

THE ANATOMICAL GRIP

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**Abstract**

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Enhanced Agent Brynn's effectiveness is questioned when a mission fails. Tormented by PTSD and family secrets, she must continue to carry out her job as a spy while battling an addiction to the drug that keeps her body from rejecting her cybernetic parts.

Unbeknownst to her, people that she trusts are making their power plays to be the head of the Controllers – the politicians that rule over the governments of the world. A series of attacks befall the capital city of the United Commonwealth as warring factions try to eliminate each other. In the midst of the chaos, Agent Brynn suddenly realizes that the war she has been fighting for her country is more sinister than she could ever realize, and that her family had much more of a part to play that she could ever have imagined.

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## CHAPTER 1 – MISSION FAILED

The man's fist connects with my jaw before I can deflect the strike. The pain radiates out towards the rest of my face and I fall backwards on the floor, spitting blood. I get my feet under me and come back with a blow to his knee. I punch again so that the bone completely breaks and he falls to the ground, screaming in agony.

I take my knife from its holster, yank his hair back and slice his throat. Blood gushes out from the wound, covering my hand.

Gasping for air, I stare at his lifeless body for a long moment. Then I straighten out and pocket my knife. Five lie dead on the floor before me. *Fuck.*

"Valkyrie One-Nine, this is Enhanced Fire Team Three Squad Leader, come in," I call through the earpiece connected to my Retinal Interface.

*"This is Valkyrie One-Nine, Captain."*

"Requesting pick up, ten minutes. You can save your stealth landing," I say, through heavy breaths.

*"Affirmative, Captain. ETA ten minutes till pick up."*

I pick my rifle up from where it lies on the floor, reload the magazine and slam the bolt into the chamber. The Retinal Interface picks up servers on the second floor of the building. I walk out of the room and back through the empty corridor quietly; careful to stop at each intersection to check if there is anyone else I might have missed.

There isn't.

"I got no bodies on my field," I say through the squad's comm channel.

*"Same here, Cap,"* Kai answers.

"Des, you got anything?" I ask, but there's no response.

I get to the elevator and press the button with a B2 on it. As it moves slowly upwards I think about what just happened.

My breathing is unsteadied and my heart is galloping in my chest the way it's not supposed to. My hands are trembling even as I hold my rifle in attack position.

*Smokin' fuck. Shit. What did I do? What did I do?*

The elevator doors open onto level B2 but there is no one here. My infrared scanner would have picked them up a long time ago. Whoever was in this facility is already dead.

The servers on this floor are stored in a dark, cavernous room. It's very cold in order to keep them from overheating and the only light in the room is that which the servers give off themselves. From one of my uniform's front pockets I take out a small information stick and feed it inside the first data terminal I see.

The information stick will find and copy any information still stored on all of these servers. It should be everything they had. We didn't give them much of a chance to destroy any of it.

I stand waiting for the information to upload completely and I notice my hands are twitching. The flashback of the accident still flares inside of my head. Not the entire memory at once, but bits and pieces of it. I gasp as the final image of the memory floods my brain again. I punch the side of the server as hard as I can and it leaves a large dent. The data collection is not harmed and it proceeds for a few more seconds until it beeps, letting me know that all the information has been transferred over.

I yank out the stick harder than I need to and stuff it back inside my front pocket. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “Squad Leader, coming topside,” I say into the comm line.

It’s not until I reach topside that I find Kai – bloody and alert – stowing away guns and knives in her holsters. She’s pointing a gun at me immediately. Lowers it when she realizes it’s me.

“I almost blew your fucking head off,” she says, panting slightly.

“That’s going around,” I say, coming up beside her. “Are you hurt?”

“What do you think, Cap?”

“Where’s Des?” I ask, looking around.

She shakes her head, “Went in after you. Got shot in the head.”

“Shit,” I say, closing my eyes for a brief moment. I sling my rifle across my chest. “I’ll bring him up.”

“Are you sure? Major Nandi’s not gonna want a dead Enhanced on her Bird when we fly back in to Command,” she warns me.

“Like I give a shit what Nandi wants,” I answer, going back towards the elevator. “And he’s not just a dead Enhanced.”

From the outside, this facility is a small, squat grey building that’s been overrun by plants and vegetation.

Biohackers have carved out small bases like these in the middle of nowhere all over the country. Most of the time they set up in the ruins of old cities where there are at least some old monuments that haven’t been swallowed by nature completely. This particular base is located in the ruins of what used to be the city of Pittsburgh.

The history files tell us there used to be thousands of cities in the country, both small and large. Today the country boasts thirty cities. Each contained and equipped to sustain its citizens. Population is strictly controlled, and in order to avoid the catastrophic overpopulation before the Apocalyptic Event, anyone wanting to reproduce needs to register within their respective districts.

I had known Des since before I was drafted into the Biohacking Initiative. We served together during the Four-Year Conflict. My R.I finds him down on level B4, the same floor I had been on just moments before.

Why hadn't he come up on my screen?

I imagine I must have missed it while neutralizing the five who ambushed me.

*"Valkyrie One-Nine approaching pick-up,"* Kai warns me through the R.I

"There's no one around, they can land for a minute."

I find Des's body sitting against the wall of a small room. This one looks like it was a living quarter. There's a bed and a small desk beside it with a lamp on it. The walls are white and bare of any decoration. There's no one in the room with him, which I find odd. I step closer to him slowly, expecting him to lift his head up at any moment and try to scare me as a prank.

But he doesn't move. When I am close enough I kneel in front of him and touch my fingers to the side of his neck. No pulse, no cybernetic whirring, nothing. Kai told me he got shot in the head. But he wasn't. There's no evidence of any bullet piercing him at all, not even the front of his battle armor.

"Des..." I whisper.

I lift his face up and I see the calm and serene expression on it. I have seen every emotion pass through his face but never this one. I search for any kind of wound I might have missed on him, one that would fool Kai into thinking he got shot in the head.

When my hand goes behind his neck in order to move him forward so I can carry him, I feel the blood.

I look at my hand and then move to the side so I can see his back and neck clearer. I see the wires of the Neuro-Connect sticking out from the base of his skull.

I check his hands for blood and see that the fingers on his right are bloodied under the nails. As if he tried to dig out the Neuro-Connect with his bare fingers, in which case...

*“Captain, Valkyrie One-Nine is on site. Wrap it up.”*

I grab Des up by the front of his battle armor and sling him over one shoulder. I make my way back through the corridor, back up the elevators, and topside with a horrible feeling inside of my chest. *What did I just do?*

The words play over and over inside of my brain.

The aircraft hovers a few feet from the ground and drops its cargo hold doors for us to enter. We get on and a second later I can feel us ascending into the air. I dump Des’s body on the floor and just as the doors are closing, I click the detonate button on the inside of my wrist – there’s a slight pause in the air – and then the entire facility goes up in flames and smoke. I can feel the heat blast even at this altitude.

*“Captain, what the smokin’ fuck happened down there?”* The pilot’s voice comes in over the intercom when the doors have fully closed.

“I blew the mission,” I say into the speaker.

*“Command’s not gonna appreciate a dead Enhanced in the middle of the flight deck.”*

“He’s not just a fucking dead Enhanced. Get us back to the base,” I almost growl at him.

*“Hang tight. We’ll be in Command in twenty minutes.”*

The communication channel closes and I slide down to the floor, placing my rifle next to me. I glance over at Des’s inert form once more.

The cargo hold is dark except for the small red lights on the ceiling every few feet. The door to the cockpit is closed but I can see white light coming from the space between it and the floor.

I sit with my knees pulled up against me, my arms resting over them. My fingers are covered with blood. I wipe them across my thigh but the dried blood remains.

Across from me, Kai is pulling out her knives to clean them with a white rag she has gotten from one of the closed compartments inside the wall. She is taller than me by a few inches and is very strong in every sense of the word. Dark hair cut down almost to the scalp. Her bare skin glistens in the red light and her green eyes are piercing.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks. Her face is serious but her voice is soft.

“Des.”

She looks over at him and back at me. “He got shot. That wasn’t your fault.”

I shake my head slowly. “Check him. He didn’t get shot anywhere.”

Her eyebrows furrow. “What do you mean? It registered...”

“What you heard must have been his circuits being cut off. He tried to dig out his Neuro-Connect.”

She scoffs. “That’s impossible. It’s suicide. Every Enhanced knows you don’t mess with the chip implant.”

“Exactly,” I say slowly. “It’s suicide.”

The words seem final somehow and for a long moment we just stare at each other, communicating everything we are too afraid to say out loud with our eyes. If he was digging out the N.C chip, then he was thinking about suicide, and if he was thinking about suicide, why didn’t either of us catch it before? How did he orchestrate this entire thing without raising a red flag in the system? Had it been spur of the moment? Or did he know he was flying into his last mission with us? On our way in, he was joking and laughing with us, trying to get me out of my shell and bantering back and forth with Kai. Had he known, then, that he wouldn’t be flying back out?

“I don’t blame him,” I say.

I take out the data stick from my pocket and throw it at her. She catches it and studies it. “Do you think it has the location of their control center?”

She shrugs. “Hard to say, but I highly doubt it. There is so much data from their computers in there it’s going to take Intelligence a full week to decode the damn thing. What do you think is in it?” she asks, throwing it back to me.

“Hacking and entrance codes. Maybe targets they’ve already hacked and targets that they’ll hack in the future,” I answer.

“Can they use it to find the hackers themselves?”

“Perhaps,” I say, “but my guess is they’ve taken every precaution to avoid that. Maybe the engineers can figure out a way to trace them though.”

Kai takes a flask from her front pocket, takes a swig and throws it over to me. I gulp back some of the liquid that burns my throat on its way down.

“Smokin’ fuck!” I groan.

She chuckles, “How’s that?”

“Tastes like ass,” I tell her, wiping my mouth with my sleeve.

“It’s Serym, mixed in with distilled liquor,” she laughs.

“Fuck. Great.” I close my eyes. Although I complain, I can’t deny that I’ve been craving to take another hit of the Serym; had I taken a swig before the mission I probably wouldn’t have had a flashback and Des would still be alive, and everyone else down in that hacker den would still be alive too. I rub my hands over my face and let out a breath.

A minute later there’s a flash of red, alerting us that we are beginning to descend into Sector Three Command.

We stand and heave our rifle straps across our shoulders. Kai stows away her knives and I remember that I have to clean out my own.

I hang on to one of the straps on the ceiling as I feel my ears pop. I’ve never liked heights but I’ve had to deal with it since I joined the military. I think of the earful I am going to get from Major Nandi. Not only did I bring back the body of an Enhanced soldier, which is a big no, but also because I screwed up a mission that was supposed to be pure recon, all because I can’t get my memories in check.

I feel the Retinal Interface embedded in my eyes activate again – it deactivates in the air – and the world changes before me. I look over at Kai and beside her head is a thin, translucent banner with her name, class and sector. I can also see her heart rate and percentage of repairs she requires at the Maintenance Facility. The worst thing about

being a Special Enhanced Agent is being able to see and know everything about the people around you.

As for myself I can see the percentage of repairs on the upper left corner of my field of vision. I have had worse injuries than the ones I've sustained on this outing. But the N.C also shows how much damage I've taken to my head and while I honestly don't remember even bumping my head, unless you count the punch I took to the cheek, it's showing me plenty of red activity. *Shit.*

"Brynn, what did you see this time? I can see your brainwaves going haywire from here," she says in the rumble of the landing aircraft. I know she is referring to my flashbacks.

I shake my head. "I saw everything."

She nods and I can feel her eyes on me as I wait for the final descent but she doesn't say anything.

Thirty seconds later the cargo-hold doors open again and sunlight streams in revealing the military base in Sector Three Command. There are dozens of soldiers and military personnel around, airships being loaded up for transport, shuttles being prepped to ship out to the Luna Base Colony, and Sonic Birds going out on Silent Details.

All of their banners show up on my R.I screen. It is overwhelming.

I see Space Officers boarding the shuttles before takeoff and I find myself wishing to be one of them, which is exactly where I would be if circumstances had been different. We walk off the loading ramp of the cargo hold. I do not look back at Des's body, and neither does Kai.

"You awake?" Kai says next to me.

“Yeah,” I say, not looking at her. “Let’s go.” We reach the elevator in one of the hangars and it drops us down below ground to the Command Center. It is teeming with activity. There is never a shortage of Biohackers in the country.

We both stand on the check-in pad – it scans our cranial nano chips – and we are green-lighted to proceed inside the Maintenance Facilities where they’ll fix everything from our eye gear, upgrade limb systems and reload spinal data with new regeneration abilities.

“I don’t think I want to hear this,” Kai whispers next to me.

I shake my head, “It’s not you that’s going to get it.”

The doors to the facility slide open. Nandi stands there with a scowl on her face and her hands clasped behind her back. Her eyes are black and she’s glaring. She’s not a very tall woman but she scares everybody.

“So, you made it back from that pile of bodies you left behind,” she says, in a measured voice. Her eyebrows shoot up as if something amuses her. “Minus one.”

“Major, if I can explain,” I begin.

She puts her hand up to silence me. “Save your bullshit for your debriefing. I am sure the interrogator will love hearing all about it.”

“I brought back Des. He’s being off loaded from the Bird as we speak,” I tell her.

“You are not authorized to do that, Captain. You know very well in the event of an Enhanced death they will be picked up by the military hospital personnel.”

“We blew up the facility. Had I left him in there, there would have been nothing for the military hospital to pick up,” I say.

She's silent for a moment and then says, "You're dismissed." She turns away from us and I watch her disappear.

I turn to Kai, "That went better than I thought."

"You think she'll make your debriefing nuclear?"

I shrug, "We'll see."

"Alright, let's go then."

But I am suddenly unable to move. The memory streams in like a waterfall.

Most of the time my flashbacks are about the weeks I spent with my unit on Federation soil, and everything I had to do to survive every nightmarish hour until we were pulled out.

But today that is not the imagery that invades my brain.

I shut my eyes and try to control my breathing as the image of the missile comes into focus. I'm sitting at the cockpit, looking right at it as it comes straight for us. I hear the terrified screaming and the angry yells behind me. There were six others with me inside the aircraft. Their dead faces flash before my eyes.

Blaming me.

Cursing me.

Condemning me.

For a moment, I feel like the voices get louder, embedding themselves in my brain tissue. I feel like I am going to faint – until, at last, my frantic breathing slows and I open my eyes again.

I am not outside where I stood a moment ago. Kai has dragged me inside a dark room where the only light comes from the small window of the door.

These memories are the reason I had blown the mission.

“Get your shit together, Brynn,” she whispers next to me.

“Sorry, I just really need that fuckin’ Serym.”

“When was the last time you took a hit?” she asks.

I shake my head. “I can’t remember but it must have been after the last operation.”

She sighs. “They’re going to recalibrate you.”

“No,” I say.

“You have more red brain activity today than I have ever seen. Your mind is going smokin’ shit crazy,” she says, opening her eyes wide at me.

“Recalibration will put me down for weeks. I don’t think they’ll want to ground me,” I protest.

“It’s the only choice. You ain’t right, and today just proved it.”

“Let’s just go, Kai,” I say, and leave her to stay there or follow me back inside the compound.

At the entrance to the Maintenance Facility we are relieved of our weapons by two medical staffers. They don’t really look at us.

We are then handed off to two senior medical officers, one leads Kai away to her own room and the other motions me to the right and leads me to mine.

“Please remove all your clothing,” he says.

I remove my uniform, stripping down to the skin. In the mirror before me, I can make out a few bruises. In the room with us is the repair pad.

“Please step inside.”

I step onto the cylindrical pad and I'm incased in glass. It blocks all sound from the outside. The senior medical officer sits at a small desk and at the press of a button a holographic computer screen pops up before him.

He is scanning every crook and cranny of my body. I see him lean in close and then press a few more buttons. The pad powers up and I float a few inches off the ground. From the ceiling, robotic hands drop down and look for what he told them to repair. They spray something cold on my thigh, stomach and upper arm. I feel the tenderness of the bruise – and the bruise itself – disappear.

Those hands slide up, and down come the washing hands. I close my eyes as I am sprayed with cold water, lathered with a special stinging soap that removes about three layers of skin, and washed off with warm water. Those arms disappear into the ceiling too.

My feet fall back onto the surface of the pad and the heat begins. I try hard not to make a fist as the capsule gets hotter and hotter. The pad is re-growing the three layers of skin it washed off. After another second, or hour – I can't tell which – the heat disappears and I am enveloped by an embalming coolness that seeps into my skin.

A single, thin robotic hand drops down from the top. A needle projects from its edge and sticks itself on the back of my neck, where the nano release chip is implanted. The nanos keep my damaged limbs in sync with the cybernetic parts that were added to them during my enhancement surgeries.

It whirs and clicks for several seconds, and then the needle is gone.

The last robotic hands of the repair cycle come down. One dabs the crook of my left elbow with alcohol and the other jabs a needle into my vein, pumping in the purple

liquid we call the Serym. A cocktail of high-grade antidepressants, antipsychotics and narcotics to help us do our jobs without having to suffer the consequences of what a life of killing can produce.

After five seconds of a drying fog, the capsule opens and outwardly I feel like a brand-new person. The senior medical officer has disappeared from the room but on the bed, he's left me my off-duty uniform. Black boots, black fitted pants and a long-sleeved black shirt. The only decoration is that of the Captain insignia on my upper right breast. The letters E.A. right beneath it. I bun up my hair and proceed out of the facility, down towards the unit quarters.

When back in my unit I open the communication line through the Retinal Interface and find I have only one message from my brother, Rhys: *When are you coming back home? We miss you.*

I close the communication line.

The flashbacks have been happening more and more regularly lately. The Serym is supposed to stop that. It's supposed to keep the insanity away. I pack my gear and head out to catch the flight to Headquarters.

On the flight out I try not to think about the heights but on the news being read on the HoloVision in front of my seat.

*“The reports of biohacking had been reaching astounding proportions until last year when they began to decrease in number. Many see this as a job well done by the Enhanced Agents who have cracked down hard on these cyber terrorists – the Controllers have stopped at nothing to ensure the safety and security of the world's citizens.”*

On and on they go with the statistics. I can't hear it anymore. Everything everywhere is about biohacking and I have to shut it off before it induces another panic attack. What those reports never say is what happens to those biohackers – who were either killed by me, or someone like me – who were disappeared off the face of the planet, never to be seen or heard from again.

After a while, the aircraft begins to descend on one of Washington base's landing pads at headquarters. Sector Three supplies all Enhanced soldiers with brand new cars. The one given to me is all black. It's sleek with curved edges and if you're not staring directly at it, it disappears from view. The trunk pops open as I approach it. I throw in my bag and the side door opens smoothly for me. I slide onto the white leather and the inner lights simmer down to a soft glow as it turns on and takes me to the location I have it programmed to.

On the way, I call my father and tell him I am back home and in one piece. He tells me he'll see me as soon as gets a chance.

My apartment is on the one hundredth floor of one of many high-rises located in the center of Washington City. It is sunset when I arrive and for a moment I just stare out into the city from my ceiling-to-floor windows. The view is breathtaking. Everything is shiny glass, metal and neon. I open a section of the window and feel the cold air sweep inside the room.

Coming home to an empty apartment is nothing new because I don't employ my drudge through the night. I strip off my uniform and throw it onto a mat on the bathroom floor. It disappears and will be inside my closet, cleaned and pressed, by tomorrow morning. My personal weapons I stow inside the closet myself. Each time I put them

away I close my eyes and hope never to see them again. Yet at the same time I know that I am nothing without them. It's a cruel joke.

I lay on the bed, hoping for some sleep, but sleep does not come. Only the cold seeps into the room.

I sit back up and plant my feet on the cold floor, elbows to knees, for what feels like a long time. It takes great discipline to not care about posture in my line of work. The glass wall overlooking the city is what is supposed to be before me, but my eyes see something else.

They tell us during training that, should our memories and past experiences trouble us in the form of PTSD, we should let them flow over us until they pass. I try to conjure the memory of when my aircraft went down all those years ago. I try to let it play out but it's no use.

Their screams fill my ears and I feel their blood running down my face and my neck. I gasp and look down at my hands and for a second I see blood there. There's a loud ping in the room and the lights suddenly come on.

*"Brynn, your heart rate is elevated and breathing is erratic. Shall I call for aid?"*

I sigh. "No, shut down until morning." The apartment system shuts down and the lights go off again. A shiver runs up my arm. I should close the window.

Now images focus on yesterday's victims. Even if they *were* Biohackers they were not supposed to have died. Our mission had been recon but because I had snapped they were all dead.

And then there's Des. He's gone. Besides Kai, he was the only other person who really understood me. He had his issues like all of us Enhanced have issues but I never

thought he was so close to the edge. Des had been recalibrated three times before, and even though he was good for a long time before slipping again, he was never the same as before the first time. Still, I hadn't known he was so off. And shouldn't I have known? As his friend?

Could that have anything to do with it? Had it just been too much for him to handle? Des was probably the strongest person I knew. If he couldn't take it, how long will it take me to snap and dig out my own Neuro-Connect? I may yet find out.

I can no longer ignore the cold. I walk over and shut the window. The city looks vibrant. There's light as far as the eye can see. Looming over it all is headquarters, the colossal seat of the Commonwealth's government and military factions. Cars zoom in orderly directions, and from the Command Center of Headquarters I can make out the shuttles flying out into orbit.

Rhys should be down there somewhere, either working, or enjoying the delights of the entertainment sector. I realize now that I didn't contact him when I came in.

The pain in my limbs is gone for the moment, but I can feel the absence of it. I know it will be back soon. My brother would roll his eyes and call me stupid, "Just ask for higher doses of the Serym," he would say.

I look down at the glass nightstand. It's displaying that it's a few minutes to six in the morning. I haven't slept at all and I doubt I will in the next few seconds. I go back to the bed and sit with my feet planted on the floor again. The alarm goes off and I slide my hand over the counter to shut it down.

The glass door to the bathroom glides open as I approach. The water starts to run in the massage pattern I have programmed it to. I catch glimpses of my tattoos on the

mirrored walls. Tattooing is not a common practice, not for centuries, but there are still a few black-market dealers who can point you in the right direction. It has become strictly a practice among soldiers.

After the shower, I go back inside my room to put on my black off-duty uniform. I wear my dark green military jacket over them. I put up my hair in a high ponytail. It is long and bright copper, like my mother's was.

My mother's face swims into my mind. I see her in her military hospital uniform, dark blue and embroidered with gold.

My father is at the dining room table when I exit my room for breakfast. I am surprised that, as Senior Advisor of the Commonwealth, he took the time to come over. He sits at my table, sipping coffee from a clear teacup. I smile slightly and place a hand on his shoulder.

"I didn't hear you come in," I tell him, coming around to face him. He stands and smiles at me.

"I figured you could use the sleep," he says.

"I didn't sleep much." As I sit down, the table in front of me opens downward and up comes my breakfast. I am under orders to eat lean and healthy. I take a sip of the black coffee first.

"Didn't sleep? Didn't you get your Serym shot?" My father is a man in his middle fifties. He's tall, though not as thin as he used to be, with thick black hair. His eyes are grey and intense.

I shrug, "I usually don't sleep on the first few days back."

He takes another sip of coffee before looking at the time on his inner wrist. “I have to be at Headquarters in eighteen minutes.”

“Have you spoken to Rhys?”

“Yes, as far as I know he never went home last night – got caught up in some overnight work,” he says.

I nod and take a bite from my breakfast. I don’t taste food anymore – it’s always the same bland ingredients. “That’s probably my fault. We brought back a lot of information.”

“Is everything alright, Brynn? You seem a bit jittery,” my father has noticed that my hands are shaking. I open and close them a few times but they still tremble.

“It’s fine,” I tell him. Another bite.

“Unsuccessful mission?”

“You can say that.”

He squeezes my hand and gives me a reassuring smile. It’s the same smile he used after he told us that our mother was gone. To let us know we were going to be fine.

“Have a busy day today?” I ask.

He nods, “Yes. I have several meetings scheduled, one of them with Sayer. He’s back from the coast.”

I simply nod. “I see.”

The drudge refills my coffee cup and goes back to stand at the edge of the room.

“I have to get going but I will see you soon,” my father says. He gets up from the table, pats my shoulder and goes into the elevator, gone.

I wait a few minutes before I take the elevator down as well. This central part of the city is all commercial. It is crowded with high-rises, shops, restaurants, schools, fountains, pleasure houses, and the entertainment sector, which never stops. The sidewalks are congested with morning traffic of people heading to their jobs – always looking at the hologram feed that their earpieces provide in front of their faces.

It is entirely different from the suburban quadrants where everything is calm, manicured and quiet. The day is cold and the wind whips around me, tossing my hair around my face.

I hear the familiar beep inside my head and I mentally open my R.I to receive the incoming message. A cool female voice speaks. *“Agent, you are summoned to headquarters for debriefing.”*

I arrive at headquarters in less than seven minutes. Most of Sector One – government personnel – works here, but many of Sector Two – private citizens – work here as well. Those of us from Sector Three – military personnel – come into Headquarters for debriefing. Walking here helps clear my head.

The entrance is all glass and metal with giant doors and soldiers posted every few feet. They all carry assault rifles.

The soldier closest to me comes forward and I place my finger on the small pad he’s holding. I wait for it to take the blood sample and confirm my identity. *“Brynn Thatcher, Sector Three, Class One E.A. Cleared for Entry.”*

“Proceed,” says the soldier. His voice is muffled behind thick headgear.

The doors open and I walk inside.

Headquarters is always swarmed with people. I turn right to take the elevator reserved for the military – it takes me down twenty-seven floors, directly to the debriefing rooms. The elevator opens to an empty corridor and I turn left towards the glass wall and the desk before it.

At the desk sits a woman dressed in a white suit. She has a thin headset on and her hair is in a bun, not a single strand out of place. Her expression is severe.

“Good morning, Alana,” I tell her.

“State your reason for being here,” she says without any kind of greeting, even though we have known each other for over seven years.

“Debriefing,” I say.

“Sector and class,” she asks, though it’s not a question.

I sigh. “Sector Three. Class One Agent.”

She types something on the computer before her. The glass wall slides open. I salute her, she salutes back and I disappear from her sight.

I come to a split in the hallway. To the left are the debriefing rooms and to the right are the computer engineering laboratories. I decide to check in with my brother before going inside. It’s a breach of protocol but I doubt I can get into any more trouble.

I head down the right hallway, and come up to the labs. I press the intercom button.

“Please state sector, class and clearance level.”

“Sector Three, Class One Agent. I have no clearance. Permission to enter and see Engineer Thatcher.”

“State your name.”

“Captain Brynn Thatcher.”

The intercom beeps and flashes red. “You are not cleared for entrance.”

I sigh. I am walking back down the hallway when I hear the doors slide open.

“Brynn!”

I turn to see Rhys coming towards me. I run back and we wrap our arms around each other. “Little brother,” I say.

“Big sister. How are you?” he asks, smiling, as we let go of each other. He holds me at arm’s length and looks me up and down. “No new scars? New tattoos, maybe?” I laugh and poke him in the ribs. Out of all his children, Rhys is the one who looks most like our father in looks and build. We all inherited our mother’s light brown eyes. Rhys is always laughing and joking.

“No, I’ve been working. Are you working all night today too?”

“I don’t know. It was a lot of information your team and a few others brought back yesterday.”

“Oh come on, we can go out and booze,” I say, winking at him.

He laughs, “Maybe. Are you in for debriefing?”

“Yes I am. And I really should be going because I am already late.”

“Did you screw up?”

“Yes.”

He puts his hands on my shoulders, “You’ll be fine. What’s the worst they can do?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Nobody does, actually.

“Well, just be good and do what they tell you. Please don’t break the interrogator’s nose again,” he says with a smile.

“He asked for it,” I say.

“Good luck.” He kisses me goodbye.

I return towards the hallway leading to the debriefing rooms. After identifying myself yet again, these doors also open and see Nandi. I salute her and she stares at me.

“You’re late.”

“Apologies, Major.”

“You’re in room forty-three. Sayer is waiting for you.”

There it was.

They had sent Lev to be my punishment.

I try to be nonchalant. “I thought the Commander was away.”

“Now he’s back,” she answers coldly and walks off.

To anyone else this wouldn’t be a punishment at all. It would be an honor to have the Commander debrief you personally, but Headquarters always knows exactly where to get you. Anger ripples through me.

Lev Sayer. The government’s most prized possession. Not an Enhanced soldier but he might as well be. Every person in the Commonwealth knows of Lev’s career; he is the nation’s hero.

Four years ago, he single handedly killed thirty-seven operatives sent to kill the five Prime Ministers of Africa. Lev had been on their protection detail as a loan from the Commonwealth when they had been negotiating a peace treaty with the East. It turned

out that not everyone in Africa liked the idea of peace, and a small sector of the government chose to take matters into their own hands.

They hadn't counted on his ruthlessness, and because of it, Lev had killed them all and got all five Ministers safely to the meeting point.

Afterwards, he asked to be placed in the Intelligence Sector. He now runs it. I haven't seen or spoken to Lev in over a year, since he was deployed out to the coast to strengthen their Intelligence Facility out there.

I wonder if he volunteered to be my punisher.

## CHAPTER 2 – NEW ORDERS

The door to room forty-three is closed but a small square window lets me see inside. It is bare except for a metal table with two chairs sitting opposite each other, and the small Searcher device on the table. Lev stands behind one.

The door slides open and I walk in. It used to be we couldn't help smiling at each other. Now the sight of him fills me with conflicting emotions. We salute and I sit on the chair placed in front of me. He sits too.

“Good morning, Captain,” he says. His voice is clear and deep. He does not sound friendly.

“Good morning, Commander.”

“This is your debrief number one-five-three-eight, is that correct?” he asks.

“I lost count, so if you say so.”

He leans forward and folds his hands on the table in front of him. My heart skips a beat. The look he's giving me is intense and for a second I am afraid. I fight the urge to look down – this is why he's such a successful interrogator.

“I will now ask you a series of questions,” he says. “And if you tell me something other than what I already know – and I find out later – the severity of the crime is punishable by years of incarceration, or worse.”

I stare at Lev's unblinking gaze. “Yes, sir.”

Lev wears a fitted, black uniform. It is plain except for the gold buttons running down the front of his jacket. The jacket's collar is high but I can still see his neck tattoos peeking out from under it. His eyes and hair are dark and luminous. His pouty lips are sensuous. His dark hair is tied back at the base of his neck.

From the small rectangular Searcher emerge two black, thin cords with electrodes at each end – he puts these on each of my temples. He powers up the device and a small hologram screen pops up that only he can see.

“Begin with your deployment,” he says.

“We were deployed at 0800. One Sonic Bird, three agents. My unit was assigned to a Silent Detail,” I begin.

“But that’s not what happened,” he says.

“No. We scouted the surrounding area of the facility for a while and we were about to call it in when I – when we were spotted.”

The electrodes attached to my brain are giving him a replay of everything I saw during the mission. We both know that’s not what really happened. The device tells him what actually did occur, but he doesn’t comment on it.

“How were you spotted? You’re an Agent, you should have been covered on every angle,” he says, playing the part.

“We missed one apparently,” I respond, feeling relief at his discretion.

“I have a hard time believing that, Agent.”

“I don’t care what you believe,” I say. Even when I know he’s trying to help me I can’t help snapping at him. “Apologies, Commander – we did cover our angles, and we did miss one.”

There’s a moment of silence before he speaks again. “And then?”

“Then everything went to shit. We were shot at but we managed to enter the facility and kill them all,” I say. My voice is devoid of any emotion.

“You lost Des,” he says.

If it had been anyone else, they would have said, "You lost an agent." But Lev knows Des has been in my unit for years. He knows the loss is an important one.

I nod, "Yes." And I know he's getting to the part where I find Des's body on the floor of the room. I know he's seeing when I check him for wounds, when I saw the Neuro-Connect cords sticking out from the back of his neck, and when I saw the blood on his fingernails.

"Did you see who killed him?" he asks slowly.

"No," I say and glance sharply at him to convey the meaning of the word.

For a second he stares at me and then says, "How many did you kill?"

"I killed five men," I answer, turning my gaze back down the table. Three I shot in the head and two I stabbed to death.

I can still see it happening.

"You brought back information."

"Yes," I say.

He looks down at the small screen before him for a few seconds and then reaches out to take off the electrodes attached to my head. "You're dismissed," he says, neatly putting the cords back inside the device.

I ask, "That's it?"

"Yes," he says, looking back up to me. "Unless you lied and there's something else you want to tell me," he says pointedly.

We stand at the same time. His imposing figure is another reason why he's such a good interrogator. I can see the muscle outlines on his broad shoulders even beneath the black clothes.

“There’s nothing to report,” I say.

He’s probably about to say something cutting when he stops all of a sudden and gives me an assessing look, as if he’s looking for something behind my eyes.

“Are you well?”

“Yes,” I answer.

He looks from my face, down to my hands hanging at my sides, notices the twitching and looks back up at my face. His eyebrows furrow slightly.

“How long have you been experiencing that?” There’s mild irritation in his voice.

“It’s recent. Nothing to worry about,” I say.

“Good day.” This time he does not wait and exits the room.

I stand there a moment. It had been a shock to have Lev as my debriefing investigator. The anger at our past is still present, but it’s been a long time since I examined that anger.

I leave the room and see Kai leaving her own debriefing.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

“They sent Lev Sayer to debrief me,” I say.

“Lev? Motherfuckers,” she says.

I see her eyeing me through the corner of my eye and I look back up to her and ask, “What?”

She scoffs. “You’re still angry with him.”

“Of course I’m not,” I begin, but she cuts me off.

“Yes, you are. I can see it all over your face,” she says, a note of anger in her voice. “He saved your damn life.”

I snap my head up and take a step closer to her. “He ruined my life,” and there’s more venom in the words that I had thought to put in.

She simply laughs and shakes her head. “Whatever you say, Cap,” and starts walking away from me.

I follow her steps and although my mind is quiet and numb from the Serym shot I was just given, it doesn’t stop me from remembering those events.

The military has four tiers of modification. Repaired; minor injuries that have to be repaired with synthetic tissue like skin, hair, nails, eyeballs and cartilage. Modified: more pressing health issues like a loss of a limb, or internal organ that needs to be replaced. The third tier is the Enhanced tier; and that means that half or more of the physical body has been replaced with cybernetic parts. The use of cybernetic parts is due to the nano technology implemented in the Neuro-Connect chip of the person that is constantly at work so that the body does not reject the implanted parts.

The fourth and last tier of the modification scale is called the full-cyborg transplantation. This is very rare and only given to extremely high-value assets to the government. Once someone is cyborg transplanted the only thing that remains of their human body is their brain and spinal cord – if they are able to keep it alive and viable for enough time to proceed with the transplantation.

I am classified as an Enhanced because the aircraft accident I was in left me severely mangled and close to death. Lev gave the go-ahead and green-lighted all of my modifications to where now a little more than half of me is cybernetic.

The problem with this is that once the military is inside you it’s impossible to leave. You can’t quit. You can’t retire. Only Command can relieve you of your duties.

And the anger and resentment I feel towards Lev for making that decision for me is as alive today as it was the second I opened my eyes after the change and I was told what had just happened.

At least I think so. Seeing him again after such a long time has thrown me off. I just need to get away and be alone.

We are walking passed the outside front desk when Alana stops us. “Soldier, you have been reassigned.”

I notice her singular term of the word as we both turn around to face her.

“Not you, Captain. You’ve been benched pending investigation.”

“You’re joking,” I say, not sure I am hearing her correctly. That can only mean one thing. Lev didn’t say anything about an investigation. Or had it been Nandi? Was this my actual punishment?

“This is the information that I have, soldier.”

For the first time in all our time together, Kai and I receive different information on our R.Is.

“You know what this means,” she tells me. She doesn’t have to say it.

I nod. “Yeah, I know.” It’s not so much fear as it is dread that I feel. “What did you get?”

“Guard duty,” she answers.

“Who?”

“It doesn’t say, just that I have to report to the Military Hospital,” she tells me.

“Yours?” Although we both know already.

“I haven’t opened the message yet,” I say.

“Now is not the time to be a coward, Brynn,” she says, stepping out of the elevator as the doors open. It’s the first time we’ve been separated since we were assigned to the same unit seven years ago. I don’t like it.

“Behave Lieutenant, don’t break anyone’s nose,” I say trying for lightness.

She chuckles, “I ain’t you, Cap. I’m headed to the Hospital. Where are you going to be?”

“I’ll give you one guess,” I say.

She shakes her head as she walks away, “Save some for the junkies,” and disappears through the crowd.

I open the R.I message that Alana sent to me. It reads: *Captain Thatcher, you are requested to appear at the Maintenance Facility for recalibration 0800 tomorrow.*

Shit. I am stunned at having my suspicion confirmed. Naturally my first reaction is to rage against it.

Recalibration? That’s not possible. I’ve never been the most stable of Enhanced but it has never gotten in the way of me doing my job. In fact, it makes me better at it. I made a mistake this last mission, but surely nothing that warrants a brain swipe.

Except I destroyed a facility of biohackers I was sent in to monitor only, and I know the real cause of Des’s death.

Why would they go to such extreme measures to erase Des’s death from my head? It’s not like he’s the first Enhanced to take his own life. We don’t talk about it, ever, but we all know that suicide isn’t a new thing for Enhanced agents. There comes a point where it’s just too much, and it doesn’t matter how many times your brain gets

recalibrated, there's too many suppressed emotions and memories. Nightmares that eat at you day and night. And there's only one way out.

But if it's about getting me to forget about an Enhanced suicide on my squad, then Kai would be having a recalibration right along with me. Or would she? She wasn't there. She didn't find him. She didn't see what I saw, and she was smart enough not to check for herself when we were on the Bird back to base.

I have a hard time believing that Lev is behind this. Despite our present circumstances I know he would never sell me out like this.

Or would he?

It has been a long time since we saw each other, and even at the best of times our personal exchanges are loaded, even when we don't go into any sort of detail about the past. A part of me wants to find and confront him for this happening to me, but I have a nagging feeling that this wasn't his doing.

Recalibration is not the worst thing in the world. Plenty of Enhanced that I know have gone through the process, either because the PTSD won't let them even move, or because their addiction to the Serym has become critical. They come back calmer and once again able to resume their lives, ready to do their jobs. But they are more prone to spacing out during quiet moments and remembering things from their life before the brain swipe doesn't come easily, if it comes at all.

That's the side effect of recalibration. It may take away unpleasant memories but it also takes away pieces of your life. The research isn't clear whether those lost memories can be regained, but I've never met anyone who remembered something they lost during the process.

I leave the bustle of Headquarters for the bustle of the city. Here in the city center everyone is primly dressed in their neutral colors and angular suits. The buildings and businesses are clean and tidy.

The people walking around barely notice each other. The holographic projections in front of their faces take up all of their attention. I look up to see a grey sky. Summer always brings its rain showers.

I walk west in the direction of the entertainment sector, where a person is free to be themselves or anyone else they choose. In this district, everything is much closer together and more personal. The people are louder – they yell out instead of talk – they booze on the streets and take drugs in front of everyone else – no issues with the authorities here, everyone else is in on it.

The food vendors all compete for your attention, the pricey restaurants are the most exclusive, catering to your every culinary whim.

The pleasure houses are the best of all.

You may be a proper politician at Headquarters but in this district you are a creature of lust and desire – just like everyone else.

I pass a few Enhanced that are hanging with civilian junkies. I see them pass around a thin glow stick that they all stamp on their tongues. My R.I registers it as a pleasure drug. Induces spontaneous orgasms.

The air smells of perfume and greasy food. It's not a good combination. Time doesn't matter in here, which is why the entire sector has been given its own atmospheric cloak; people can't tell what time of day it is unless their earpieces tells them so.

The small place I am looking for is brown on the outside; nondescript and nameless, but we all know where to find it. It's the only place in the city where Enhanced can buy illegal Serym. I have nothing left in my apartment and I'm going to need it in order to get through tonight.

The inside is small but uncluttered. There's no one there when I come in but the door has an alarm system and it has alerted the shopkeeper of my presence.

She comes up from behind the wooden counter, an old lady with wispy white hair and a hunched over back. She walks up slowly with a cane for support. She's dressed in a white off-duty uniform – like they used to be before they were changed to black – and grunts when she sees me.

“Good morning,” I say. I have never asked her name.

She places three vials of Serym on the counter along with a money card terminal. It's small and I slide in my card to transfer the money from my account to hers. I take them and she turns around to go back down the stairs she came up from.

I leave the shop and see more than a few pairs of eyes on me who know what I have just bought; most are civilian junkies with wide eyes and open mouths as they reluctantly walk away.

Only Enhanced are allowed inside here. A civilian would be seriously injured if they tried to enter at all. Many don't know about the door scanner when they try and that's when their skin begins to blister and burn until they leave the premises.

It is no coincidence the old lady wears off-duty uniform. Word has it she's one of the original creators of the Serym – the brainchild that spawned an entire group of addicts and junkies. I don't put much stock into superstitious stories, but I don't know how she

could manage to have an endless supply of Serym if she's not still connected to Headquarters in some way.

Back home, I strip down to my underwear and lay on the bed. I open one of the vials and gulp it down in one. Even as it relaxes me the tears begin to flow down my face, but I don't care. There's no one here to see me. No one that really cares except for me, and at this particular moment even I don't care as much as I should.

My R.I pings. It's Kai, no doubt calling to complain about her assignment. I pick up the call and she pops up in front of my face.

"What the smokin' fuck happened to you?" she says.

"What do you mean? I should look great right now. I'm flying high," I respond.

"For fuck sakes, Brynn," she starts but I cut her off.

"Did you call to berate me about my life choices or do you actually have something you want to say?" I ask loudly.

"I fly out to Sector Three tomorrow. Eric Jance needs extra security," she says.

"Eric Jance," I say the name slowly, trying to remember whom it belongs to.

"Eric Jance, as in the son of the Chancellor of the Federation?"

I see her nod. "The very same. The man's indisposed at the moment and needs a higher level of security until he gets better."

"Indisposed? I thought I heard somewhere he was touring the country on a diplomatic visit."

"He was, until he got sick. Apparently it's something he's had for ages and it's acting up now," she says.

“Not that I care, and I know you don’t care, but I am pretty sure that’s supposed to be classified information.”

“Of course it is. That’s why I am only telling you. I’ll be gone for a few weeks so don’t do anything stupid without me,” she smiles at the last request.

I sit up on the bed. “I won’t be doing anything at all. They’ve scheduled me for a recalibration, so the next few weeks are going to be rather unpleasant ones.”

“Big buckets of smokin’ monkey shit,” she says and I can’t help but chuckle at her chosen curse words.

“I concur.”

“When is this happening?”

“Probably around the same time you’ll be leaving for Sector Three tomorrow,” I answer, lying back down on the bed. “Don’t worry, Kai, we’ve been through too much together for me to forget about you.”

“Brynn, you’re the toughest person I know. Recalibration isn’t going to work on you.”

I think for a moment before I answer. “Maybe I want it to. Maybe I don’t want to be the toughest person you know anymore. It’s exhausting.”

“You will be fine. Think of it as a vacation from your thoughts for a while. If there’s anyone that can regain their lost memories after the event it’s definitely you.”

We end the call after saying goodbye and I stare into the ceiling again. In a way, I am glad that it’s not me doing the guard duty out on Sector Three, but even through the content befuddlement of the Serym I am curious about Eric Jance and his illness.

I get up from the bed slowly and put on some clothes, and make my way to my office where I sit in front of the computer terminal and dial my father's code. His face appears on the screen after a few rings.

He stares when he sees me but doesn't comment on what we both know is happening. "Have you had supper?"

"No, I haven't yet," I say, heavily.

"Having a tough day?" he asks and I can't tell if he's really asking about my day or simply asking to get it out of the way.

"I wouldn't call it the best day, but then again I've had better days. Command has benched me for the time being and I've been assigned for recalibration in the morning."

"Well to be honest darling, I think it is the best thing for you. You have to admit that you've been struggling with these issues for a few months now and recalibration may be just the thing to put your mind at ease again," he tells me.

He talks to me as if I'm some distant relation instead of his daughter. I see how little my father knows me when he thinks this has only been going on for a few months. I spend my days hiding my *issues* from my brother, but my father who sees everything, doesn't see me at all.

"You're right, of course," I say. "But on to more important matters, what's really going on in Sector Three?"

He narrows his eyes at me. "How did you know?"

"You're not the only one with contacts, father," I say.

He grunts. "Well, one of these days you're going to have to give me their name because they are turning out to be better than even the ones I have."

“Tell me,” I prompt.

“Well, there’s not much to tell. Eric Jance’s tour was disrupted because his illness has flared up again.”

“What exactly does he have?” I ask.

My father shrugs. “They’ve never officially named it. As far as I know, whatever it is, it’s making his organs fail, among other things.”

It sounds terrible. “But if he’s just ill why all the extra precaution? I am sure he brought enough guards for the entire country.”

“He did. But it would look bad if we didn’t help at all,” he says, shaking his head.

There it was. “And what will the Commonwealth be gaining from trying to help him live?”

My father smiles, “Can’t the government do something just because it is right?”

I nod, “Yes, but we both know it’s not going to.”

“It is a chance to put away any last vestiges of contempt and misunderstanding between our two countries.”

So, it’s all publicity, a way to get the Controllers off of Maximillian’s back.

It seems a pretty coincidence that Jance would fall ill on his visit to the Commonwealth. Doctors here will try everything to save him and still gain support and sympathy when they fail. Nice show for the Controllers.

“Well, I am sure President Maximillian will want to do all that he can,” I say pointedly.

“Yes, he will. I have to go now, darling. Good luck tomorrow,” he says and disconnects the call.

## CHAPTER 3 - RECALIBRATION

The next morning I am at the Maintenance Facility at my appointed time. I check in with one of the medical staff and they ask me to follow them inside. One man opens a door down the hall where I know the repair pads to be but when he opens the door there is no repair pad, or medical equipment, but a simple steel table and a couple of chairs. He asks me to take a seat and I decline, but he insists, so I do.

“Dr. Gwyn will be here momentarily,” he says before he closes the door on his way out.

Like all rooms in Headquarters this room is white and sterile. I sit on the metal chair with my hands folded on the metal table. There are no windows on the walls so no one will be watching us, and I don't see any timepiece on any wall either.

*They are making me wait on purpose,* I think to myself. I thought this only happened during military interrogations.

When the door does open, three people walk inside. I have never met any of them.

“Good morning, Captain Thatcher. My name is Dr. Alis Gwyn and I am here today to help perform your recalibration.”

Dr. Gwyn is a short woman, who even though sounds pleasant enough, has a severe voice and an even more severe face. I wonder for a moment if she's related to Alana in the Intelligence sector. Her blonde hair is tidily picked up in a bun and her electro specs are gold-rimmed and round. The other two women do not offer their names, so I look them up with my R.I.

Mari Mendell is the woman standing to the right of Gwyn. Her hair is light brown and it is styled loose over her shoulders. She's a tall, pretty woman with green eyes and a senior medical officer who looks somewhat familiar to me.

I've been in and out of military hospitals so many times that I have no doubt she has worked on me sometime in the past.

The other one is also a young woman by the name of Seren Nest. She's slight and lithe and stands at attention without looking at me. Registered as a junior Intelligence officer, I can't imagine why she should be here. She's got close-cropped black hair with black eyes and a small face that matches the rest of her small body.

This evaluation takes place within the few seconds it takes Gwyn to pull up her chair and sit down on the other side of the table facing me. The other two don't sit down, but stay standing a few feet behind Gwyn's chair.

"Are you going to recalibrate me right here?"

"Not here precisely," says Gwyn. "I would like to ask you a few questions first."

"Like what?"

"Like how long has it been since you've been experiencing memory disturbances," she tells me.

"Disturbances," I say, mulling the word around in my mouth. "That's a really nice way to put it, doctor. It's been a while."

"Does the Serym not work for you?"

"It works fine. Just not long enough," I answer. "How long does the process take?"

“Ms. Thatcher, we are dealing with your brain and your brain has been through enough in that past already. It will take as long as it has to.”

“And what exactly are you going to do?”

“Recalibration is simple. The nano technology invade the brain and find the disturbances in your brain and either erase them completely or numbs them enough so that they are no longer a problem. Once it’s over you won’t have PTSD or any of the things that the Serym takes care of, and as for the Serym itself it will work perfectly fine the first time and you won’t have to go looking for more.”

I glance up at the two women behind her. “And what are they here for?”

“Dr. Mendell will be administering your recalibration, and soldier Nest is here to supervise.”

I laugh. “You really think a junior officer is going to hold me?”

“It won’t come to that,” says Gwyn. “Let’s begin,” and she makes to stand up.

“No.”

She pauses. “No?”

“No. I do not give my consent to be recalibrated,” I answer, testing the waters. Maybe if I push hard enough I won’t have to go through with it.

“You do not have any say in the matter, soldier. Those are your orders and you will comply as you have always done.”

“Not when that means I have to let you probe inside of my brain and have you erase or alter whatever is convenient for you.”

Dr. Alis Gwyn is cool and collected. Though I register elevated heartbeats from the other two in the room, she is perfectly calm, and although she is serious I can still see the corners of her mouth turned up as if something amuses her.

“As a matter of fact,” she begins, “none of the cybernetic reconstructed parts of your brain, or your skull, or your arm, or your leg, or even lungs belong to you. They are the property of Sector Three – there’s even a stamp of ownership on them that I can show you – so if you won’t let us recalibrate you, if you won’t let us recalibrate *our property*, they can easily be removed. You can either choose to die or spend the rest of your days in an incubator waiting to die. The choice is yours.”

Maybe not.

I straighten out in my seat and nod at her.

“Good. The process itself is simple but it will have residual effects over the next few weeks.”

“What are the effects?”

“Nothing much to worry about really,” she says, not answering my question. She stands from her chair, “Mari here will take you to the recalibration room and we’ll take it from there.” Gwyn leaves the room.

“Ready?” The woman named Mari asks me.

I stand and follow her out of the room. “Where are we going now?” The junior officer, Seren Nest, walks silently behind both of us.

“Just down the hall. They like to greet patients in a neutral room before going in here. It puts them at ease,” she says.

I scoff, shaking my head. “I’m sure it does.”

“Do you recognize me at all?”

The question catches me off guard and I turn my face to look straight at her. She’s looking at me with an expectant small smile on her face. I shake my head. “If you’ve read my file you know I had a severe head injury several years ago. Am I supposed to know who you are?” I ask honestly.

“I was one of the junior medical officers assigned to you when you had your accident. I assisted in several of your surgeries, and I was present when Commander Sayer decided to green-light your modifications,” she tells me.

I stop moving. “You need to stop talking.”

“Because I helped him save you?”

“That’s not what you did.”

“He’s worried about you. It’s obvious every time he looks at you.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Lev and I have been friends for years. I work with him down in Intelligence,” she says. It must be something serious then.

“Let’s just get this over with,” I say and motion her to keep walking.

The recalibration room is not so different from the medical rooms that hold the repair pads.

The machine in the middle of the room is a white sphere connected to the ceiling. It is hollowed out in the front where I guess the patients sit.

“You’re going to have to remove your weapon holsters and your shoes,” Mari says. “Soldier Nest will take them.”

I unstrap my shoulder and hip holsters and hand them over to Soldier Nest. Again

she doesn't look me in the eye when she takes them and I wonder if it's because I scare here or because she just doesn't care.

“Sit down, please.”

As I walk up to the machine, I notice the window inside the room on the right wall. A two-way mirror where Gwyn and her team can observe what is happening. Before I take a seat, I fist my hands at my side to stop the trembling.

“Is something wrong?”

I shake my head and sit down. The cool touch of the machine envelopes me, and curves to my shape. I lay my head back on the soft padded square and close my eyes.

“It's called the anatomical grip. It will, for lack of a better word, latch itself onto your head, *grip* you, and connect with your N.C chip. Once that happens the nanos will deploy and find the disturbances in your brain,” she says. “Are you ready to begin?”

I do not open my eyes but give her a nod. I just want to get this done. With any luck, the machine will malfunction and my brain will fry.

But I have never been so lucky.

## CHAPTER 4 – MEMORY SCREAMS

The last thing I feel before the effect hits me is the anatomical grip of the machine locking onto my skull and inserting itself into my brain.

And then the rushing begins. And I am sucked into a vortex of memories that are a jumbled kaleidoscope of color and sound that threatens to drive me insane.

*I am thirteen years old. I know because I am looking at myself in the mirror and I am wearing my cadet uniform. Today is the day I am inducted into the Military Academy. I straighten out my collar and make sure that not a single strand is loose from the bun my mother put my hair in. There's a knock on the door and she walks in with my brother on one hip. My sister Ara trails behind her.*

*I can't remember the last time I looked into Ara's face. I smile at her as I turn around. "How do I look?" I ask them.*

*"You look weird," Ara laughs.*

*"You look beautiful, darling," Mother answers. The three of them smile at me.*

The memory fades.

*"Brynn, isn't there something else you would like to do? The Military Academy isn't just about soldiering. There are plenty more career choices you can choose from," my mother says, wanting to derail my plans for the millionth time.*

*I walk over and sit beside her on the sofa in front of the window at our house in the suburbs. It's been a long time since I thought about this house.*

*"I want to be a soldier, mother. I want to go into Space Command and work on Luna Base. This is what I want to do, and you all can always visit me up there," I tell her.*

*She cups my face with her hands. Her bright copper hair glints in the sun coming through the window. "It's a very hard life, Brynn."*

*I laugh and roll my eyes. "How would you know, mother?"*

*"The soldiers and agents who come into the hospital tell me enough," she says.*

*I shrug. "They just can't handle it. I am eighteen now, mother. I can choose my career for myself."*

Again the memory fades, like a fog dissolving in the morning sun. The words echo around in my skull. I want to tell her that she was right. That I had made the wrong decision.

Another memory begins.

*"I want to tell them," I say, barely able to speak through the horrible lump in my throat. I can feel my heart breaking and the tears fall freely down my face.*

*"I should be the one to tell your brother and sister about their mother's death," says my father in a monotone voice. I can tell that he has been crying because his eyes are rimmed with red and his fists are clenched at his sides.*

*"No. I want to tell them. You have to let me do it, Father."*

*He nods but his head doesn't come back up. He begins to cry and I take the few steps towards him and hug him hard. But his arms don't come around me and his face doesn't nestle into my neck. He is already far away from us. He stands up straight and leaves the room.*

*How do I tell my younger siblings that our mother has died? That some freak accident at the Military hospital has taken her from us? I slump against the wall and cover my face with my hands. I cry as quietly as I can because I can't scream and yell*

*here. Not right now. As far as I am concerned we have just lost both of our parents and I am the only left.*

*I feel myself jump.*

*No. I don't want to be in this memory. I can hear voices around me but I am unsure if they are from more memories or from the people inside the room with me.*

*Lev is pulling me through an empty corridor. I can feel the butterflies in my stomach and the excitement rushing through me as we turn corners and try not to make noise but fail because we are laughing.*

*"Lev, we're going to get caught," I say, trying to pull him towards me and make him stop running.*

*He turns suddenly, holding me to him as I yelp and bump into him. "No one is going to see us, promise." He kisses me and I wrap my arms around his neck.*

*He disengages himself from me and starts moving again. I don't ask where we are going. I trust him implicitly.*

*When we get to wherever it is we are going, I find that it is one of the private rooms in the officers' wing of Sector Three Command. He opens the door to one and I gasp when I see it has been filled with small candles and flowers.*

*I laugh and cover my mouth with my hands. I walk around the small room for a moment taking in the beautiful sight. He is standing by the closed door, smiling at me.*

*"How did you get all these flowers?"*

*He sighs theatrically, "Painstakingly. Let's just say I'll pulling a lot of grunt work for about three months."*

*I laugh, lunging myself at him, and kiss him hard. He twirls me around the room a few times and then puts me down on the floor, but neither of us lets go of the other.*

*"I love you so much," I tell him. "I don't know how you pulled this off in a middle of a conflict zone but thank you. Thank you." I bring his forehead down to mine and feel his hand caress my cheek.*

*"Will you marry me?"*

Again I jump and this time I call out, but I don't hear what I say. I want to wake up from all of this. I want to leave this place.

*I am panting. The ditch is covered in recently killed soldiers. Some have all of their limbs attached, but others are dismembered. Their arms and legs strewn across the dirt like garbage. There is blood everywhere.*

*The man next to me is dead. His eyes are open and his bottom jaw is on his lap. It churns my stomach and I look away from him. To distract myself from my present predicament I check the ETA of our EVAC. Ten minutes.*

*"Eat this," says Des on my other side. He hands me a peeled orange. Orange trees grow everywhere out here in Sector Three. When we are deployed and situations like these happen, it is better to eat the fresh oranges than the dried food they provide us with. I take the orange and look overhead as I hear aircraft traveling to and fro above us.*

*"Relax, Brynn. They'll be here in no time," he tells me, winking at me.*

*"Easy for you to say, you're Enhanced."*

*"Someday you might be so lucky too," he says and starts to suck on the fruit.*

*I shudder at the thought of ever becoming an Enhanced. They are stronger than a regular person, yes, but they stop being actual people. Enhanced are unpredictable and*

*are almost always volatile. They belong to Sector Three and there is no returning to being just you. No. I am not Enhanced material.*

The images come faster now.

*“What time do you fly out tomorrow?” Lev asks beside me. We are laying down on his bed, each on our side turned towards each other. He caresses my arm with his fingers and leans in to kiss my neck.*

*“In the morning,” I say with a laugh, because his nuzzling is tickling me.*

*“Please be careful. I know you’re the best pilot in the battalion but please.”*

*There’s fear in his voice.*

*“Hey, I’ll be fine. I’m dropping in some Enhanced and then I’m right back here. I’ve flown in and out a dozen times. I can handle myself.”*

*“Just come back to me.”*

They blur together now. Making me dizzy and nauseous.

*I am sitting on the cockpit of the aircraft. Two minutes to drop zone. The system locks the missile coming straight at us. My copilot warns me but there is nothing I can do. Whatever maneuvers I can pull – this weapon has already locked in on us.*

*There’s screaming and yelling. The fear is alive. I am going to die.*

Then the scene changes.

*I am waking up in a hospital bed. I know I’ve just had an accident. It’s incredible that I am alive, and I must be alive because the face that peers over me is Levs’. He looks worried and he’s been crying.*

*“I feel fine,” I say, surprised to find that my voice is strong.*

*“Sweetheart,” he says, and bends down to kiss me. “I am sorry. I am so sorry, but I couldn’t do anything else.”*

*“What’s wrong?”*

*“You’re Enhanced.”*

It feels to me like something more was said that day. The anatomical grip has already started to erase parts of the memories. I was sure there was something else he had said in that moment. There was something I had answered.

The images that follow are from my years as a Captain in the Biohacking Initiative.

Meeting Kai. Being deployed together for our first mission along with Des, whom I had requested be part of my team. Clearing my first biohacking facility. Shots. Blood. Death. Knives. Slicing. Cutting. Shooting. Chopping off. More blood.

I can pinpoint the exact moment I lost my mind. The exact moment I stopped being Brynn and became the Enhanced I so despised. I can pinpoint that first kill that actually felt *good*, the first of many I had *enjoyed*.

The sensory overload is too much and I open my eyes to the present, gasping for air and wanting to get as far away from this machine as possible.

*“Wait, Brynn, you haven’t completely disengaged yet...”*

*“Captain Thatcher...”*

I can’t see clearly around me, but at the touch of someone’s hand grasping my shoulder I throw a punch and I feel it connect and hear a crunching sound at the same time.

“Put her out!”

I collapse on the cool tile and pass out.

When I open my eyes again I am not in the recalibration room. I am lying down on a hospital bed with Dr. Gwyn and Mari standing beside me. One glance around the room and I see the junior Intelligence officer, Seren Nest, standing by the door. She’s got a large purple bruise around her nose, and it’s been bandaged. She’s looking right at me.

“What happened?” I ask.

“We had to pull you out of your recalibration. The nanos were picking up too many disturbances in your brain and we had to make an emergency stop,” answers Dr. Gwyn.

“When can I go?”

“Soon. First you have to tell me what you remember from the experience.”

I think for a moment but nothing comes to mind. I try to bring up older memories but even that takes effort and it brings on a headache. “I can’t think of anything right now.”

“We’ve brought you this,” says Gwyn and she pulls out a small Serym vial from her pocket. She walks over to the small table on the other side of the room and takes from one of its drawers a hypodermic needle. She sucks the Serym into the needle and then swiftly injects me with it.

At once I feel the Serym’s calming effect. It’s like a balm, washing over me and taking away all of my discomfort. It hasn’t worked so well so fast for me in a long time.

“How do you feel?”

“Much better,” I answer.

I turn my gaze towards the junior officer. “Did I do that to you?”

She nods but does not speak.

I shrug and say, “Sorry.”

“Commander Sayer is outside waiting to see you,” says Gwyn.

“Why?”

“As Head of Intelligence, he can come and go as he pleases, soldier. You can leave the premises whenever you are able to and remember what I said about residual side effects over the next few weeks.”

The three of them leave the room. I lay my head back on the bed and enjoy the feeling of nothingness. I try again to remember what happened during recalibration but I can't bring anything up. Maybe the emergency stop had shocked my brain and it will be some time before I can regain those memories. Or maybe the thing actually worked and I won't remember anything at all from now on. I don't know which one scares me the most.

The door opens and in walks Lev. His long hair is tied at the base of his neck and his dark, luminous eyes study me from his spot at the door.

“I don't have a contagious disease,” I say.

He smirks and takes a few steps closer to me. “I am told there was a problem with your recalibration.”

“You don't say.”

“I've always been honest with you,” he tells me.

“Have you really?” I ask rhetorically. Even in my calm state I find it hard not to take little jabs at him whenever I can. “Are you keeping up with everything I do?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I know everything that goes on with Enhanced under my command,” he says. Apparently he can’t help himself either.

“Why is that, I wonder?”

“Erratic behaviors,” he answers.

I laugh, “I would be careful if I were you, Commander. Remember, I have superhuman strength thanks to you.”

There’s a prolonged silence as my words hang between us. “Then you should be grateful,” he says finally.

I clench my fists. I am tired of everyone telling me I have to be grateful for something I didn’t want in the first place. Tired of having to be grateful for being two people inside of my brain. Brynn, the woman. Brynn, the killing machine. Tired of having to be grateful that with my Enhancement came an addiction to the Serym; because it doesn’t work for me as it works for the others. Tired of being grateful that now I have been recalibrated and I can’t remember what I have lost, or what they might have taken from me.

I have never reconciled these two parts of me, and it puts me on edge. And the only escape is blaming him for it, even if he doesn’t deserve it.

“Grateful is something I’ll never be,” I say with as much poison as I can muster in my sedated state. Somewhere in the back of my mind I know I am not being fair.

“I don’t expect you to,” he says, taking a jab right back. I know in what way he means it. I am an Enhanced now. Enhanced don’t feel anything except rage.

After a moment I turn to him and say, "I met your friend Mari today."

"Yes, I assigned her to you specifically."

"Then it was you who recommended me for recalibration?" I ask.

"No. I fought against the decision but I was overruled," he says. "I am glad you remember meeting her. She's been a great friend, and she's a terrific doctor."

"A doctor who helped in my Enhancement surgeries," I add.

"Yes, she did. Are you going to resent her for the rest of your life as well?"

"No." I close my eyes again. "I'm tired, Lev. Please leave me alone." He doesn't answer me but I hear the door open and close.

The next few days I find to be some of the strangest in my entire life. I spend my time in a haze walking back and forth in my apartment always heading somewhere but forgetting what I am doing midway.

When leaving the Maintenance Facility I was given a medical bracelet that registers me as 'temporarily psychologically impaired.' They force me to employ my drudge day and night, and I am told I can't go anywhere outside my apartment until further notice. They field calls coming in through my R.I and the 'currently unavailable' message gets send out as a response.

I comply.

In the days that pass I am able to remember bits and pieces of what I saw while I was being recalibrated. They are not cohesive and I can't be sure that they haven't been altered or manipulated somehow, but I remember them. I wonder if they know, and if they do, I wonder if they will try to fix me up again.

I wish I could have forgotten them. This brain, that isn't technically mine according to Gwyn, must be something truly special if it can withstand something so powerful as a recalibration and a malfunction.

I think of Lev being there and what he said about assigning Mari to be there. Why? Was it simply so she could report back to him what had happened? Or was it because maybe...

My thought trails off and I forget the idea that had been forming in my head. This would have scared me before but I find that no matter how far my thoughts stray, they come back around eventually. And I am sure that is not what they had intended to happen with me.

## CHAPTER 5 – SURPRISES

Exactly two weeks after my brain swipe I get my medical bracelet removed and I am finally given the green light to proceed as usual. The first thing I get is a call from Rhys.

His image pops up through my R.I and I can't help but smile when I see him. "I am so happy to see you."

"What happened to you? You look very pale," he tells me. "What's going on?"

For a second I am puzzled at his question. Does he not know that I've just been brain swiped? And then I remember that my brother works at Intelligence and that Lev would have neglected to inform him of it because he knows I never want to bring my brother in to things he doesn't need to know. I suspect my father feels the same.

"I'm sorry but that information is classified," I say, winking at him.

"I figured as much when you were unavailable every time I called you. I haven't seen you in two weeks."

"Well, I am available now so when are you coming to see me? Or do you want me to go over instead?"

"I'm at Headquarters right now. I wanted to talk to you about the data you and Kai brought back on your last mission. Is the line secure?" he asks me.

"Secure enough. What's wrong with the data?"

"Nothing's wrong with it, at least that's what I fear. The information you picked up is comprised of a very long list of Biohacking targets. All of which have been completed," he says.

“None in progress?”

“Not currently. None of them are new: some of them took place years ago – some even ten years ago. My guess is that that facility you cleaned out was simply where they stored information,” he tells me.

I nod, “Okay.”

He hesitates for a moment and sighs, “I looked over all the names myself and cross-referenced them. Something is not adding up. There is a record on the list that was done by the Federation government *on* Federation soil, it is one of the oldest names on the list.”

“Why would a Commonwealth Biohacker keep track of a hack in the Federation?” I ask.

“Along with the specification of time and place, the recorded name is Lennox Thatcher.”

This is the last thing I need right now, but I can’t very well tell my brother to stop talking because I feel my brain might explode. My heart drops down to the bottom of my stomach. That makes no sense. That name can’t be in that database.

“Are you sure?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

He nods, “It might be someone else.”

“Lennox isn’t very common,” I tell him. I have a hard time speaking the name out loud.

He gulps, and nods, clearly having a bad time with this too. “What do you want me to do?”

“Look into it – there’s got to be some kind of mistake,” I snap at him. “Sorry.”

“I’ll contact you whenever I have something new,” he says. The image is crystal clear and I can see the turmoil in his eyes.

“Let’s not think the worst yet, alright?” I say gently.

He nods again and disconnects the call. I have tried throughout my life to protect him from things he doesn’t need to know. This could be the biggest, and the only one, I am unable to keep him from.

Lennox Thatcher was our mother.

At least, that was our mother’s name.

My mother worked for Sector Three, but she was a doctor – she worked in the military hospital at Headquarters. Could she have been a spy? Did she work for the Intelligence Facility as well? Did my father know? Surely he would have said something, at least to me.

I sigh heavily. If that is our mother, then I am sure there is a good explanation for it.

I stand motionless in front of the tall windows overlooking the city in the living area of my apartment.

Will this ever stop? Will I ever get to live a life of peace and obscurity? I want nothing more than to disappear from the face of the Earth. But every time I turn around there’s another problem, something else to deal with.

I should be used to being alone in an empty apartment, but the events of the last several weeks have weakened my indifference. I have rarely stayed above two days here after any mission. We are given new orders almost immediately.

If you are considered a high-value asset, the military will give you a rest before issuing a new mission. The idleness I have been enjoying for the past couple of weeks is beginning to wear off and I need something to do with myself.

Looking around the dark apartment, it is obvious a soldier lives here. There are no touches of home, no welcoming lights. The house system does not greet me and there is no one to come home to.

My father will be at Headquarters.

My brother is at his computer den at Intelligence.

My sister is lost somewhere out in the solar system.

And my mother is dead.

I realize it is raining but even so I can see people crawling like ants under their neon umbrellas and coats making their way into the entertainment sector for their nightly escapades.

I call Kai and it goes through.

“You’re back,” I say when she comes in through my screen.

“And you’re alive. I tried you a few times but you were unavailable,” she tells me.

“Yeah, my brain is still unavailable to me,” I tell her.

“I was just about to leave to the Entertainment sector. Come through,” she answers.

Her apartment is much like mine, except she fills her space with knick-knacks and collectibles and her system is always on.

She wears a tight blue jumpsuit that’s slit open in the front down to her navel. Her face is painted and her skin glitters as she moves away after opening the door for me.

“Are you really going to wear that?” I ask.

She laughs, “Underneath my uniform I am still a woman, Brynn.”

“Come on, then.”

Here she looks me up and down, “And are you wearing that?” I am wearing my black off-duty uniform. “Live a little, Cap.”

“I’m going out with you, ain’t I?” I say sarcastically.

We leave her place and activate the hoods in our coats to cover up from the rain.

The Entertainment Sector is loud and rowdy. People walk back and forth on the electronic sidewalks wearing too much clothing, or barely anything at all. Everything is bright and neon colored. Women paint their faces to match those bright colors, and hair that sparkles even at night – which I am told is the new trend of civilian augmentations.

The streets are lined with restaurants, bars, clubs, and pleasure houses all vying for the attention of each passerby. Music plays out of each venue and people cry out in delight at this or that.

Kai’s favorite den is the Passion Pit. It’s one of the few pleasure houses that cater specifically to military enhanced and their followers – drugs, sex, music and secrets. The only sign denoting the existence of it is a bright red neon sign of a naked woman with a missing arm, holding a gun on the other hand. I always thought it to be a bit much but Kai calls it poetic – a perfect representation of the Enhanced – powerful, but never all there.

Crowds line the outside and the inside is vast and cavernous. The loud music paired with the low lighting are mild compared to what’s going on down on the pit.

Hundreds of people are either lounging on sofas, or sitting at the bar enjoying the show, or fucking each other's brains out in plain sight for everyone to see. The orgy itself is like a living, breathing thing in and of itself. There are so many naked bodies on the pit that it's hard to figure out when one starts and when another person begins. Especially since everyone moves around constantly starting with one partner and going through as many as possible.

One time I sat drinking at the edge of the pit and watched as one Enhanced made his way through fifty people before he got up for a drink. After a few minutes I saw him go back into it.

“What are you thinking so hard about, precious?”

My eyes focus on a short girl with long, neon hair. Her eyes are purple with golden flecks that shift around every time she blinks. She's slender and beautiful and wears nothing but a pair of clear thigh high boots.

“I'm thinking I'd like to get a drink,” I tell her.

She smiles, takes my hand and leads me to the bar. I have already lost Kai.

She leads me over to the bar, showing me her full ass, and orders two drinks. She hands me one and clicks her glass to mine. We both drink. She's about to open her mouth to speak but I cut her off.

“I don't have any of what you're looking for,” I say.

She gives me a coy smile and sidles up to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. She kisses me, bites softly on my lower lip.

“Come on, baby, are you going to make me beg?” she asks, and as she does, she presses herself more to me.

I chuckle, "I can fuck you until tomorrow but I don't have any Serym, and that's the real reason you're here, aren't you?"

Still with a smile on her face she backs away from me, finishes her drink and blows a kiss over her shoulder as she walks away to find someone else. Junkies.

I watch her for a moment and then order another drink. I look around for Kai but I don't see her anywhere. She's either lost in the pit or gone off to one of the playrooms upstairs.

"Well, well, Cap, what are you doing here alone?"

An Enhanced I've worked with in the past comes around me and places his hand on my shoulder. Cyrus.

I smile easily, "Kai has deserted me."

He laughs. "Of course. Why aren't you joining?"

"Well, apparently civilians don't like Enhanced who don't carry illegal Serym."

He throws his head back and laughs, and sticks his hand inside his pocket. He retrieves two small vials and hands them to me. "There you go. Don't ever say I didn't do anything for you." He winks and walks off.

I stare at the small vials. I itch to down them both in one. It's why Junkies are called Junkies. And why they only ever fuck Enhanced, because we're the only ones who can get our hands on it. They are addicted.

Just like we are.

I put the vials inside of my jacket and order a second drink. Maybe I'll find her and we can both have a good time. The ones who first had the idea were onto something,

there's nothing like sex on Serym. There's nothing like anything on Serym. I down the drink.

I register an incoming call from Ceri. Surprised, I take it and automatically drown out the noise around me.

“Captain.”

“Ceri, I wasn't expecting a call from you,” I say.

“Can you come by? I have a few things to tell you,” he says.

I didn't feel like discussing my sister at the present moment.

“I told you life or death, Ceri,” I say, annoyed.

“It might be for her,” he answers. “You might as well come, it's not like you're doing much in the Passion Pit.”

“Fine,” I tell him and cut the communication line.

I give up on trying to locate Kai and leave the place. Outside the music is less distracting and the people don't mind me as much because it is still raining and they can't make me out very well. I keep my face as much under the hood as possible as I walk the few blocks to the Old tree, where Ceri resides.

The Old Tree is the oldest liquor bar in the city. It has been standing since the reconstruction of the country began after the A.E – historically known as WWIII, but commonly referred to as the Apocalyptic Event, or A.E. It's been modified and rebuilt over the years but somehow it still retains its age.

The bar is covered in moving posters of entertainers and famous celebrities. There are long automated bars dispensing liquor on each wall. The music comes down from the

ceiling and a refreshing green mist seems to permeate the air, designed to seep into a person's pores and do away with their inhibitions.

I move towards the back and go down a flight of tight steps that everyone seems to be ignoring. At the bottom of the stairs there is a door, I knock four times and it opens a moment later. Inside there are three giant computer servers, and behind it all a small man sits at a desk. His fingers fly on the holokey and he stares into the projected screen in front of him.

Ceri looks up from his screen and studies my face. His eyes are dark and his brown hair is in braids that fall all the way down to the back of his knees. He wears a black off-duty uniform that's spotless. Ceri is the ex-biohacker I refused to kill who I brought in to Lev a few years back. He worked out a deal and now he reports to Lev on any and all hacking activities in the city.

"You don't look so hot, Cap," he says.

"Don't feel so hot. What do you got for me?" I say, sitting on the edge of his desk.

"Well, your little sister is getting herself into some trouble," he tells me, looking back to his screen.

"How?"

"She's been smuggling illegal goods across the solar system, was stopped by the Aegis and spent a few weeks in a Martian dungeon cell," he says casually, sitting back on his seat and looking at me.

"Fuckin' great. So she's a criminal now?" I ask.

He shrugs, "It's been going on for a few years."

“Why hadn’t you told me before?”

He shrugs again, “You said life or death.”

“And what’s changed this time?”

“She’s working for a Martian thug, Dyl. He’s nothing big here but he’s been on the wrong side of the Aegis for quite some time. Many of his co-workers have a tendency to end up dead.”

I am quiet for a moment and look down on to the floor. What in the world is that girl thinking? And how come the Aegis didn’t return her to Earth when they went through her record? I ask Ceri.

“She modified her record. Apparently that’s what her partner is good at,” he tells me.

I shake my head. At least she wasn’t out there all on her own. When Ara went off-planet it took Ceri a while to find her. I had asked him if he could keep tabs on her for me. I’ve never told my father or my brother anything about her life. I don’t know what my father would have done. Rhys would try and find some way to communicate with her, which might have endangered him.

“I can’t deal with this right now,” I mutter.

“You wanted to know. And following orders is what keeps me out of a dungeon cell. If you want to have something less on your mind then do something about it.”

“Like what?”

“Forget her,” he says.

I could never forget my sister. I understand why she had to go and why she never reached out; she knows it would bring us trouble.

“Or reach out to her and find a way to make it right again,” Ceri says.

I shake my head. “She’s been gone almost ten years. I can’t even begin to wonder how all of that would go down. Total nightmare.”

“Maybe not if she had an Enhanced agent on her side.”

“Ara doesn’t want to come back. She succeeded in going off-planet and that is something that very few people attempt, much less get away with.”

“You would know, right?” he asks, smiling ruefully.

I shrug off his comment.

“It won’t help your shaking hands any to have one more thing to worry about,” he says.

I ball up my hands. “Anything else going on?”

He turns back to his screen. “Well, I’ve been seeing a steady decrease in Biohacking over the last two months.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“It’s on purpose. The chatter I’ve been hearing is that the hackers are actively stopping.”

I furrow my eyebrows. “Why?”

“No idea. But I’ve called Lev over to let him know about it,” he says, and for just a moment the corners of his mouth lift in a small smile.

The familiar four knocks that serve as password bang on the door. Ceri presses a button and the door opens, letting in all the noise from outside for a second. Lev materializes out of the darkness and stops short as he sees me leaning against the opposite wall with my hands crossed in front of my chest.

“Commander,” I say with a nod.

“Brynn, I didn’t know you’d be here too,” he says.

“She’s not here for the same reason you are, Commander,” replies Ceri.

“Old friends catching up,” I say.

Lev comes closer and sits on the same spot I had sat on just moments ago at the edge of the desk. “I am sure,” he says. “What do you got for me?”

“What I have to say concerns you both, as a matter of fact, so it’s a good idea to have Brynn stay.”

Lev nods at this, “Proceed.”

Ceri recounts to Lev what he tells me, and then adds, “That can mean many different things, but the most likely is that the hackers are making way for one big hack and that means big trouble for us.”

“Are you telling me that all the hackers in the city decided to step back and let someone else take the information they want?”

Ceri shrugs, “Hard to say. The group – because I have a hard time believing it is one person – responsible for this might have promised wanted information, or might have made threats in order to get everyone off the Mainframe Net.”

“There’s bound to be hundreds of biohackers in the city alone,” Lev says.

Ceri nods, “Yes, yes there are but you forget that we all have a way of communicating with each other. It wouldn’t be a difficult task to get through to everyone.”

“Have you heard anything?” Lev asks.

Ceri shrugs, “Only chatter. There’s some talk of a big hit from the outside, others say that it’s from the inside. I am asking as much as I can but none of it is very reliable information.”

“Why not?” Lev asks.

“Because the chatter can be a tool for distraction. False trails. It might all be lies just to keep you from figuring out the truth,” I say.

“Precisely,” Ceri smiles and nods.

Ceri looks back to Lev. “I can let you know if anything changes, if I hear any rumors that might be true but there isn’t much I can do without raising flags.”

“If all of these hackers are making way for one big hack on the Mainframe, what is the magnitude?”

Ceri sighs. “It depends on what they want. But if I had the entire Mainframe free of hacks I’d go for the very, very top. That’s the cabinet, that’s Maximillian and anyone else on the top floors.”

“We can always wait for a preemptive hack. They always want to make sure it can happen without actually going through with it. If we can figure them out then we might be able to do something,” I say.

“I can’t sit and wait for a Biohacking hit to happen, especially one of this size,” says Lev, shaking his head.

Ceri shrugs again, “For all we know it can be a big hoax. Get you all riled up for no apparent reason.”

That doesn’t make sense to me. “I doubt they would go through all this trouble as a prank to the government. If something is going to happen it’s just a question of when.”

Lev nods. He doesn't speak for a long moment. Ceri studies me. I look back with a defensive gesture and he looks back to Lev.

Lev sighs, "Find out as much as you can and let me know when you have something solid."

Ceri nods, "I'll see what I can get you."

Lev turns to me. "Were you planning on staying or can I walk you out?"

I unfold my arms and nod. "Sure."

We go back upstairs into the noise of the bar and then back outside onto streets where there's an even bigger crowd. Even in their drunken state people part to make way for us, Lev is very well known.

I see them pop pills, and drink from flasks and stamp things on their tongues. Civilians are always finding new ways of drugging themselves in order to find enjoyment.

"Are you okay?" Lev asks as we walk down the street.

"Yeah, of course. A little biohacking threat is no big deal to me," I say, going for a joke.

"That's not what I meant," he says.

"I'm fine, Lev, thanks," I say. "I just really want to know what the hell is going on."

"We'll get to the bottom of it," he says. "You can help out more if you joined my department."

This makes me smile. "Leave the military for Intelligence? Kai would kill me."

"She's a big girl, I think she'll be able to handle it," he says.

“Catching biohackers is what I do,” I say.

“If the hackers aren’t doing their jobs anymore then sooner or later your team and all the others will be grounded. At least in Intelligence you’ll still be able to do something,” he tells me.

I shake my head again, “I am no good inside four walls.”

He stops walking and I stop to face him. “I got you into this and now I am offering you a way out. Come to Intelligence and you won’t have to kill anymore.”

I sigh, “Here’s the truth; killing is the only thing I know how to do now. If I stop doing that then I don’t know who I am.”

His eyebrows furrow as he looks at me. This is not the answer he was hoping for. “Will you at least think about it?”

“I’ll think about it.”

After I am sure he’s gone, I turn around and go back to the Passion Pit. The junkie who approached me earlier is sitting at the bar, talking to someone who I can tell is not an Enhanced. She turns to look at me as she sees me approaching. I can see her pupils dilate. She hops down from the stool and grabs my hand, taking me upstairs to a private room, where we can both forget for a while.

## CHAPTER 6 – NOTHING TO FIND

Three days later I receive a call from Rhys. He has been keeping his distance from me, no doubt consumed in his search for information on our mother. But I miss him.

When his image appears before my eyes it is my turn to tell him he looks pale and bedraggled. “Seriously, have you showered or eaten at all since we last talked?”

“Not the issue. Once I start I can’t stop.”

I nod. “What did you find out?”

Rhys sighs. “I hacked into the facility you took the data from and downloaded all other information on the biohacks that wasn’t in what you gathered. It turns out there was one case they kept especially under wraps – Lennox Thatcher. From that data, I found Lennox Thatcher was an undercover spy working in the military hospital at Headquarters – and was sent off to the Federation. But she deviated from her supposed work and hacked into the Federation Mainframe. She was caught and was biohacked, then executed.” He speaks slowly as if the knowledge pains him.

“Is there a picture?” I ask. I am having trouble breathing.

He loads it into his screen and it opens on mine. There on the screen looking back at me, as she hasn’t done these last ten years, is my mother Lennox Thatcher. She wears a severe expression in the picture – not like my mother at all.

This is not the mother. This is the spy.

My heart falls through my stomach down to my toes. The facts are right in front of me but they seem not to be registering.

“Is the information she gave them what started the war?” I ask.

“The problems between the two countries started within days of her death. It may have contributed,” he says.

I think for a moment back to the start of the war. The Federation made serious accusations against the Commonwealth about sending secret agents to murder high-ranking government officials with anti-Commonwealth agendas. High Command explicitly denied any involvement and announced that any agents doing so would have gone rogue, and against all government protocol.

“Rhys, do you know what this means?”

He nods slowly. “Yes. She was one of the rogue agents.”

My head is hurting. “But why? Why would she go rogue? Unless...”

“Unless she wasn’t rogue at all and was sent by the government,” he finishes for me. He is trying to sound detached but the emotion is there in his voice and face.

“Have you gathered any Intel on what her actual mission was?”

“No. That information can only be accessed by a much higher clearance level than mine, and if she actually did help start a war, I doubt many people have it.”

I nod. “Is there anything else?”

Rhys shakes his head, “Is it stupid to wonder whether father knows the truth?”

“Of course he knows. He probably sent her. Or she volunteered.”

“It could have been withheld from him,” he says.

“Rhys,” I say gently, “he is senior advisor to Maximillian. He knows.”

Of course our father knows. He wouldn’t have his position at Headquarters if he didn’t know everything. But I find I cannot fault him for keeping the information from us. He would have wanted to spare our feelings.

More disturbing though, is my mother, sweet Lennox, was an undercover agent for the government, and that her mission involved going on Federation soil. The odds of her getting back to the Commonwealth had not been high to begin with, and she had accepted that.

I am unable to connect the woman who raised three children to the woman who had stared back at me on the screen with her hard expression. It's as if there were two of my mother. I can't decide which one scares me more.

“You think Ara knew something...”

I shake my head. “Don't. Ara left because of Ara.”

He sounds like he's trying hard not to cry. “Don't you ever think of her? Do you think she ever thinks of us? She just vanished...”

“She's gone now, darling. We have to let them both go.” I cannot listen anymore. “I'll see you soon, okay?”

He gives me a weak smile and disconnects the call.

The second after he hangs up there I receive another ping, and I think it is him calling me back. But it is not. I open the connection to receive the message. It displays clearly before my eyes. *“Agent, you are to report to Command for mission status, today 1800.”*

I look at the chronometer implanted on my wrist. “Smokin' fuck,” I mutter under my breath and get up to leave.

I arrive at Command exactly thirty minutes before I am supposed to ship out. I am directed to the Maintenance Facility for gearing. I see Kai already in a Repair Pad.

“The usual, Captain,” says one of the medical officers.

During the gearing process our systems are checked and updated if they have to be. They always make sure we are in tip-top physical shape before heading out somewhere. It's a pity they don't care about our minds the same way.

"Smokin' fuck, Cap, I feel brand new," says Kai as we walk together down to mission control.

Nandi is waiting for us, "Good evening, Captain, Lieutenant."

"Major." Kai and I speak at the same time.

"Intelligence has sent over some startling information," she says, bending over a data terminal and clicking a few buttons. The information is sent to our Neuro-connects and comes up before my eyes through the R.I.

"It's a biohacking site," says Kai.

"We've been getting hits from these same coordinates for the past week and are green to clear it," says Nandi.

I see Kai look in my direction out of the corner of my eye.

"The site is abandoned, the hackers working there packed up long ago. We need you to verify if they left anything behind. Return any data you find so we can analyze it and see what the hell is going on," she says.

"Yes ma'am," we say in unison.

"You're dismissed. A Bird is waiting for you on landing pad eight." With that she walks away.

"Let's go, Lieutenant," I tell Kai and we walk out of mission control and up to the landing pads.

The flight out to the site is a forty-five minute ride west of the city, deep into the wild. We pass parts of the country that used to be states called West Virginia and Ohio, until we get to the ruins of the old city, Indianapolis. Not much comes up on my R.I about the history of it except that it was once considered a major metropolis.

*“Valkyrie One-Nine, twenty seconds to drop zone,”* the pilot’s voice comes over my earpiece.

Kai and I stand from the cargo hold seats attached to the wall. I press the helmet button on the inside of my wrist and the uniform comes over my head and face, protecting me. The visor part of the helmet clears and I can see Kai beside me doing the same. My field of vision has connected with the R.I and once we drop it will reactivate and help us move around.

At twenty feet from the ground, a floor hatch opens big enough for once person and I drop out, Kai follows a second later.

*“Enhanced Fire Team Three Squad leader, Valkyrie One-Nine secure perimeter. We’ll call you in when it’s time to go.”*

*“Roger that, Fire Team Three.”* The Bird quietly disappears from view and Kai and I turn to the facility only a few yards away. We approach the tree line carefully. They told us it was deserted but we don’t really believe that until I see for myself.

Like all the others, these hackers set up shop in the most unobvious building they could find, and built their facility underground like everything seems to be now. I pick up no bodies on my R.I. It is completely deserted.

*“I got no movement, Cap,”* says Kai over the helmet comm.

*“Copy,”* I answer. *“Scan lower floors for bodies.”*

I do the same and after a moment I can hear the voice through my earpiece. “*No bodies detected.*”

“In we go,” I say. I lower my rifle and deactivate my helmet. Kai keeps hers on. We walk towards the entrance of the building and after trying to get the doors to open a few times unsuccessfully, I let out a few rounds that burst the glass door and we walk in over the shattered glass on the floor.

There’s nothing on the ground floor. Just an empty lobby and a pair of elevators.

“Servers are on the third floor,” I say, after the R.I locates and pinpoints their locations.

Kai and I take the elevator down to the third floor.

“There isn’t going to be anything in these,” I say. The door to the elevator opens and we are deposited onto a dark floor. I take out three small light cylinders from one of my front pockets and twist them. They immediately light up and hover above my head.

We walk towards the nearest server and Kai hands me the data stick to plug in.

“Data stick in place,” I say.

“*Stand by,*” says the voice through my earpiece. A data engineer back at Intelligence is remotely controlling this particular data stick; and I wasn’t curious enough to ask why.

“This is a total waste of time.”

“What’s wrong with you? You’ve been complaining since we set foot on the Bird,” says Kai, sounding mildly irritated.

“What they sent us here to do is a waste of time. There’s a bigger picture here,” I snarl at her.

“This is just another mission,” she says.

*“Captain, no information found in the servers.”*

“Of course,” I mutter under my breath.

“We’ve had bust missions before,” she counters.

I shake my head, “This is serious. They’ve been getting hits all week and now it’s deserted? It makes no sense. And why did they wait this long to send us out and check it out when they know nothing is going to be left in these servers?”

Kai shrugs, “If there’s no need to worry then we shouldn’t.”

I shake my head, “That’s the wrong way of thinking, Lieutenant.”

Over the course of four missions, Command sends us to four different biohacking locations that have been known to still be active. They send us far out away from the inhabited cities, one was even as far as old Missouri, about three hours from the Federation border. When Kai and I arrive they are always deserted. Some look as if they haven’t had people living in them for weeks.

The servers left behind are empty and swiped of most of their data. The information that the data engineers can get from it is useless and there’s no way of tracking anything when we get there because the servers have been cleaned for over twenty-four hours.

Even Kai starts to realize that something has to be going on. It’s impossible for them all to know we are on the way to raid them. Biohackers are deviously smart but they still haven’t learned how to hack into Command’s system and know what we are doing

ahead of time. It's as if someone is telling them we are coming, or worse, baiting us with a false signal in order to get us out there for no reason.

But there has to be a reason.

“Those sites were supposed to be filled with biohackers. Even if by some chance they were monitoring our channels somehow, we would have gotten there much faster than they could have cleared out,” I tell Rhys over my R.I.

His image is clear before my eyes. He's sitting in front of his data bay at Intelligence. “Do you think they were informed?”

“It's the only explanation, Rhys. If a big hack really is about to happen, then someone is cleaning them out,” I say.

“Have you told Lev?”

“I've been giving him information after every mission but there really isn't much to go on,” I answer.

He shrugs, “I think you'll have to resort to less than reputable resources on this one, Brynn. I try as much as I can but not many ex-hackers trust a Headquarter computer engineer.”

I chuckle, “And you think they'll trust an Enhanced?”

“No, but they are afraid of you,” he tells me. Then pauses and continues, “I did more digging on what we found on moth – I mean, Lennox Thatcher.”

There is no one around but he looks anyways. “What did you find out?”

“Turns out, she wasn't the only agent in the Federation at that time. There was another, Gregory Bethan, at the time of her death,” he tells me.

“The reports said it was a couple of agents who had gone rogue,” I say, thinking back to before the war. “Where is he now?”

“As far as we know, he lives down south on the coast of the Atlantic. He retired from the government sector ten years ago.”

“Ten years, that means he was taken off line as soon as he got back,” I say, lowering my voice.

“Most likely hidden away for his own safety, until they could use him again somehow,” Rhys is now whispering. “The Federation had all the evidence at their fingertips, why didn’t they present it to the Controllers?”

That’s an easy question. “The Federation was accusing the Commonwealth of illegal espionage through biohacking, and according to your report, Lennox Thatcher was biohacked and later killed – they committed the same crime – had the Federation given evidence, it would have been found out, and they would have been tried right along with this government.”

It is both easy and gut wrenching to talk about Lennox Thatcher, about our mother, in this way. It’s easy because we knew her as a doctor, someone who helped other people. Gut-wrenching because underneath it all she was a trained assassin who ignited a war between two nations.

“That’s why *you’re* the soldier, always two steps ahead of everyone,” he says, smiling at me.

I smile back as normally as I can. My brother doesn’t know any of my demons.

“What do you want to do with the information?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing to do,” I say. “We have to accept that mother had her secrets and she kept them for a good reason – to protect her children. That’s the best I can think of.”

He nods. “You’re right.”

A few minutes later we end the call and my living space materializes back in front of me. The view to the city is distorted because of the rain and fog. I sit hunched over with my elbows on my knees. I haven’t had an episode in a couple of weeks, and that scares me. Since the recalibration I don’t know what’s really going on inside of my head. The memories come but they are dull and silent. So maybe the process worked after all before it went haywire. But I am afraid the blanket is going to fly off when I least expect it and when they come again it’s going to be worse than all of the times before.

I sigh and drop my face into my hands. Then I snap my head back up and remember that I don’t have time to focus on me because my job is calling my attention. And I welcome it, because however warped it may seem to an outsider, getting to the bottom of this biohacking problem is what is going to clear my mind of everything.

If only to come back and bite me in the ass later.

I check my wrist chronometer, 2300.

Ceri’s working hours.

I don my Enhanced uniform in my room and bun up my hair. The face in the mirror is pale and could use with a bit of color. I look almost gaunt. I touch the shadows under my eyes and look into them. Nothing there except turmoil.

I wish I could shake it off. I tell myself that I am not the only person who has been through hard times, and certainly not the only Enhanced who has suffered from crippling PTSD, but even then, I can't get rid of it.

I make my way back to the Old Tree and as usual, despite the rain, the entertainment district is packed to the brim. I notice people give me a wide berth as I pass by, as always. I enter the Old Tree and head directly downstairs to his office. I knock four times.

"Who is it?" I hear over the din.

"Brynn Thatcher," I yell back.

The door is unlocked after a moment and he sits at his desk with a smile on his face. "Well, Brynn, welcome. Where's Kai tonight? You're usually joined at the hip."

"She doesn't like to be bothered when we're not on missions," I answer.

"I see," he says.

"Ceri, what do you know and are not telling Lev?" I say, sitting on the edge of his desk. I think he is surprised to see me in my Enhanced uniform because he looks me up and down before settling on my eyes.

"Don't you think I'm telling him everything I know?" he says nonchalant. His long hair is picked up in a large bun. He wears his off-duty black uniform. Ceri is not an official member of Intelligence but the uniform sets him apart from everyone else, and that's what Lev wanted.

"I know you wouldn't give him information you'd want to save for yourself. Don't forget I've known you longer," I say.

He nods, "I haven't forgotten. And I am not hiding anything from him, or Headquarters for that matter. All I am getting is chatter."

"What chatter?" I ask carefully.

He leans forward, "Every biohacker I've ever known is spooked out of their wits, Thatcher. They've gone offline and have gone underground." He studies me for a moment, "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

I nod. "Every site I've been to in the past weeks has been swiped clean before we get there. Someone's got to be informing them."

He nods his head slowly, "It's not impossible. Question is who. It's not going to be easy to flush them out, unless they make a huge mistake."

I shrug, "If we can find out who it is, it will be a step in the right direction."

"Are you asking me if I am the informer?"

I stare at him for a moment. "Are you?"

"I don't think you realize how much I value my own life," he says.

"You're an ex-hacker, Ceri," I point out.

"And I'm still alive, aren't I?"

After a moment, I nod, conceding. "Someone is, and it's someone working in Intelligence."

"What makes you think Intelligence?"

"Who else would it be? It's definitely no Enhanced and no other military personnel either," I say.

"Hmm," he says, nodding.

There's a moment of companionable silence before he speaks again. "Are you okay, Brynn?"

I flick my eyes over to him again and I see concern in his features. "I don't know what I am," I answer quietly, and truthfully.

He turns his head to the side, "Are you talking about the way you feel or who you are?"

"Both," I say.

"You need to make peace with what you are, Brynn. Only then will you be able to get through the rest of the slag."

I nod and then I change the subject. "And what of my personal request? Any news on that front?"

His eyebrows furrow as he smiles slowly. "Life or death, huh?"

I roll my eyes. "Have you heard anything or not?"

He shrugs, "Nothing to worry about." Then adds, "I've come to be thankful that you put me on spy duty. Whenever I need to relax, I change to her frequency and watch her and her partner go about their lives. It's like watching HoloVision, only infinitely more entertaining."

"Get a kick out of watching others, do you?"

He throws his head back and laughs, "As do you, and as we all do. Were you thinking of making contact after all?"

"I was only asking."

Ceri gives me an eerie glance but says nothing in regard to my answer. I told him once I never wanted to know anything about her unless it was life or death. But these

days I am increasingly more certain that the one to have her brush – and inevitable demise – with death, will be me.

## CHAPTER 7 – SECTOR ONE

I get back to my apartment to find Kai waiting for me sprawled on the living area sofa with a drink in her hand. She looks up when I come in.

“When did you get in?” I ask, going over and sitting on the sofa next to her.

She sits up and takes a sip of her drink. “A few minutes ago. Where did you go?”

“Ceri.”

She nods. “Any news?”

I shake my head. “No, but this is going to be handled through Intelligence. I think we should put in a transfer order.”

She laughs. “Transfer to Intelligence? And what the smokin’ fuck would we do inside four walls? We’re no computer engineers or mainframe spies to be checking in on everyone and what they are doing.”

“Intelligence deploys fire teams too, not just the military,” I tell her.

“We’re not spies,” she repeats.

“Once they ground us, they will put all military personnel on rotating police duty and I really don’t want to ride around the streets of the city and bringing people in for homicide or breaking and entering,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “Isn’t that what we do with biohackers?”

“Our stakes are much higher than that,” I say.

She takes another sip. “Is this really about biohacking or is there a personal reason you want to get to Intelligence?” She looks at me pointedly.

I get up and move towards my room. “You’re out of your head. We’re going to Intelligence tomorrow so I suggest you rest.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Before going inside of my room I turn back and look at her. “What happened out there? In Sector Three when you had to guard Eric Jance?”

She gives me a shrug, “Nothing. They patched him up and sent him on his way. He’s supposed to be resuming his tour, if he hasn’t already.”

“What did he looked like before he got patched up?”

Something flickers across her face as she remembers. “He bled from his eyes and from his ears and from every orifice you can think of. There were days when he looked like he didn’t weigh fifty pounds and I was sure that was the day he died. But he didn’t. Each time he went into cardiac arrest he came back and instead of getting weaker he got stronger. Sometimes I sit down and wonder how he did it.”

It’s the longest speech about anyone I have ever heard her make. “And what’s he like?”

Kai just smiles, a real, genuine, warm smile. “Let’s just say he doesn’t deserve what he got.”

“Did you get close to him?” I ask, taking a step towards her.

Another shrug. “As close as a guard gets to her ward. We only talked sometimes,” she says and I am absolutely sure she’s being evasive. But it’s none of my business. She gives me my space with my secrets and I’ll give her the same with hers.

It’s not until later when I am wide awake on my bed in the middle of the night, that hear voices coming from the living area. I get up and walk to the door and see her sitting on the sofa in front of a holographic projection of someone. My RI hones in on the person talking to her and I see that it is Eric Jance himself.

The Holographic Projector is the making of the Federation and so there's no question that he gave it to her. I slump against the door entrance and watch them for a moment. They're not talking about anything important, mostly what each of them has been up to, but even though I can't see her face, I can see his – and with each answer he gives he smiles dazzlingly.

*As close as a guard gets to her ward*, I think. I shake my head and go back to my room, where I am sure I won't be getting any sleep anyways.

When I wake up the next morning she's gone. No evidence that she was here at all. And then she calls me stubborn.

I have a fast, mushy breakfast and then make my way to the Intelligence Facility at Headquarters. Like the military sector, this facility has its private elevator and is deeper underground. The depth does not appeal to me but it can't be helped.

The elevator makes its way further down until it opens into a quiet reception area. There's a red haired woman behind a glass wall.

"Name and Sector," she asks me as I approach her.

"Brynn Thatcher, Sector Three, Class One Agent," I say.

She inputs that in the computer and I see her screen light up a soft green. She looks back up to me, "Commander Sayer is waiting for you in the Control Room, three floors below."

I had pinged him as soon as I woke up to let him know I wanted to see him. I take the elevator down again, and when it opens it is an entirely different kind of room. A large control center with hundreds of individual data bays organized in straight rows.

There is one massive screen on the far wall displaying information from around the country, and even some from the Enhanced out in the rest of the solar system.

The lights are dim and the only other light sources come from the data bay screens. The engineers don't notice me as I pass by, as they are completely concentrated on the information before them.

Rhys is here somewhere, I think, as I make my way around the place. I walk parallel to the back wall where I came in. I know that besides keeping in contact with Enhanced agents on missions, and monitoring their progress, the facility also employ a full medical staff that oversees their Neuro-connects and health levels.

“Welcome to the Intelligence Facility.”

I turn to find Lev behind me. “I was coming to find you.”

“Looking for Rhys?” he asks, noticing that I am distracted and looking around.

“Maybe.”

“Let's go into my office,” he says.

Lev's office is large. Every surface is automated and programmed with the workings of the Facility itself.

“Do you want something to drink?” he offers.

I shake my head, “I came to talk about the biohacking attacks, or lack thereof.”

“Tell me, then.”

“As you know, every mission site they have sent us has been completely clean. They are going to ground us soon like you said, I can feel it, and I can't sit at home knowing something big is about to happen, so I came to ask for you to request a transfer.”

“Transfer here?”

I nod, “Not here, necessarily, but there must be something I can do in the city, or in any other city that can help figure out what’s going on. Sitting around on my ass would be a terrible waste of government money, don’t you think, Commander?”

He smirks at me. “Quite. I just don’t get a lot of agents knocking at my door asking for a job.”

He goes over to the large projection desk in the middle of the room and starts tapping away until he finds what he’s looking for, and then looks back up to me.

“Most of the hacking activity is now coming in through the entertainment district, and we don’t want to interrupt their work because it might lead us to exactly the person we are looking for,” he says, and motions me to come to the desk.

I stand opposite him with my hands on the edges. He flips me the digital files on the surface of the desk and I look at them one by one; they are files with dates, locations and hacking targets, both completed and planned. Before the Mainframe came about and everyone was connected for the purposes of safety and surveillance, hacking was done to and from computers.

After the Mainframe was created, where everyone’s brain is connected in the same system, the hackers decided to infiltrate the people themselves – *biohacking* into their brains for information they wanted. For the most part, the hacker doesn’t kill the victim, only implants a small device that lets them forget they have been brain hacked. It is only the more nefarious individual who ends up killing the hacked victim.

The person, or organization, planning this one massive hack is after much more than just information.

“Wouldn’t they know you’re onto them by not intervening? I mean, they are right in the city,” I ask after a moment of looking over the files.

“Well, we won’t leave them online for too long, but we do want to give them a window of time to hack and see where that gets us,” he says.

“Who is it that you have in mind?”

“I want to check out Eric Jance’s files.”

“The son of the Chancellor? Whatever for?” I ask, puzzled at the thought.

“I have a hunch,” he says, not giving anything away.

“Lev, I can’t go in there blind. I have to know what I am looking for,” I tell him.

“You won’t be looking for anything. I’ll have someone else in charge of the hacking part,” he answers.

Even though his hair is tied back at the base of his neck there are a few strands that threaten to come undone. I have the momentary urge to ask him to sit down so that I can fix it for him but I dismiss it as soon as it comes.

That was something I used to do.

More pressing still is the thought that he wants to spy on Eric Jance. It is because he suspects him of something? Or is it simply a routine inspection that Intelligence puts everyone through?

“Alright then. When’s our first mission, Commander?”

“Tonight. 2300.” His voice is firm and he doesn’t answer more than what I ask.

I stand there looking at him for a moment longer than is appropriate. I feel like there is something I should say, like thank you, but my mouth stays shut. I tell myself it’s

because he owes me this much, and not because I suddenly feel awkward standing in front of him.

“I’ll want Kai with me,” I blurt out.

He nods. “Of course. It’ll be a three person team.”

“Who’s my third?”

He straightens up to his full height and says, “I am.”

“You?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Last time I checked I was still an officer in the military,” he tells me.

“Really? Can the Head of Intelligence put himself at such risk without a reprimand from High Command?” I ask. I can tell that the sarcasm in my voice does not escape him.

“This information is classified above top secret. I can’t just delegate it off to the next person. The necessary people already know what’s going on, and if I die on one of our little outings then I am sure they’ll find someone soon enough to replace me.”

That night at 2300, I am stationed on the rooftop of one of the tallest high rises in the city overlooking the entertainment district. I am kneeling down on one knee and holding my sniper rifle with the other. I can hear the music and people’s voices, though dimly, from this altitude, and it is soothing to me, even if I have to concentrate hard on not letting the heights rattle me.

“I have a visual. What’s your location?” I ask through the squad’s comm channel in my R.I.

“We’re walking up now, switching to telecoms,” says Lev in my ear.

“Ceri, report.”

“Nothing to report yet. I’m using as many back channels I can but they are locked up nice and tight. It’s going to take a while.”

“We don’t have a while,” I say.

“Expecting trouble, Captain?” asks Lev.

“You have a fire team about to hack into the files of a very prominent Federation politician. Are you so sure we’re not going to encounter any?”

“And may I say, for the record, that this is a colossal waste of time?”

“Duly noted, Lieutenant,” I say. “For the fifth time.”

As I crouch down by the side of the roof I can see them through my R.I’s X-ray vision that has been following their ascent into Eric Jance’s borrowed government apartments. He already has enough of a security detail to oversee the entire city. Lev’s plan of coming under the pretext to offer more seems like the actual waste of time in this scenario. But I have to wonder if this placement was on purpose and if Lev had been planning this all along. No matter how I ask or say he still won’t divulge the reason we are all here today.

“Brynn, take it easy, will you?” Kai says in an irritated voice. I zoom in on her through my R.I and she’s scowling. “I can hear all your brain whirring.”

“Focus.” Lev’s tone brings a stop to what was going to be a cutting response to her. I forget that I am the only one of us who has a brain that has been partly modified

and since we're all connected through the telecoms they are able to hear, if not my actual thoughts, then the brain whirring itself as I think.

I see them both go through floor security once they are out of the elevator and into the hallway leading up to Eric's apartments. Several people salute Lev, both Federation and otherwise. Right before they go in to see Eric, I see Seren Nest stop and talk to Lev. The nose injury I caused her a few weeks back is completely gone, and I turn on the outside audio feed to hear her just in time to say she'll take them both in to see Eric.

Eric himself is enthusiastic. He greets Lev as if they were old friends and banters back and forth with Kai as easily as if they had been doing it for years.

"He's really friendly," I say to no one in particular.

"You would benefit from a few lessons," I hear Kai say.

I smile. "Touchy, touchy." I can't help myself when she hands it to me so easily. She's usually the one making the smart-ass comments but on the very rare occasions that our roles reverse I don't pass on taking them.

I turn my attention away from Lev and Kai and switch comms. "Ceri."

"I'm in the files but there's nothing out of the ordinary here. Just schedules and appearances, expenses and..." his voice trails off.

"And what?" I ask. There's a long pause. "Ceri?"

"Hang on," he tells me.

I wait for what seems like a long time before asking again. "Ceri," I repeat.

"There's a signature here that I recognize," he answers slowly as if taking a good look at something.

"A signature?"

“There are several ways to secure computer files. If you hire an expert, as Jance clearly has, they use a specific code on each step of the protection so that the information they are securing is unreachable – which we call a signature. The person who secured this file...I am sure I’ve seen this signature before.”

“What file?”

“What?”

“You said ‘this file,’ so what file?” I say.

“It’s called Amber,” he answers.

“Does that mean anything to you? Can you hack it?”

“No. Not anytime soon.”

I look back over to Eric Jance’s apartments. “Lev and Kai are about to leave,” I warn.

But it is no use. A few seconds later they both get up to leave, and Ceri’s window of opportunity closes. Again, I see Seren Nest sidling up to Lev, saying her goodbyes. I furrow my eyebrows. It seems strange to me how she pops up all the time and out of nowhere. How much privilege can a junior officer in Intelligence have? And why does Lev trust her so much?

“Seriously, Brynn,” Kai says once she’s inside the elevator with Lev again. They have switched off their telecoms and she’s speaking normally again. “You’re killing me with all that whirring.”

I ignore her comment. “Commander, Ceri found a familiar signature in one of the files he was unable to get into.”

“Why?” he asks as I turn from the side of building and turn off my X-ray vision. I kneel down again and start dismantling the rifle and putting each piece carefully back inside its case. I explain everything Ceri told me.

“We’ll talk about it with Ceri tomorrow,” he says.

“Copy that,” I answer him, and then switch the comm back to Ceri. “We’ll rendezvous tomorrow at Lev’s discretion.”

“Affirmative, Captain,” and Ceri’s feed disappears from my R.I.

I sling the rifle case over my shoulder and take out the jumper cable stick from one of my front pockets. I jam it into the concrete on the roof railing; the stick activates and buries itself further in with a low beeping sound and a flashing red light.

Once it’s secure the beeping stops and the small light goes from the flashing red to a steady blue. From its protruding end, I pull out a thin cable that I secure tightly around my wrist and then take in my left hand.

I climb up on the railing and the cold wind whips around me and even my rifle case flaps a little in the wind.

“I’m in position,” I say.

“So are we. Ready when you are captain,” Lev says through the earpiece.

“How you holding up?” The humor in Kai’s voice doesn’t escape me.

“Pretty good. About to drop in on you,” I tell her.

“Just breathe,” Lev says. I close my eyes and let out the breath I’ve been holding in for too long. I leap off the building and hold on tight to the metal cable that’s digging into my wrist. The feeling of weightlessness is terrible and I am sure the cable is going to fail and I’ll be a heaping bloody mass on the floor. But just at the right moment, the cable

suddenly stops, jerking me upwards and back down again, making me yell out in pain. I unfasten the cable and drop the few feet towards the ground.

The back alley is completely deserted except for Lev and Kai who are both waiting for me by a car a few yards away. I fix the strap of the case on my shoulder and hold my damaged wrist in my other hand. There's no blood and the pain is coming from my shoulder. What I see beneath the fake skin is just metal and wires. My R.I lets me now that I should head over to the Maintenance Facility for repairs.

## CHAPTER 8 – DIPLOMAT’S GALA

When I come out of the repair pad room at the maintenance facility, Lev is waiting for me outside a few yards away standing against the opposite wall with one leg propped up against it and his head tilted backwards looking at nothing in particular.

In the few seconds before he sees me I am reminded of a time during the Four Years War when he had been waiting for me to come out of a different room and was standing just like this. At the time, I had suffered a minor injury but he had worried and waited just the same.

He turns his head in my direction and sees me staring at him. “Everything okay?” He asks me in a neutral voice, as if he thinks showing concern will make me snap at him.

I wince mentally at the realization. I have been exceedingly hard on him. *I think he saved your life. Show some damn gratitude.* Kai’s words come back to me as clear as if she were repeating them beside me.

“Brynn?”

“Yes. Sorry. All fine and fixed,” I say showing him my newly repaired wrist. We walk down the hallway towards the elevators.

“What’s next commander?”

“I have some things to get to Ceri.”

“I’ll come with you,” I say.

“No. I need to see him alone.”

I stop walking and turn to face him. “Lev,” I begin, “you have to tell me why you’re suspicious of Jance. The file Ceri found clearly indicates he’s hiding something

and it's already got me curious so why don't you fill in the blanks for me? Who knows you might even benefit from a second opinion."

"This is classified above top secret. Only a handful of people know this information," he warns.

"So, you've said. Are you saying you don't trust me?" It's unfair of me to ask him this question when so much of our personal issues deal with trust. But it bothers me that there might be a small part of him that doesn't.

"Let's get to your apartment. I'll explain everything there."

The relative peace I had established for myself the last several weeks vanishes as soon as we get to my apartment a few minutes later. I have not crossed the threshold yet when a bloody image floods my brain. It's the accident. I see the missile coming straight for the Bird but I can't change direction. It's locked itself onto us coming to destroy.

It's happening right before my eyes.

I gasp and I lean back against the wall, shake out my head and try to dispel the image. But I relive the moment again. I relive the terror and the certainty that it was how I would die.

All I can hear is the screaming in my ear. Everyone is screaming and yelling, panicking and calling things out to me, as if they think I don't see the missile, as if they think I am doing it on purpose.

"Aghhh!!" I finally collapse on the floor. Seething at my weakness.

"Brynn!"

I don't think I've ever reacted faster in my life. My gun is in my hand, pointed at the voice's direction.

“Brynn!”

The image fades. The sounds dissipate and I see Lev again, both his hands raised above his head. There is both extreme shock and extreme concern in his features.

“Lev...” I say, reaching out towards him, but my voice breaks.

He's grouched besides me in an instant, his hands on my shoulders “Flashback?”

I nod and he helps me up. For a moment I slump against him, my face buried in the hollow of his neck. My breathing is erratic and my legs feel weak.

“Easy there. It's okay; you're not there anymore,” he takes my arms and holds me at arm's length, looking right into my eyes. “You're safe with me.”

I want to wrap my arms around his neck. I want him to hold me close. I want him to whisper soothing things in my ear and calm me down like only he can. I want to cry and not have to worry about doing so because I know he'll be there for me. I want him to share my bed at night because it is only in his arms where I am able to get a good night's sleep.

“Help me inside, please,” I say and let him take me inside the apartment and sit me on the sofa in my living area. The system has turned the lights on and has pulled back the automated curtains of the window wall.

I sit with my eyes closed until I feel him press a glass into my hands.

“Drink,” he orders.

I look from the glass of water to him and gulp it down.

“Do you feel better?” he asks.

I nod. "Yes. It's already gone."

"What did you see this time?" he whispers.

I look up into his face. "This time...it was the accident. The missile."

His expression changes too quickly for me to pinpoint all the emotions but I do see sadness, though at what or whom I couldn't say.

"Okay," I say, "tell me."

"Give yourself some time. Maybe we should do this another time when you're feeling better," he says.

"Lev, the last thing I need right now is time to be with my own thoughts. So tell me."

He waits a bit and then goes over to the opposite wall and presses a button. A section of the wall opens and he types in a code for the room scanner. The green light flashes across the room. "*Area secured.*"

"I can't believe you have the same security code," he says.

"I haven't had reason to change it," I say, standing up from the sofa. I hate seeing pity in the faces of people who have witnessed me having a flashback. But Lev's eyes show nothing of a kind. Still, I don't like the admiration I see on his features either. I don't deserve it.

He motions me to follow him into my office where he goes over to the projection desk. From his pocket, he pulls out a data stick and feeds it to the terminal. The contents of the stick appear on the surface of the desk. They are files, more than I can count, but I realize immediately what they are.

“These are biohacks,” I say. I am standing next to him, looking down at the desk as he sweeps through them to find what he wants to show me.

“You were right. Whoever or whatever is doing this is putting out feelers. Hacking hasn’t completely stopped but we’re getting new, stronger kinds of intrusions that have sent up red flags,” he says.

“What new kinds?”

“Phantom kinds,” says Lev.

I furrow my eyebrows, “From where?”

He shakes his head. “That’s what makes these different. The system logged no information besides time and date. It’s completely new cloaking technology and we know next to nothing about it.”

“How is that possible?” I ask. “Intelligence is supposed to know.”

He nods. “We’re working on it. Everyone’s working around the clock to try and figure out how to get passed it. The only connection I can think of is Eric Jance.”

“And what do these have to do with him?”

“These phantom hacks only started when he came back to the Commonwealth,” he tell me.

I let out a laugh. “Are you saying Eric Jance is committing biohacking?”

He shakes his head, “No, not Eric, but someone on his team might be, or at least someone wants us to suspect it was him or his people. These mystery hacks have happened only twice and the only thing they have in common is Eric and his entourage.”

“Lev,” I say carefully. “Think about what you are saying.” The implication that a Head of State could be biohacking our Mainframe is very serious.

“It sounds ridiculous, I know, but I don’t have anything else to go on. If he’s innocent then he’s got nothing to worry about from us. If that Amber file is simply personal information then nothing is going to happen,” he says.

“What if its classified information pertaining to his position as Head of State and you have one of your hackers take it? That can cause a whole new set of problems,” I warn him.

“If it comes to that I’ll assume full responsibility. But I can’t ignore it if it means it might be a threat to the Commonwealth.”

“But it makes no sense, why would someone on Eric’s team want to hack the Commonwealth for? His team is just full of assistants and camera crews?”

He shakes his head slowly, “I don’t know. Maybe they are after something specific, or maybe they think it’s good fun, or maybe it’s not anyone on his team at all and something else is going on – but tell me that doesn’t strike you as odd, tell me you’re not even a least it curious?”

“Of course I am, and with that file that Ceri found even more so. Still, do you have any proof of Jance’s connection to these hacks?”

“No, but I’ve put everyone at Intelligence on high alert. Ceri is working around the clock too. If something is going to happen, it’s going to happen soon.”

I sigh heavily. “I had hoped that it would be nothing.”

He nods. “I had hoped so too. I want to ask you something else, though.”

I wait.

“Your brother has made two secure calls to you from Intelligence over the past several days. I can only guess that he found out something and wanted to run it by you, as he always does,” he says quietly. “Do you want to tell me what this information was?”

“Are you asking as my Commander or my friend?” I ask him.

He says, “Both.”

I wait a moment before I speak. “Through various means available to him my brother found out that our mother was an Intelligence spy.”

His face is impervious. I don’t know for sure what he’s feeling or thinking but I have a pretty good idea.

“Did you always know?” I whisper.

“I was informed when I came to the Head of Intelligence. For obvious reasons I was expressly forbidden to speak on the subject,” he answers.

I nod. “After he told me, Rhys asked me about Ara, since mother dying is why she went off-planet. I think he was wondering if Ara knew what had actually happened if it would have changed her mind about leaving us.”

“What did you say?” he asks me gently.

I shake my head. “I told him to forget her. That she was gone.”

“But you still check up on her with Ceri’s help,” he says, tilting his head to the side.

“Is there anything you don’t know about my life?” I am annoyed at Ceri’s big mouth, but not enough to make a scandal about it.

“Quite a few things, actually.”

“Thank you for not telling him about the recalibration. I know it was you who kept it from him.”

He nods. “I knew you wouldn’t have wanted him to know about it.”

There’s an awkward pause as neither of us says anything for a long moment.

“Will you be attending the Diplomat’s Gala?” he asks.

“Yes. My father sent me my invitation and he expects me to make an appearance,” I answer. “Will you go?”

“Yes. Comes with the job,” he answers with a small smile. He clears his throat.

“Well, I’ll keep you posted on things.”

I nod. “Please do,” I say.

He takes out the date stick from the terminal and stows it away in his pocket. He comes around the table a few inches away from me. He’s too close for me to not look up at him, so I turn my face up to his.

“Are you feeling better?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes. Thank you.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t understand. You were recalibrated just a few weeks ago. Even with the malfunction you experienced, you shouldn’t be experiencing any of this right now.”

“It worked for a short time, and it’s the first one I’ve had for a while.”

“But what is it? What triggers that specific memory? Were you thinking about it on our way up here?”

Up until now, I have never questioned why this particular memory jumps out at me. I’ve never even thought to think of a trigger for it. I have always assumed that it’s

PTSD and it comes because it has to, because there's only so much suppression the Serym can do before it all explodes.

"I don't know," I tell him, surprised at my own answer. "I don't know what triggers it."

His hand comes up slowly and places it on my shoulder, gives me a small squeeze. "I'll see you soon."

I nod. "See you soon."

And he's gone.

The dress I order for the occasion arrives an hour before I am supposed to leave the next day. After I shower, I put on the floor length silver dress. It is sleek and the material slippery, embedded with tiny crystals that sparkle in the light. It is long sleeved with a high neck and an open back. I let my hair flow freely down my back in loose curls. I wear the jeweled earrings that belonged to my mother. Before leaving the room I take a look at myself in the mirror and only see her.

Her hair was exactly the same shade as mine, fiery copper, and when she and father would go out into the entertainment sector, she always looks her best. For a split second, it is not my face I see in the mirror, it is hers.

She smiles at me.

The warm and loving smile that I miss so much.

And then the image disappears forever. Just like her.

Before exiting the room, I retrieve my knife holsters. They are thin enough not to be visible under the dress as I tie them around my legs, three on each side.

In the garage I program the car to the presidential palace close to the center of the city and I arrive about fifteen minutes later. The security is even tighter than Command and I have to pass through several stations before I am let inside the mansion itself.

The palace is unlike anything I have ever seen. It is styled in the ancient way with tiled floors, vaulted ceilings and arched doorways. Oil paintings and dark wooden furniture of years gone by adorn the corridors and when we arrive at the great hall of the event I am nearly breathless.

Every surface is gilded and shining with crystals and jewels. The chandeliers are so large that I see people have to walk around them. The antechamber itself is filled with people and in the far corner I see a stage with live musicians on it. You rarely see a live performance anywhere, even in the entertainment district of the city.

There is an equal amount of people I know as well as ones I do not know and I figure the ones I don't know are from the Federation. I am approached and greeted by various members of the government and military factions in the initial chamber. They compliment my dress and I thank them kindly for their well wishes.

*"To your left,"* says a voice in my earpiece.

Kai is coming towards me with a big smile on her face. She's dressed beautifully in midnight blue, and with heels on I have to look up at her.

"You look beautiful," I tell her, as she snakes an arm around my waist and kisses me.

"So do you," she says.

"Did you just get here?" I ask.

"A few minutes ago," she answers. "Want to go find the booze?"

We leave the first chamber of the great hall and enter the second arm in arm. This one is made up of the food and beverage. Tables upon tables are laden with all kinds of meat, seafood and poultry. There's a second section dedicated to delicate sweets and desserts. The drinks section is all the same; tables filled with wine and spirits. I see that my favorite frothy pink concoction has center stage.

"Wait until you meet Eric, he's such a character," Kai tells me.

"You know for someone who was just there to guard him I am amazed at how close you got. How did that happen?"

"It's hard not to, actually," she says.

There is double the amount of people in this room, and I feel my chest tighten. Large crowds put me on edge. She's handed me a tall glass of champagne when she says, "Incoming. Your three o'clock."

Lev and Mari are a few feet away from us, but people greet and engage them in conversation before they have a chance to get to us.

"Kai, Brynn, you both look fantastic this evening," Mari says with her pretty smile and cool voice. She wears a soft pink, skin-tight dress that shimmers when she moves.

"As do you, Mari," I tell her.

"You don't look bad yourself, Commander," Kai says.

Lev is dressed in black, his hair falling over his shoulders. He smiles easily, "Thanks, Kai."

"I thought Mr. Jance would have been here by now," Mari says, taking a sip of her champagne.

“He strikes me as the kind who likes to make an entrance, I am sure he’ll be making one soon,” Lev says.

We all stand there for a while not really saying much. When I look over at her, Kai is on her third champagne glass.

“Oh, for smokin’ fucks sake, don’t start,” she threatens.

I smile and look around the room and spot Rhys. He’s holding a large glittering glass of the pink drink in his hand. He’s handsomely dressed in a dark green suit.

“Brynn!” His face lights up when he sees me walking over to him. He kisses my cheek and looks me up and down. “You look radiant.”

“Thank you.”

Kai wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him full on the lips. “My beautiful Rhys, when are we going to get married?”

Rhys laughs and kisses her again. “When you leave the military.”

Kai laughs, “Fat chance of that.”

Rhys turns his attention to me. “What’s the matter? Do you feel sick?”

I nod, because I don’t want to give him the impression that there is something else wrong with me. “I think it’s something I ate from the food tables,” I lie.

“Here, have some of this,” he says, handing me the glass. I take a healthy portion and automatically I feel its calming effect.

There is a commotion near the entrance of the room. Someone important has arrived and everyone is craning his or her neck to see whom it is. The high-profile celebrity is Eric Jance and he’s making his way through the crowd, shaking hands and kissing cheeks.

Kai waves at him beside me and he makes his way slowly towards us. “Lieutenant Cadfael, you look beautiful this evening,” he says, taking her hand and kissing it.

Kai smiles at him and introduces him to us. “This is Captain Brynn Thatcher. She’s my squad leader, and this is Rhys Thatcher, her brother and a data engineer at Intelligence.”

“Good evening,” he says, and he takes my hand to shake it. I return the favor and move aside as he does the same with my brother.

Eric Jance is a few inches taller than me. He’s slender, almost gangly, with golden blonde hair and blue eyes. His smile is brilliant, no doubt perfected through years of being in the spotlight.

“Commander Sayer, I am delighted to see you again, sir,” Lev and Eric Jance shake hands and move a few feet away from the rest of us as they start to talk about something in hushed voices.

I nudge Kai to get her attention. “What is he like?”

She shrugs. “He’s a politician’s son; comfortable in the limelight, and an avid politician himself. He can never take anything serious though. Even when it comes to his illness he always manages to find something to laugh about.”

“And what about the people around him? Did you get any vibes from them?”

“Complete idiots, at least to me anyways,” she answers.

“Would you like to dance?”

I look to see Lev standing beside me. His elbow is extended towards me in an invitation. “Yes,” I blurt out before I can decline.

I take Lev's arm and he leads me out to the dance floor where a fair number of couples are dancing too. I feel nerves churn in my stomach. We come together as he takes one hand and holds it in the air and his other hand he snakes around my waist and brings me against him. I lay my free hand on his shoulder. I see Kai and my brother join the dancing as well.

Turning around the room feels better here than feeling surrounded by so many people.

"I can't remember the last time I danced," I tell him. Lev is staring at me, his eyes shimmering in the low lighting. His mouth is quirked up with a semblance of a smile.

"I can."

"Was it with you, then?"

He nods. "Yes, it was."

"When was it?"

His smile falters a little. "I don't want to upset you here. I know you're nervous around big crowds already."

"Lev, tell..." my voice trails off. Through the foggy bog that is my memory I pull up the night before I was sent out with the Enhanced. It was the night before I got hit. We had been in his military quarters.

"I remember," I whisper and manage to smile up at him. "I remember that."

Although we are not paying attention to our surroundings, I can tell that the musicians had already started the next song because when I catch sight of Kai again, she is dancing with Eric Jance.

"Have you seen your father tonight?" he asks, clearly changing the subject.

I am going to answer him when I see Seren Nest, once again popping up in places I didn't expect her to be. She's talking casually to my brother.

"Why is that junior officer in different places every time I see her? I ask Lev.

He looks away from me towards them. "She's been assigned to Eric's detail for the duration of his stay."

"She was at my recalibration," I tell him.

"There's always in Intelligence officer present at recalibrations. That's not abnormal," he answers.

"I see," I answer absentmindedly. They are very close in conversation and when she looks up her eyes find mine and I swear she smirks at me.

Beside them, standing with a drink in her hand, is Mari. She's looking at us dance with an odd expression on her face. I look away.

The music stops and we both join in the applause for the musicians until the next song comes on. We both leave the dance floor and return to her side, along with Eric and Kai who have finished dancing as well.

It's not long before Lev and Mari disappear together through the crowd as more and more people vie for his attention. I look after them, as they get further and further away, wondering.

I am craning my neck to get a last good look when Rhys announces he's leaving.

"Are you going home?" I ask.

"No, I'm just going to mingle," he says. Rhys shakes Eric's hand again and kisses my cheek.

“Would you like to come with me Eric? There’s so much to see,” my brother tells him. “And you too, Kai.” The three of them smile and nod and leave my side.

Standing there alone I can better make out the kind of people that have been invited to this function. Having never been invited to one before, I had always assumed that only members of Sector One and Sector Three were invited.

However, there are a fair number who belong to Sector Two as well, no doubt Maximillian has invited the richest in the private sector to keep them happy and in the loop. There are also dignitaries from all Ten Nations as well as representatives of the Global Assembly and various guests from the Luna Base Colony and Mars.

I can’t help but envy the space envoys. They are surely to be missing their life up above, watching a mostly broken planet survive from their high alcove.

Beyond the envoys, I spot my father, deep in conversation with friends and colleagues. He’s elegantly dressed in black.

I am walking towards him when the trumpets herald in Maximillian’s entrance.

Everyone stops what they are doing and turn to the entrance, applause breaking out as he and his wife appear, smiling benevolently at everyone and giving small, contrite waves of their hands.

Maximillian is around my father’s age, a middle-aged man with thick black hair and green eyes. He wears a dark violet suit, with black gloves and a white flower in his lapel. He’s not a handsome man by any means, but maybe he thinks the expensive clothing makes up for it.

He walks hand in hand with his wife, Elain, who’s around the same age, and dressed in a long-trained dress of the same deep violet. I see their aides around them as

they step down from the entrance and join the crowd – their team walks a few feet in front of them both for protection and information purposes – it is not possible for either of them to remember everyone’s name and occupation.

I find Rhys in the crowd and tell him I am leaving. “Why?” he asks.

“I’m just tired,” I say.

“You’re lying. I can tell, you know,” he says, looking at me concerned.

I kiss his cheek. “Fine. I just want to go home.”

“You’re not going to wait for father?” he asks.

I sigh. “He’s too busy talking to people right now.”

“Turn around,” he whispers in my ear.

I do and see that my father is walking towards us. “My children, you both look wonderful,” he says, smiling. He and Rhys shake hands and he gives me a contrite kiss on the cheek.

“Father, I was just leaving,” I tell him.

“But you just got here, besides, Eric Jance is supposed to give a speech. Stay, enjoy a little,” he tells me.

I take in a deep breath. “I am tired, I’ll see you both another time.”

I kiss my father and hug my brother. I don’t see Kai anywhere and I have had enough. I am just passing through the last security gate before getting inside of my vehicle when I hear Lev’s voice calling me.

“Are you leaving too?” I ask him.

He nods. “Intelligence picked up some outside activity in the Mainframe. I was called in.”

“That’s unfortunate. Where’s Mari?”

He cocks his head to one side before answering. “She stayed behind. She knows quite a few people in there.”

His long hair has fallen over one side of his face. I take a step towards him and tuck his hair behind his ear. I manage a small smile and he gives me one in return.

“What did they find? Hacks?”

“They were attempting, or making it seem like there was an attempt.”

“Why wouldn’t they finish the job?” I ask.

“To confuse Intelligence, is my best guess, so when the real hack takes place we’ll ignore it,” he explains, taking a step closer to me.

“Why go through the trouble?”

“They want to give us as many false leads as they can, or want, and the big one might just slip through the Net,” he answers.

I shake my head. “You may be right but I still find it completely idiotic. If you’re going to do something, just do it.”

A balmy breeze sweeps around us, the kind that follows and also precedes rain.

“Keep me posted, then?”

“Are you going home?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes.”

“I’ll come with you. I can access my computer from your Projection desk and I can have your opinion.”

He follows me inside the car and it drives us the few minutes to my apartment.

## CHAPTER 9 – SUSPECT

We are both standing in front of my Projection desk thirty minutes later, looking at the open files. The strangest thing about these hacks is that there is no information on them. No information on *who* might have been being hacked, and no information on *where* they originated. The Mainframe always registers the origin of the hack, whether it's real or not. The only thing we have is that someone is attempting to hack it.

We can only conclude that the information is missing because it's a new type of hack. Some idiot somewhere has developed a way to cloak the information from being discovered. Not an idiot at all, then.

Lev activates the dictation feature on the desk. "Give me all the information on the new hacks with no information," he says.

*"Three unregistered Biohack attempts have been made on the Mainframe. It has registered the disturbances but it has neither been able to ascertain where they are coming from, nor to whom it is aimed. The hacks are started but never finished."*

The system pulls down only the dates and times of the hacks on the screen in front of us.

"Please tell me not all of the engineers are at the gala," I say.

He shakes his head, "No. Rhys spends more time in there than anyone else. He was ordered to leave the premises."

"He's tenacious," I agree. Then say, "These hacks could really damage us, Lev."

"Over my dead body," Lev says, leaning over the table.

"Preferably not."

He shakes his head. "It doesn't really matter."

“Of course it matters,” I say.

He shuffles away from the desk. “You know, I try to keep a distance. I try to act like I don’t care. I ignore you, but somehow you always manage to wiggle your way back into my life.”

I don’t know what to say or feel when he changes gears on me like this. Whenever I think there is nothing more to our story, another paragraph gets added.

“Just because you matter to me that doesn’t mean our friendship has to get complicated,” I say.

He laughs mirthlessly. “Complicated is all we’re ever going to be.”

“I think there are more important things to talk about right now,” I start but he cuts me off.

“There’s always something going on, Brynn. I’m Head of Intelligence. When exactly do you propose that we talk about this?”

“Lev, what more is there to say?!” I yell out. “How can you stand there and talk to me about us when you’re involved with someone else?!”

“You abandoned me for saving your life.” He doesn’t yell it out. The slow whisper with which he draws out the words is ten times more painful. They spear right through the middle of my chest.

There it was. The thing I’ve always imagined he’d want to say to me after all this time. I take a deep breath, regaining control of myself.

“I just couldn’t stay at the time.”

“All I wanted to do was keep you alive. It was the only decision I could *live* with,” he says.

I hesitate for a moment. “I couldn’t even look at you,” I whisper. “When I was told what had happened and what I had to become – when they told me you had given the go-ahead – I couldn’t even *look* at you.”

“And now?”

“And now it doesn’t matter,” I say.

“Why not?”

I shake my head slowly. “Because I can’t deal with this right now. My mind is so jumbled that it’s upside down. I only have strength to keep *that* from destroying me completely. I don’t have the patience to also deal with all the confusing emotions that come to me when I think about you. So please don’t make me,” I say. Then add, “I can only be your friend.”

I see his bottom lip tremble before he pulls himself together and clears his throat. He unhooks the data stick from the terminal and puts it back in his pocket.

“If that’s your decision,” he says, and leaves the room.

I follow him out to the living area and stop a few feet away from him when he too pauses right in front of the door. He doesn’t look back at me but turns his head to the side and talks to the floor.

“For the record, Mari and I are not together,” he says. “She is to me what Kai is to you. A friend who’s been there for me since I sentenced you to a life of an Agent; and she went with me tonight because she knows how hard it is for me when you and I...well, when we’re in the same room together. I won’t bring it up again. I am sorry.”

He leaves the apartment and I stand there for a long time looking at the closed door before I can muster the strength to move again.

It takes three taps of my foot to decide to leave the apartment and I head to my bedroom to change my clothes.

Ceri is in his usual spot when I go down to the Old Tree at the entertainment district a while after that.

“You know, I never expected to see you this often in so short a time,” he says when he lets me in. As usual he is dressed in his dark uniform, and his long braids are clasped at the base of his neck with a single black band. There is humor in his dark eyes as he looks at me.

“I need eyes on someone,” I tell him, turning back to him.

He makes his way past the large servers to sit in front of his screen. I sit on the edge of the desk. “You can track anyone on your R.I.”

“Off the books.”

“Someone of import?” he asks, mildly curious.

“I am not sure.”

He turns to the screen and types something on his holokey. “Name?”

“Seren Nest,” I answer.

“Senior?”

“Junior Intelligence.”

“What she done?”

I sigh. “I don’t know if she’s done anything but I’d rather know if she does sooner rather than later,” I say.

“What do you want to know?” he asks, looking at the screen in front of him.

“Movement. I want to know everywhere she goes and everything she does there,”  
I tell him.

“You know the only reason I stay in business is because I stay out of the  
Mainframe, Brynn.”

“I don’t want you to hack the Mainframe. I want you to monitor her.”

He types away for a few minutes before he talks again. “Don’t you think this  
seems a bit superfluous compared to everything else happening in the solar system right  
now?”

I shrug. “Nothing else for us to do. If we ever join Space Command then we’ll  
have other, bigger things to worry about, and not debase ourselves with the politics of the  
Ten Nations.”

“Your sister sure had the right idea,” he says, a smile on his face.

I look at him carefully.

He chuckles, “Don’t give me that death stare. You know I’m right.”

“Of course you are,” I say. “Have you got the tracker yet?”

He nods. “Yes, it’s done. I’ll let you know if anything mysterious happens.”

There’s a long silent pause before I speak. “What has she been up to?”

“Ah, curious after all,” Ceri smiles. “She’s alive and well. Her partner never  
leaves her side. Sam Mayson, commonly known as Mayson, is Martian-born,” he says.

“Sam. That’s an Old-World name,” I say. “Definitely Martian.”

“Served in the Aegis for about a decade during the Northern Conflicts but retired  
about five years ago.”

“Retired? How old is he?”

“Thirty-five. They are quite the team, only taking on specific projects, and smart enough to never bypass the Luna Base Colony on their outings, that way the Aegis don’t mess with them out in the open.”

“Maybe that’s why the Aegis won’t touch Ara, because of his connection to them,” I say.

He shrugs. “It could be. Every police system has been known to take a bribe or two over the course of the centuries.”

I stand from the edge of his desk and fix my gun belt unnecessarily.

“Does that make you uncomfortable? Or does it make you want to reach out to her?”

I grunt. “Reach out? You must be joking.”

“You know, I’ve been tracking her for years but I never asked why she left at all. Care to elaborate?” he asks in a calm voice.

“Nothing to say. She went off-planet and never came back. It’s good to know she’s alive at least.” The last thing I wanted to discuss was the reason she left the planet.

He shrugs. “Very well.”

My R.I registers a ping. Lev.

“Duty calls,” he says, rising from his hoverchair.

“Keep me updated. This shouldn’t take long,” I say.

The people on the street make way for me and don’t look me directly in the eye: either because I make them nervous or because they seem too distracted by their R.Is to notice.

Headquarters is quiet for a place that is supposed to be on high alert. I make my way down to the Intelligence Facility, and because it's late at night and no soldier to recognize me, I have to give a blood sample twice.

The Control Room is not empty but the officers are intently focused on their data bays and pay me no mind. I see him through the glass wall of his office: busy at work on his private data bay. He doesn't see me until I am standing right outside of his door. He presses a button on the side of his desk and the door slides open.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi," I say as I walk in. "What's going on?"

He doesn't speak for a long time and I am about to ask again when he answers, "There was another attempt earlier tonight."

"Show me," I say, coming around the desk to see the display.

The system shows the time of the hack. "*A hacking attempt was made on the Mainframe earlier today. Officials of the facility on High Alert.*"

"We have reason to believe that more than just one hack will be attempted tonight," he says.

"Have you mobilized everyone?" I say, looking up at him.

He nods. "Everyone in position."

There's a double ping in the room. The R.I system flashes a bright red banner before my eyes. *INTRUDER ALERT. INTRUDER ALERT. MAINFRAME BIOHACKED. INTRUDER ALERT. INTRUDER ALERT.*

"Let's go," Lev tells me and I follow him out.

As we leave the Control Room I see him alerting every agent under his command. Many of those are in the building and I see all the answering pings he receives from the agents who are responding.

“The Mainframe is five minutes away by car,” I tell him, hurrying to the elevator at his side.

“We’re not taking a car. There’s an underground connection to the Mainframe Facility,” he tells me.

We board the elevator and go down several floors, then he presses a button and a new screen appears behind a section that opens. He punches in a code; the elevator drops down for a few seconds and then moves forward, fast. Thirty seconds later it stops, then drops down again for another ten seconds.

“Weapons ready,” he says beside me. The elevator doors open right in front of the Mainframe. The physical servers are kept deep under Headquarters where only a handful of people have access and knowledge of its actual location.

“Lev,” I say, looking at the code-entry door.

The door has been left disabled and it is slightly ajar. However, the emergency lights are not on and there are no signs of the guards that are posted here around the clock.

“Wait,” he says and from his R.I he requests to merge with mine. I accept and he switches our vision to infrared. The heat signature will let us know if there is anyone around.

We have only moved one step in front of the elevator. *“Three bodies detected inside.”*

Adrenaline courses through my veins and I begin to feel the hammering of my heart in my chest. My gun is ready to fire.

“We should split up.”

He nods. “You take right and I’ll go left.”

We move towards the door and slowly swing it inside. The Mainframe room is cavernous. There are dozens of servers lined up in rows as far as the eye can see. The room is kept at a low temperature so they won’t overheat. Once inside I can see the cold air leave my mouth as I breathe.

“Be careful,” Lev says.

His eyes search my face. I can tell there’s something he wants to say but he gives me a quick nod and says, “You too.”

We both go our separate ways.

How am I supposed to find three people in this enormous space? I ask the R.I to pinpoint their location.

*“Impossible. Cloaking device in place.”*

This will be pointless and time consuming without Lev’s agents. We will not be able to sweep this entire area on our own.

The servers are seven feet tall each. They whirl softly and light up according to whatever function they are performing. On one of the topmost floors of Headquarters, Mainframe Control will be monitoring every citizen in the Commonwealth, but direct Biohacking can only be done through the servers themselves.

*Ping*

I stop when I hear the sound. It came from my left. I tread carefully in between two servers but the infrared vision reveals nothing, even though it is still detecting three bodies.

“Have you found anything?” Lev’s voice comes through my earpiece.

“I heard something but it could have been a server,” I respond.

“Agents are two minutes out,” he tells me.

“Is there another way out of here?”

“No. The code-entry door is the only way.”

“Lev, if it was that easy for them to get in here through the door then this means infiltration,” I say. “This doesn’t make any sense. They snuck in but they still want us to find them?”

“Maybe not. If it’s infiltration it would make sense why they accessed the room without issue. However, without specific permission, any data stick or instrument inserted into any server will automatically warn Intelligence. Maybe they didn’t get that memo,” he says.

“I thought Mainframe security was impregnable,” I almost hiss at him.

His response is lost in my ear because as I come around the corner of another server I see her and two others. Anger consumes me and I want nothing more than to rip her throat out. She sees me coming, perhaps she knew I was, but doesn’t flee or make to attack me. She smiles, I suppose trying to be cruel, but I can see in her face that she’s nervous and unprepared for what’s about to happen.

“Get here fast,” I say to Lev through the earpiece.

I stop when I am only a few feet away from her. I keep my finger on the trigger.

“Good evening, Captain,” she says.

“Seren,” I say, by way of greeting.

## CHAPTER 10 - TRAITOR

Seren Nest doesn't waver. "I thought I would have more of you in here by now."

"You mean to say you didn't expect it to be me. But don't worry, give it two minutes," I say as casually as she.

"Why don't you put your gun away so we can have a conversation?" She's wearing all dark clothes and the two beside her as well. I see her nose is still bandaged and the bruising around it.

I shake my head. "Criminals always want to talk. Is that why your plans never seem to work in the end?"

One of the accomplices makes a move toward the server. I aim the gun and fire. Even though the gun itself is silent, I can hear the hiss of the bullet flashing through the air and penetrating his knee, smashing the bone. He crumples to the floor in a heap of yells. My arm comes down to my side again.

"He was making me nervous," I tell her.

She sighs sharply and I can see the flash of anger pass across her face. "I would be lying if I didn't say I'd much rather someone else had caught me."

I take one step closer. "Oh, trust me, I know."

"Thirty seconds," Lev says in my ear.

"You won't be able to stop the hacks, Brynn," she tells me.

"It's Captain to you, Nest," I say.

Seren chuckles, "You won't be able to stop the hacks, *Brynn*. They'll go through without a hitch." Her eyes dart from me to something behind me, her smile disappears.

"Seren," says Lev, coming up behind me.

“Commander,” she tells him. There’s a tremor in her voice. “I am sorry to be doing this to you sir, but I was left with no choice.”

“You’ll be able to tell me all about it in the interrogation room, along with your two friends,” says Lev.

Beside me, he points to the man on the floor who is clutching his knee, bleeding on the floor. “Was that necessary?”

“He moved.”

He nods. Then turns to Seren, “Disable the hacks.”

Seren shakes her head, “I am sorry, sir, but this is much more important.”

He levels his gun at her head. “Disable the hacks.”

“Even if you kill me, sir, the hacks will go through,” she tells him, and it’s almost like she’s sorry that it’s going to happen

“We can always put you in a level three interrogation room,” I threaten.

She chuckles, “Brynn, please. Let’s not pretend you can go anywhere near an interrogation room. That PTSD of yours doesn’t really help, does it?”

I take a step towards her. Lev extends his arm in front of me. “Not now.” Then he turns to Seren, “Who else is in on this?”

“Lots of people,” she answers easily.

I hear Lev pull the trigger beside me and the other man goes down in a screaming blur. A second later, dozens of boots are running inside the server room. All the agents that Lev called have arrived.

“I hope you didn’t ping them all,” I say to him.

In a minute there are twelve agents running towards us. They stop and take in the scene.

“Take the injured to the hospital, post heavy guard on them. Seren gets a level two interrogation room,” says Lev and a few of the agents pass us to apprehend the three of them.

“We need her here,” I tell him. Two agents are dragging her away from us.

“No, we don’t. We need Eric Jance,” he tells me. In his eyes I see he believes Eric has something to do with this.

I make my way to the server being used for the hacks and find a data stick and a holographic computer plugged right into them. There’s something being downloaded, almost completed. I ask my R.I if it is possible for it to stop the hacks.

*“Negative. Biohacking is taking place on other network.”*

*“Who is the target?”*

*“Unknown. Cloaking device in place.”*

“Sayer, I’m here.” I look up and around the server to find the source of the familiar voice. I see my brother in his dark Intelligence uniform and a small burst of happiness explodes in my chest. If anyone can disable these, it’s Rhys.

“Rhys, over here!”

He hurries over to me and I relinquish my spot in front of the computer. “Happy to see your brother?”

I nod. “We need to stop whatever is happening here.”

He smiles but he already concentrated on the task before him. He takes the computer in his hands and starts typing on the holokey.

“This cloaking device is unlike any I’ve seen,” he says.

“Don’t say that.”

“Give me a second.”

Lev comes to our side after giving orders to his agents. They are to pick up every person under the employ of Eric Jance based on national security, and to bring him to Headquarters as well. I can imagine the surprised look on his face when his people are dragged out of the apartments he’s in.

I turn back to Rhys. “Anything?”

“It’s slower than I thought but I think I’ll be able to get through it, but I can’t promise that it will be before the hacks go through,” he answers.

I scowl, “What’s that good for then?”

“If you get to it before, will you be able to stop the hacks?” Lev asks.

“Commander, they bypassed Mainframe security and added a cloaking device without breaking a sweat,” he says as if the answer is obvious. “I don’t think anyone is going to stop this hack.”

“Well, then let’s hope it’s only one,” I say.

“This hack would have been impossible to complete without inside help. The Mainframe updates itself every three hours to the most advanced technology there is.”

“Fucking Seren Nest,” I snarl, shaking my head. “Smokin’ fucking ruin, why didn’t I catch it earlier?” I ask myself. Whatever information Ceri can glean from the system now about Nest will be moot. She’s already done what she was going to do.

“Hold on,” Rhys says. He types for a few more seconds, looking intently at the screen before him. “I’m going through the cloaking on it.”

“What’s the target?” Lev asks.

My foot begins to tap on the floor and my hands begin to tremble. I take in steady breaths.

“Let’s see here...okay, passed the cloaking. Ten targets. No information, though.” He keeps typing.

Lev curses and almost growls the words, “How is that possible?” I have not seen him lose his composure like this in years.

“There’s something worse. These hacks are timed to go through in one hour,” says Rhys.

“Timed? Why? What are they waiting for?” I ask.

“The amount of the hacks might have something to do with it. As well as *who* is being hacked – more security, more time.”

“One hour. These targets have to be someone important,” I say, turning to Lev. “They wouldn’t need so much time if it was a random citizen.”

“Brynn, you and I are going back to Headquarters,” he tells me. Then turns to Rhys, “Stay here. I am leaving eight agents under your command. Keep us updated on the countdown.

Rhys nods, “Yes, sir.”

If, when I first arrived at Headquarters earlier tonight it had been the quietest I had ever seen it, then this would be the busiest. Officers and military personnel run back and forth, speaking into their earpiece or to someone they are rushing with somewhere to. High Alert is in full effect.

“Where are Eric’s people?” Lev asks an officer as soon as we enter the Intelligence control room.

“They’re being rounded up. Maximillian has gone underground with all his advisors. The General has been briefed – military is also on full alert,” the young man answers.

I see Lev give me a sideways glance before turning his attention to our surroundings. All data bays are occupied and the large screen above us projects the information on the hacks that Rhys has gathered so far.

At this point the nervousness in my system is palpable. The possibilities of who the targets could be are few. Ten targets. That’s the number of the Commonwealth Cabinet, my father included.

Nest said there were a lot of people who were in on the hacks. There’s no way that many people can know about something this serious for us not to notice. She must have accomplices, sure, but I think looking at Eric Jance and his people is a waste of time. Why would they ever do something like this? And if they had *someone* would have caught it.

Nest’s calm about the situation is both infuriating and alarming.

Does she think she will escape? That’s even more unnerving. For her to think that *anyone* can get passed Commonwealth military is insane.

Yet, they already have. Bypassed Mainframe security without a hitch. However, Rhys did say it couldn’t have been done without the help of someone from the inside, and that’s a comfort, however misplaced.

I feel my hands tremble at my side. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, banishing the images that threaten to fill my head.

The feeling that something is going on in the shadows is pervasive. I fear we're missing the big picture, as if Seren Nest is a front, and the big event will happen any minute now.

One by one, all twenty-three of Eric Jance's staff is brought in to the Intelligence Facility and given Level One interrogation rooms. They are the same room used for debriefings, sparse and empty, but unthreatening.

"We have a little less than an hour to figure out how to stop these hacks from going through," Lev says. His voice is projected throughout the entire chamber so that everyone can hear him. The officers at the data bay are all looking up to hear him. In a small corner of my mind I cannot help but think how at home he looks. He was born to be a leader, more so than any politician that's ever held power over a people. A small surge of warmth, of pride, spreads out over my chest as I look at him.

It eases the fear, somewhat.

"I want every data bay focused on breaking the information barrier. I want to know who's being targeted and I want to stop it. We know for sure there are ten targets and we have reason to believe these targets are very, very important people in the country. If they succeed it would mean the crippling of our entire society, and that won't do," he tells them.

He dismisses them and everyone turns their attention back to their work. An instant buzz of keys and low murmurs fills the air.

When he turns to me I have already deciphered the look on his face. “Do you seriously believe Jance had anything to do with this?”

“Are you so sure that he doesn’t have anything to do with it?” he counters.

I shake my head. “Lev, you can’t possibly believe that he or anyone on his staff really has something to do with this? The whole thing is ridiculous. Nest is a liar and she’s playing us all for fools.”

He sighs and the look he gives me is one that tells me he’s decided to tell me something important, something that no one else knows. “About a year ago, Ceri helped me decipher a coded message. There wasn’t much to it but it led us to believe without a doubt that the Federation was planning a major hack on the Commonwealth.”

“Why am I only hearing of this now?”

“Eyes only. Besides, you didn’t need to know,” he tells me.

“*Smokin’ fuck, Lev!*” I whisper as I take a step closer to him.

“The point is that there’s no doubt in my mind this is the Federation’s doing and that *this* hack in particular is what they have been planning for over a year and for who knows how much longer,” he says, and points a finger at me, “don’t stand there and tell me Eric knows nothing about it. Seren Nest just confirmed it.”

An officer comes towards us and addresses Lev, “Eric Jance is here. Room forty-three.”

Lev turns to me, “You’re up. When he asks, tell him that his staff has been mentioned as being coconspirators in the hacking plot.”

“Lev, are you sure...”

“Do it, Brynn. That’s an order.”

I let out a deep breath and make my way to room forty-three. I remember this is the same debriefing room where I saw Lev again after my last tour. Before going inside, I look through the small door window and see him pacing back and forth, not hurried or angry, but as if he's thinking about something and doing this simple gesture will give him the answers.

I open the door and walk in the room, closing it behind me.

"Ms. Thatcher," Eric says pleasantly.

"Hello, Eric. I am sorry that our second meeting has to be under these circumstances," I say apologetically. I notice the two-way window on the wall behind him.

He smiles. "There's no need to apologize. I understand the drill."

"We're on High Alert. Have you been briefed as to why?"

He shakes his head. "Only that it was a matter of national security and that I should follow Intelligence officers all the way down here."

"Our Mainframe is being biohacked directly. We've apprehended some coconspirators. One of them has named your entire staff as being part of the operation."

"Don't you think that's a little ridiculous?" he laughs. "My staff are not the brightest and they certainly wouldn't know how to hack into anything, let alone the Commonwealth Mainframe."

"I would refrain from making jokes during this particular situation. This crowd is getting impatient."

"Impatient and stupid," he mutters under his breath.

"Do you have anything you wish to tell me?" I ask deadpan.

Eric stops his pacing and looks at me, his smile slowly sliding off his face. “Wait, are you serious?”

“Yes. We need to know what you know, if anything, about this,” I answer.

“Ms. Thatcher, what would my staff want to hack your Mainframe for?”

I move closer to the table between us. “If you are harboring any information, or protecting an accomplice because they are part of your staff, now would be the time to come forward, Eric.”

“You’re not making any sense,” he says, leaning over the chair. His expression is one of confusion and disbelief.

Whatever Lev and Ceri discovered a year ago, I am sure it has nothing to do with Eric. His father the Chancellor, however, would like nothing more than to cripple the Commonwealth and become a Controller himself. I wouldn’t put anything past that man.

I realize now that the Chancellor was probably the one who had my mother tortured and killed after she was discovered. I wonder if Eric knows about that and if he knows she was my mother.

“Are you positive that your staff is your staff?”

“I don’t understand,” he says.

“Can you be sure that everyone you’ve brought over from the Federation is loyal to you? Could there be one among them that is loyal to someone else? To another cause?”

He laughs, “And to what ends? What could they possibly gain from it? Dead at the hands of some mindless Enhanced or worse, a lifetime in a dungeon cell?”

“People will do anything when they believe in something,” I say.

His face clears and he shakes his head softly. “I am the son of the Federation Chancellor, nothing more. I wouldn’t presume to take matters of State into my own hands.”

“How are we supposed to know that? By your own admission you are the son of the Chancellor. How do we know you didn’t come here with another purpose in mind?”

“What purpose? What are you *talking* about?” he asks, clearly frustrated with my line on questioning.

“Your staff was mentioned...”

“My staff is *my* staff. They do things for *me* and not for anyone else. So if I had told them to hack your Mainframe, they would have done so – but as I don’t recall myself giving them those orders then they have nothing to do with it either,” he says clearly losing patience.

I am about to speak but he cuts me off.

“And how do I know this isn’t all some elaborate plot to implicate me in a crime against the Commonwealth on your soil? What better way to prove to the Controllers that this country is good than by acting the victim?”

“You need to watch what you say from here on out. You are being recorded and anything you say can be misconstrued...”

“Misconstrued?” He gives out a mirthless laugh. “Is that what you call it? Nothing in this country is misconstrued. Everything is twisted and reformed for your own needs. It’s sickening.”

“You seem to be very passionate in your beliefs about us,” I say calmly.

He looks at me apologetically, “I don’t include you or the people I’ve met personally in this assessment.”

“It doesn’t matter. You feel what you feel because you see and understand things, even if you don’t agree with them. However, a small mind might see but not understand and *that* is what I mean about a fanatic doing anything to further a cause, Eric,” I repeat. “Tell me they at least wouldn’t try.”

For a long moment we stare at each other. His countenance is inscrutable and I am unable to gauge his emotions.

“May I ask who the targets of these hacks are?”

“We have no information except that they are targeting ten Commonwealth citizens,” I say.

“Ten citizens. Must be high in the Command chain,” he muses.

“We believe so,” I say standing in front of the table with my hands clasped together in front of me.

“And where’s my staff now?” He puts a hand on the back of his chair and the other on his hip.

“They are being interviewed by Intelligence officers as we speak,” I say.

“You mean interrogated.”

“Yes.”

“They cannot be harmed,” he warns me.

“They won’t be if they have nothing to hide.”

I risk a glance at the window behind him. “Eric, you are in serious trouble, and your people even worse. If there is even a shadow of a doubt that their activities here in

the Commonwealth are not Federation-sanctioned – now would be the time to say so,” I stress.

He sighs, “I don’t know what Seren and the other two told you but they are lying.”

“Well, then your staff will be thoroughly questioned and not be allowed to return to the Federation until we can know for sure that they are in no way connected to...”

I stop. And realize something.

“Mr. Jance,” I begin cautiously and take two steps back from the table. “How did you know it was Seren Nest and *two* others that we have in custody?”

“I know things, Ms. Thatcher. Even here on foreign soil I can find out what is going on around me,” he says.

“How did you know?” I ask.

“I make it my business to know everything that’s how. What does it matter anyways?” Eric says dismissively.

The door opens and Lev walks in accompanied by ten Enhanced agents. “It matters because you’ve just ousted yourself as an accomplice in a plot to biohack the Commonwealth,” says Lev.

The Enhanced form a circle around Eric and are leaving the room as Lev sends me a cold stare that says, “I told you so.”

## CHAPTER 11 – BIOHACK

“Commander, I...”

Lev holds up his hand to shut me up, and because he is my senior officer I do not protest.

“Please take Mr. Jance to a level two interrogation room,” Lev tells one of the agents. If he knew that piece of information, what else does he know?

Eric is escorted out with Lev on his heels. I watch them all disappear down the hallway until they make a turn. The officers left behind all stand at attention.

“Did you receive any orders from Commander Sayer?” I ask one of them.

“His orders were to stand by. He’ll be debriefing Mr. Jance himself,” the man answers.

Through my R.I I get an urgent message to Kai to get to Intelligence as soon as possible.

I fist my hands hard at my sides.

This has grown beyond any scale I could possibly imagine. Ten citizens are being targeted that are believed to be high value Commonwealth officials. Seren Nest is part of that operation and Lev has decided that it’s all got to do with Eric and he’s having Eric’s staff interrogated as possible accomplices. And now Eric himself knows things he shouldn’t – it that because of privilege or because he knows something that we don’t?

“What room is Seren Nest being held in?” I ask. He tells me in fifty-five and I make my way down the hallway towards it. When I arrive at the room beside it, where the window in the room looks into, I see that an officer I have never seen before is interrogating her. A handful of agents are also in the room with them.

I listen to what they are saying only half-heartedly. My mind is in whatever interrogation room Lev is holding Eric. Does the Chancellor already know that his son is being held? Have they already declared a State of Emergency?

“Captain.”

An Intelligence officer has opened the door and motioned me to follow him outside.

“Yes?” I ask when we are standing in the hallway.

“Officer Thatcher has let us know that we have reached the ten minute mark,” he says and walks away.

I walk back to the Control room and see on screen that my brother is still down with the servers trying to stop the attack.

“Any progress?” I ask, walking closer to the screen.

“Nothing,” he says. His voice projects all around. “As soon as I think I am close to getting through, it pushes me out again. This is the most advanced technology I have ever seen.”

I close my eyes. *They are going through. They are going through.* I prepare myself for the worst, knowing that most likely my father will be among those afflicted. I turn to the closest officer besides me.

“Have the advisers been moved to secure locations as well?”

She nods. “Yes, Captain. Security measures have been put in place to remove their Neuro-connects should the need arise.”

“Tell Commander Sayer it is time to initiate that security measure,” I say and she walks away fast. That will no doubt get him out of the room he’s holding Eric in.

I register a message from my R.I. It's Ceri. I take a few steps away from everyone and answer it.

"You're a little late," I snarl at him.

*"I heard, but that is not the reason I am contacting you,"* he tells me.

"Then what is?"

*"Well, I've been doing some research here and I've just learned that your sister and her partner have taken on a new job,"* he says.

I roll my eyes. "Ceri, whatever they do in the middle of the solar system has nothing to do with me. I've got bigger problems than worrying about the illegal workings of my sister!"

*"You told me to watch out for anything strange. And this is anything but ordinary. Your sister has just acquired a young woman named Amber, and is to be smuggled to one of the Kepler planets, three days hence."*

"And what does that have to do with anything that is going on down here?"

*"Have you forgotten the impenetrable file in Jance's possession? Through a rather long list of inquiries, I have found out that the person who contracted them to smuggle this Amber girl is none other than Eric Jance."*

Now there's something. "Where was she taken from?"

*"That's the best part of all. She was taken from a remote space station out by Venus, funded by the Global Assembly,"* he says and I can hear the smile in his voice.

There's a long pause. "Brynn?"

"I am here." I sigh. "Look, thank you for letting me know, but I don't see how that information is going to help me right now."

“*As you wish,*” he says and I disconnect the call.

I don’t move from where I stand for a long time. Everything is happening too fast and I don’t know where to turn my attention.

Lev turns the corner and walks down the hallway towards the control room and I walk out to meet him.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Eric is confined to his interrogation room,” he tells me. “The advisers and Maximillian have already been taken into Repair Pads to remove their Neuro-connect chips. When the time is up the hacks won’t go through,” he tells me.

I am not convinced, even though I want more than anything to believe that it is over and I can turn my mind to something else.

“Eric is guilty. I know it. I’ll prove it,” he tells me, leaning his head down and whispering it to me.

“Lev, he’s a diplomat – he can have access to information here. Maybe that’s all it is.”

“Brynn, even if he’s not committing biohacking – he’s getting confidential information from someone,” he replies.

I nod. “Yes, and that person is Seren Nest. *She’s* the one behind the hacks and blamed Eric’s staff, and by extension Eric. She’s guilty on both counts, *that* I can promise you.”

He sighs and takes a step back. “Perhaps. But like I said before I’m not willing to take that chance.”

“Fine. Keep them all here as long as you wish, but do not hurt Eric – and that is

not a personal request. If you hurt Jance, it will be an international incident and we'll be dragged back into another conflict with the Federation and the Global Assembly."

He knows I am right but he only nods.

"There's something else that I think you should know," I say, and I am about to tell him about Ceri's call but we are interrupted. Rhys has announced the hacks in sixty seconds and we both run back into the Control room to see what the outcome is going to be.

Besides me, Lev is talking to someone on his earpiece. He is confirming and reconfirming that the advisers and Maximillian have been de-chipped.

"It's coming online," Rhys says.

I feel the terrible excitement building up from my feet, traveling up my legs and pooling inside of my stomach. My heart is hammering inside of my chest and I badly need to be doing something with my hands.

When the clock runs out, we all await Rhys to tell us who the intended hacks were – and if they succeeded despite all our efforts.

"This doesn't make any sense," he says, his voice projected for everyone to hear. I can only see half of his face because to the bad lighting in the server room.

"What do you mean?" Lev asks.

"These hacks...I can't...I mean, I don't..."

"Rhys!"

He jumps at the sharpness of my voice. "These hacks are not ours. They are not hacking anyone in the Commonwealth. The signal is coming right from *this* server room and it's aimed at...oh no."

I have never seen that look of horror on my brother's face, nor that tremor in his voice, in my life.

“Rhys, who are the targets?” Lev asks beside me.

“The Federation cabinet. These hacks are *from* us, from our *own Mainframe*. The entire upper echelon of the Federation Government is being hacked as we speak.” Rhys is shocked and I can see his eyes are wide as he looks at the screen.

The shadows that have finally come to light.

Seren Nest and her crew never intended to biohack anyone in the Commonwealth – only to make it seem like the Commonwealth was Biohacking the Federation.

This means another war. This means the direct interference of the Global Assembly and the Controllers. It means the entire shutdown of the country.

“Come on!” says Lev. I follow him out of the Control room towards the elevator.

“Where are we going?”

“To speak with Seren Nest,” he says and his voice is quiet and cruel.

When we arrive at her interrogation room I realize that I missed more than I thought when I watched earlier. I hadn't noticed then that she has a bloody lip, or that the steel cuffs on her hands are so tight that she is bleeding.

She is right about one thing; I cannot stomach an interrogation, much less one that uses torture. I am counting on Lev remembering that while I am here.

She smiles as we walk in and the door is closed behind us. She leans back and licks her lip. “So, you finally know the truth.”

“Before we begin, you do realize that there's no way out of this for you, right? Even if you want nothing to do with this later on, and you give up every single person

that worked with you – you’re going to live in a dungeon cell for the rest of your life,” Lev tells her, sitting down in the chair before him. I stand back.

She gives him a small smile. “I don’t intend to beg for my life, Commander.”

“Not now you’re not, but when we are done here you just might,” he says, getting up from the table again.

Seren Nest gives me a sly smile. “You might want to look away, Captain.”

Anger flares inside me, but so does curiosity. “How do you know that I have flashbacks?”

“It’s good to know your enemy,” she answers.

“Captain, a word,” Lev tells me and we go back outside the room and he closes the door.

“You don’t have to be here for this,” he whispers.

“You don’t have to do this to her. What good will it do?” I ask. “We both know that torture is not effective when it comes to gathering intelligence.”

“This isn’t about gathering intelligence anymore, Brynn,” he says. No, this is now about punishment.

I sigh. “Fine. What room is Eric being held in?”

He gives me a warning look and puts his hands on his hips. “Brynn, you can’t go see him.”

“I’m not going to go inside the room. I just want to be outside and make sure nothing happens,” I answer.

“I know you think –”

“Lev, he’s not responsible for this – I am sure of that,” I say sharply.

“It doesn’t matter what you think, Brynn,” he says. “I’m sorry but you can’t go inside.” With that he leaves me and goes inside Nest’s interrogation room.

“Brynn!”

I turn around at the sound of Kai’s voice. She’s running down the hall towards me. “I got your ping. What is going on?”

I fill her in on everything that’s been happening over the last few hours, but I keep the Amber girl in space to myself. I don’t know whom I’m supposed to tell that to right now.

“Where is Eric now? There must be some mistake, Eric wouldn’t do something like that,” he says.

I nod. “I don’t believe he did it either. Some information he has he probably shouldn’t have but I in my opinion it doesn’t implicate him in the biohacking of ten people, especially when they are on Federation soil. This is all Nest’s doing.”

“Where is Nest now?”

“Lev is interrogating her,” I answer.

“Good. She might cough of some information,” says Kai, looking around. “Where is Eric? Can we go see him?”

“Lev has forbidden anyone to go near him,” I say.

She opens her eyes wide at me. I sigh. “Smokin fuck. Fine.”

At the end of the hall there’s a Senior Intelligence officer and I ask him the same question. He does not hesitate to tell me that Eric is being held on a lower floor. Kai and I take the elevator down two floors and see immediately where he is being held.

There are a dozen officers standing guard outside of his room. I don't know if they realize we are not supposed to be here but we walk towards them regardless. Right away they can tell we are Enhanced and use it to our advantage.

"Open the door. I'm interrogating Jance," I say.

They do not question the order in my voice and we are both immediately let inside the room. Eric is sitting down at the table, but his hands are not handcuffed. Lev had some sense in that at least.

He stands when he sees us walk in the room. "Kai," he sounds surprised.

"Eric," she says. She goes over to him and wraps her arms around his neck. He presses her to him for a long moment.

I can't help my eyes when they go wide. I look from them towards the door and back at them when they stay in the embrace for longer than I am comfortable with. What in the smokin' fucking shit is going on here?

They break apart. "Should you be down here?" he asks her with a smile.

"No, so consider yourself lucky," she says.

"Ms. Thatcher," he says, finally realizing that I am in the room along with the both of them.

"Sir," I say. "Sorry to intrude. We wanted to know everything was alright here."

He chuckles. "You mean you wanted to make sure I wasn't being tortured? Well, I appreciate your concern considering that I am now an enemy of the state."

"Things are bad, Eric. The hacks; it wasn't against any member of the Commonwealth cabinet – they went through from our Mainframe *to* the Federation," she tells him.

“Are you saying your government has directed an illegal information hack against mine?” he asks.

I nod. “It would seem so. Seren and whomever she is working with orchestrated the entire thing. We are trying to figure out exactly who that is.”

Eric is silent for a long time as he paces back and forth slowly. He is thinking hard.

“We haven’t received information as to who has been targeted,” I tell him.

“I just can’t believe it,” he whispers.

“We will get to the bottom of this. I can’t guarantee that your father wasn’t a target but we’ll catch the person who did this,” Kai says and to my surprise she extends her hand and gives his own a squeeze.

“I know my father is safe. He was never intended as a target,” he says, pacing back and forth.

“What did you just say?”

He looks from me to Kai and back again. He turns towards me to answer my question but the door bursts open and in comes one a woman I have never seen before. She wears a long black, sleeveless dress. Her hair is disheveled and she’s panting.

“Eric, we have to go now,” she says urgently. Then she turns and sees me. Fear flits across her face and she gulps.

“Go where, Eric?” Kai asks, and we both take a step back from him at the same time.

## CHAPTER 12 – THE TRUTH

“Lieutenant Cadfael, I didn’t realize anyone was allowed down here,” she says to Kai, whom apparently knows the woman.

“My clearance down here may be questionable, but I know for a fact that you don’t have any, nor should you be running around outside of your allocated interrogation room,” she says cautiously. “Where are you taking Eric?” Kai’s hand moves to her weapon holster.

“Kai,” Eric begins.

“Sir, I don’t think now is the time,” the woman interrupts him.

Again the door bursts open and this time it’s none other than Seren Nest, with four officers. Immediately my hand flies to my holster and I am pointing my gun at her before she has taken a breath. I am about to pull the trigger but the staffer steps in my way, blocking her from my view.

The four officers have their guns directed at Kai.

“What is going on here?” I ask. My gun is aimed at the staffer, who I have no name for, but I am looking at Eric.

“Listen to me, Kai, this isn’t the way I wanted you to find out,” Eric begins.

“Really, Eric? Please explain how you wanted to let me know you aided traitors to the Commonwealth in a complete government shutdown and the death of ten people,” she snarls at him.

This isn’t happening.

“That is not what I am doing, I promise – I just need you to *listen* to me. Let me explain,” he repeats. He says it like he’s in pain.

“I trusted you,” Kai says. “I was prepared to defend you against anything and anyone.” The hurt in Kai’s voice is unknown even to me.

“We have to go,” the staffer repeats. The anger boils over me and I move the gun from Eric’s head to hers and shoot. She falls down on the floor with a loud thump.

“Shit!” Eric yells out. His hands are raised and he’s looking down at the body as though he’s never seen a dead person before.

“So it’s true. You are responsible,” I say with equal parts rage and incredulity.

“Eric, you should go now. The window is closing and you won’t get out otherwise. Everything’s in place,” says Seren.

“He’s not going anywhere,” I say. “And neither are you.”

“If you shoot any of us, she dies,” says Seren. The four officers point all of their guns at Kai’s head.

Cold washes over me and even as I see the loathing now seeping through Kai’s expression I have no choice but to lower my weapon.

“Good choice. Now, Eric you have to leave right now,” she tells him.

Eric moves towards the door but pauses to stare at Kai. “Relieve her of her weapon,” he says out loud. “And cuff her. She’s coming with us.”

“Sir, that is not a good idea,” Seren protests as Kai’s gun is thrown on the floor and she’s electro-cuffed.

“She’s been here with us for too long. They will take her as an accomplice and I will not have that.” He takes Kai’s arm and they both disappear from the room. I feel my breathing become shallow. Where could he possibly be taking her?

“I am going to kill you all for this,” I tell Seren, who has now turned her attention back to me. The four officers have also turned back to me. They make an informal line in front of her, barring me from my prey.

“You think Lev’s going to come in and stop us?” she whispers.

Lev. He was with her. Interrogating her.

“He was shot in the chest and head when we escaped. One of his own officers; didn’t even hesitate. I think it’s safe to say he won’t be doing much anymore.”

Vicious loathing courses through my veins for this single person: the officers don’t come at me at the same time, and that is their first and worst mistake.

They are not Enhanced like me. The first is easy to dispatch with a bullet to the head. The second manages to knock the gun out of my hand and connects a punch to my stomach, but I ram my leg between his thighs, bring his face down hard to my right knee and snap his neck for good measure.

The last two do come at me at the same time and I slide across the floor on my knees as I pull out two knives from my holsters and slash their stomachs open. In this moment, their agony is music to my ears.

Panting, and covered in blood, I turn to Seren Nest.

The lights turn off and the red emergency light comes on, along with a blaring alarm. Headquarters is under lockdown.

I use the opportunity to knock the gun from her hand and attack her. I’m surprised to find she’s just as quick as I am, and she dodges the straight punches and kicks I aim her way. The only weapons at my disposal are the knives secured at my thigh holsters.

I reach for one and she punches me in the face so hard I spit out blood. I slice at her with the tanto knife and manage to scratch her neck as she moves out of my way. I notice that she too has a knife in her hand.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I whisper. I know she can’t hear my voice under the blaring of the alarm but she sneers as if she’s heard me.

“Go ahead. Try it.”

I dive for her again and we both fall down on the floor. I bring down the knife on her chest, but she shifts, and it penetrates her shoulder. She screams out in agony and at the same time so do I.

I look down to see her own knife buried in my stomach.

I pull out my bloody knife – and anticipating another shift – I plunge the knife in her right flank. I twist it while it’s inside her body but she’s pushed me off herself.

We are groaning and panting, spitting out blood, and holding our wounds to keep the blood inside.

Seren gets to her feet and she stumbles backwards against the wall.

“You fucking cunt,” I tell her. I am on my feet as well, and keep pressure on the stomach wound. The pain is unbearable, but the nano tech has already deployed numbing agents to the site to keep me mobile until I can get to a Repair Pad.

“I will kill you all for this,” I repeat. The blood is seeping less and less out of my stomach wound but I look down to see a great puddle at my feet. Seren is paper white.

She moves towards the door. I make to follow her but I stumble and have to hold on to the back of the chair. I take a step towards her but I stumble again and fall on my

knees. When more officers swarm inside the room I am already losing consciousness. Only one thing remains clear in my mind.

Lev is dead.

When I open my eyes again I can't make out my surroundings. My vision is hazy and I only perceive flashes of light, and I can't hear anything well. All I register is that I am very tired and I close my eyes again.

I wake up again and I see I am inside a Repair Pad. The robotic hands have come down around me but I don't know what they are doing. I can see someone outside, watching the monitor carefully. He's not alone. There are two others with him. It can only mean that I will need another modification. I remember Lev. How he must be around somewhere ready to green-light any and all alterations to my body.

But then I remember what really happened.

I've been taken. And Lev is dead.

I close my eyes again and let the darkness swallow me.

For a long time, or what at least feels like a long time, I am in and out on consciousness, and in a period of constant flux. When I am asleep I neither feel nor dream of anything. The darkness is a warm and inviting blanket that I have no hurry to leave. When my eyes open I can hear muffled sounds and voices. The light pushes against my eyelids, forcing me to open them, but I do not acquiesce for long.

I can only make out that once again I find myself in a hospital room, but for how long I have been in it this time I couldn't say.

I think of my father, and my brother, and even Ara who is out in the vastness of space somewhere and I can almost feel the impulse to rise and to fight my way out of this stupor. Then the reality hits me and I find I do not want to go back. I don't want to do anything else except lay on this warm bed and wait for death to take me.

I welcome it at this point.

Maybe my time was over when I had the accident, and everyone's attempt and eventual success in saving my life was merely delaying the inevitable.

The last thought I have before going back under is of my brother and sister. How I failed in protecting them both from the world.

When I am really, truly awake again my brother and father are in the room with me. I feel like something must be terribly wrong because they have never visited me in the hospital before, but when Rhys and I lock eyes he comes towards me with a big smile on his face.

"Brynn," he says, leaning down and kissing my forehead. My father joins him on the other side and squeezes my hand.

"How are you feeling?"

I sit up on the bed and move around. "I feel fine," I say. "How long have I been here?"

"Three days," Rhys says. "Lev's in the room right next door. He took a..."

"Lev? You mean he's alive?"

My brother nods. "Of course. There's no killing either of you, apparently."

I feel a great swell of emotion wash through me and I close my eyes in order to keep it from making me cry in front of my family.

“Can I see him?” I ask.

My father nods. “As soon as you are able to stand.”

Two hours later, I am outside his hospital room waiting for the doctors to come out and clear the room. I pace back and forth, impatient for them to come out.

When the doctors emerge, Mari is one of them. She’s got a serious expression on her face and stops to talk to me.

“How’s he doing?” I ask.

“He’s awake and talking.” Mari’s face is stoic.

“What is it?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “He’s refusing synthetic brain tissue.”

“Does he need it?”

“He’s himself now, but the nano tech can only do so much when a part of the body is that damaged. He will need a replacement before he loses motor functions. Maybe, as an Enhanced, you can persuade him to change his mind.”

“Of course he’s going to accept the brain tissue. He’s just being stubborn as he always is with everything. He’s got no choice in the matter,” I tell her fervently.

She stares at me as a small smile begins to take form on her face. She’s looking at me as if I have finally come to a realization that she had been waiting for me to get to.

This was probably the same thing he said when they asked him about my modifications. I sigh and nod at her.

“He needs to accept it soon, or it won’t be long before his condition worsens,” she says.

I walk in the room and see Lev propped up on pillows looking listlessly at the opposite side of the bed. His long hair has been completely shaved off and there’s a thick, white bandage wrapped around his head.

“Well, you’ve had better days,” I say, my voice slightly tremulous.

Lev’s head snaps in my direction at the sound of my voice. It snaps him from whatever daydream or nightmare he was in. “Brynn.”

The relief in his voice makes my heart flutter and I rush over to the side of the bed and throw my arms around him. His own come around me like vices and lock me against him for a long time. The fact that I missed being this close to him hits me like a ton of bricks. I manage to keep the tears at bay, but we hold each other for a long time, perhaps trying to convey everything we want to say to each other in this single embrace.

“This is definitely new – me visiting you in a hospital room,” I say, finally breaking away from him, but staying as close as possible.

“They told me you were still out,” he says. He extends his hand and I don’t hesitate to take it in mine.

“I was out until about two hours ago. They wouldn’t let me in until they’ve checked me over and until they checked you over,” I say.

He squeezes my hand. “Eric Jance has taken Kai. They boarded an aircraft headed for the Luna Base Colony three days ago and no one’s been able to track them since they’ve been off-planet,” he says. “Also the country is under shutdown by Controller decree.”

I laugh because the alternative is to cry and I don't want to do that in front of him.  
"Ceri called me the day of the hacks and told me something interesting about Eric Jance."

He nods. "I know. He passed the information to me too. I think the only way to be able to find Eric is going to be through your sister."

"But that means putting Ara in danger," I protest.

"She's already in danger, Brynn. She's a criminal who works for a Martian drug lord," he tells me.

"Lev, they're going to interview all of us and most likely it won't be pleasant. Shouldn't we worry about that first? And what about this shutdown? We have to let people know what really happened."

"Brynn, the more we wait, the farther away they all get and if we can't show the Controllers proof that this was a coup then we are all in very deep trouble."

I sigh. "Fine. But to do this I'm going to need you at 100 percent capacity, and that means accepting synthetic brain tissue. I don't have the time or the patience to pick you up off the floor in the middle of an operation because you were too stubborn to take proper care of yourself."

"I don't need it," he protests.

"Yes, you do. It'll only be a small part of your brain that will be reconstructed. You'd hardly be classified repaired, let alone modified or even enhanced."

"I don't want to be anything synthetic," he says angrily.

I shoot up to my feet from the bed ignoring his wince as I jostle the bed. "I didn't want to accept anything synthetic from Sector Three when you made the decision to save my life instead of letting me die. I'm asking you to do the same for yourself now."

For one throbbing moment we stare at each other. “Fine. I’ll get the damn synthetic brain tissue.”

The relief I feel is like a punch through my chest. “Good,” I say, standing up. But he knows me too well for that and grabs my hand before I can move away from him.

“Now do you understand?” his voice is barely a whisper.

I squeeze his hand and give out a shaky breath, nod. “I think I always knew,” I say, in another whisper. “I’m so sorry.”

The smile spreads on his face and he puts his head back with a groan. The machines in the room start to beep and I lean over him with a hand on his head.

“It’s time,” I tell him, as the door opens and three nurses come in ready to wheel him out.

“He’s accepted the synthetic tissue,” I tell them as they push me back and get him ready for transfer. Then they are gone, leaving me inside an empty room.

## CHAPTER 13 – NOT THE END

That same day Lev is fitted with his new brain tissue. I am allowed to watch the operation from the observation deck above it. I see how they open his head and pull back the flap of his scalp to reveal the damaged skull. They remove all the tissue and insert the new ones, grafting each to its human counterpart. Before they close the wound with a new piece of alloy skull, I see them inject a black liquid into his brain.

It's the nanites in the nano tech that's going to keep his body from rejecting the new parts.

Once they fit the new skull piece, they close the scalp and suture it closed before applying the sealant that will close it for good. The whole procedure takes about two hours and then he's left alone on the table as the doctors leave and the cleanup crew come in and tidy up around the place, discarding everything in a chute inside the wall.

I watch him from my high alcove. I monitor his vitals looking to see if they change but they all hold steady. After I am certain they won't plummet and send him into cardiac arrest, I slump against the opposite wall.

Did he do the same with me as he watched them replace part after part? How long had he stood there watching through a window as pieces of me were sawed off to better accommodate the cybernetic parts?

I have hated and resented him for so long – and yet when Mari told me he was refusing the new tissue I had no thought of what he wanted – only that he was going to get it no matter what. I had no thought of his consent, and a total disregard for his wishes. Is it because of what he means to me? Is it because of our history?

In the back of my mind I always knew why he had saved my life, but I always chose to ignore it. Why?

The realization is stunning and profound. I don't want to be in a world without him in it – a world where he doesn't exist. A deep sense of regret for all these past lost years bubbles up inside me, but it's no use feeling this way. We are both inside this now, whatever that's worth.

The door to the room opens and in comes Ceri. I am both surprised and pleased that he's here.

"How's he doing?" he asks, as he goes over to the window to get a better look at Lev.

"He'll survive, and up by tomorrow morning," I tell him.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Command's ordered all military and government personnel for interrogation. I was called in."

I nod. "Starting today?"

"Yes. I imagine you'll be summoned today too," he tells me.

"Good. The faster it's done the faster we can get to the bottom of this," I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

"You realize your sister is in the middle of all of this," he tells me.

"What are the odds of that?" I muse to myself.

"High, if Eric Jance is targeting your family," he says.

I turn to face him. "That's absurd, why would..." The words trail off as I think back to the discovery that my brother made about our mother. How she was the rogue

agent captured and biohacked and most likely the reason for the Four Years Conflict. As son of the Chancellor he would've had access to that information, especially since he's so involved in politics.

I take a few steps towards Ceri. "When did you find out about my mother?"

"I work with the Head of Intelligence. I've always known," he tells me.

"You never thought to tell me?"

He shakes his head, "That's not the issue right now. Jance targeted your sister knowing who she was, and he probably believes you'll try and go after her."

"What about Rhys?"

"I am running scans on him as we speak. If anything crops up I'll be notified immediately," he tells me.

This new piece of information is startling and a little bit ridiculous. Why would Jance go through all this trouble to get to the children of one agent his government killed off years ago? After the conflict ended, the Controllers cracked down hard on the Commonwealth to appease the Federation on the alleged information that we had sent spies to hack their Mainframe. They got what they wanted. We were censured by Controller decree. Apparently, he wanted the full shutdown as compensation. Yet, something tells me that it is Aeron Jance the Chancellor, and not the son, who is behind all of this.

"Do you know where Ara is?"

"Currently orbiting Mars with the package in hand," he tells me.

"She's made no contact with Jance?"

He shrugs. "I can't be sure if she has or hasn't. But it doesn't look like they are going anywhere for a bit."

"What do you think is keeping him?"

"He just shut down a country and killed ten people in his own country and everyone thinks it was us. I think he's lying low, for now."

Nausea churns in my stomach when I think of Kai being stolen away by that maniac. If I had done more, reacted faster, killed them all without asking any questions, she would be here with me. I remember the look on her face of utter shock. She had shut down, didn't even make a struggle.

"You'll get them both back," Ceri says, perhaps seeing the turmoil in my face. Usually I am good at remaining stoic but the last forty-eight hours have been difficult ones and I don't have the strength to put up a front. I expect a flashback or some kind of panic attack to rip through me at any second.

The ping to my R.I comes in a second later. Summoned for debriefing. I let out a sigh. "Asking and supposing isn't going to help anyone. Let's just get this over with so we can focus on what we have to do and get it done."

The interrogation is not pleasant, but it makes me more angry than nervous, so I am able to stave off all PTSD and its accompanying effects. They keep me for three hours, drilling me with the same questions over and over again. They plug me into the Searcher device and look back on days of footage; where I went, who I saw, what I did. They suggest the idea that Kai is an accomplice to Jance's plan because of my memory of her and Jance talking through the Holographic Projector.

“She’s not an accomplice,” I tell the interrogator. “She believed him to be her friend. He tricked her, and then he stole her.”

He refutes this piece of information and I ball up my fists so as not to use them on him. But keeps coming at me with the same line of interrogation until I have finally had it. I get up quickly from my chair, grab him by the back of his head, and slam his face against the metal table. There’s a loud thump sound and a following crunch. He’s bleeding and yelling on the floor when the door opens.

I am dismissed, because even though they don’t fully trust me, there’s no real reason for them to keep me. A headache starts right behind my eyes as I am leaving Intelligence. They’ve become more frequent since I had the recalibration.

The next day Lev is discharged from the hospital early in the morning. I open the door to his room and find him buttoning up his uniform. I stand in the doorway looking at him before getting closer. He looks so different without all of his hair. All softness has gone from his features. He looks every bit the soldier who killed all those operatives in Africa single-handedly; ruthless, dangerous, and unforgiving.

“How do you feel?” I ask, walking the few steps towards him.

He sits on the edge of the bed so that I have to look down at him. “Physically I feel fine. But my mind is heavy.”

“Well, they just added new parts, it’ll take a while to get used to it,” I tell him. I reach up and finger the thin pink scar across the side of his head. It will be gone by tomorrow.

“Command has green-lighted you for Luna Base. You are to find and bring back whatever Eric stole from the G.A. It’s what the Controllers want in return for lifting the shutdown,” he tells me.

“When was this decided?”

“Yesterday when you were breaking another interrogator’s nose during your debriefing,” he says but there’s a small smile on his face.

I ignore the comment. “Why me, though?”

“I recommended you for the operation,” he tells me. “There’s no one more qualified.”

“That’s not the actual reason, is it?” I ask.

“It’s one of them. The other one is that you’ve always wanted to go to space and this is your chance, if all goes well you might even get promoted to an Aegis cruiser,” he tells me.

“And my sister. That’s why you recommended me. You want me to see her,” I whisper.

“Don’t you?”

I nod. “When do I leave?”

“Today. 1300. Ceri and I will be in your ear the whole time, and let Ara know you’re coming without alerting anyone,” he tells me.

“I thought you’d want to come with me,” I say foolishly.

“I do. But every level of my organization was infiltrated right under my nose and on my watch. I have heads to cut off,” he says, and he gives me a faint smile. But nothing about this is funny to either of us.

“Okay then,” I tell him, the nerves beginning to bubble inside of my stomach.  
“Let’s go.”

We’re moving towards the door when it bursts open and Ceri is there, panting, and closing it behind him.

“What happened?” asks Lev urgently. In that same instant, I have my gun in my hand, safety off.

“The signature,” he pants. “The signature...I found...on Jance’s Amber file.”

“What about it?” asks Lev.

Ceri lets out a long breath and regains some of his composure. If he hadn’t contacted either of us through the R.I with this information it’s because it’s too sensitive.

“I told you I recognized it. And I was right,” he says, coming closer to us.

“Whose signature?” I ask.

Ceri looks from me to Lev and then back to me, his eyes wide, and his hands on his hips.

“Rhys,” he says gently. “It was Rhys’s signature.”

I simply stare.

“What do you mean it’s Rhys’s signature?” I hear Lev ask him.

All I can do is look at Ceri. I know he has just said something but I don’t understand any of it.

“Every hacker leaves their signature on any program, file or network they have touched. It’s how we are all able to identify each other’s works and either commend them for a good job or rip them a new one if they don’t know what they are doing. The signature on Jance’s Amber file was very specific,” Ceri says in one breath and then

continues. “If Rhys thought it would have been seen by anyone in the Commonwealth I am sure he would have changed it so it would be unrecognizable. But, why would he? This file belongs to Jance and he is a Head of State with immunity.”

“Ceri, what are you saying?”

He sighs. “Wake up, Brynn. Your brother is working with Jance!”

“Where is Rhys now?” asks Lev.

“I tired locating him at Intelligence, but he’s not there, and he’s not coming up on any of my software. He’s gone ghost.”

My brain is malfunctioning. I can’t seem to make a cohesive sentence with my thoughts, much less execute them into sounds. After a few moments, though, I am able to speak. “He needs to be found. This doesn’t mean he’s working with Jance. There are a million reasons why his signature could be on that file.”

“Rhys was never assigned to Jance,” Lev tells me softly. His eyebrows are furrowed and there’s a sad expression in his eyes that make me angry.

“My brother is not a biohacker. He helped us decode it!”

“Helped us, or helped them?”

“Find him, right now,” I warn Ceri.

“We’ll find him, but you have to go soon. All of this now may depend on whatever Jance had Ara and her partner get for him. It might be the only thing that can put this puzzle together,” Lev says and nods at Ceri, who after a few seconds leaves the room again.

“He’s not a biohacker. I know it,” I tell Lev, who puts a hand on my shoulder. I brush it off angrily. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Then follow orders, soldier. You’re out to Luna today. Get your gear, get on the shuttle and await further instructions,” he barks at me.

I stalk out of the room. Each step I take makes me angrier and more scared than the one before. Just when I think there’s a clear path to follow, it all gets muddled again.

Not just muddled, but completely impenetrable.

The tears burn my eyes but I swipe them from my face with my fist before they fall down my cheeks. This is no time to fall apart and wonder why in the smokin’ fuck does my family seem to be the most dysfunctional of all.

I get to my barrack unit and pack up everything that’s been laid out on the bed for me, and I switch my agent uniform to the brilliant white uniform that only those who work up on Luna wear, but I am in no mood to appreciate it.

I stop and think about my brother. How this is all just a huge misunderstanding, but how it can also be very true. I have only speculated on the matter that Jance, or rather his father the Chancellor, had a direct hand in our mother’s murder. But Rhys, if he did indeed get inside Jance’s circle – and have access to his secret files – could have potentially found something more solid.

Was my brother double crossing us? Or was he only pretending to in order to spy on Federation activities and report them back to Intelligence?

And where could he be? Had he been taken like Kai had? Or was there something else entirely at work here? With Ara’s help or without, whether it helped the mission or simply hindered it, I intend to find out.