

General de Pommier's avatar steps closer to me and looks me over, examining me. I hold still.

'Impressive,' she says, her dark eyes moving over me, curious. 'And you have all your memories, intact, no?'

'Yes, ma'am. As far as I can tell, nothing is missing.'

'You are the first of your kind, Maddox. A great success.' She steps back and sips her coffee, the muscles of her throat moving. 'I understand you know you are no longer human, but a conscious machine with the memories of Delta Force Capitaine Ryan Maddox.'

I nod, my throat tight. I really don't want to talk about it, especially not the way she describes it. I feel real. It's enough. No need for inconvenient details.

She takes another sip, watching me, intent. 'We French tend to be quite romantic—even now, stuck in this ravaged, dying world of ours.' She nods at me. 'Yours was the first successful transfer of a complete neural network. After four years, and fourteen failures, this time we got everything right. Lucky you, no?' She arches a thick, curved eyebrow at me. 'Your body was badly burned when the drones found you, but you were still alive, barely. Per protocol, your body was cooled twenty degrees and shipped to base for memory retrieval.' She pauses to drink her coffee, nodding at me to try mine. I do, because I have to, not because I want to. The coffee is bitter, syrupy, familiar, reminding me life in the barracks. The memory is somehow comforting. Nostalgia assaults me.

'It seems the line between life and death is much wider than we have been led to believe,' she continues, breaking into my thoughts. She sighs and sets aside her coffee cup. It's still half full. 'It is fascinating to think on the brink of our annihilation we

have finally been able to transcend death.' She glances up at me, a look of regret fleets through her eyes. 'It is . . . ironic, no?'

I blink. I thought I was a droid, and a really ugly one, my memories copied and programmed piece by painstaking piece onto a hard disk buried somewhere inside me. But this—the transfer of a complete neural network, this is something else. It is the holy grail. Eternal life.

'I understand Major Akron has debriefed you regarding your mission to acquire the target.' Her attention is back on the screen on the smartdesk. I sense our cosy chat time is over, it's all business now. I set my empty mug onto a nearby chair and stand at ease, my hands clasped behind my back.

'Yes ma'am.'

'You were told the target is essential to the success of the project known as Genesis II?' she asks, tapping the smartdesk's screen, swiping left more than right.

'Yes ma'am.'

'Excellent.' She looks up, her eyes sharp, calculating. 'However, that is not, shall we say, the whole of it.'

Why am I not surprised. I wait while she finishes scrolling through a list, swiping left at various intervals.

'What do you know of the UFF's so-called Oracle?' she asks as she closes several tabs.

'According to Delta Force intel,' I answer, crisp, 'the Oracle is capable of predicting the location and severity of major natural disasters with uncanny accuracy, disasters the UFF have exploited for their own purposes against Global Command since 2075.'

The first known strike was made in the same year against the Yukon space dock in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Josiah.'

General de Pommier nods. 'Accuracy of strikes to disasters since then?'

'One hundred percent, ma'am.'

'One hundred percent,' she repeats, soft. 'Thousands have died because of her—and you were sleeping with her.'

Here it comes. The stiletto. She smiles, enigmatic. 'But I am French, and I am romantic, so I like this strange story, very much.' She taps the screen. It goes dark. A few steps and she is front of the desk. She leans back and rests against the desk's glass edge. 'You see, you are unique. There was a reason you survived the transition when the other fourteen did not: You wanted to come back. For her.' She smiles again.

'Love is a powerful thing, no?'

'So when do I leave?'

'As soon as you can be ready. Anything you need, it will be yours.'

'Ma'am.' I salute her and turn to leave.

'Ah, one more thing.'

I stop.

'You will go in alone. You have one chance. Do not fail me.' She looks back down to the screen, her fingers moving, swift over its interface. 'And do not deviate from the plan. We can shut you down just like this.' She snaps her fingers, the sound sharp and abrasive in the harsh, metal and glass-clad room. She looks up at me and tilts her head at the door. 'You are dismissed.'

Her eyes dull and the droid stiffens. I think that could be me, next. It won't happen.
I'll get Blue for them, but after that, we'll see.