’ve been defending him all along. You’ve been the constant voice of reason, pushing the fact that he had no control over what the Foundation programmed him to do. You’re the unofficial leader. You should be the one to talk to him.’

‘Leader? I’ve done a great job, haven’t I! The Nomad don’t exist anymore! We’re hiding in the shadows like vermin. That happened on my watch, Milla.’ She rests her hand on his arm but he pulls away from her comforting touch. ‘Don’t, Milla. He trusted me with this and now there’s nothing left.’

‘Chayse, what happened to the Nomad is not your fault. It was a mix of, well, what Gryffin unintentionally did, the colonists’ reaction to that and the Foundation. I doubt Gryffin himself could have done anything about it. You can’t think he’s going to blame you for everything.’

He runs a hand over his blond spikes. ‘You don’t understand, Milla. The Nomad are the most important thing to him. *Nemesis* was a life line — something to save the Nomad. I’ve done the exact opposite.’

‘You’re looking at this from the wrong angle. *Nemesis* did exactly what she was meant to do. Ultar is safe and the Foundation haven’t been able to get a hold on the Sector.’

He laughs and shakes his head. ‘That’s down to blind luck. Milla, I haven’t got a clue what I’m doing. What was he thinking putting me in charge? I was his aide.’

‘He believed in you. Believed in your commitment to the Nomad.’

‘Yeah, well, I’ve only got Aleena’s word that Gryffin chose me

because he really believed in me. Why didn't he try to find some way to block any modifications to his programming? I could have helped with that. None of this had to happen.'

'Maybe he thought nothing could be done about his programming. In his eyes, *Nemesis* was the only solution he could find.'

'He knew full well that I'm an engineer. Of all the people on *Ares*, I was the best one to find another solution.'

'I don't have the answers for you. But, luckily, the man who does is in bed along the corridor from here. When he wakes up you can ask him.'

'Are you crazy? I can't face him.'

'For the love of-' Milla mutters under her breath. 'Why not?'

'I let him down. When he died, the fleet looked to me for leadership. I went from being an aide to a captain and I blew it.'

She shakes her head quickly, loosening some locks of hair from their tie. 'No you didn't! I really think you should stay until he wakes up. Everything could be cleared up in one conversation.'

'You've met Gryffin, right?'

She raises her eyebrows and nods. 'Fair point. I just don't want you to race away from here thinking the wrong thing. I seriously doubt he'll blame you for any of this. Please stay. I'm sure he'll be grateful to see a friendly face when he wakes up.'

'Yeah, well that's not me, not when he finds out what I did to the Nomad. I'll help you fit the mod, then *Nemesis* is leaving.'

Before she can muster a reply he turns and walks away from her without another word. She stares at his retreating back, barely resisting the urge to throw something at him.

∞

The head of the Foundation Council clasps his hands behind his back as he surveys the city through the reinforced glass. It had taken

him ten years to work up to the illustrious title of One. The rest of the Council would turn to him for the final word on all main decisions. From an early age, he knew his future lay with the Foundation Council. Academically, he suited the role perfectly. His parents were delighted when, at the age of seven, the school made it official and entered the role against his name in the database. Dozens of names were entered but only twelve were selected.

Although he wants nothing more than to celebrate the promotion with his family and friends, they can never know. The identities of council members must remain a secret to protect their relatives. All meetings and public addresses take place behind a mask. Remaining incognito makes him feel powerful. While wearing the mask, he can make decisions that will directly impact millions of people. Then, at the end of the day, he can go home to spend a pleasant evening with his wife — the perfect balance.

He turns away from the view and settles behind his large wooden desk. One runs his hand along the solid gold edging and leans back in his leather chair. A small light flashes on his screen and pulls him back to his job. He opens the message. It's a report from a Foundation ship stationed in the Outer Sector. He scans through the message and his good mood melts away. *Infinity* has been causing trouble for them again.

Stationing *Infinity* in the Outer Sector had been his idea. If he brought the lawless region under Foundation control it would assure him a place with the great leaders of the past. At the time, he trusted *Infinity* would meet little resistance. What resistance could the Sector offer with inferior, old ships, barely any weapons, and no recognisable structure to speak of? But, they proved him wrong.

Then things deteriorated when *Infinity* was stolen from the group. Losing the ship is a greater inconvenience than losing the personnel.

People can be replaced easily. The ship, however, is a different story. When Roman was given her command, she had just left the space dock. One clenches his fist tightly on the top of his desk. By commandeering *Infinity*, Roman had earned his place under the Nomad leader on the Foundation wanted list.

He thought time would help ease the feeling of betrayal and anger at Roman's actions, but it had the opposite effect. Roman continues to parade around the Sector in a Foundation ship. How dare he! *Infinity* is fitted with state of the art trackers and sensors. Or at least it was. Roman must have had outside help to disable them. A state of the art vessel disappeared and there's nothing he can do about it.

Time is running out for him. At the moment his great plans don't seem as great. Instead of turning the colonies, they are joining to fight against the Foundation. He needs those colonies under Foundation control. The populace expects him to deliver.

He takes a deep breath. The smell of his expensive leather chair fills his nostrils. He deserves this role and he will not let a rogue captain and a defective cyborg destroy everything.

∞

Terra sighs loudly and drops the tablet on the bed — Gryffin's bed. Well, technically it's Desyl's bed now. He's the captain so presumably this will be his room now.

'You okay, Commander?'

She turns to find Bray leaning against the doorframe. 'Yeah. Just can't get this antiquated system operating again. What are you doing here?'

He shoves his hands in the pockets of his navy combats and shrugs. 'Just thought I'd see how you are.'

Terra forces what she hopes is a convincing smile on her face. 'I'm good. I'll be glad when we sign *Ares* off as being fit for duty.'

Bray steps across the threshold and brushes a lock of hair behind her ear. ‘You know that’s not what I mean. I don’t want to argue with you. I care about you, Terra. That gives me the right to be worried.’

She squeezes his hand. ‘I’m sorry I acted the way I did. I guess I’m just tired. Seriously, Bray, there’s nothing to worry about. Well, apart from the comms system on *Ares*.’

Even though he doesn’t look convinced he nods and bends down to kiss her. She can’t explain why she turns her face slightly so he kisses her cheek instead. The hurt is visible in his eyes as he pulls his hand back and steps away. Without a word, he turns and disappears down the corridor, his footsteps fading as he moves away from her.

Terra slumps on to the edge of the bed, suddenly not caring who it belonged or belongs to. What is wrong with her? She has an amazing man like Bray in her life and she’s still not happy. She should leave the past in the past and focus on planning a future with him.

She glances around the empty room and her heart aches. Over the months, she thought Bray had managed to fill the void left by Gryffin. Until the Nomad leader crash landed back into her life, she had convinced herself she was over him. Those last few minutes with Gryffin on the freighter play in her mind like a horror movie. “Terra, I can’t go with you.” She didn’t realise at the time how much those six little words would change her life.

“I’m sorry, Terra.” She nearly laughs out loud. Did Gryffin really think that everything would be made whole again with his final words to her? It was Bray who slowly managed to put her back together after Gryffin pulled her apart with his words. She can never forgive Gryffin for that or for giving up on them so easily.

Terra wipes tears from her face before she chastises herself for weeping over him yet again and storms into the bathroom. She splashes cold water on her face and looks at her reflection in the

mirror. Yeah, she looks as horrible as she feels. She knows she should go after Bray and apologise, but she can't face him just yet. She needs to get her own head sorted out before she even attempts to speak to him. The last thing she wants to do is make things worse.

Terra faces her reflection again and grimaces. She's emotionally attached to two brothers. How can it possibly get worse?

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