

# THE INFINITY FILES

*Ash's gaze swept the vault again. This was all getting disturbingly real. Was this her life now? Alone with a centuries-old hologram, on a forgotten moon?*

*She wrapped her arms over her chest and shut her eyes. Life wasn't fair. She should be donning a red pilot uniform right now and taking her place in one of the fighters to help defend her planet against invading forces. She should be learning strategy, fighting techniques and tactical manoeuvres – not tripping over ancient weapons in a secret far-flung library. This was all a horrible mistake. She opened her eyes, ready to speak. But Orius was watching her, waiting.*

*His wide smile returned and he held out his hands.*

*“Welcome, Guardian Yang, to the Library at the End of the Universe. Home of the Infinity Files.”*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. M. Wilson is obsessed with books – she has read thousands and written more than fifty. *The Infinity Files* is her second teen series, channelling her love of all things sci-fi. She lives with her family on the west coast of Scotland.

[susan-wilson.com](http://susan-wilson.com)



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THE  
INFINITY  
FILES

S. M. WILSON



USBORNE

For my three heroes: Kevin, Elliott and Rhys Bain

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# CHAPTER ONE

**A**sh leaned forward, even though she knew it made no difference. The expanse in front of her was still the same. Darkness so wide it almost sucked her in. Tiny lights glimmered around her – stars that were millions of light years away. Behind her lay her home planet, Astoria. But she wasn't interested in that right now.

This was it. The moment she'd waited for. Sixteen years of preparation and study – even when it wasn't the popular thing to do. Sixteen-hundred candidates, whittled down to six hundred, then to sixty. And now there was only one place. One place in the Star Corporation Academy. It was hers. She wasn't going to put a foot, hand or strand of hair wrong. Not when it meant so much to her.

A blue tress of hair floated in front of her eyes. She grabbed it and stuffed it back inside her pilot's helmet with one hand, keeping her other hand on the throttle. There was no gravity in a ship as small as this – it would be considered

a waste of energy. The thick harness holding her in her seat was already pinching at her shoulders and the top of her thighs. Tonight, her skin would be rubbed raw.

She waited, slowing her breathing and trying to exercise the thing she struggled with most – patience.

It was so easy to get distracted. People thought that space was dark, just blackness. But up here, there was so much more to see than a blank expanse. If she concentrated, she could see a myriad of colours through the view screen in front of her – streaks of pink and purple, elements of yellow, and a littering of silver strands.

The sun at the centre of their solar system was off to her left. At the edges of her peripheral vision, the three other planets were moving slowly in their orbits. Her face scrunched in a perpetual scowl. Astoria had been at war with Corinez for as long as Ash had been alive – even the sight of the harsh icy planet made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. It would be easy to let the feelings overwhelm her after everything she'd lost. All to a war that seemed never-ending.

Five hundred years. That's how long the war had lasted in her solar system. No wonder the reasons behind it seemed blurry – though the effects were not. For her, the war had meant the loss of first her sister, then her mother, then her father. It had meant the bombing of the school in her village, houses reduced to rubble, and people scrambling and digging through the dust. That was the reality for Ash.

She gave an involuntary cough as her body remembered

the clouds of dust sent up from the last blast she'd experienced on Astoria. The ringing in her ears for days, and the huge crater where the village had been. A piece of flying shrapnel had given her the scar on her cheek, which she usually hid behind her hair.

She pushed the memory from her mind. She didn't have room for it right now. All her attention had to be on the here and now.

The green of Hakora and sandy colour of Vallus shimmered in the distance like smudges in the dark. Astoria currently had an uneasy alliance with both of these planets, all three sending candidates to compete for places at the Star Corporation Academy. But that alliance could fade as quickly as the flash of a passing comet.

The Star Corporation Academy had originally been founded as a training academy for the planets allied against Corinez. The shimmering grey metallic sphere hung in the sky like a tiny moon. The defensive forces it provided had been used continually since its foundation – and not just against Corinez. Occasionally there had been attacks from other solar systems – the latest from Resto, trying to plunder resources from their planets.

Ash was determined to become a vital part of those forces. Two more hurdles and then she could proudly wear the red uniform of a Star Corporation fighter pilot and defend her planet against all enemies.

Today was the final pilot test, tomorrow would be the final practical test. She planned to ace both.

The practical test was set to examine their engineering skill and ingenuity under pressure. Last year, an interstellar freight shuttle from Hakora had been damaged in a meteoroid storm, with holes puncturing the hull and some components sucked out into space. The pilot and crew on board had been forced to rebuild the ship using what was left. And it hadn't been much. Their story was one of the most retold and admired, because they'd all survived. Ash was betting credits that the final practical test would involve something similar, like all the candidates being thrown into a room with a random set of components and told to create something to save their lives in space. She'd practised so hard for it that she almost craved it.

Her mind worked in a logical way. Building things and taking them apart again never lost its shine. It had been her favourite way to pass the time, back home on Astoria when the temperature dropped sharply at night and most people didn't want to be outdoors. So it didn't matter what the practical test was – building new relays or landing gears, finding a way to power the engines, repairing the comms system to radio for help, or building an antenna to signal the nearest spacecraft – she would be prepared.

She just had to finish this test first, and it shouldn't be difficult. Her piloting skills were sound. All she needed was a little strategic thinking and she should nail it.

Ash gazed at the view screen, waiting for the test to start – waiting for the battle to commence. This area of space was mined around the edges, owned exclusively by the Star



Corporation Academy and used entirely for their training exercises. All the attacking spacecrafts in the test were controlled remotely from the Academy. The only ships that were actually manned during the test were the ones the cadets were piloting. Her four fellow pilots were out there somewhere. Ezra, Trik, Arona and Castille, all in the distinctive Star Corporation fighters with the bright-green logo on the side. They were all being tested at the same time, and all hoping to come out on top.

She twisted her head from side to side, the clear bubble at the top of the ship giving her an open view of the space around her. A dot appeared to her immediate right. It was almost unnoticeable, but the tiny flicker brought her back to the present with a harsh crash. Ash was ready, spinning her fighter craft around, her fingers poised above the red trigger buttons.

The black test craft seemed to burst from nowhere, directly in front of her. Wormholes were like that – something could appear in literally the blink of an eye. She opened fire, not hesitating for a second. It could have been the wrong move – it could have been a “civilian” ship. But she’d seen this often enough when she’d reviewed every previous test for every previous candidate. And statistics told her the first craft to jump into the final pilot test was most likely to be an “enemy” ship.

White streaked across the darkness in front of her, ending in an explosion of muted yellow as the black craft disappeared. There was no sound – sound didn’t carry across space –

but in her head, Ash heard a kind of *pop*. It was weird how her brain just added in sound effects when needed.

She spun her ship around, her heart thudding in her chest. Her hand slid a little on the control lever, sweat coating her palm. She cursed and rubbed her hand on the leg of her dark flight suit. The last thing she wanted was for her hand to slip at a crucial moment. The pilot exam was like a carefully choreographed routine, each test individualized for the participant, pushing them to their absolute limits.

Ash's peripheral vision picked up some other fighter pilots. She frowned. Each ship was identical – a single-seat pilot craft with a standard weapons array and the familiar green logo – so there was no way of identifying who was manning which. She gave a little shiver of excitement – the thought of outperforming Trik, Arona, Ezra and Castille appealed to her competitive edge. She wanted to come out on top. She wanted to be truly the best candidate for the pilot job.

But the other four all wanted the same. Each student was equally committed and equally ruthless. For any of them, getting into the Star Corporation Academy would be life-changing. An opportunity. An opportunity to make a difference. An opportunity to get off the planets they all claimed to love so dearly, but saw no future on. Failure would mean going back to the mines for Castille, the military factory for Trik, the fishing boats for Ezra, and the desert dunes of Astoria for Arona. Ash didn't even want to contemplate her own dusty village.

Her gaze flicked left then right, scanning the darkness for another distortion. There it was. Up to the far right of her vision – the place where she had a tiny blind spot.

If Ash looked at a grid solely with her right eye, four of the small squares would disappear. Part of her retina, near the fovea, had been damaged years ago by one of the explosions caused by the Corinez forces. Most of the time she never noticed. Using both eyes together meant that the tiny loss of vision was almost cancelled out.

Almost, but not quite. The Corporation tested their potential cadets with a scrutiny that seemed over the top. But it was to reveal things like this. This part of the pilot test had been made specifically for Ash – and they meant to pressure anything that could be considered a weak spot.

She yanked the stick towards her, throwing the nose of her fighter upwards as she let out a stream of fire. This time the enemy craft had barely started to materialize from its jump before it disintegrated into a million splinters. For a split second, she saw a flash of red against the pale hull – the familiar circle signalling it as a fighter from Corinez. Too close. She'd been far too close. Her mouth instantly dried as shards of metal shot past her, a few spearing the hull of her fighter.

There was a *ping*. Two orange lights. She glanced at the screen in front of her. Potential hull breach and fuel leakage.

She shifted, the straps of her harness digging in even more as her stomach twisted. The two biggest crises for a fighter pilot. Loss of fuel could leave her floating in space for

the rest of her natural life. A hull breach could cause the rest of the outer structure to fracture, or could lead to leaking oxygen – both of which were deadly. If things got to that point, she was sure they would pull her out in time – no pilot had ever died during a Star Corporation assessment – but the test here was for *her* to find a way out of this.

She licked her lips, not taking her eyes from the solar system in front of her.

This was a test.

She had to concentrate. The Star Corporation Academy was watching her now. Waiting to see how she would react to the hull damage.

She noticed one of the other Star Corporation fighters looping around, its green logo clearly visible. It seemed senseless. There was nothing to see except drifting shrapnel from the blast.

Then she spotted it. Her fingers sped across her controls, trying to zoom in on the tiny blot beyond that fighter. Was it another hidden threat, ready to attack? No. She frowned again. A cargo vessel. Generally slow-moving, cargo vessels usually carried either freight or passengers – occasionally both. Unless this was part of the test, under no circumstances should it be in this part of the solar system.

The other fighter hadn't moved. She had no idea what it was doing. It seemed suspended in space, hanging there, watching the struggling cargo vessel.

Two thin streams were currently leaking from her craft – one of oxygen, the other of fuel. But the streams coming

from the cargo vessel were much thicker than her own – it was obviously in serious trouble. It was a bigger craft, potentially carrying passengers, as well as crew. It shouldn't be here. Not in this zone.

*Expect the unexpected.* The thought permeated her brain. One of the instructors had mentioned it on their first day, his mouth quirking into a smile. The Academy must want to see her reactions to this unexpected element. And truth be told, they'd got her – because she'd practised hundreds of scenarios, but none of them had been like this.

Her brain started to rationalize what she was seeing. Maybe they'd combined the two final parts of the test. Maybe she was supposed to help repair the cargo vessel and save it.

Her stomach squirmed. But what if this *wasn't* part of the test? What if this was totally random, and completely out of everyone's control? What if this was *real*?

No.

It couldn't be. Not here. Not now.

She pushed forward with the throttle. The hairs on her body prickled as she flew towards the bigger ship. There was an enormous rent in the side of its metal hull. Cargo vessels had minimal shields. There was a shimmer around the edge of the craft, telling her that right now, it must be diverting all its power to those shields to try and keep the ship together.

The little prickles grew stronger. She lifted one hand to subconsciously rub her arm. Could there actually be *people* inside that craft? Why else would the shields have diverted

to the hull? This whole situation was making her distinctly uncomfortable.

Part of Ash's brain was telling her this was all deliberate – a test to play with her mind and her ability to think straight. But something else, a feeling deep inside her gut, was putting her on full alert.

She shot past the fighter, which still hadn't moved. She had no idea who was manning that craft. Maybe they were just as bewildered as she was, and trying to pretend *not* to be. More lights started to flash on her boards. She had to make repairs. She had to pay attention to her own vessel or she would soon need to be rescued herself.

But she couldn't. That horrible gut instinct wouldn't let her. It could just be nerves, but she had a bad feeling about this. She couldn't leave another ship like that, not when it was so damaged. Another light appeared on her control panel – orange. She wasn't going to die quite yet. She only had to *really* worry when the lights were red – but of course by then she might have no time left.

She hit the comms button. Her eyes saw the name on the battered hull. "Cargo vessel *Attila*. What is your condition?"

Her ears were flooded with static and she flinched. She flicked to another channel and tried again.

"Cargo vessel *Attila*, this is Pilot Yang. Give me your status."

Still nothing.

She looked behind her. The clear bubble around her allowed her to see the other fighter now sitting on her tail.

“Fighter, identify yourself and your purpose.”

Something resembling a snort came over the comm. The voice that replied was almost mocking. “Guess it’s time to go home, Ash. You’re leaking like an old pipe in the Carpesian desert.”

Ezra. It would be him. Friends or not, in the final test, Trik would likely have ignored her. Castille would probably have spoken first. She wouldn’t even have appeared on Arona’s radar – the girl was too focused for her own good. But Ezra? He did annoying for a living.

“Are you going to help or not?”

“Not,” came the short reply.

“There might be people on that cargo vessel,” she hissed.

“There are people on my fighter. Me,” he replied.

She heard that clicking noise he always made, right about the time he was about to be most annoying. He was enjoying this.

Ash flicked her switch again and heard something else above the crackle coming from the *Attila*. Something that made panic swell in her chest.

*“Mayday. Mayday. Shields are failing. Request assistance...”*

The rest of the dialogue was lost in a hiss. Ash was sure she’d heard more voices in the background. She responded immediately. “Cargo vessel *Attila*, what assistance do you require?”

She was trying not to freak out, thinking about the capacity of that vessel. Her fighter was tiny. What would she do if they requested emergency transport?

Ash spoke before they had time to answer. “I can tether you. Tow you back to the nearest space port.”

“*Negative. There’s no time.*”

She struggled to turn again and see behind her, desperately trying to figure how much space there actually was in a single-seat fighter. Could she possibly cram any people in here? Her stomach plummeted as a thought filled her mind. What if there were children on the cargo vessel? Could she squash some kids in behind her?

Her alarms were still sounding. One of the orange lights flicked to red. Too many things were happening at once.

Anger bubbled inside. She’d run a thousand practice scenarios. In every single one she’d been methodical, logical. She’d weighed up complicated situations in less than a few seconds and acted without hesitation.

But none of them had been real.

And that was the difference. This *felt* real.

She could practically hear the heartbeat of the captain of the cargo vessel through the comm. He was a living, breathing person. Practice sessions involved *theory* – not reality. None of the other vessels in the final test should be manned by actual people. The only people in space should be the cadets.

“*Systems failing...*” came the crackle. “*No...time...*”

“How many people do you have on board? Do you have transport technology? I’m a single-seat fighter. I’m not sure how many I can hold.”

She couldn’t remember any scenario where extra people



had been transported aboard a single-seat fighter. Fear was starting to grip Ash. Her heart missed a few beats inside her chest.

The comm crackled. Most of the words were lost. “...transporting now...”

The air shifted in front of her, just above her eyes, as whatever the freighter was beaming over began to materialize.

Her recognition was instant – it was far too small to be a person. A second later a brown package appeared in the air before her face.

“Wh...at?”

The dark space outside lit up as the cargo vessel exploded into a million fragments right next to her. The shockwave pounded off her own smaller craft and sent her rocking and rolling around.

She choked and spluttered, doing her best not to vomit. The fighter was showered with debris and a stuttering voice cut in through the mess.

“T-tethering now.”

Her fighter gave a shudder as an emergency tether from Ezra’s craft clamped on to her tail and yanked her backwards.

Ezra didn’t normally stutter. He sounded as shocked as she was. This was a training exercise. Or it was meant to be. What had just happened?

More debris kept hitting the nose of her fighter as it was pulled away. She winced. Every light on her panel was now red. Her fuel tank was empty – her oxygen tank almost

the same. She grabbed for the emergency supply under her seat and clapped the mask to her face. Not that it would be much use for long. Her mind finally started to go into automatic pilot mode. She flicked all power to the shields. The damage to her craft must be extreme. She didn't have the view that Ezra did, but why else would he tether her?

With no gravity to keep it anchored in place, the package bounced off the side of her head. She'd momentarily forgotten about it, in the shock of the explosion. Commander Clay's voice cut across the airwaves.

"Flight Cadet Yang. Prepare for emergency transport."

What? No.

Reality hit. Her craft was too badly damaged. Her test was well and truly over.

She reached out and made a grab for the package. The package that the captain of the *Attila* had thought more important than any life on board his vessel.

None of this was supposed to happen.

Her body twitched as the transporter took hold. The shimmering sensation, like a billion little insects crawling over her skin, started. She automatically sucked in a breath even though it was entirely unnecessary, closed her eyes and prayed.