

PERSES

NOMAD SERIES BOOK 3

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‘Never thought I’d have to wear one of these,’ Garvan grumbles to himself.

Bray glances over at him, barely managing to hold back a laugh at the sight of the large man struggling to force his thick arms into the tight sleeves of the Foundation uniform. ‘It suits you.’

Garvan glares at him before focusing on his task again. ‘You just couldn’t have found someone the same size as me, could you?’

Bray finishes pulling on his own Foundation issue jacket. ‘Slim pickings.’

Garvan grunts. ‘Slim is right.’

Bray fastens his borrowed jacket, all too aware they could have company any minute. As soon as they realised their excursion was going to end in an unplanned holiday on Earth, they set to work erasing any evidence of their presence. The large vessel was quickly gaining ground on Earth leaving little time for the task. They barely had enough time to drag the body of Forty-Three to one of the smaller storage rooms off the main cargo bay before the ship landed. After some desperate searching, Garvan finally found the perfect hiding place. The access tunnels that ran behind the wall panels of the ship would keep the body out of sight until they were far enough away.

‘How do I look?’ Garvan holds his arms out to the side and spins around. In spite of the seriousness of their predicament, Bray can’t help but laugh. How the large ex-prisoner had managed to convince the sleeves of the Foundation jacket to accommodate his arms he’ll never know.

‘Ridiculous. It’ll have to do though.’ He takes the cap from the body at his feet and pulls it over his hair to hide his implant. ‘Give me a hand with these two.’

Garvan frowns at Bray. ‘That supposed to be funny?’

Bray glances at the two severed right hands on the box beside him. He grins and shrugs. ‘Bad choice of words. C’mon.’

Garvan takes hold of the feet of the first hand donor while Bray grabs the man under his arms. After a bit of manoeuvring, he joins Forty-Three in the cramped space. Garvan steps back and smiles.

‘Don’t they look cosy.’

Bray thumps him in the arm and gestures to the third body. 'Even cosier once he joins them.' Bray helps Garvan unceremoniously stuff the man on top of his colleague and Forty-Three. Not quite the Foundation-styled send off the men probably deserved. It's just their bad luck they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Killing the men didn't sit well with Bray but they had no choice. All doors in and out of the base have palm scan locks fitted.

As soon as Bray and Garvan left Earth as criminals, their identification had been marked. Their palm prints, retinal scans, and any other means of identification was permanently flagged. If they were caught, they'd be back in prison before they knew what was happening—if they were lucky. Escaped convicts infiltrating Earth without permission is bad enough. Add killing Forty-Three and the other men to that, and it probably earned them a place at the top of the most wanted list.

Garvan makes sure the panel is secured back on the wall while Bray packs his own clothes into the bag at his feet. Garvan passes him the guns they borrowed from the men. Bray hides their Outer Sector weapons in the bag under their clothes then pushes the Foundation issued weapon into the holster on his hip. He stands up and takes a deep breath.

'Ready for this?'

Garvan rubs his hands together. 'Can't wait.' He looks around the small storage room. 'Still wish we had time to cause some mayhem here. Seems a shame to miss such a great opportunity.'

'I hear you. Our best chance of getting off the ship in one piece is as soon as she lands. We need to jump ship along with the rest of the crew. There's less chance of us standing out in a large group.'

Garvan nods but is far from happy. 'I just wanted to have a little fun before we leave, is that so wrong?'

'We'll come back and destroy something later. Will that make you happy?'

'I'll hold you to that.' Garvan grins and nods. 'Fair enough. Lead the way.'

They step out of the relative safety of the storage room and enter the vast cargo hold on *Alpha*. Her enormous loading ramp is

lowered, showing an enormous hangar housing the ship. Dozens of drones march up and down the ramp, carrying boxes of supplies in and out of the ship. A gleaming transport is being loaded with some of the heavier crates taken from the new colony. Bray's eyes narrow as he tries to make out the details on the boxes. One of them holds the Scientist's personal computer along with all the data from every procedure he carried out.

Like damaging the ship, the cargo from the new colony will have to wait. It tears at Bray to walk away and leave it here, but again, they have no choice. They're just two men and they need to get as far from here as possible while they figure out what to do. Bray glares at the crates being loaded onto the shuttle. Whatever happens, he will locate and destroy the data from the Scientist's system. There's no way he's leaving Earth if the Foundation have the knowledge and ability to make more cyborgs, to destroy more lives for their own personal gain. The experiments have to stop. No one else should have to suffer like himself and Gryffin have.

Garvan nudges him in the side discretely. 'One foot in front of the other, Commander. You're looking a tad suspicious.'

Bray nods and clutches the strap of the bag in his hand. Full of illegal weapons, Outer Sector clothes, and two severed hands, he can't afford to let it go for even a second. He straightens his shoulders and strides through the cargo hold towards the ramp. It appears luck is on their side. The cargo bay is so busy with transports entering and leaving in quick succession they manage to slip out unnoticed. Using a transport as cover, they keep pace beside it as it exits the ship and travels along the length of the far wall.

Bray tries to focus on where he's going but his eyes continue to wander around the space they are in. In stark contrast to Ultar's crude stone hangar, the Foundation base is made of highly polished, immaculate metal. Powerful lights embedded in the towering ceiling bathe every inch of the space in a harsh white light. Lines and lines of fighters and cargo vessels take up the entire right side of the hangar and occupy the numerous levels like a giant

beehive. Human and drone technicians mill around the ships seeing to repairs and maintenance.

‘Ultrar doesn’t stand a chance against this,’ Bray mutters to Garvan. ‘We have to find a way to warn Gryffin and the others.’

‘Agreed. How about I ask someone if I can make a call?’

‘I’m being serious,’ Bray hisses.

‘So am I, Commander. Right now, it’s our own lives I’m worried about. Stop thinking with your heart. Our first priority is to get out of here. We’re no good to anyone as corpses.’

Bray bites the inside of his cheek to stop any reply. Garvan is right and that irritates him.

‘So, Commander, any idea where the exit is?’

Bray nods towards the far end of the hangar and the glowing red emergency light. ‘Must be down there.’ They slip out from behind the automated transport and crouch behind the cargo containers lining the wall. Ducking and diving behind the crates, they near their target. Bray stops all of a sudden and grabs Garvan’s arm. ‘Wait.’

‘Are you serious?’ Garvan hisses.

Bray crouches down to examine a crate. He taps his fingers against the side of the box. ‘This came from the new colony.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘I’m serious, Garvan.’

‘So am I,’ he replies, harshly. ‘We’ve talked about this.’

Bray gets to his feet and leans closer to Garvan. ‘The cargo is why we were on *Alpha* in the first place. Everything about the cyborg program is on that computer.’

‘Yeah, I know. You agreed we had to leave it for the moment. Look around you. We’re seriously outnumbered, Commander. I know the Foundation having that information is a bad thing, but if we’re going to have any chance of getting out of here, we have to leave it. It’s going to be hard enough getting the two of us out without lugging a flipping big crate along for the ride.’

‘But—’

‘But nothing. Have you forgotten the small matter of a dead cyborg and two personnel hidden in the wall on the ship? Once

they're found, they'll know someone hitched a ride. I want to be long gone before they come looking for us. Move!

Bray opens his mouth to argue, but changes his mind when he sees a group of technicians moving in their direction. 'You're right. Time to go.'

He picks up the bag and aims for the door again. Every step of the way, Bray fully expects someone to shout for them to stop. It seems the buzz created in the bay by the return of *Alpha* is keeping everyone busy. Bray crouches down in front of the door to rummage through the bag while Garvan keeps watch. Bray takes the two hands out and passes one to Garvan. The large man makes a face as he splays the fingers out. 'This brings back memories.'

Bray glances over his shoulder at him. 'You've handled a severed hand before?'

Garvan smiles. 'Long story, Commander. Perhaps when we have more time.'

Bray raises his eyebrows and turns back to the door. He passes one of the two stolen key cards to Garvan. 'You want to go first?'

They hold their breath as Garvan presses the hand against the scanner at the side of the door, and slips the card into the reader. The light above the door turns green and the metal slides silently into the wall. Garvan steps through and the door secures behind him. Bray repeats the procedure with the other man's hand and joins Garvan on the far side.

Bray stares in wonder around him. Instead of the maintenance tunnels he expected, they're in an enormous glass lobby area. The room must be at least ten stories high and made entirely of seamless glass. Their scuffed boots squeak on the highly polished white floor as they cross the vast space.

Garvan attempts to pull the sleeves of his coat down so the cuffs are in the same vicinity as his wrists. 'I feel like we're leaving a trail of grime after us.'

Bray nods. 'I know what you mean. We don't exactly blend in.' He looks around and grimaces when he sees two security personnel and two drones standing at the door to the outer courtyard.

Garvan turns his back to the guards and Bray follows suit. 'Drones randomly scan faces. Don't think they'll like what they discover with us.'

'We have to get out of the open.' Bray gestures to three doors at the back of the lobby and smiles. The door on the left has 'MAINTENANCE PERSONNEL ONLY' stamped on a red plaque attached to the door. 'Best option for us.'

Garvan follows Bray to the door, and after using their acquired hands again, they disappear into the corridor. Garvan stoops to talk quietly to Bray. 'No way we're going to be able to mosey out the front door. Could be a bit risky using the prints out in the open like that. Nothing screams we're trouble quicker than taking a severed hand out of your bag.'

Bray readjusts his cap to make sure his implant is concealed.

'There are drones everywhere. We need to get out of here and regroup. Somewhere away from so many Foundation security measures.' They continue along the maintenance corridor, checking each of the doors they pass for more guards or drones, but they're alone. They reach the last door and Bray pulls the "borrowed" hand out of his pocket and holds it up to the panel. He looks at Garvan and raises an eyebrow. Garvan rests his hand on his gun and nods. Bray places the palm against the panel. The light flashes and Garvan steps outside.

'All clear.'

Bray joins him, blinking as the bright sunlight hits him. Once the spots clear from his vision, Bray finds himself in a large maintenance yard lined with rubbish compacters and recycling units.

Garvan spins and grabs Bray by the arm. They duck down behind the nearest compacter and slump to the ground. Garvan points to the far wall. Bray risks a quick look and sees what caught Garvan's attention. 'Security units, Commander. No doubt motion detectors and facial recognition. Best keep out of the open.'

Bray closes his eyes and takes off the cap. He runs a hand through his sweat-soaked hair and rests his head back against the wall.

What a bloody disaster. Garvan is only in this mess because of him. He should have gone after Forty-Three alone. If he'd acted immediately, Forty-Three would be dead on the landing deck of the colony and Garvan would be in the Outer Sector. Now they're both stuck here and the Foundation still have access to all the data. He presses the heel of his hand against the implant on his face. As if things aren't bad enough, the metal hurts like crazy. The blow from Forty-Three probably did some damage to the useless component.

'You okay?'

He opens his eyes and grimaces at the look of concern on Garvan's face. 'Yeah. We can't stay here. You know anyone in the area?'

Garvan shakes his head. 'Last I heard, my family relocated to the colony on Mars after my arrest.' He smiles but there's little warmth in it. 'Doubt they'd be too welcoming anyway. In their eyes I'm a criminal.' He rubs the back of his neck as he looks away from Bray. 'Don't get me wrong—I'd give anything to see them. Hell, I'd give my life to see them, but not like this. I want to clear my name before I go anywhere near them.' He shrugs and looks back at Bray. 'You?'

Bray makes a face. He's got family on Earth and that's part of the problem. His uncle, Morgan, was incredibly close to his younger sister, Maggie, and took it especially hard when she died. It didn't help when Bray took a slightly grey path in life. Morgan's wife Shayla had spent most of her time separating the two of them or stepping in when Bray and his cousin Erin got in trouble for doing something they shouldn't have. The last time he saw Morgan, the man had made it clear Bray was a disappointment, and he never wanted to see him again. 'Yeah, like you, I'm not sure how welcomed I'll be.'

Garvan holds up his hands, mimicking scales. 'Uncomfortable family reunion verses being killed by the Foundation.'

Bray looks down and sighs.

Garvan drops his hands and frowns. 'Seriously? What the blazes did you do?'

'Everything I wasn't supposed to... and more. I guess we don't have much choice though.'

Garvan clasps his hands together. 'Fantastic. Uncomfortable family reunion it is. They near here?'

Bray shakes his head. 'That would be too easy. They live a couple of hours from here. We'll need transport of some kind. Stealing a shuttle is out. The Foundation will have plenty of time to track us down. We'll be picked up before we leave the city limits.' Bray leans back against the unit and chews his bottom lip. Something on the side of the compacter catches his attention. 'I think I have an idea. You're not going to like it though.'