



Alien Prince Defender (Space Knights MC #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: An outlaw alien protecting Earth. A human woman determined to save lives. A battle for the future.

Chicago Paramedic and firefighter Grace Orloff has been sucked into a war that isn't hers. Frustrated with his inability to stop the Spaceknights, King Garnon has sent a robot army to attack Earth in hopes of drawing them out of hiding and into the conflict.

While Garlin leads a team to try to infiltrate the mothership controlling the android army assaulting Earth, his cousin Tarax, along with a few other members, coordinate the resistance planetside.

Thrown together fighting an alien invasion, Grace and Tarax fall for each other hard in the midst of the crisis, and end up pinned down in a derelict building with a dozen frightened survivors, forced to defend them from the robots.

Sparks fly between the courageous and compassionate Grace and the fierce and determined Tarax, but even if they survive the barrage from the invaders, will their differences mean an end for their future?

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CHAPTER 1

TARAX

"Y ou better watch out... I'm gaining on you, big brother." The voice of my twin, Norin, drifted through the communicator speaker imbedded into my oxygen helmet.

Norin was only younger than me by five minutes, but I sure as hell never let him forget it and reminded him of it on a routine basis.

"In that case I'd better pick up my pace," I said with a devious laugh.

"You wish." Norin floored his space bike and approached me from the right.

As soon as we were riding parallel to each other, I glanced in his direction. He was grinning from ear to ear with a wild gleam in his dark teal eyes.

Everyone said that we looked exactly alike, even though we weren't identical twins—but fraternal instead. Unlike me, Norin wore his dark teal hair longer and always pulled back in a single wrist-thick braid. I preferred to keep my own teal hair on the short side. It didn't get in my face that way.

"Just take it easy on these bikes until you get used to them," Merrix, our second in command for the Space Knight's crew, explained cautiously. He was riding a few yards behind us.

I glanced over my shoulder as Merrix encroached on our area of the space lanes. We

were riding through the solar system, close to our 'home base' of Mars—the fourth planet from the sun and our 'home away from home,' so to speak—at least for now.

We'd been living in an underground base of sorts for the past several months in a place we referred to as 'the Knights Hall.'

The Knights Hall was filled with ancient Martian vegetation and wildlife. How any of it got there in the first place was still a mystery to all of us.

However, the presence of it made life inside the Hall pleasant and safe, especially when it came to climate and breathable air.

There were still several sections of this pyramid area that had yet to be explored—but we were working on the discovery daily.

Either way, the Knights Hall became a shelter for the entire crew of the Space Knights. It worked as both a protection from the harshness of the Martian storms at night, and also as a great hiding spot. Our location sensors didn't work when we were in it, underground. That meant we could mask our communication operations from any outside enemies trying to scope us out.

Merrix had a cautious look in his steely gray eyes as he rode closer to us. His short, jet black hair was hidden underneath his helmet.

" You are the one who built the space bikes," I said with a light laugh, tossing a glance at Merrix over my shoulder. "Why are you so nervous about them?"

"I'm not nervous ," Merrix countered, "but we still need to be careful and respect the machine for what it's power can do."

"Whatever you say, Grandpa," Norin joked. "I'm going to test that power."

"Just don't take it to the limit," Merrix advised.

Norin laughed and whipped around Merrix in a taunting circle.

"Laugh all you want, but these space bikes are more powerful than you know. If you aren't used to the equipment, it could make you spin out of control if you do the wrong move," Merrix advised warily.

Merrix was about six years older than us, already well into his thirties. Sometimes, he acted like the apprehensive older brother, even to his own peers around him. I could understand why he had to have such a stable, cautious type of personality though. The guy had a tremendous number of responsibilities riding on his shoulders every day.

Not only was he in charge of the maintenance and construction of most of our space riding equipment, armor, weapons, and engineering—but the guy was also in charge of going on supply runs for the team.

First off, he was the only one of us who looked the most similar to a humans, seeing as he had dark skin and dark black hair with gray eyes instead of the usual bronze skin and teal eyes and hair that was most common among us Telanians.

He also had the fastest bike of anyone—even Garlin, which meant the obligation often fell into his lap for the supply runs to Earth. Traveling on his space bike at close to the speed of light, it only took him about two Earth hours to make the trip there and back and that included picking up the supplies, which was the longest part of the trip.

He didn't do it very often, but when he did, he always chose the dark side of the planet. Nighttime made the supply fetching process substantially easier. Lately, he had been taking Shan, another of our Space Knights, and Shan's human partner Elise Kent, with him.

Elise was only twenty years old, but she was raised in a motorcycle club environment when she was growing up. She was a street kid at heart, and she could fight and steal her way out of any situation.

Elise was a valuable asset to our Knights crew. Without her, I wasn't sure we would be able to pull off those supply runs as seamlessly as we did, but she was feisty and fast. It really made all the difference.

At any rate, I felt like I had a lot to learn from Merrix and all of the Knights in general. I paid attention — and I took advantage of any opportunity I got to make a difference for our overall wellbeing.

The space bikes Merrix had built for everyone were remarkable in a lot of different ways, had all sorts of gadgets and weapons, and flew as fast as I'd ever ridden on anything through space.

I was the Communications Officer for the Space Knights. I took my role in this group seriously, and I wanted to leave a lasting impact.

"Don't worry about me. I can handle whatever this bike wants to offer," I reassured Merrix, then cranked the heat on the throttle to speed up past him.

Merrix had created new hovercycles as well, bikes that had the capabilities of flying within the Martian atmosphere.

Those bikes were a blast to ride on as well, but they couldn't handle the space lanes in the solar system, nor did they go as fast. We could only take them about twenty feet in the air, but it was still fun to race each other. Besides, on the hovercycles, we could cover a lot more ground on our exploring adventures than we could on foot.

Merrix had a real knack for constructing the riding equipment for the crew, and he

made sure not to leave out the humans who had stuck around with us, too. He was working diligently to make sure everyone had a bike of their own.

It wasn't an easy accomplishment, either. He had to use tools and spare parts that had been salvaged from some of the destroyed robots in the last battle, along with various pieces from abandoned or destroyed saucers. Either way, we were in better shape because of him and his abilities.

I respected the guy — yes — but that didn't mean I wouldn't test him out here in the open. If I wanted to go fast, not even he was capable of convincing me to slow down.

"Just stay away from Earth's gravity," Merrix said. "It can get a little dicey when you're closing in on it at that speed."

"I know what I'm doing," I retorted with a wild grin.

Merrix laughed. "Famous last words."

The red alert sensors on my bike began to blink and flash, and a second later — an alarm warning chimed through my oxygen helmet.

I glanced over at my twin brother Norin. His sensors were going off too but judging by the befuddled expression on his face he was equally as perplexed about what was going on as me.

I tossed an apprehensive glance over my shoulder to Merrix. I hated for him to give me some bullshit like 'I told you so.' When I looked at Merrix, I quickly discovered that his features were etched in worry — which was no consolation for me.

"We aren't anywhere remotely close to Earth's orbit yet," I advised.

"That's not what this is," Merrix said cautiously.

"What is going on?" Norin shouted through the alarm chimes that were growing louder by the second in escalating warning. He looked like he was on the verge of a panic attack.

Before any of us could figure out what was going on, a robotic voice crackled through our helmet comm set.

"It sounds like one of the robo Knights," Merrix advised. "The androids that we programmed back at Knights Hall."

We listened intently, but my heart had already jumped into my throat. I had an unsettled feeling about the whole thing. My eardrums felt assaulted by the hammering wails of the sirens that pounded through my oxygen helmet.

"This is a proximity warning," one of the robo Knights declared with a superficial, unemotional tone.

"Proximity warning?" I shouted. "Again — we aren't close enough to Earth?—"

"Just listen to what they are going to say next," Merrix interjected. "It's not about that."

There was no time for a bruised ego or to argue with Merrix because the robo Knight began talking again only a moment later.

"A Telanian warship has entered Earth's solar system," the robo Knight advised.

The voice was haunting and hollow, echoing through my space helmet. A bone-chilling sensation rippled through my body.

"Warning, Telanian warship has entered Earth's solar system," the robo Knight declared again. "This is not a test. This is not a drill. Proximity warning impending."

"Shit," Norin exclaimed, glancing between me and Merrix as if he expected us to solve the problem within the next thirty seconds.

Unfortunately, it wasn't going to be that easy. If we had an enemy threat on our horizon, we sure as hell weren't prepared out here as just the three of us to take down a warship. Those things were massive.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, turning toward Merrix. He was the second in command, after all, and maybe he did have a solution to offer.

Merrix's jaw tightened, and he narrowed his eyes as he stared off into the vastness of the open solar system. "We're going to try and stop the warship."

"Right now ?" I asked.

"Yes." Merrix didn't hesitate.

"Just... the three of us?" Norin cried, looking appalled by the idea.

He was normally the one who was never rattled in a crisis situation no matter what — so, naturally, his unnerved reaction made me feel even more uneasy than I already did. I always looked to him when I needed to calm down, but not now.

Merrix pressed a yellow button on his space bike. An intercom noise clicked through my headset and then I heard Merrix voice as he called out to the Knight Hall.

"This is Merrix, accompanied by Tarax and Norin. We need immediate, emergency assistance in the space lanes near Earth's orbit. A breach of an enemy warship is on

the horizon, threatening entrance into Earth's atmosphere."

"This is Garlin coming through," a male voice said.

Garlin was the leader and founding member of the Space Knights. Garlin's father, Garnon, was the king of our homeland the planet Telanis. King Garnon's dynasty was stained with corruption and poisoned with war, poverty, and complete suffering for all those currently living on Telanis.

Garlin wanted nothing to do with his father's legacy of despair and had left the reign of terror and any chance he had of being next in line for the throne years ago to guide the Knights instead.

"Can you send immediate assistance?" Merrix asked.

"I can send a fleet of robo Knights to surround the ship," Garlin explained. "It might not be able to stop them completely but at least it will slow them down until we can figure out what to do."

I glanced between Merrix and Norin who both wore cautious expressions and behaved as if they didn't know what they should do next while we waited on assistance from the robo Knights.

"Yes, send them. I have no idea why this warship is headed toward Earth—" Merrix began.

"But it can't be for a good reason," I said, feeling that twisting knot of dread, along with fear of the unknown that tightened like a fist in my stomach.

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CHAPTER 2

GRACE

I glanced at my reflection in the mirror. My wavy black hair cascaded down my back and shoulders. My olive complexion looked slightly wan under the brightness of the fluorescent lights in the fire station bathroom. My brown eyes looked large and lost. I hated feeling so hopeless. Despair tried to crawl into my brain and fester, but I refused to let it set up a permanent residence in my psyche.

I slowly brought my hands to my face and lightly pressed on my cheekbones to perk my features up a bit and bring some color back to my face.

"You can do this, Grace. You can handle him. You've had to deal with him for years — so why today of all days do you decide that you are going to reach your breaking point? You can't do that. Not today, Grace." I shot myself a look of perseverance, refusing to cave to an emotional breakdown.

I inhaled slowly and deeply, then I measuredly released the breath. I stared at my face in the reflection.

"He's not going to stop," I whispered. "No matter what you try to get him to ease up."

My expression mellowed, and my pupils dilated.

"I'm just not in the mood to deal with him today," I told myself.

So just ignore him, my brain told me.

I scoffed aloud. Easier said than done.

Normally whenever I gave myself pep talks, they worked about ninety percent of the time, but for whatever reason, I wasn't mentally buying it tonight.

"Maybe I'll get lucky, and the dispatch alarm will ring, and we'll have to go out to a job," I whispered aloud.

Not that I wanted to wish an emergency on anyone. I frowned, then groaned and turned around. I pushed the bathroom door open and stepped out into the snake pit. If I didn't force myself to do it, I'd dawdle in that bathroom forever trying to stall for time to avoid my problems.

Sure enough, the moment I stepped out of the bathroom, David was standing there in the hallway waiting on me.

He had his hands planted sternly on his hips. David was short — for a man. He claimed to be six feet tall, but I knew he wasn't. He was only five-ten. Not that height was everything, but when you had nothing else going for you as far as personality goes in David's case, there wasn't much else to back him up.

As soon as we made eye contact, David, the effervescent ego chaser, flexed his muscles and tightened his jawline quite acutely.

He had a nice, toned body, don't get me wrong.

He was handsome too, but his abrasive temperament made him impossible to get along with and dulled his attractiveness significantly.

He brushed a hand through his short black hair and then scratched the top of his head. He narrowed his dark eyes at me disapprovingly.

"You sure were in there a long time."

I tried to squeeze past him. "That's inappropriate, David."

David cuffed his hand around my arm and gently pulled me back toward him.

I glared at him and stiffened. " Stop, " I warned.

"I'm not doing anything," David protested and tried to sell me an innocent glance.

My eyes drifted slowly from his fingers that were coiled around my arm up to meet his steely gaze. I lifted my eyebrows with suspicion.

"Then what is your hand doing on my arm ?"

David immediately dropped my arm as if it was now spontaneously burning him to the touch.

He licked his lips and gave me an anxious look. "I just want to talk to you."

"That's funny." I crossed my arms over my chest and gave him a sullen, mocking glance up and down. "To you talking must mean you give yourself free reign to gripe at me over every little thing and put your hands on me without permission." I rubbed my arm in response to the current example.

"I haven't been griping at you," David said defensively, having the audacity to look offended by my accusation.

I leaned in close and gave him a resentful smirk. "Just because we used to date doesn't mean you can walk all over me."

David paused, frowning while he contemplated my statement. "I'm the second in command here at the fire station. I have authority?—"

"Don't go there with me," I said, raising my voice so high that I had to glance over my shoulder to make sure no one was listening.

"Don't push my buttons today, David," I hissed, staring him coldly in the face. "We have been broken up for a year. When are you going to move on and get a life of your own?—"

"Hey guys, come here and check this crazy shit out."

My protest was cut short by Mike Brass, the leader of our ladder crew of Station Twenty-Nine in the lower side of the Chicago precinct.

I glanced over my shoulder. Mike was waving us into the next room. He didn't seem to notice that David and I were arguing, which was a relief.

I brushed past David and into the 'hang out' as we called it, the upstairs room in the fire station that had a couple of couches — couches that had seen better days with sagging cushions and several chunks missing from the arms, but they were nevertheless still cozy after a long night out in the field. There were also a few chairs too, and a large flat screen tv that was attached to the wall.

The tv was on, and Mike was standing only a couple inches away — directly in front of it. His attention purely fixated on the news. His eyes were huge with disbelief at what he was seeing.

"What's going on?" I asked curiously, staring between Mike and the tv.

Mike had short, wavy black hair and large black eyes to match. He was wearing a long sleeved shirt, concealing his dark mocha skin tone. His mouth hung open with shock.

I stood next to him, my eyes panning to the screen to check out what had him so visibly disturbed.

A woman with fiery short, thick, red hair was holding a black microphone. Her green eyes pierced through the screen as she stared into her photographer's camera lens. Unblinking, she began to describe what sounded like a perplexing, albeit frightening scene outside in the streets of downtown Chicago.

"Authorities are advising everyone to stay in their homes or indoors at this hour until the source of these lights moving in the sky can be identified," the reporter explained with a professional, journalistic tone.

"What the hell?" David slowly approached. His eyebrows knitted with concern.

I laughed and pointed to the screen, at a large cluster of witnesses standing in a herd in the background of the camera.

"It doesn't look like people are taking the advice to stay indoors," I mentioned.

The reporter placed her hand to the earpiece plug in her ear and nodded swiftly.

"Folks, we have just gotten word that the source of the mystery in the sky might be meteorite showers that have hit five major world cities — Chicago included. The meteorites are being reported as large enough to inflict damage to life and property. Please remain indoors if you can, and don't venture out tonight unless vitally

necessary," the reporter urged with large, pale green eyes.

My heart began to drum rapidly. I glanced at Mike — whose eyes were still rooted to the screen.

"Mike?"

"Huh?" Mike looked slightly startled as he turned his head to look at me.

"Why haven't we heard anything about this from dispatch?"

"I'm going to check it out," David said and jogged over to the balcony.

He opened the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the terrace, craning his neck as he curiously peered at the night sky overhead.

I took an apprehensive step outside too, followed by Mike and a few other firemen in our unit who were now popping up out of their beds to see what all the commotion was about.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Normally, this was something I was accustomed to hearing in this job — but not tonight. Something was eerie about the sound of these sirens tonight, and it made my stomach feel unsettled.

The police scanner crackled through the intercom speakers that were interspersed throughout the station.

"Structure fire on Third and Beckett Street. All units respond." The voice was that of a woman who seemed to be just as shaky and worried as I felt inside.

A moment later, another voice — this time male — broke out across the intercom.

"Meteor shower damage is being reported to residential area in the Providence District."

"Shit," I whispered, more to myself than anyone else. I glanced at Mike. His features were marked with concern. "This sounds bad?—"

Mike opened his mouth to give orders but before he got a single word out, a huge explosion boomed outside our station walls. We all raced back to the balcony and glanced out at the horrific scene unfolding in front of us.

An enormous fireball was incinerating the street about a mile away. Huge plumes of smoke billowed into the night air. Paper and other debris was blown to bits and dancing through the air like feathers floating back down to the ground.

I didn't even have time to react before another meteorite came barreling toward the ground at a mind bending speed.

A few seconds later, screams and shouts ensued from bystanders in the nearby vicinity. I glanced down in horror to see a crater the size of a small canyon in the middle of what used to be a heavy traffic intersection only a few blocks away.

"What the fuck is going on?" David shouted, his voice echoing hauntingly through the night air.

"Sound the alarm. We're rolling out to respond to those in trouble," Mike commanded.

He spun around and started shuffling toward the garage where our engines were waiting to be cranked. Mike was a little wobbly on his feet. He looked shell shocked and dizzy.

It was unnerving to see him so out of it. Mike was always the calm, level-headed one as our First Commander. We needed that kind of leadership because sometimes this ladder in particular could be an unruly bunch.

Mike was pushing forty. He had a wife and three kids and was an upstanding citizen — an amazing guy all around.

He was known as a neighborhood hero to the locals because he had spent a lifetime of servitude as a fireman — putting out fires and rescuing those in trouble for the past twenty-five years. Mike always put everyone else's needs in front of his own. There was no one on the planet less selfish than Mike Brass.

It was such a terrible misfortune that his number two, right hand man just happened to be David Ogata, my bitter ex-boyfriend and fellow fireman at this station.

Speaking of which, David came up behind me as we were leaping into our gear downstairs in the garage.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked with a patronizing smile.

I tried to ignore his subtle jabs. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"This is an emergency unknown — foreign. I just want to make sure you can handle it," David said.

I cut him an icy glare. "Let it go. I'm trained for emergencies of any kind. I know what I'm doing. Just because you still resent me for our breakup a year ago, doesn't reserve you the right to chastise me any chance you get."

Sure, I was slightly intimidated about what I might find out there in the streets tonight, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let David or all people know that. If you

gave David an inch — he'd definitely take a mile.

The garage doors opened. The lights on the engines were turned on. The roar of the sirens began to flood the garage space, wailing and blaring through my ears. Adrenaline rushed through my veins and pumped through my heart.

We backed two trucks out into the Chicago streets with the lights flashing and the siren screaming through an already devastated and panicked environment. I took a deep breath and sat in the back, staring out the window — ready to investigate this strange phenomenon — and ready to get up close and personal with it.

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CHAPTER 3

TARAX

I felt completely helpless as I watched the enemy warship orbiting Earth like a satellite of doom, encroaching on territory that didn't belong to them — also looming intimidatingly in the skies. It was clear that the robots riding on this spacecraft were ready to infect innocent lives with a mixture of torture and fright.

One by one, the warship launched what looked like an entire android army that skyrocketed in a downward spiral toward Earth's atmosphere. It was horrifying to watch these androids on an obscene mission, just knowing already the chaos and destruction they were capable of achieving. They continued barreling down to Earth en-masse.

There was so much foreboding involved. I wasn't even down on the surface of Earth, but my heart thundered anxiously about the impending attack.

"Their goal is to strike, capture or kill anyone unfortunate enough to cross their paths," Garlin warned us, speaking to us from the receiver of our communicator helmets. "They have an entire fleet of androids that are being catapulted from the bottom of the warship. Those androids are crashing toward Earth as we speak — undoubtedly to wreak all kinds of chaotic havoc."

Garlin continued to hand down a much needed explanation of what was happening, and he gave some instructions as well.

"I'm sending a crew to help you," Garlin said. "A mixture of Knights, humans, and robo Knights are already on their way to your location in the solar system space lanes. I want to make sure you have the best team possible — a real elite group that is going to give you the backup you desperately need right now."

"Thank you," Merrix said with some relief. "Just please make sure they hurry." He sounded nervous and rattled.

"They have been briefed on the situation and I assure you that they are coming prepared," Garlin promised. "So far it's five cities across the Earth that have been hit," he added.

Merrix blew out an anxious breath. "Five cities already? That's quite a lot."

I exchanged a wary glance with my brother while we both cautiously waited for further instruction. We were hovering near Earth's orbit — careful not to get too close until our back up arrived.

"Five major cities," Garlin explained. "So far. I fear other cities will fall victim soon enough."

"Did he get word of that intelligence through the transmission signals?" I asked Merrix.

He nodded and blinked at me solemnly. "Must have."

"We're watching it all unfold right now," I added, speaking directly to Garlin. "It's horrifying, especially when we can't do anything right now but watch from a cautious distance."

"I am sending two separate teams in your direction," Garlin advised. "But the only

one the three of you need to worry about is the crew coming to assist you. "

"What will our crew need to do first?" Norin asked.

"I'm assigning your team to Earth. You are going to lead up the Chicago crew. "I'll send the navigation coordinates to your space bikes in the next few minutes."

"Got it," I said and tossed a confirming nod to Merrix and Norin.

Norin looked a little pale as if he wasn't sure he was going to have the guts to join this force — but we had no other choice. We were going to be pushed into this situation whether we wanted to or not. Me, on the other hand — well I was almost excited about the challenge.

"I can't wait to kick some android ass," I said.

Merrix laughed and gave me an apprehensive glance. "Be careful what you wish for."

"I'll send other groups made up mostly of robo Knights to the other cities. Those humans are going to need all the help they can get."

I nodded, sighing hard. "Those poor, innocent people aren't even going to know what hit them."

" Literally, " Norin added.

"I'm also going to send a team to attack the warship," Garlin advised.

"Who is coordinating the attacks on Earth?" Norin asked.

Garlin paused before answering. "At this time, we believe that an artificial

intelligence, or an A.I. is inside the warship and is ultimately the one responsible for this spring of attacks. If we can get a unit of Knights, robo Knights, and human's inside to deactivate it, we might be able to stop even more androids from leaping out of the fleet and barreling toward Earth."

"They are programmed to destroy," Merrix said with a tone of regret.

"Those robots are programmed to take out as many lives as they can," I agreed grimly.

"Or capture them to become slaves," Norin said.

At that moment, the landmarks, and the satellite coordinates for where we were advised to land in Chicago came through on the navigation feed screen part of our space bikes.

Merrix glanced between me and Norin. "Have you received the coordinates?"

"I'm looking at them right now," I confirmed.

"Me too," Norin said. "It's a bigger city than I expected."

I briefly glanced at my twin. He seemed slightly daunted.

"Don't let the buildings intimidate you," Merrix said.

I cranked the throttle on my space bike. "If anything, the buildings will just get in the way."

"Or make it harder for the robots to find an escape route when we start chasing them down," Merrix said.

"There are going to be a lot of people to try and save," Norin said with a bleak expression.

"We are just going to have to do the best we can, brother," I told him stoically.

He glanced at me through his oxygen helmet and nodded, but he still had a dreary look on his face as if he wanted to believe me but couldn't.

"We have to be in this together," Merrix said, his eyes darting cautiously between us. He must have noticed some hesitation on both of our parts.

"I'm with you all the way," I said as spiritedly as I could.

Norin licked his lips nervously, but judging by his expression of resolve, he was on board. "I'm with you as well."

"Do you have the map I sent through the wire?" Garlin asked, his voice crackling, and cutting in and out.

"All three of us got it," Merrix verified.

"Good luck," Garlin said. "I'm counting on you all. I'll be out there in the thick of it as well."

Merrix smiled. "I never doubted for a second that you wouldn't be."

"It looks like the robo Knights assigned to you are only about thirty more seconds away. They'll be reaching you momentarily," Garlin declared.

"We need all the help we can get if we are to save the humans," I said, glancing between Merrix and Norin. I drew in a sharp breath. I needed a moment to prepare

myself, but as long as the robo Knights were on the way, we were in better shape than we would have been trying to fight out the war alone.

Ten minutes later, we had our crew and our robo Knights — ready to give us the vital assistance we needed or else we weren't going to get very far with this battle mission. We were now hurtling toward Earth on our space bikes, defying the laws of gravity one sky bounding inch at a time.

We were traveling fast and breaking the sound barrier, but we weren't quite flying at the speed of light.

We had to be careful about reaching that kind of monumental speed, especially when entering a planet's unforgiving and protective atmosphere.

These bikes had more yield than I expected. Merrix had done a fantastic job of constructing them, but it was important not to forget their incredible power. If I wasn't careful, I would spin out and I might not be able to get my bearings balanced back out.

The last thing we wanted to do was burn up into dust on the journey downward. We usually only traveled at the speed of light in the space lanes — traveling for longer distances in between the planets. Keeping this trip slower helped us see and navigate our surroundings much easier.

Clouds whipped past me. The ground began to spin and whirl in front of me. City lights blurred in front of my vision. The air felt thin at first, and then as it became denser and the lights grew brighter, I knew we were close to hitting solid ground. My body involuntarily stiffened, preparing for impact.

"We need to slow down," Merrix enforced. "Our altitude is declining rapidly."

Norin and I took Merrix's guidance to heart. We weren't playing around with Earth's gravity today — or any day. If we struck that concrete too fast, we'd be knocked unconscious at the very least — if not killed immediately on impact.

We lowered the throttle of our bikes and slowly hovered above the ground several feet, assessing the already exponential damage.

Down on Earth's solid ground, we landed. A horrific scene unfolded in front of us. Wild frantic disarray was going on everywhere . People were in the streets, clustered together with their arms roped defensively over their chests and their eyes wide with fear of the unknown and paramount shock.

Cars had been overturned, their engines steaming, their steel doors bent inwards. People were running, scattering in different direction like rats leaving a flood.

Little fires were spread out everywhere. The asphalt of the streets was morphed and cracking from the impact of the androids' travel vessels crashing into it. The humans raced past me — undoubtedly searching for somewhere safe to run and hide. Each one that I saw had perplexed expressions on their faces and panic in their eyes.

Sirens blared close by, and in the distance, wailed hauntingly with dread. No one was prepared for an attack of this magnitude. The worst case scenario was actually happening, and the streets of Earth felt eerie and invaded.

I exchanged a worried glance with Norin. "It's worse than we thought," he said, his eyes panning the hectic streets with unease.

"We have plenty of backup now with our robo Knights," I reminded him. "Garlin sent us here to do a job, and that's exactly what we're going to do. We aren't leaving until it's finished."

I lifted a blaster from the weapons holster on my space suit and cocked it, preparing it — along with myself — for war, or any enemy android who dared to fuck around with me.

Merrix shuffled toward us, having to dodge humans as they continued to flee in every direction.

"The first thing we need to do is intercept and attack the robots that have already landed," Merrix advised.

I fondly patted my gun and grinned aggressively. "Let me at the fuckers, then. I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Honestly, I couldn't wait. I hated these enemy androids with every shred of my being. They were going down no matter what.

Merrix and I snuck up on a few of the androids who were closest to us. They had human arms and legs but were metallic gray in color. They had black slits for eyes and pursed, pencil thin lips. I had to hand it to these morose androids. They could fight, but we were better because we were made of flesh and bone — not wires and casing.

"They sure are fucking fast," Merrix said, struggling with one.

I came up behind the android who was trying to strangle Merrix. It had its long, slender fingers coiled around Merrix's neck and wouldn't let go.

I fired a bullet straight into the little asshole's brain. Wires and a milky substance, undoubtedly robot juice and grease, sprayed out from the now gaping hole in the android's head. The robot collapsed into a heap on the sidewalk. I kicked it for good measure, but it was as dead as could be.

"That's what I thought," I roared at it, ready to take down another one. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, making me feel bionic myself, untouchable.

I spun around in a circle, ready to fend off any others that lurked nearby, and when I glanced to my right, I noticed a firefighter crew. They were diligently trying to pick up and assist the injured, bringing them around the backside of their fire trucks.

The firefighters were fervently trying to remain calm as the wounded screamed and cried, bloody and dirty in their arms. They were moving with fortitude, quickly through the streets, scrambling to help and rescue as many as they could from the rubble.

I could tell they were overwhelmed, out of their element — but they were doing their best under these impossible circumstances. The heavy gear they had to wear couldn't have made it any easier to lift and drag those who couldn't walk themselves.

I raced up behind Norin and lightly pushed on his shoulder. "Let's go help them." I pointed to the firefighter crew who looked like they were in desperate need of support.

Norin and I rounded up a few of our robo Knights, who were easy to spot and separate from the enemy because ours were built to look just like us with dark, bronze skin.

Upon orders, our robo Knights rushed to the aid of the firefighters, forming a protective barrier around them and their fire trucks as the fire fighter crew worked tirelessly to bring the injured assistance. They were scrambling back and forth like terrified people without a direction.

"Instruct our other team of robots in case we get separated," I shouted to my brother.

He looked overwhelmed too but nodded and set straight to work in doing what I asked. In the disturbance happening all around us, I couldn't get eyes on where Merrix was at the moment, but hopefully he'd surface soon and rise among the ashes of destroyed property all around us.

I'd gotten distracted by trying to assist the firefighter crew because they looked so frazzled and helpless. Hopefully, even though we came to Earth prepared — we ultimately wouldn't get separated.

CHAPTER 4

GRACE

" I don't think the things plunging to Earth were meteorites after all," I shouted to Mike and the others as we worked together swiftly, albeit slightly hectically, to bring some order to the chaos unraveling all around us.

A nervous film of sweat was beaded across Mike's forehead and nose. His eyes were wide with shock as if he hadn't really fully processed what was going on. To be fair, none of us had. This bone chilling terror was something that up until this point — I'd only seen similar circumstances in the movies — on a blockbuster action film or something — but never in real life.

"Mike?" I glanced downward.

Mike was crouched on the ground, sitting in a patch of grass just off the sidewalk. He was rocking himself back and forth consolingly. His arms were draped over his head, and he had tucked himself into a tight little ball. He looked tormented in every sense of the word.

I slowly went down to my knees and placed my hand on Mike's back, giving him an encouraging pat. "Mike? We have to go and help others. There are so many more injured out there who need us?—"

"I can't do this." Mike lifted his head and met my gaze. His chin began to quiver with distress. He shook his head remorsefully.

He stared at me with immense fear shimmering in his eyes. Seeing Mike — our leader — like this made me want to give up and shatter into a million pieces. I couldn't give up, because I was a public servant — an emergency responder and people needed me... needed us as a team to help them in times of trouble.

I cupped my hands over Mike's shoulders and firmly squeezed them, giving Mike a resilient nod.

" Yes, you can do this," I said to Mike, hoping he would tap into some of my resolve. "Don't let yourself fall into the trap of a defeatist attitude. We are trained for emergencies?—"

Mike gave me a disparaging glance. "Not of this magnitude."

I was about to press on with my pep talk when David jogged up to us. He was panting hard and sweating profusely.

He had stripped away most of his heavy fire gear and was now just wearing the t-shirt with our ladder unit logo on it. The collar was completely soaked through with sweat. He had dirt caked around his temples and left cheek, and his left elbow was bleeding.

"What the fuck are these things?" David asked, his eyes enormous, his pupils dilated, dread etched onto his masculine features.

Mike stood up. He looked like he was willing to pull himself together, but his hands were still shaking immensely.

"I don't know... but I'm worried about my family..." he trailed off as his voice cracked and emotional turmoil seemed to take over.

I took his hands and gently squeezed them, staring into his eyes with resiliency. "I'm

sure they are safe. I'm sure they are hiding out, waiting for you to return to them — but for now — we have to figure out a way to fight back against these monsters."

"They're... fucking aliens... " David said, glancing with panic over his right shoulder before turning his attention back to us. " Aliens. "

I shook my head in disbelief. "I know. I don't know what's happening in the world right now."

"This shit isn't real." David pushed his hands into his temples and groaned, shaking his head violently. Then he began pounding his flattened palm into his forehead. "Wake up, David. It's all just a bad dream. Wake up, you fucking idiot."

"Unfortunately, it's not a dream," I told him regretfully. "You are wide awake. We are here with you, and we are all a part of this."

I didn't want to have to comfort David, but as much as I hated to admit it, we needed him. David had a fighting spirit like no other — and if anyone had a viable shot at taking these wicked machine beasts down — it was him.

"How did they even get here?" I exclaimed as we stood in a semi-circle, watching others from our unit scrambling to help the injured.

"The aliens?" David looked at me.

"Yes," I shrieked. I was starting to feel lightheaded. "I mean I know they came from the sky but how ?—"

"They curled themselves up into balls," Mike said, stepping forward, and suddenly looking defiant and immortal.

He clenched his hands into tight fists. At least he was physically and mentally coming back to us. Meanwhile, I felt somewhat tragic myself. My emotions came rolling in like cresting waves yawning and sometimes crashing to the shore. There was nothing I could do to stop the way they ebbed and flowed.

"I saw a few of them," Mike continued breathlessly, staring fiercely straight ahead. He licked his lips and stared out into space as if he were in a trance or being controlled by a higher power.

"What are you talking about?" David frowned, shaking his head impatiently as he gazed at Mike expectantly.

Mike brushed trembling fingers through his hair. "When they landed, they were curled up into a ball. I saw it when they unfolded themselves. They had these weird blast shields covering themselves all around, like in a circle," Mike explained. "That's how they survived the impact."

"That explains why we thought they were just giant rocks pelting at the ground," I said.

"Well, whatever they are and however they got here, they are going to fucking kill us," David said.

A little girl carrying a tattered, pastel pink blanket was standing near David when he said that. She began to wail with fright. Her cheeks were dirty and when she cried, her tears stained her face with translucent streaks that ran down the grime caked to her cheeks.

"David," I hissed through clenched teeth, and I cut him a reprimanding look to boot. "Don't talk like that right now."

I knelt in front of the little girl. She had light brown hair that was slightly disheveled. She was wearing an ivory white pajama dress and she was barefoot. Her little fingernails were painted blue. She looked like she had just fled from the safety of her bed. She was also alone.

"What?" David exclaimed, shrugging at me defensively. "It's true anyway."

"You're not helping," I said, scowling at him before focusing back on the little girl. I stroked her hair and tried to sooth her. "Where is your mommy?"

"I don't know," the little girl squeaked.

Fresh tears pooled in her eyes and glistened as they slowly rolled down her cheeks.

"Caroline?" A frantic woman's voice cut sharply through the midnight air. "Caroline, honey? Where are you?"

The little girl jumped from my embrace and started running for her life toward the shouting woman. As soon as she got to her, the woman scooped up the little girl in her arms and began spinning around with her, hugging her close and sobbing.

"Well, I guess she found her mom," David said and rolled her eyes, droning sarcastically. "What a happy ending."

I stood up and glowered at him. "You can be such an impossible asshole sometimes, you know."

"Guys, please stop bickering and come help me," Mike cried urgently.

As embarrassing as it was, unfortunately Mike was used to hearing me and David arguing. Most of the time, he took it all in stride and he was patient with it — but

now wasn't the appropriate time for all that drama shit.

I turned my head and noticed that Mike was trying to defend himself against two of these weird, slender, metallic colored aliens. They had black slits for eyes. Just looking at them sent a shiver of cold jogging up and down my spine.

I raced to Mike's side. Unfortunately, we didn't have many weapons at our disposal and had to kind of make do with what we did have. You could technically turn anything into a weapon if you were desperate enough.

A few other members of our ladder unit began helping the neighboring paramedics put the critically injured people into ambulances and whisk them off to the hospitals that would undoubtedly be overcrowded by now.

David rushed up behind us. He was wielding a full fire hose in his hands and a fiery expression. He roared. The veins in his neck bulged. He looked crazy as he twisted on the pump to the fire hose nozzle.

Water began to spray out with a thousand pounds of violent force against the gruesome aliens that were clustered all around Mike.

David's quick thinking had done the trick — at least for now. The aliens were pushed backward, repelled by the enormous force of the water. They went flying, covering their heads, and flailing their arms and legs like cockroaches through the air.

David was screaming animatedly with an enormous grin curled at the edges of his lips. He looked almost deranged as he continued to drench the aliens. Mike stumbled backward, panting hard and soaked to the bone. His gear hung loosely from his arms and legs and dripped from his hair and clothing. He was completely water-logged, but he was alive.

"Wow," I said in awe. "That was incredible, David."

"I thought I was impossible ," David said with a smirk.

I wished I could slap it off his face, but he did in fact just save our commander.

"Don't be snarky," I said. "Just shut up and take the compliment because its rare."

"I can't be the hero?" David chuckled.

" All of us need to be the hero right now," Mike said. "There are more of them coming. We can't fight them off fast enough as they ambush us from all fucking angles."

I had a fire axe in my hand. I was clutching it with all my might. I wouldn't hesitate to sear it into one of these alien brains if it dared to get too close to me.

A few seconds later, another alien-looking man leaped into the picture. I was immediately astounded by him. He was... huge. He had to be easily seven feet tall, maybe more. He was sculpted with defined muscles from head to toe. He wore warrior battle armor, black in color.

His skin was as dark as the night sky. His dark teal eyes met with mine and made my heart pound. There was a certain warmth and protection about him that I couldn't explain.

I wasn't afraid of him. I didn't understand how I knew it — but I just knew deep inside my soul that he wasn't here to hurt me like the other aliens. He didn't look like them either. He moved around like a human — a man — not an alien, but he didn't look human, so it further deepened my confusion about him.

He had short, dark teal hair and when he stepped into the illumination of a glowing streetlamp, I realized that his skin wasn't dark — but bronze instead. He was lean, but still muscular enough to keep me fascinated and fixated on him. His armor made him appear bulkier than I thought he probably was underneath.

He was... beautiful. I couldn't pull my eyes away from him. He moved around swiftly, attacking the other aliens who were attacking us. He made it look easy.

Once the wave of assaults near to us died down, the alien-man approached us. He was breathing hard. His dark teal eyes wandered across our unit.

"You all are firefighters, yes?" he asked.

He spoke perfect English. I was surprised. I didn't know how he did it, or where he came from. He had a heavy accent, but I couldn't place it. Obviously, he was well-educated if he could talk to us in our own language. He clearly wasn't from Chicago — or this planet for that matter.

Mike took a step forward. His shoulders were lined up protectively. He glared at the alien-man with rising defiance. "It doesn't matter who we are. Who the hell are you ?"

"I am Tarax of Telanis," the alien-man said with a serenity about him, pointing to his chest.

"Well, Tarax of Telanis, " Mike said scornfully, "we have a lot of work to do here so?—"

"Mike," I whispered under my breath. I was fascinated by Tarax. I wanted to hear more.

Mike gave me a befuddled glance. "What?"

"Let him talk," I said, thankful that it was dark out and the shadows hid my blushing cheeks.

"We are here on a mission to aid in the rescue of humans who have been injured in these brutal attacks," Tarax explained.

"Aren't you an alien too?" Mike asked cynically.

Tarax shook his head and briefly closed his eyes. "I think you misunderstand," he began again more diplomatically than Mike had before. "I... we are not the enemy."

"Who is...we?" I asked, glancing around the street with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"Me and my Space Knights crew," Tarax said.

"Space Knights?" David quizzed with a baffled expression.

"Yes, Space Knights." Tarax nodded.

He seemed so innocent in his explanation that it made me find him even more adorable somehow. I couldn't explain why I was so attracted to this alien. It probably had something to do with the fact that he was a smoking hot hunk — but he also had kind eyes.

I took a curious step closer to him.

David wasn't having it. He took my arm and tried to yank me back toward him instead. "What the fuck are you doing, Grace? Don't go near him."

"He's not going to hurt me," I whispered back and shrugged David's hand off my arm.

"We have a base station on Mars," Tarax said, glancing down at me and giving me his full, undivided attention through those piercing teal eyes of his.

I was completely captivated. "You're on Mars? Really?" I stared up at him, unblinking.

"Yes, we have a base on Mars." Tarax nodded again. "We were flying near Earth's orbit when we saw the warship descending toward Earth's atmosphere. That's when we swooped into action, formed teams of our robo Knights to join us and came down here. My team and I were assigned to Chicago — and now here we are."

"Yeah, that's a great fairy tale and all but unfortunately this is real life," David shouted from behind us. "We're under attack by terrorists, clearly."

"Alien terrorists," Mike added as if he couldn't believe the words were coming out of his own mouth.

I didn't take my eyes off Tarax. I found myself basking in his presence. "You don't need to listen to him," I said. "They're just jealous because they don't have all the special equipment and skills to fight off these aliens like you do."

I said it low enough so that they couldn't hear me. I had no idea why I was behaving like this and so enamored with this bronze, alien-man.

"We just want to help," Tarax informed again.

I nodded, smiling up at him. "It's okay," I whispered softly. "They might have trouble believing you, but I do."

Why did I say this to him? I had no idea. I couldn't make any sense of this, or why I would take this stranger — this alien-man's side over the people I'd worked with for

years. I'd be cautious and keep my wits about me — but something inside my brain told me to at least give him a chance to prove himself.

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CHAPTER 5

TARAX

"We need to act fast while we still can," Merrix said, coming up beside me with one of our robo Knights in tow.

Merrix was out of breath. He had a few ripped tears in the arms of his space shield suit, but he was otherwise okay, perhaps a little shaken. Norin was standing beside me to the left, and he appeared relatively unscathed as well.

"Who the hell are you? There are even more of you?" the same man who had just tried to squabble with me earlier asked condescendingly. He tossed a distrusting glance between me, Merrix, Norin, and our robo Knights scattered around everywhere, diligently trying to mow down the enemy attackers.

Merrix turned to face him. He looked unphased by the man's berating expression. "I am Merrix, I am second in command for the Space Knights."

"I told him about our crew a few moments ago," I said, catching Merrix up to speed on the situation since he'd been off fighting.

"And I'm Norin," Norin said, taking a step forward. "Twin brother to Tarax."

He straightened his posture and tightened his jaw as if he were daring any of these humans to protest anything against him.

The brawny man with the muscular physique shook his head in disbelief. He stared at us through big, black eyes and scratched the top of his short, wavy black hair. as if he was trying to wake up from a nightmare.

"This is insane . This can't be happening," the man exclaimed in a distraught voice.

"That's what I said too, but Grace here reassured me that this is real life." Another man stepped up beside the dark-skinned man, scowling.

He had pale skin in contrast, but also had short black hair — albeit straight instead. He also had black eyes that were narrowed on Merrix, Norin, and I with increasing distrust.

He crossed his arms defiantly over his chest and cut a snide glance to the woman who had been kind to me. She was the only one who right now seemed willing to give us a chance. The man had called her 'Grace.'

The woman huffed beside me and rolled her eyes, but she didn't argue with either of the men beside her. She seemed exasperated, maybe even a little frustrated — especially with the light skinned man. I noticed right away that there was some unspoken tension between them. I didn't know what that was about. Although I was curious, I knew it was none of my business.

The woman called Grace was exceptionally beautiful. She had remarkable brown eyes that drew me in and made me feel warm all over. I didn't even know her, but I saw compassion in her eyes. She acted like it was her personal responsibility to take care of others. She had radiant, shimmering eyes.

She looked young, but I could tell that she was brave and took her job as a firefighter seriously, and she didn't seem so quick to judge us like the others on her team so blatantly did.

She was on the tall side, slim, yet athletically toned. She had long, wavy, black hair that looked soft and silky. Her olive complexion was attractive and matched her brown eyes perfectly.

Her beauty was distracting, and I found myself having to fight off an urge to want to do sexy things to her. Sometimes I had trouble controlling my internal desires.

I reminded myself that we were in a dire situation and Merrix was right — we needed to take advantage of this lull in the action. The enemy would be back and stronger next time.

"We need to develop a formidable plan to keep ourselves alive," I said.

"We don't have time to stand here and bicker about it," I added after no one shared any ideas after a few seconds. "These enemy androids are ruthless. I fear you don't understand their killing potential until it's too late. They are armed and dangerous with advanced weapons technology that would blow your mind and make your head spin. If we don't take their threats seriously, we are all going to die."

I glanced at Grace. She had a horrified expression on her face and her eyes were red-rimmed and shrouded with dread. I hated to scare her, but the others weren't catching on and they needed a little mental shove.

I felt like I was preaching to them, but again, they didn't seem to be grasping the gravity of the situation. I could be blunt, and now was one of those times to put it to good use.

"You all can stand around and argue all you want, but I'm not going to stand idly by and let these vindictive androids take control over the Earth or my life."

"You think we want to be under attack by these terrorists right now?" the pale-

skinned man said with a glower aimed at me.

"Thank you for being so straightforward with us," Grace said.

"Thank you for being willing to listen," I responded.

I looked at her and gave her a nod. I felt an instinctual and spontaneous protection over her. She seemed to be the only one willing to heed my warning.

She was the sexiest human woman I'd every laid my eyes on. Every time she met my gaze, it made my pulse quicken, my heart thunder, and blood rush to my cock. My cock throbbed with yearning. It had been a while since I'd enjoyed intimacy with a woman.

It didn't matter that she was human, and I was not. I was still a red blooded male with primal needs, and every time I cast a glance in her direction, I felt the magnitude of just how powerful my sexual appetite really was.

"What should we do?" an anxious looking Grace asked, wringing her hands together nervously — but I could tell she was trying to be brave in front of me.

"We need to be ready for the next wave of attacks," I said. "We will do our best to defend and protect along the way."

Grace gave me a genuine smile and if it weren't for the glow of the streetlamp, I might not have been able to see her cheeks flush a rosy, attractive pink shade.

"It's funny you say that, because it's our job to defend and protect the civilians out there," Grace said. Even under this impactful stress... she couldn't help but think about the irony.

"Everybody can do their part," Merrix said. "We have to be in this together."

"We don't know you," the light-skinned man said antagonistically. "How can you say we need to be in this together? How can we trust you?"

"How can we trust you ?" Norin said.

"Norin," I hissed through clenched teeth, giving my twin a reprimanding glance. "Not now. I know it's hard to deal with these abrasive attitudes, but we can't just leave them here. What would Garlin think of us if we didn't fulfill our assignment?"

"I don't know what you're thinking, but we aren't going anywhere with you," Mike said, interrupting our private conversation as he took an agitated step forward.

He glanced at the rest of his crew. He pointed to the pale-skinned man. "David here is my second in command, and he will agree with me."

David took a domineering step forward. He cracked his knuckles and glared at us as if he wanted to bash our faces in. "Abso-fucking-lutely."

Unfortunately for him, I wasn't going to waste my energy brawling any humans.

"We are going to wait right here ," Mike said and pointed a firm, straight finger at the ground while staring at me with wariness. "We are going to wait for the National Guard. They have a military base on the north side of the city. They will give us all the help we need. They will give us shelter."

I shook my head in protest. "I'm not arguing with you that they will bring a certain element of help, but I can also assure you that it won't be enough. You need us too."

"How can you stand there and be so self-righteous?" David asked, matching Mike's

cynical sneer. "What makes you so special in being able to fight off these machine-robot-beasts? You claim to want to help, but I still see the evidence of chaos all around me, the aftermath of destruction is mind-boggling."

I opened my mouth to retort, but Grace stepped up in front of us, standing in between. Her features were soft and accommodating. She looked like she wanted to become a mediator of sorts.

"What if we... compromise?" she asked, wincing as if she immediately expected to be met with seething protest from all angles.

Everyone stared at her, including me. Mike arched a doubtful eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Grace took a deep breath and glanced around the group. She looked slightly self-conscious that all eyes were on her, but she continued.

"What if we all work together, just like they suggested?" She gestured cautiously in my direction.

"The National Guard is going to be our only hope—" Mike began again.

"The National Guard isn't coming for us," another man dressed in firefighter gear cut Mike off.

He looked like a kid. If I had to guess, I'd say he was a rookie on the force. He was tall and rail thin, but he looked like he wanted to be taken seriously and held his own. I had noticed him before, out there in the throes of the action and panic. At the time, he'd made an impression on me. Out there in the battle, he didn't let his size or lack thereof get in the way of getting the job done. Even though he looked young, my first impression of him was that he was brave.

Mike faced him. "What are you talking about, Randy?"

Randy glanced nervously around the group. "I just heard some of them talking on the scanners in the truck." He pointed abstractly over his shoulder. "The National Guard is tied up fighting an even larger group of androids on the Southside. They are too busy to break away because they are dealing with a monumental problem. We are on our own... at least for now."

There was a long pause where no one said a word. A certain despondency hung in the air like a cloak of humidity.

David clasped his hands on his hips. "Well... fuck. "

"We could start escorting people to the base ourselves," Grace suggested animatedly. She looked around the group — and at me in particular — for support. "We could start evacuating people and bringing them to the base. They'll be safer there than they are here , and it beats standing here doing nothing but arguing about it."

"I'm up for that option," I said.

Merrix nodded solemnly. "I am willing to help, and we can transport them on our space bikes too."

To my surprise, this time, Mike didn't argue. He looked like he was out of ideas on his own and was ready to approach the last resort.

"Okay. We can do that — but we need to hurry." He reluctantly glanced at the sky and pointed upward at the dome of blackness and a peppering of stars. His black eyes were etched with fear and despair.

I looked up, only to discover with pain in my heart that more androids posed at first

as 'meteorites' on that initial attack were soaring toward Earth at warp speed — undoubtedly ready to launch another attack.

We weren't prepared for either round, but if we could put a dent in the damage and save as many people as possible — it would be better than sitting back and watching the demise of the human race as they got completely annihilated off the map.

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CHAPTER 6

GRACE

"Let's start bringing as many as we can toward the Naval base," Merrix instructed. "We need to go there. We will be safe there, and we need to draw as many other civilians as possible, and innocent humans to the base that are willing to go with us."

"How in the hell do you suppose we do that?" Mike asked.

Tarax looked at Mike. The two stared at each other; almost as if they were sizing each other up and trying to gauge how much trust they were willing to give to each other.

"What are you saying?" David asked, stepping up from the background. David wasn't one to be ignored or forgotten. He would make sure his voice was heard no matter what.

Tarax looked at David as if he was an afterthought.

"I'm saying that we need to get these people out of their homes and into the refuge of the base," Tarax explained.

"Why don't you do it then," David said.

Tarax slowly approached him. his eyes narrowed. Mike was a big guy, but Tarax was bigger, and represented a bigger intimidation power.

"Wait a minute," I interjected. "I thought we were on the same page and that we all agreed to do this together."

"It can't be us. We can't approach the homes and knock on the doors." Tarax pointed to Merrix and Norin.

"Why not?" Mike shouted with exasperation.

"We aren't human, and we won't be convincing enough to get them to leave of their own free will," Merrix explained.

Mike looked at Merrix with a combative, somewhat snarky expression. "You look like you could pull it off."

"You want us to trespass into other people's homes, pull them from their beds and their living rooms and tell them they have to come with me — no questions asked?" David added.

"They'll ask the questions anyway, but you must try to prove to them that you aren't here to hurt them, but help them instead," Merrix said.

"You need to be the one to do it," Tarax instructed Mike with more urgency and insistence.

"What makes you so sure that they'll even go with me?" Mike exclaimed.

I could tell that Mike was near his breaking point.

"You're a firefighter. People will trust you by nature," Tarax assumed.

Tarax made a good point.

"Hey Mike?" I coaxed gently. "See them, behind you?" I pointed to his wife and three young children, cowering, and shaking under blankets in the back of one of the firetrucks.

Mike's wife was beautiful. She had long, straight brown hair and a trim figure. She stretched her arms protectively over each of her children, like an eagle's wings roped around the babies in its nest.

Mike blinked at his family. He almost looked baffled, as if he were living in a series of dream fragments that he couldn't wake himself from.

"Yeah?" He glanced between me and them.

I cupped my hands over his shoulders and pressed on them firmly. I stared into the blackness of Mike's eyes until I found the light inside, the kindness and the heroicism that I knew was there all along, hiding from the panic and hysteria — just waiting to burst back through.

"They need you. need you. Your family needs to get to this shelter — but think of all the other families out there who deserve the same protection."

Mike nodded. I still felt like Mike had a slight disconnect, but he nodded and took a deep breath to prepare himself for what he knew he had to do. At least he was listening.

"You're right," Mike said and balled his fists with perseverance.

He then proceeded to pound on the front door of a random house in a residential area we were in.

We, along with Tarax and his fellow Space Knights were covering this particular

area. There were other firefighter units trying to rescue and encourage people to leave their homes to follow us to an unknown base as well.

It wasn't an easy accomplishment. Many of those we'd already encountered in the streets were wary as it was. Everyone had their guard up, for good reason. They assumed we were under attack by a terrorist organization. Even I still didn't fully understand the threat myself or how bad it could possibly get — even from here. I felt sorry for these civilians. I was afraid, even though I had more information than they did.

"Chicago Fire Department," Mike roared as he continued to pound his fist into the front door of a stranger's house. "Open up. We're guiding everyone to a more secure shelter, but you must come with us. Bring only what you can carry. The National Guard base will be waiting for us and can assist any who are lost or injured."

A few seconds later, a couple who looked to be in their mid to late sixties slowly opened their front door. The man had a shiny bald head with dark gray, slightly curly hair on the sides. He wore wire-rimmed, spectacle styled glasses and a wooly, gray bathrobe.

He wore dark maroon slippers and had his right arm protectively clasped around a thin woman. The woman was almost equal in height to the man, which was average. The woman had light blue eyes, wrinkles, and a curious expression. I assumed they were married.

They both peered at us with a morsel of hope shimmering in their eyes.

Mike's features softened when he saw them. "Please... you have to come with us. I know it's a lot to trust in but?—"

"You're from the Chicago fire department?" the woman asked skeptically.

Mike nodded, pointing to his uniform. "I am. I'm the captain of ladder twenty-nine. I've been a firefighter for over twenty years," he added, probably to reassure the couple.

"I'm only wearing my night gown," the woman said in a croaky voice and pinched the middle of her pastel pink night dress.

Mike shook his head. Tears gleamed in his eyes. The strong, burly firefighter had a soft spot in his heart for babies and the elderly. He was nothing but a tender teddy bear on the inside.

"It's okay," he whispered. "We can come back for more clothes and belongings, but for right now — it's vital that we find somewhere to hide out until this attack is over, and that place is the National Guard base."

The couple exchanged a hesitant glance with each other but when they nodded and agreed to come with us, I released a heavy breath of relief that I hadn't even realized I'd been holding in the first place.

We whisked the couple to temporary safety with the rest of the group and continued on our assignment, expecting it to be a long and gruesome night. A few hours in, my feet were dragging, my back and neck throbbed, and my eyes stung with exhaustion. I kept going because the people of Chicago desperately need someone to save them.

One by one, we patrolled to individual houses in each grid of the city and plucked bleary eyed, bewildered, and afraid people from the safety of their homes — homes which were no longer safe at all.

Anyone who would agree to come with us, we took. I began to wonder just how big this military base was to hold all these people but reminded myself to just do my job and not worry too much about it.

Others, however, weren't as accommodating to agree with our plan of action. Many refused to follow instructions and became animatedly hostile.

There were far too many people who were paranoid about us and refused to be rounded up, complaining that they were being herded blindly like cattle. Others protested that they were being duped by a terrorist organization or the military and slammed their doors in our faces.

One man in particular left me feeling shaken and rattled.

"Don't take another step in this direction," he instructed, wearing a tan colored baseball cap. He was already standing on his front porch when we arrived. He had a defiant stance, warning us not to mess with him.

The bill of his baseball hat was pushed down low and covered his facial expressions and most of his eyes. It was difficult to see his face. I didn't like not being able to tell what people were thinking — or what kind of monumental mess they might be capable of creating.

The testy man adjusted his weight, fidgeting with paranoia. He raised his rifle, pointing it directly at me. The dark, black, steel of the barrel looked menacing and calculated, sending an icy cold flaring through my arms and legs.

I raised my arms by my sides and licked my dry lips apprehensively. My hands tremored with unease. This man's nervous energy was affecting me, especially with his deadly gun pointed at my face.

"Sir... please. We are just trying to help you," I attempted to reassure him.

"Stay... away... from... me..." the man said methodically and with frosty warning. "I don't know what you fucking, slimy, government officials are playing at but I'm

not going anywhere with you."

"I don't work for the government," I tried to explain as rationally as possible. "I'm a firefighter. It's my job to keep you safe."

He was wearing a black and red checkered — plaid long sleeved shirt with a tan jacket. "If you know what's good for you — you won't step any closer. I will shoot. I will." He cocked the rifle, but his fingers were shaky on the trigger. It was almost as if he needed to convince himself that he was capable of committing impulsive murder.

My heart thundered with anxiety. A cold sweat started dripping between my breasts. I stared at the man, internally praying for one last chance to convince him to make a better choice.

"You're making a mistake," I said. "I'm one of the good ones. I am not trying to take you hostage or anything here. I want to bring you out of the danger — not further into it."

"I'm good right here," the man said with a sniff, wiping his nose with the back of his sleeve. "I've never left my home for any shit like this, and I don't plan to start. Me and my little friend here can protect ourselves just fine without your help." He patted the base of his gun.

I was about to give up when another siren shrieked through the night air.

The man became extra paranoid after that. He ran down his steps in my direction. His jaw was clenched, and he was gritting his teeth with animosity. The rifle barrel was aimed at my heart. I didn't even have a split second to jump out of the way.

I knew I was going to die and there was no way to stop it. I could almost hear the gun

being fired and the bullet plunging straight into my heart. I could almost smell the smoke of gunpowder pluming from the barrel after the round had been spent.

A solitary tear rolled down my cheek. The last thing I was going to see before I died was this man's rifle along with his menacing scowl.

In the next instant, a large figure flashed in front of the man, colliding with him, and knocking him straight to the ground. The man's rifle flew into the air, and I leaped in to catch it before it fell to the ground and unloaded accidentally.

I saw a blur of bronze and realized that it was Tarax who had bravely dived in front of the deranged man and disarmed him before he had a chance to hurt me.

I was panting hard, shaking all over and feeling completely rattled. I slung the rifle strap over my shoulder just in case the delusional man tried to jump right back up and finish what he started. He seemed wiry enough to try something crazy like that.

Tarax had him pinned down hard, but the man continued to violently jerk his arms and legs and arch his back, bucking his hips up and down like a bronco on the loose.

"You aren't going to touch her. You're not going to hurt anyone. If you don't want to come with us, fine. That's your choice. We aren't going to help you dig your own grave. You have your free will... but you are going to go back inside your house, lock your door, and not inflict even more damage on this city that's been done already, do you hear me?"

Tarax was on the ground, preventing the squirming man from standing up. He was shouting at him with angry spittle flying from his mouth.

"Fine," the man hissed, glaring at Tarax with a maddened expression. "Just let me the fuck up, then."

Tarax slackened his grip on the man, but he didn't let him go completely. He was testing the waters to see if the man would keep to his word not to charge at me again. When he was certain that the man wasn't going to go on a second assault rant, he let him go.

"Give me my gun back," the man roared menacingly at me.

I gave Tarax a reluctant glance. Tarax nodded. "It's okay. Do it. If he tries anything, I'll shove that rifle so far up his ass he'll never be able to walk again."

With some hesitancy, I shoved the rifle back into the arms of the odd man. Tarax stood protectively in front of me, towering above me.

The man stumbled backward, staring at Tarax as if he were only dreaming him. He tripped over his own feet but quickly regained his balance. He bolted back for the temporary safety of his home — but everyone knew that safety was quickly fading.

Once he was gone and no longer posing an imminent threat, I turned around and faced Tarax... gazing over his lustrous body. He looked so majestic. I was in awe of him and his striking handsomeness.

"You didn't have to do that..." I trailed off, staring at Tarax with gratitude swirling through my body.

"Yes, I did," Tarax said immediately, without hesitation.

He was so good looking. His jaw line made my heart ache with longing. His piercing teal green eyes revived my soul in a way that I didn't know was even possible.

He looked like he just came straight from the set of an action movie scene. His bronzed skin was toned and firm. Every surface of his body was covered by rock-

solid muscle.

He was tall, handsome, and brooding. He took my breath away, giving me the most sensational feeling inside.

"Come on, we need to go, quickly," he instructed.

Tarax made brief eye contact with me. My heart flipped, but the moment didn't linger. Tarax quickly broke my gaze. His eyes flickered down toward the pavement. He wore a humbled expression, as if he didn't want to give himself the credit he deserved. I didn't care. I would praise him for his efforts anyway.

I glanced over my shoulder. David stepped out of the shadows of the night. His angry face provided enough darkness of its own. He wasn't looking at me. He was staring with enormous loathing at Tarax as Tarax protectively swooped his hand around my waist and gently attempted to guide me along, back toward the National Guard base.

The jealousy was practically seething from David. His jaw was clenched as tight as an oyster shell, and his cunning glower sent a chill through my body.

I turned around and put one foot in front of the other, jogging to keep up the pace with Tarax. David's envy, although it wasn't surprising, still unnerved me. I already felt like I had enough to worry about, without adding David's exhaustive and suffocating envy to the mix.

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CHAPTER 7

TARAX

"We need to get in the air," Merrix said, addressing me and Norin. "Things are really starting to unravel down here."

The moment he said that a huge explosion shook the ground about twenty yards away from us. An enormous fireball lit up the sky and painted it with a fierce orange color, vibrant and powerful. The searing heat from the explosion made my body feel instantly hot. Cars that had been parallel parked on the street were scorched, burning, and incinerating in seconds. I watched in horror and awe as the metal frame from a van started melting and bending inward.

Behind me, shrieks of terror and gasps of fright broke out among the refugees and the first responders surrounding me.

I glanced between Merrix and Norin, trying to measure their panic levels by the looks on their faces.

"Like I said, we should have already been in the air by now," Merrix informed again, sounding frustrated.

I could understand his frustration, but it was hard to round all the people up who were willing to flee with us, especially on our space bikes.

"We are going to split into groups, but we are still going to try to stick together. We

will take twelve humans at a time in each group," Merrix confirmed, just as we'd already discussed.

Norin jumped on his bike. He seemed eager to tow the masses, and he already had his group pulled together. Our bikes were designed to fit at least three or four a piece, and the robo Knights on each team would take the rest of the people that we weren't able to carry on our own bikes.

"Those fucking hostile androids are going to be in the air, too," I reminded Merrix cautiously. "We're not going to be able to avoid them completely."

"You think I don't already know that?" Merrix asked sharply, practically barking at me. His features dulled a moment later. "Sorry. I am just stressed?—"

"It's fine," I said as I began reeling people and instructing them to round up and get strapped onto the bikes. "Everyone is stretched thin right now."

How could we not be hitting the limits of what we could handle? Tensions were high, yes, but it had a lot to do with the fact that the second wave of attacks had begun and there seemed to be even more of the enemy pelting from the skies. They were hurtling toward the Earth in droves this time.

The androids littered the sky and clustered like insects on the ground, scattering about and disturbing the peace.

These damn robots were everywhere. It seemed like as soon as we killed off five of them, ten more were produced from seemingly nowhere.

I tried to be optimistic, but it didn't seem like we had a viable solution for this. How could we ever escape them at all?

At least in the sky, we could get to this military base Mike spoke of. We just had to make sure we got there in one piece, first.

I tried to keep eyes on Grace. She was going to be part of my transport team. I made sure to get that locked in from the start. I wanted to make sure I was the one protecting her at all times. I didn't want to take my eyes off her, even for a split second.

She jumped on my bike with me, and I helped strap her in. She coiled her arms around my waist, but gave me a reluctant, almost sheepish glance.

I respected the fact that she had made sure everyone else had already gotten safely to a bike before she herself got on one. She was selfless in her own way. She seemed like she took her job seriously as a rescue worker.

"Do you know how to shoot a weapon?" I asked her.

She paused, her pretty eyes meeting my gaze with a serious look. "I have shot a handgun before, why?"

I pulled out a second weapon and handed it to her. "I want you to have this for protection."

She gingerly took it and put it through the belt of her firefighter uniform. "Thank you," she said softly.

"Is this okay?" I asked once I climbed on the bike and sat down directly in front of her. "You can hold on tight, right?"

"Yes," she said, but she seemed slightly intimidated.

"Have you ever ridden on a motorcycle before? I asked.

Grace contemplated. "Maybe once or twice... but I'm no expert."

"Stick with me and you'll be just fine," I reassured her. "Don't worry — you can't fall out of this thing."

"Well hopefully my driver knows what he's doing," Grace said with a flirtatious smile and a sparkle flaring in her dark brown eyes.

I chuckled. "Trust me. I know what I'm doing. I've been riding a long time." I paused and glanced reflectively at my fellow Space Knights who were ready to go — jumping into the roles of heroes of the night. "We all have a lot of experience in that department."

We were outlaws on the run, and I wasn't sure anything would ever change that. I didn't think I'd ever know a different life. It was fast paced and could sometimes get exhausting, but I don't think I'd change it for the world.

The sense of freedom and adventure was what kept my pulse pumping. Besides, we were supposed to fight against the bad guys. It was wired into our DNA. We lived for this shit.

These innocent people didn't deserve to have their lives uprooted and disrupted in the middle of the night. It was our responsibility to keep these innocent lives as protected as possible from these horrible robots that were seemingly reproducing in thin air.

"I appreciate what you guys are trying to do," Grace said softly. That charismatic charm was still twinkling in her dark eyes.

"I'm just trying to do what's right," I said, staring back at her like a love-struck puppy.

Her wavy black hair billowed softly around her face when the breeze gently fluttered through the air.

She took her long, slender, olive toned fingers and pushed a few loose strands of her hair behind her ear. She was wearing silver stud earrings that I hadn't noticed until now. They added an element of femininity to her that sucked me in.

There was a moment where we made eye contact and it felt like the rest of the world faded away. It was brief — but I would take it. If I could get lost in her eyes and forget about my problems — even if it was only for a single second — I would savor that moment.

Grace roped her arms around my waist a little more snugly. Her chest rose and fell slowly as she inhaled and exhaled, preparing herself for this ride.

I gave her an assuring smile and she stared at me with resolve.

"I'm ready to go."

I nodded to Merrix and Norin. They both looked worried about the journey, but what other choice did we have? If we stayed here, unprotected and out in the open — we would remain an easy target for the enemy. They would become attracted to our weakness and thus defeat us while we were vulnerable.

We soared into the skies, hovering above the tallest buildings in the city. Grace didn't slacken her grip on me, but I didn't mind it. Her body felt warm and amazing, closely snaked around my torso.

We quickly realized that the skies weren't any safer than the ground had been. The enemy androids swirled and swooped all around us, flying past like angry hornets out on a mission to sting and destroy.

Almost immediately, two of our own robots were shot down from my transport team. Luckily, they weren't carrying any innocent civilians and were merely escort robots, but it was still a terrible loss because they were in the front — serving as blockers against the vicious androids.

I tried to weave around the murderous androids before they could shoot me down too. My bike flipped on its side, and we did a spin move. Grace gasped and stiffened, but she bravely held her own.

Once we were turned right-side up again, I tossed a careful glance at her over my shoulder.

"Sorry about that."

"It's okay," Grace said, but her voice was shaky.

"There are more of them in the sky than we expected," I said. "How are you holding up back there?"

"I'm holding on for dear life," Grace said with an anxious chuckle. "But I trust you, don't worry," she quickly added.

"It's like there's no free riding space," Grace agreed, tightening her grip on me.

I glanced around the vicinity. I couldn't find Norin's team anywhere. I tried not to panic too soon, but the noose of fear began tightening around my neck after a few disparaging minutes and I still failed to locate him.

"Where is Norin?" I asked through my headpiece communicator. "Norin, are you there?"

I got a bunch of crackly static, and then Merrix voice cut in and out, but nothing from Norin.

"Base... androids... shooting at us from behind..." Merrix garbled voice declared.

Whatever Merrix was trying to tell me, it was coming through in fragments and I couldn't understand him.

"What are you trying to say?" I shouted into the headpiece. "Merrix? Do you have eyes on my brother or anyone from his team?"

After that, the communicator line went dead. The silence was almost deafening, and instantly sickened my stomach.

"Shit," I roared and squeezed my fists around the handles of my space bike.

"It's going to be okay," Grace said in a soothing tone. "We will catch up to them. There is too much chaos going on up here to keep track."

"We weren't supposed to split up," I said, hearing the agitation in my voice.

"Things happen. I'm sure he's fine. The separation seemed almost inevitable from the beginning," Grace said, still trying to reassure me.

My heart drummed anxiously. My pulse quickened and a nervous sweat broke out against my skin, making me feel icy, hot, and clammy all at once.

I became lightheaded. The androids blurred and buzzed all around me.

"Don't have a panic attack now, you dumbass," I mumbled to myself.

"What?" Grace shouted through the roar of the chaos.

"Nothing..." I trailed off. "I was just talking to myself."

Another android swooped in out of nowhere and tried to clip us. I steered away from it at the last second and dodged a bullet, and the brunt impact from its vessel.

Adrenaline surged through my veins. I wanted to obliterate every last one of these motherfuckers from the sky until there were none left to fuck with us. They were bringing fire and terror from the skies, on a war path to kill and demolish anything that crossed its boundaries.

They surrounded us, forming a huddle around us to prevent us from going anywhere. Every time we tried to crank up our pace and whiz past them, they were already hot on our heels, trying to shoot us down from the sky. They maneuvered everywhere around us, relentlessly.

They were traveling around us so fast that it made my head spin. They nicked at our bikes and tried to clip us from the side.

Their ultimate goal was to try and make us tailspin out of control. They slammed into the rear of our space bikes, trying to get us to crash. They were ruthless. There were no rules, and nothing was off limits for these monster androids.

"I can't find a single pocket of space to get around them," I shouted to Grace over my shoulder.

Grace paused a moment or two. I could tell she was thinking. I appreciated the fact that she was calm and rational. She wasn't rash, and she wasn't hot tempered like that David guy seemed to be. He was in our group, and I feared that his reckless behavior was going to get us all killed. At least I found myself being able to easily trust

Grace's judgement.

"I grew up around this area," Grace mentioned. "I think I can map out our location just by looking down at the surroundings directly below. Do you think you could fly a little lower? That way I might be able to pick out some landmarks."

"Sure," I said compliantly.

I was open for any options to be able to weave around these angry assholes. I decelerated and began to lower my altitude.

Grace craned her neck downward, narrowing her eyes in concentration as she inspected the area down below us. She was quiet for a few moments.

"I think I know where we are now," she exclaimed excitedly, while pointing eastward. "There... can you steer us in that direction?"

I had a narrow window of opportunity, but I saw a fleeting gap between a cluster of androids. I picked up the pace and flew in the direction that Grace instructed.

"What's your plan?" I asked her.

"I think I know where we can hide out, at least for a little while," she said.

"Aren't we supposed to be going to that military base?" I asked.

"I don't think we are going to make it, do you?" Grace didn't sound confident but to be fair, she had a point.

"We need to find the others," I said.

"If we don't try to hide from these savages, we might die before we ever get that chance," Grace insisted with some urgency in her voice.

"Alright," I said. "What were you thinking?" I should at least hear her out. The situation was becoming a clusterfuck. We were trapped from practically every direction because of the robots.

"Do you see that run-down looking building over there?" Grace asked. "In between that tall gray building and that huge traffic intersection?"

I glanced in the general direction of where she was pointing, studying the area.

"Yes..." I said once I spotted it. The lights were still working, which meant that there must still be electricity in certain areas.

"I grew up in this neighborhood," Grace explained. "That building over there is abandoned now. It used to be a bank, which means it has good bones and lots of places we could hide out—including the area that used to be where the vault was located."

"The vault?" I asked.

"Where they keep all the money," Grace explained. "It's a super secure area."

"Okay..." I trailed off. I needed to hear more, but it sounded somewhat promising.

"I'm sure we could find the armored vault. My dad used to have a friend who worked there. The vault was on the second floor if my memory serves me correctly. Not to mention there will be plenty of offices with secure doors that we can lock."

"Are you sure all that stuff is going to still exist?" I asked.

Grace contemplated with a shrug. "I mean yeah it hasn't been in service as a bank for a number of years — but the structure of the inside of the building shouldn't have changed."

The robo Knights that were carrying the rest of our refugee group with them started following us, just as they were programmed to do because they were on the same navigation track.

We rushed back to the ground and as soon as we were there, we explained to everyone what we were trying to do.

We parked around the back of the building where it was extremely dark, thus giving us some proper area to be concealed better.

I shot a bullet through one of the windows and used my protective space gloves to break the rest of the shards without hurting my hand.

The window was our access point on the ground floor, and one by one Grace and I desperately tried to maneuver the people inside the building and out of harm's way. It wasn't going to be a permanent solution — and I really wanted to find my brother and Merrix before it was too late.

For now, this solution was going to have to do, and it would buy us some time. Once we got everyone inside, I'd try to connect with Norin and Merrix again, hoping and praying along the way that they were still alive and making their way to the base as we'd originally planned.

CHAPTER 8

GRACE

"Has everybody made it inside safely?" I asked Tarax as he slid inside the window last, roping his massive legs around the frame as he pushed himself into the building.

He had waited until there was no one else, selflessly going last — but I just wanted to ensure we hadn't left any stragglers behind on accident.

Tarax nodded, glancing over his shoulder with a trace of paranoia flickering in his dark, teal eyes. I was unnerved by how frantic he seemed. He was the glue that was supposed to hold us together.

"Yes, that's everybody," Tarax confirmed. He assessed his surroundings, scanning the inside of the lobby. "I think it would be a good idea if I go around and check out the rest of the building, just to make sure there is no one else here and that it's secure."

"Let me come with you," I urged on a whim, feeling slightly impulsive and supercharged on adrenaline.

Tarax shook his head insistently, albeit compassionately. "No. I need you here, please — tending to the wounded."

His eyes scanned over our group. There were several people trying to nurse their superficial injuries, wincing in pain and trying to stay strong.

"Whatever you need me to do," I said. "Sure." I tried to keep my ego balanced. I brushed the hair off my face and planted my hands on my hips, sighing deeply. I gave Tarax a resilient smile to let him know I could handle just about anything.

Tarax's massive, sculpted body was silhouetted by a shadow, making him appear even more mystifying and somehow... also smolderingly sexy. His bronze skin was effervescent, even in the darkness.

It was cold inside the main lobby, and it smelled somewhat musty. There were some graffiti markings on the wall and an old brown and tattered couch in the corner that had one of the arms missing. There was an empty pizza box laying open and face up, haphazardly on one of the main staircases leading up to the second floor.

The air was damp and heavy. However, at this point anything was better than being out there in the open — vulnerable and exposed to those robot monsters.

"I'll be right back," Tarax said, pulling his gun out from his space suit holster. He looked at me. "Make sure you keep yourself armed, too."

I patted the side of my uniform. "I'm good, don't worry."

As a firefighter, we weren't armed with guns, but Tarax had given me this gun for protection right before we'd flown off into the hostile, robot infested sky. I'd been trained to use a gun, and I was confident I could protect myself and the rest of our group with it if I needed to.

"Keep your dispatch radio on the second frequency," Tarax said. "That way I can call for backup if I need to."

I glanced down at the walkie talkie. The green light blinked. "It's on and ready."

Tarax gave me an endearing smile. His exotic eyes flashed with resilience. "Thanks. I'll be right back," he promised.

Once Tarax jogged away, I tried my best to start helping people who needed it. I was still trying to wrap my head around what was happening out there. The chaos and destruction still seemed so surreal.

David had been assigned to our group too. He was sitting off to the side, by himself. He was rocking back and forth. He looked even paler than usual, and I could tell by the grimace on his face that he was in a lot of pain. His eyes kept fluttering closed, too, which I found disturbing. His body went limp. He stopped rocking and he weakly laid down on the cold, concrete floor.

I approached him warily, feeling worried.

"What happened to you out there?" I asked, standing over him.

David glanced up at me and blinked, attempting to focus in on me.

"What..." he trailed off.

I knelt beside him. "David? It's me, Grace. Tell me what hurts."

He had a cut above his eyebrow. It was bleeding heavily. I took a cloth from the duffel bag of emergency supplies. I'd snatched it off the back of one of the firetrucks right before we'd left.

I gently touched the cloth to David's head to blot away some of the blood, and then I firmly pressed on the wound to prevent it from bleeding harder.

David took his uninjured arm and tried to swat my hand away. I didn't think he was

consciously doing it. I knew he was dazed and disoriented, judging by the confused expression on his face. His eyes closed again, and his mouth hung open. It concerned me that he was having trouble staying awake.

"I'm just trying to help you, David," I said with blatant frustration.

David looked away from me and stared at the wall for a few seconds before his eyes closed again.

"Your arm looks like it might be broken," I said, pointing to how his forearm was bending inward in an awkward, unnatural way.

David glanced down. His eyes widened in shock and horror. "No wonder it hurts so bad."

"We can wrap it in a splint," I suggested, patting the duffel bag of supplies.

I sat down next to him with a heavy sigh and unzipped the side compartment of the bag, reaching in for a temporary fix to his arm.

"Come on. Let me see it. You can't solve this problem by yourself, David — no matter what you think."

David tightened his jaw and looked away again, staring sullenly at the wall. He started breathing rapidly. His chest rose and fell with panic. I was concerned for his overall wellbeing. When I tried to touch his arm, he squirmed away from me.

"Can you try to sit up?" I asked. I was just trying to keep him awake. "You can lean against the wall while I work on your arm."

David nodded, but he looked fearful, and he held his breath as if he were too scared

to move.

"Can you hold pressure with this cloth to your head wound?" I asked.

David furrowed his eyebrows worriedly. "Is it bad?"

I hesitated. "It might need stitches, but I can put a gauze band aid over it in the meantime." I couldn't lie to him. He'd see the truth in my eyes anyway.

David broke out in a nervous sweat. His expression became dazed, and his eyes became delirious. His eyes roamed around the lobby of the bank with skepticism.

At least he was becoming more alert. He could get angry and scared all he wanted, we all reserved that right, but anything was better than watching him drifting in and out of consciousness. Up until a few moments ago he could barely keep his head up.

I took several bandages and a split from the duffel bag. I made eye contact with David.

"I'm going to start this process," I said. "Just try to stay as still as possible."

David closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A sweat ring had dampened the edges around the collar of his shirt.

I lightly brought the splint under his arm. He sucked in a sharp breath as I put a little pressure on the wounded area. Slowly and methodically, I circled the bandage around his arm, all the while holding the splint in place at the bottom.

"I'm sorry if it hurts," I said.

David's face was ashen. He looked like he might even be sick. I prayed he wouldn't

vomit all over me. He said nothing, but he let me keep working.

"Alright," I said a couple minutes later. "I'm just going to clip the bandage in place and then you'll have your makeshift splint. It's the best I can do for now."

David glanced down at his arm with trepidation, as if he were afraid of what he might find. His features relaxed when his eyes landed on the splint.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you. It hurts, but I know this is better than nothing."

We smiled at each other. I appreciated the moments, however few and far between they were, where David wasn't acting like a total asshole. He had moments in him where he could be a decent human being.

I walked around the lobby and began checking through the rest of the people who were in our group, making sure they were alright. We had a set of robots, or robo Knights as Tarax had called them that had followed Tarax to clear the building, and there were also several of them guarding the windows and doors around us on the bottom floor.

A few minutes later, footsteps thundered through the hallways and became louder as they approached the main lobby. I stiffened, hoping that it would just be Tarax returning.

When I saw him, I was flooded with a sense of relief. We made eye contact, and my heart galloped.

A fierce sense of safety rushed through me. His muscles contracted as he moved. He was fluid and precise, like a born leader. I felt a sense of deep attraction to him. I wanted to believe it was mutual, but there was no time to dwell on it.

I felt David's burning gaze beside me. I ignored the resentful way he stared at me. I refused to take his bait, refused to look back at him and ask him what the hell his problem was, because I had the sneaking suspicion it was about Tarax, anyway. I wasn't in the mood to argue with David.

Tarax addressed the group.

"There is no one else here. We are safe, for now."

"We need to get upstairs," I advised, looking at Tarax to remind him about what we'd already discussed. "The vault rooms will be virtually impenetrable."

Tarax nodded and started to speak, but David spontaneously stood up and cut him off.

David straightened his posture. He tightened his jaw. He stared at Tarax with defiance and defensiveness.

"David..." I hissed through clenched teeth. "Please don't make this harder than it has to be." I knew him well enough to know that he was going to start drama with Tarax.

David ignored me... just as I'd expected him to.

"I know these Chicago streets better than anyone. I grew up around here and?—"

Now it was my turn to cut him off. "I grew up around here too, David, as I'm sure many other people in our group did. That doesn't mean we have all the answers. We're under attack by an alien robot force. All bets are off."

David scoffed. "So, we're supposed to immediately do everything that this fucking alien tells us?" David pointed to Tarax. "Who the hell made him boss? Why does he get to take charge?"

David sounded like a bratty child. It was humiliating me.

Tarax's teal eyes narrowed, and his face was cast in shadows that darkened his features. It made him appear intimidating and brooding. "Like I said before, I'm a Space Knight, patrolling the space lanes?—"

"Yeah, whatever...blah, blah, blah," David droned, rolling his eyes. "Quit your yapping. If you want us to trust you then you need to prove it."

"He's trying to prove it but you're not even giving him the chance , David," I countered. "He got us this far."

"No, you got us this far," David reminded me. "By suggesting the abandoned bank in the first place."

"Please don't argue with each other," Tarax urged.

He took on an assertive posture and stared at each one of us with a firm glance. "I know more about what these androids are capable of than you do. I strongly advise you to listen to what I have to say. If you aren't ready to give me your complete cooperation, then you don't belong in this group. Maybe it's not for you, and you should try your luck out there alone instead." There was no mistaking the resentment in Tarax's voice.

The room was dead silent. Nobody said a word, or even dared to breathe. The tension was weighing heavy on my shoulders.

"I think you're lying," David said.

I stiffened and cringed, wishing that he would just shut the hell up, but I had a better chance of rewinding time and stopping the attack than I did of getting David to

follow anyone else's commands, especially if it was another guy like Tarax that he felt threatened by.

Tarax stared at David, unblinking. He frowned. "What do you think I'm lying about?"

"I don't think you really know what you're doing. I think it's all a sham. You are just as scared shitless as the rest of us."

Tarax contemplated. I marveled at his uncanny way of staying calm no matter how persuasively David tried to break him.

"Please go on, then," Tarax said and gestured around the lobby to the group of confused people. Everyone was just waiting for the argument to end so they could get instructions on what to do next.

Tarax continued, "If you think your own leadership skills are better than mine, then let's hear your ideas. I'm listening."

David wasn't expecting this kind of response from Tarax. He stared at him, stunned and bewildered. I knew he wanted fists to fly and teeth to break, to prove himself the better, stronger man. Tarax wasn't having it. He wasn't going to stoop to David's level.

David opened his mouth to retort, something snarky, no doubt, but after several agonizing seconds, he slinked backward.

He offered nothing because he had nothing to offer in the first place. He stared at the floor, fuming quietly.

"I can put you on guard duty if you want," Tarax suggested, attempting to extend an olive branch to David.

David lifted his head and scowled at Tarax beratingly. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You can go out on the roof with a gun for protection. Patrol for us," Tarax instructed.

"I'll go too," a man wearing blue and white flannel pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt said, stepping up in front of the group. He put on a brave face and swallowed hard. "I want to help..."

Tarax glanced at the man for a beat. "Alright. You can do that. What's your name?"

"T-tim — it's — Tim," the man stammered, shifting his weight self-consciously. He scratched the back of his head. "Tim Selfini."

"Well, Tim Selfini... if you want to help guard the roof then I'm not one to stop a volunteer." Tarax's eyes looked kind when he smiled.

"Fine," David huffed, grumbling something inaudible under his breath, but he otherwise made no further protest against the plan. "Let's just get on with this bullshit, then."

"I can help escort everyone to the vault room," I suggested to Tarax as we got a moment alone, off to the side of the group. "Then I can make sure everyone who still needs help for minor wounds is going to be okay."

Tarax's teal eyes shone with bright admiration. "That sounds great to me, and I'll be with you too."

I wasn't the type of woman who needed a man's approval for anything... but I'd be lying if I said that getting that unspoken approval and kindness from Tarax sure made

me feel good.

CHAPTER 9

TARAX

" I just finished a call in to the rest of the Knights assigned to ground crews," I mentioned to Grace when we had a minute alone upstairs in the bank. "I've touched base with all of them, and everyone is accounted for. No fatalities among the Knights ... so far, or anyone they were supposed to be protecting in their group."

Grace inhaled a deep breath and released it slowly. She put her hands on her hips and nodded with relief. She was letting this new information sink in. It was a lot to process.

"I must say... that is great news to hear. You guys have been completely awesome with the way things have been handled here so far," Grace praised.

"I could say the same thing about you," I said. We made eye contact. There was chemistry between us. I felt it, and judging by her fiery smile, I knew Grace felt it too.

We had waited out the rest of the night in the vault of the bank. The perimeter was relatively quiet. There wasn't much going on outside the city block, and the streets looked more forgiving under the light of day. However, it was a catastrophic mess all around us. Cars were toppled over on their sides. Dust and dirt were everywhere.

Traffic lights were hanging off their hinges by frayed wires. The air was hazy and smoky, resembling a grayish fog. Papers fluttered by on the street. It was eerily quiet.

It was like a scene from an apocalyptic movie. I'd seen a few in my lifetime, but this was real and haunting.

The second wave of android attacks had fizzled out, giving us some wiggle room to move around, but we were still bolted by choice inside the bank. We had discussed it as a group, but in the end, I'd made the ultimate decision to have us stay put for now.

Everyone knew that the bank was only meant to be a temporary solution to a much bigger problem that we were dealing with, but I didn't want to make any rash decisions and get anyone else hurt or killed. Whether they believed me or not, I was ultimately responsible for these people.

I'd been tense and nervous all night, but it was great to have someone like Grace working alongside me and being a great team helper. Her motivation kept me going, no matter how fatigued I felt.

It was also a bonus that she was so familiar with the area of the city, too. Overnight, we hadn't encountered any unforeseen incidents, and no hostile androids got in our way.

Nothing and no one tried to bust through the abandoned bank to get to us. We were lucky for now, but I was afraid that eventually — our luck would run out. It was my job to figure out something to do before that happened.

I knew I'd have to talk to Garlin sooner or later with an update, and I wanted to give him good news... or at least something optimistic about our progress.

For now, that progress was slow moving. I'd let Merrix deal with Garlin. They were closer anyway, and Merrix was Garlin's second in command. If he wanted to talk to me specifically, he knew where to find me.

"I'm grateful that the other Knights survived the overnight attacks, but how are they faring?" Grace asked. "You know... how are they processing it all."

She brushed a strand of hair off her rosy cheeks. Her hair looked soft and elegant, even after all the turmoil we'd gone through overnight. I appreciated her concern. She was so authentic.

"Better than expected," I admitted. "They are clearing out debris right now — mainly from the androids that were destroyed in the battle overnight."

Grace sighed and glanced around the area where we were standing. We were in a secure location, but I still felt like we were exposed against these aggressive androids. If they really wanted to hunt us down, I feared they had the capable programming to do so.

I also didn't know how long we were going to last in this destitute situation. We had minimal supplies to survive on, in contrast to how many of us there were. Some of the others in our group needed medical care as well that we couldn't offer in this abandoned building. They were alright and surviving, but it was not going to work forever.

All was quiet... for now, but the work was far from over. I was grateful for the lull in activity so we could take a breather, clear our heads, and formulate a plan for the next steps.

This particular area of Chicago was an apocalyptic mess. As I glanced out through one of the upstairs windows, I noticed bewildered humans walked around in a trance, shuffling along through the streets in sheer disbelief of what had turned their world upside down overnight. It was incredible and daunting how fragile life really was. Anything could change in a split second.

Grace stood beside me and looked down. "They shouldn't be out there," she whispered.

I shook my head, agreeing. "No, it's not safe yet."

"What's going on?" she asked, peering up at me as if she were clinging to a hope that she already knew was false. "Are there more of them expected? Those alien robot things?"

She had changed into a pair of black pants and a white t-shirt with her fire stations emblem patched into the corner of the right breast pocket. Her hair was loose and long, falling elegantly down her back and shoulders like black, wavy feathers.

Her olive complexion and her big brown eyes complimented each other and gave her an exotic beauty that lured me.

"When I was talking to some of the other Space Knight ground forces in some of the other cities, I found out that they were hit hard just like Chicago was," I explained.

Grace's eyes flickered with concern. She pushed her hands into the back pockets of her black jeans. "So, you're saying that it's just as bad everywhere else?"

"It seems to be," I said somberly. "At least that's what they are telling me." I didn't want to lie to her. There was no point in sugar coating the situation. Grace was a first responder. Unfortunately, she knew all about death and destruction in the line of work she was in, anyway.

Grace sighed with a certain solemnness that made my heart ache for her. "It's going to take a while before life goes back to normal... if it ever does."

"We are going to stay and help pick up the pieces," I promised her.

Grace gave me a sincere smile. "We appreciate that. I radioed through to some of our police officers who are in the nearby area. They were praising you all for your hard work and efforts to help restore some order and peace. The local law enforcement agencies, me included, really need all the help we can get right now."

As Grace talked, I admired her stunning beauty. She was beyond gorgeous. It was hard to look at her and not feel that impulsive tick of desire and passion in my heart.

I couldn't ignore the way my cock hardened whenever I looked at her. I pictured her naked, wrapped in my arms. The situation wasn't appropriate for that kind of thing, but my imagination had a mind of its own. Being around Grace exposed the yearning even more.

Sometimes my fantasy world got carried away. Grace was remarkably beautiful. It didn't surprise me that I was so attracted to her, human or not — her personality and good looks were all it took to make me feel hooked.

"We need to be prepared for more attacks," I said regretfully.

She looked more shocked than I expected.

"Are you kidding me?" she asked.

"I wish I had better news to give you," I said.

Grace shook her head in disbelief. "It's really not over?"

"Just because it's a new day doesn't mean the problems are over," I said as gently as I could.

Grace frowned and looked out the window for a moment before turning her attention

back to me. "How do you know all this?"

"When I was on my headset talking to Merrix, he told me some disturbing news. We also have a team up in the sky trying to take down the warship, but it's not going well so far — and that crew is struggling."

"The... warship?" Grace quizzed, giving me a perplexed frown.

"It's the ship that's housing all these attacking androids," I explained. "It's in charge of releasing them, too. It's commanded by an artificial intelligence, or A.I. for short."

Grace nodded. She seemed to be getting it now. "I have heard of those before. I've never actually seen one though."

"This one is in charge of controlling the mobile androids and giving them the power to launch to Earth," I added, trying to keep the explanation simple.

I didn't want to overwhelm her with the logistics of it, although maybe she could have handled the information anyway. She had already proven herself trustworthy and intelligent to me.

The woman was strong and brave. I'd watched her tirelessly try to save her fellow humans. The compassion about her was fascinating. She had this aura about her — one that radiated and gave her this compelling glow.

I admired her courage. She was like this gravitational source in and of herself, and here I was orbiting around her like a lust-sick moron when our lives were on the line.

If I didn't find a way to keep my emotions in check, my distractions could cost us our lives.

My brother Norin is near the military base," I explained. "He is ready for the third wave of androids when they strike. He is going to try to defend the base as best as he can."

"I wish we could get to them to help out too," Grace said with a dismal sigh and a bleak frown.

"Me too."

There was an extended silence between us. The air felt heavy.

"We need to tell the others," I said, looking at Grace.

She gave me a contemplative glance. "Tell them what?"

I inhaled slowly. "Update them on what we know so far without causing a panic."

Grace nodded and gave me a resilient glance. "Okay. That seems fair. They deserve to know what's going on."

We met up with the rest of the group that was still hiding out in the bank vault.

I started catching everyone up to speed. "I just don't think it's safe for us to be on the move yet. We can't march out of here without a viable plan in place, especially since a third wave of attacks is expected. We'll be easier for them to spot out in the open and in broad daylight."

"We hardly have any supplies, and we have no food," Mike declared, standing up in front of the rest of the group. He planted his hands on his hips and gave me an expectant glance. Defiance flickered in his dark eyes.

I paused a moment and nodded. "Yes, I understand that?—"

"I don't think you do understand, alien man," David said, standing next to Mike and backing up his captain.

Grace released a labored sigh. "David don't be an ass?—"

"We are thirsty and starving," David said, glaring at Grace to cut her off. "What is this guy's plan for that ?" He shot me an accusatory glower.

My blood pressure was rising and so was my frustration. I wanted to put an indentation through David's face with my fist, but I knew that wasn't going to solve any of our problems and would only make the tensions worse between us.

"I can go out for supplies," I suggested. "Is there a corner store around here?"

"What makes you the big hero?" David scoffed, cutting me an icy, patronizing scowl.

"I'm not trying to be a hero. You mentioned food, and I can go and get something?—"

"I thought you said it wasn't safe to leave the bank?" Mike gave me a questioning glance, arching his left eyebrow cynically.

"It's not safe to travel long distances, but if there is a store that has supplies and food in it, we could take the risk to try and bring them back here," I mentioned. "I can scavenge things if I need to and pick through whatever is left."

"You might run into problems with that," Mike said. His expression wasn't as hard anymore. He looked like he might be ready to bend a little more flexibly now. "I'm sure looters have come through."

"Maybe not, though," Grace said. "People might be too scared to come out of their hiding places right now."

"That's a good point," I noted.

Grace all but beamed. Her olive cheeks turned a rosy shade, and she gave me a subtle smile. I noticed David watching us. He seemed angry and jealous every time Grace and I shared a bonding moment.

"I'll go with you," Grace offered. "I know the area. I can help you rummage through the convenience store that is on this same block. It's only a few yards away and it's our best option for now. We can hurry, and I can be your navigational guide. I can also help you carry things back."

She seemed determined to help me. I wanted to find a reason to keep her here where I knew she would be safer, but I trusted in her abilities, and I'd much rather go with her than David or Mike.

"Grace, you can't go out there with him," David protested.

Grace cut him an irked glance. "Why not?"

David reflected. Once again, he couldn't conjure a legitimate excuse. He sulked in the corner and crossed his arms over his chest with anger. I didn't trust David. I thought he was reckless, like a loose cannon. I thought he might be a ticking time bomb. There was only a matter of time before that guy snapped and fucked us all over.

Grace looked at Mike. "Let me guess — you are going to protest, too."

Mike shook his head, surprising me. "Go ahead with him, but hurry back as soon as you can. If you run into trouble, take a radio so we can send back up to you. Stay with

each other, don't separate under any circumstances. Remember — your safety and health are more important than the supplies and food you bring back."

Grace nodded, giving Mike a grateful nod. "Got it. Thank you."

She leaned down to pick up a backpack full of medical equipment, but Mike stepped up to her and shook his head. "No. You have to leave that here, with us."

Grace glanced at me to see if I would argue.

I shrugged. "It's fine with me."

Grace handed the bag over to Mike. "Alright. Here you go."

She turned toward me and gave me a timid smile. She looked nervous to go into the outside world after everything that had happened and to be honest, I couldn't blame her.

"Hey Grace?" Mike asked.

Grace glanced at him over her shoulder. "Yeah?"

"Be careful out there. Come back to us in one piece. We need you." There was kindness and respect in Mike's eyes as he looked at her.

Grace smiled. "Don't worry, I will."

"You are making a mistake, Grace!" David shouted arrogantly behind us.

Grace ignored him and don't look back. David wasn't willing to be as accommodating to the plan.

Grace and I hurried off together before David could charge after us and block Grace from leaving with me.

I thought privately that he might need to be dealt with later if worst came to worst. I wasn't going to rule anything out. We needed to stick together, but if our lives depended on it — I wouldn't hesitate to take matters into my own hands.

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CHAPTER 10

GRACE

"I 'm going to go outside first just to make sure it's safe," Tarax told me. "Just a few steps out into the open to clear the vicinity."

"I can agree to that," I said.

He had that protective presence about him that I found exciting. He was tall and brooding as he took a brave step out the back door of the bank. His bronze skin reflected against the grayness of the sky, shimmering almost ethereally.

He had his snazzy blaster with him, one that I found enticing because of its vibrant and sharp primary colors. It was something unlike anything I'd ever seen here on Earth.

He nodded back to me and beckoned me to follow him out the door. "It's safe," he advised, but I need you to stay as close to me as you can."

"I will, I promise," I said.

I stepped in front of him because I had to lead the way, but soon he was walking side by side with me.

"Where is this store?" he asked.

"It's just up that way." I pointed straight ahead. "It's a corner store. I have no idea if there will even be any supplies left there. For all I know the place has already been ransacked and cleaned out but?—"

"But it's better to try anyway than to just assume something and not take the risk," Tarax said, finishing my sentence for me. "Who knows. We could walk out of there with a bounty in our arms."

I smiled at him, taking a moment to breathe in the scent of fresh air I felt around him. He was amazing and handsome. He had the warmest, kindest eyes.

"I sure hope you're right." It was a long shot, but I didn't have a problem feeding into his optimism even though I expected the worst.

I didn't even know if we would make it to the store alive, much less be fortunate enough to be able to grab stuff and return to the bank in one piece.

As we walked along, we started talking, getting to know each other better. I was surprised to find Tarax easy to talk to, and I appreciated his company. His body was sensational. I couldn't stop staring at him. I kept sneaking little subtle peeks at him. Sometimes he'd notice and I'd get embarrassed, looking away so he wouldn't see me blushing. I felt like a girl with a new crush.

Every so often, I had to remind myself to take a step back down to reality. Now wasn't exactly the time to get my head all fucked up with lust and longing.

It had been a while since I'd had sex, and I was intrigued by this new mysterious alien man. I wondered how he would be in bed. These were thoughts going through my head that I was having trouble controlling.

However, given the current circumstances we were in and the litter of debris and

wreckage all over the streets, my melancholy mood returned rather quickly.

Tarax carried his blaster in his hand, having it ready just in case we came across some unfriendly scavengers or androids along the way. The androids were terrifying with their slit black eyes and ominous, gray colored armor.

The worst part was that they walked around on two legs just like we did, had two arms just like we did, but black slits for eyes that had no emotion in them. I knew whatever was behind them was cruel and unforgiving. I shuddered at the memory of how awful those androids really were.

"So, what's the deal with you and that David guy?" Tarax asked, cutting through my thoughts.

I grinned at him. He was kind of adorable, like he was trying to play it casual when he secretly wanted to know all about my relationship with David. I could tell, just by the curious look on his face that he wanted to know what was going on between us.

"You want to know about me and David?" I chuckled, still smiling wryly at him.

Tarax cleared his throat and put on a masculine front. He stared straight ahead and tightened his sexy jawline. He shrugged as if he was indifferent, but I knew better.

"He seems to really care about you," Tarax mentioned.

I scoffed lightly. "Please. The only person David cares about is himself."

"Well, I get that sense too," Tarax said, looking at me and grinning too.

"What are you jealous or something?" I teased.

"Do you want me to be jealous?" Tarax asked.

I smiled. "I asked you first."

Tarax laughed and glanced up at the sky. "Do you want to know what I really think?"

My heart fluttered. "Sure."

Tarax looked at me. "I think David is a prick."

"I'm surprised you know that word." I laughed.

"You'd be surprised about a lot of things," Tarax quipped.

I met his gaze. "Is that so?"

"Maybe." He shrugged again, looking even more handsome, if that were even possible.

"Well, if it's any consolation, I happen to think that David is a prick too," I admitted.

Tarax chuckled. "I'm glad we think alike."

"David is my ex-boyfriend. Things didn't end very well between us, but we work together, so it can get a little awkward sometimes," I confessed.

Tarax gave me a sympathetic nod. "I kind of figured there was some rocky history there between you two."

"However, could you have guessed?" I chuckled sarcastically.

Tarax laughed too. "I can keep him in check for you if you want."

"I can handle David just fine myself, thanks," I joked.

"Well pardon me then," Tarax said and laughed. "I'll just be going back to the bank base. It doesn't sound like you need me in the slightest. I'll let you take care of this one."

"Come back here, big shot," I said and scooped my hand around his muscular bicep. Holy shit — it felt good to do that. He was fine as hell. What in the world was wrong with me? I needed to snap myself out of it.

Maybe if we snuck behind an alleyway and fucked each other's brains out we could get the sexual tension out of the way and clear the air. We would have the chance to get it out of our systems and move on. At least we would get a better sense of whether the chemistry felt right or not.

Yeah right. Fat chance of that ever happening, but a girl could dream. Besides, it wasn't safe out here, exposed and in the open anyway.

The last thing I wanted to do was have Tarax and I get caught with our pants down around our ankles when a wicked android alien could pop out from around the corner and try to decapitate us both in an instant. That wasn't exactly the 'happy ending' I counted on.

Our eyes locked. A warmth sizzled in between my legs. I felt hot and flustered. My heart pounded. The attraction between us soared. The chemistry was searing, mind-blowing just from that simple touch. So maybe I wasn't way off base after all with Tarax.

"Sorry," I said and quickly yanked my hand back to my own body where it belonged.

"It's okay..." Tarax trailed off, looking slightly disappointed that I wasn't touching him anymore.

I looked straight ahead. "We're here," I said and pointed to a white stucco building on the corner next to what used to be a stoplight intersection before the tornado of alien androids had plowed through this area last night.

Tarax took a deep breath. "Oh good."

The intimate moment was over, but the sexual tension lingered on, weighing heavy on my mind and body. Great. Now it was even worse than before. My clit throbbed.

You have a job to do, Grace. Put your head on straight before you lose it altogether.

The door was open when we approached the entrance. It was half hanging off its hinges and the glass had been shattered completely out of its frame. The 'open' sign on the wall had been smashed and was making a buzzing sound, crackling through the store.

The fluorescent lights were blinking on the ceiling above us, but part of the roof had been blown to bits, and a mess of drywall explosion and exposed wires was hanging down above our heads.

I was honestly surprised that there was still electricity in here at all. I was certain that the power grid had been wiped off the map. We certainly hadn't had power back at the bank, but then again, it had been abandoned for years anyway.

"It looks pretty rough in here," I said, taking an apprehensive step inside beside Tarax.

He protectively put his hand out in front of me. "Let me walk ahead of you so I can

clear the aisles as we cross them."

"Okay," I said, thankful that he cared enough about me at this point to keep me safe.

I scanned the rows of products on the shelves. This store hadn't been as picked through as I expected it to be. I guessed we were lucky in that way, but it was still better to get in and get out. The longer we lingered, the greater our risk of being found became.

I grabbed some bags from the counter area and then turned down the aisle to grab a few containers of SpaghettiOs. They could be eaten cold, and wouldn't go bad.

It was the nonperishable items like that we should bring back with us to the bank. We could open them with the supplies we already had, but if I got lucky and happened to find a can opener lying around, I would certainly snatch it up before we left. You never knew.

I backed up a few inches to study the shelves and figure out what else we could bring back with us. I plucked a loaf of bread from one of the lower shelves. I knew we would need water too, and if I could find over the counter medicines, I would scan that row as soon as I came across it.

I bumped into something hard and large when I was walking backward. It startled me and when I turned around, Tarax was standing in the center of the aisle with his arms full of water bottles. It was him that I had backed into.

"Nice score," I said, trying to keep my eyes on his face and not his groin area.

Tarax smiled. "Thanks."

"We're a pretty good team I guess."

Tarax's teal eyes flickered with passion. "The best team."

"Oh, come on." I laughed. "I'm not better than your Space Knights."

"Actually," Tarax began with a charismatic smile. "You would make a great Knight."

"Oh yeah?" I studied him with a grin. "What makes me so special?"

"Well for starters, you're brave. I saw you out there last night. Don't think I wasn't paying attention because I was. I liked what I saw. You have street smarts, and you take your training seriously. You put others before yourself. That takes a lot of guts to do."

"You were paying attention to me?" I grinned.

Tarax rolled his eyes playfully. "I think you're missing the point."

"I'm not missing the point," I said and gave him a graceful smile. I felt at peace when I looked into his eyes. "Believe me. I understand exactly what you're saying. Thank you for your kind words."

We made eye contact. Neither one of us broke the gaze. Tarax took a step closer to me. He stood there, towering over me, looking ethereal and exotic. He was exquisite from head to toe, a sexy, bronzed-toned creature who was stealing my heart without even knowing it.

He leaned in and closed his eyes. I went with the moment, feeling spontaneous and rippled with excitement. It was like my entire body was electrified.

I felt like I was glowing in that moment, radiating passion. Tarax's lips lightly brushed with mine at first. it was a thrill. He took his time. There was a tenderness

about the way he pressed his lips to mine that grounded me and rocked my center of gravity.

An explosion of pleasure launched through my entire body. I wanted more. I needed more. I never wanted him to stop.

A current of ecstasy spread through my body like wildfire. I was flying on a euphoric high. Endorphins surged through my body as he parted my lips and caressed his free hand through my hair. Our tongues tangled together. His body felt strong and protective, pressed up against mine.

I felt like I was on top of the world. I forgot that the world was in shambles. In this moment, I was locked in time, imbedded in how good it felt to have Tarax kissing me. It was fresh and new, and I embraced every moment of it. The world was a harsh place, but Tarax made me feel safe and secure. He was a wonderful person to ride out this storm with.

Our intimate moment was surreal. When Tarax pulled away, the Earthy, salty taste of his lips lingered on mine. The warmth of his tongue dancing with mine still made my heartbeat fast.

"That felt good," I said, giving him a dreamy smile.

Tarax softly brushed his thumb across my cheek. He gave me a tender smile. "Yes, it did. I would love to keep doing it, but we should really get out of here and back to the bank with our supplies."

I wanted to keep kissing him too, but I knew he was right. We gathered as many items as we could carry in the bags and started walking together back toward the door.

As soon as we arrived at the exit, we were ambushed by a squad of androids. They came out of nowhere and started assaulting our area. They had formed a semi-circle outside of the store with their blasters raised and their snake-like, slitted eyes glaring at us ominously.

Tarax protectively leapt in front of me. He was armed and dangerous in his own right — ready to fire back as many rounds as it took to take them out.

One of the android's fired a bullet from its blaster. The bullet ricochet off one of the aisles that held a variety of different chips products. The bullet slammed through a bag of Doritos and the chips exploded, flying out everywhere. There were Doritos raining down all around us.

"Shit," I said. "Let me help you," I called out to Tarax.

He nodded and glanced at the weapon I held in my hand, a smile lighting his face. It was the one he'd given me. "Just try to stand behind me so I can guard you from all angles," Tarax said.

"I've got you from behind," I shouted.

These ruthless androids seemed hellbent on destroying us and everything else moving, living, and breathing that crossed their paths. They must have had some kind of radar or antenna attached to them to detect us and our whereabouts.

How else could they have found us? We were in the back of the store, otherwise undetected and away from any windows. It just didn't make any sense to me. it unnerved me to know I was being so horrifically hunted.

My heart had just been pounding from lust a few seconds ago, but now it had jumped into my throat and was thundering with fear.

Life could change in an instant, but I wasn't prepared to die here in this corner store — and I sure as hell wasn't going to leave without our supplies. It was a dangerous world out there, but somebody had to be willing to take the risks. Our survival depended on it.

CHAPTER 11

TARAX

"C over me from the right," I shouted to Grace.

"I've got you," she shouted back.

She didn't hesitate. She didn't cower. She looked frightened, maybe a little daunted, but she did what she had to do. I admired her bravery in a situation like this. It was when shit got really tough, and we had to throw down with these androids that I got to really see just how courageous Grace really was.

I got to see how far she was willing to go to protect our supplies and make sure neither one of us got killed in the process of bringing them back to the other survivors.

An android knocked over a shelf beside me to the right. It pointed its blaster at my temple, but Grace was there in a heartbeat to shoot it down. The bullet went right between the fucker's eyes too. When it fell to the ground, it convulsed and made a horrible buzzing sound as a tarry substance began leaking out from its robot head.

I looked at Grace and my jaw dropped with awe. "Nice shot. You really saved me."

"Thanks." Grace grinned proudly. "I have no problem shooting every last one of these fuckers down to save us both."

I had already killed two of them. Grace just killed another. There were six of them in total, at least in this squad. "We need to get closer to the front," I said. "Hopefully, there will be only three left to take out."

"I've got you from the back," Grace promised.

I nodded to her. I still felt possessive and protective over her, but right now I needed her cooperation and assistance.

An android swooped up from behind us. It tried to clip me in the back of the head with the blaster. Grace screamed and jumped out of the way. I took the feisty robot by the arm and yanked it forward, trying to break the arm in the process.

I slammed its ugly robot face into the shelf in front of me. It recoiled backward, clutching its wounded area while making a hissing sound.

Grace was quick on her feet. She wasted no time leaping into action. She plucked the android's blaster from the ground where it had fallen and shot it through the head.

It convulsed like the others had when dying — then exhaled a giant plume of steam. It went limp. The computer inside its head was fried. It didn't move again. One more to cross off the list.

Grace and I exchanged a grateful glance with each other. She was panting hard. Her wavy black hair fell over her face. Her big brown eyes were terrified, but she continued to put on a brave front.

"Two to go," I said to Grace, feeling out of breath and frazzled as we continued to be assaulted from all angles.

An android jumped over a knocked over shelf and tried to land on me like a spider. It

coiled its long arms around my neck and shoulders, attempting to strangle me. I tried to fight it off, but its armor was smooth. There were no grooves on it to grip or hold onto. I was scrambling. Grace was screaming. The last android came up from behind her.

"Watch out," I roared. "Behind you, Grace."

She was fast. She shot around, reeled her arm backward, balled her fist and landed an exceptional blow directly in the left temple of the android.

It was enough to buy her some time so she could shoot it with her blaster. Now we had another extra gun as well. She focused on killing her assailant.

The android fell backward and crashed into the area of the store that sold the fountain drinks. Plastic cups went flying everywhere.

The soda machine broke on impact from the android. It began to spray foamy, carbonated liquid all over the place. The floor was wet and slippery. Grace scrambled to her feet, now soaked with the sticky, orange liquid.

She grabbed the android by the shoulders and shoved it into the refrigerated door beside her. The glass cracked but didn't shatter. The android whined. I didn't think it was capable of feeling pain, but either way, it didn't like what she was doing.

"Grace, help," I called out from behind her. "I can't reach my blaster to kill this damn thing." It was still trying to strangle me.

The android I was trying to fight off had me in a headlock. We were locked in a death grip. One of us was going to die here, and I was going to make damn certain that it would be it and not me.

Grace broke her concentration from her own battle to come to my rescue.

"I don't want to shoot it because I'm afraid I'll shoot you instead by accident," she cried anxiously.

"Just aim and be careful," I coerced her. "You can do it. I trust you." I met her gaze. "Hey, Grace?"

She gave me a timid look. "Yeah?"

"You can do this. I have the faith in you. Alright?"

Grace licked her lips and gave me a persevering nod. She took a deep breath. She needed that connection, that reassurance. I gave her the confidence, and now it was up to her to pull the trigger, both metaphorically and literally speaking.

I had broken out in a nervous sweat. My jaw was clenched so tight it ached. I gritted my teeth and squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for impact.

"On the count of three, just do it, Grace. You have to. This fucking thing is going to kill me if you don't," I choked out.

It was a lot of pressure to put on her, but I was running out of options, here.

My eyes were still closed, but I heard her voice as she counted anxiously. Then I heard the blaster round get fired. It was like a giant pop ringing through my eardrums.

I squeezed all my muscles tightly together until my body went stiff. The android's arms slackened around my neck and shoulders.

It slithered down my back and fell into a heap of metal on the floor beside me.

I opened my eyes and stared between Grace and the robot with amazement. "You got it."

Grace looked astounded as if she couldn't believe she'd been able to fire at her target so accurately.

"Behind you," I exclaimed and lifted my blaster from my belt now that I could reach it.

I shot the last one right as it was raising its arms to attack Grace from behind, while she had her guard down.

It collapsed to the floor too and slid a couple feet across the fountain drink mess.

Grace clutched the sides of her head, staring at me with a mixture of dread and relief. "Is that all of them?"

"For now," I said. "Now come on. Let's grab our supplies and get the hell out of here."

Grace set to work, filling her arms with the bags of things we desperately needed. "You don't have to tell me twice."

Back at the bank, Grace and I were beyond grateful that we had each other back there. It was like having an extra defense. We were tired, dirty, and famished. My throat was so dry and thirsty it felt gritty and scratchy.

Grace popped open a water bottle. She took a long and arduous slug from the top, panting hard as she glugged the water.

"Be careful," I reminded her. "I know you're parched, but we still need to find a way

to ration everything."

Grace wiped her mouth and chin with the back of her hand and looked at me, nodding as she breathed heavily.

"Yeah... I know. You're right. It just... tastes and feels so good."

I smiled at her. "It's hard to resist the temptation."

She gave me a compelling look as if she were searching for the double meaning in what I was saying to her.

Of course, yes, I was secretly thinking about how difficult it was to resist the temptation to kiss her again. Kissing her might lead to fucking her and I was still scared of what that could mean.

I got back to business and gathered the group together. The hungry survivors seemed eager to rip into all the supplies, but Grace and I carefully reminded them just how dangerous the world was out there — and that making these items last was extremely important.

"Who wants to share this bag of Fritos with me?" David exclaimed and popped the bag open carelessly, after I'd just relayed a speech about keeping control over our consumption.

A herd of starving people clustered around him and began taking handfuls. They stuffed their faces as if it were their last meal on Earth. Maybe it would be if they didn't abide by my suggestions.

Grace and I exchanged a wary glance with each other. Everyone else seems to be ready to celebrate, but they didn't fully comprehend just how dire the circumstances

were out there, or how we had almost lost our lives trying to haul just this little bit of superficial supplies back to the bank.

"What's the matter?" David asked, looking at Grace. He was almost gloating as he went against our wishes to stop opening all the bags of food in one sitting. "Not hungry?"

Grace folded her arms stubbornly over her chest and returned David's glare. "Don't patronize me, David."

"We're all hungry," Mike said.

Grace must have had enough of both of them defending each other and pitting everyone else, mainly me and Grace, against each other.

"I've had enough of this bullshit," Grace said, stepping forward. Her scowl was livid as she stared between Mike and David. "We were nearly killed by a unit of those androids that ambushed us at the corner store. They are everywhere, and they can strike anywhere at any time. They are literally everywhere. You don't know what it's like out there. We would appreciate it if you rationed the supplies. Please. "

She paused to look at Mike. "I would sure hope as our fire captain you would understand and that you wouldn't always be so quick to defend David. He's not that special."

Grace spun on a furious heel and began marching out of the vault. Her annoyed footsteps echoed through the room.

"I'm not the one with a fixation on an alien," David called out to her. The resentment and jealousy in his voice was hard to miss.

"Just stop making it worse, alright?" Mike turned toward David and gave him a frustrated glance. He looked like he was about to lose his temper with the schmuck. "We need to stick together, and your snide comments to Grace aren't helping."

"It's just weird, " David barked, talking about me like I wasn't even in the room. "Why does she trust him so much? Why does she want to be attached to the hip with him?"

"I'm going to go check on her and make sure she's okay," I said to Mike. I cut a wary glance to David and pointed to him. "Make sure he lays off the snacks."

Mike seemed to understand. He gave me a respectful nod. I felt like he was finally seeing the light about the selfish way David was behaving. "Will do."

I found Grace upstairs. She was staring out the window with a melancholy look on her face.

"I brought you a single serving bag of chips," I told her and handed them to her in offering.

She took them and smiled. "Thank you. I'm so sorry about that asshole, David."

"He seems really jealous of us spending time together," I mentioned guardedly.

Grace's eyes narrowed and she stared outside. Her body language stiffened. She didn't look at me. "He is jealous. He doesn't want me to talk to any other men, even though we have been broken up for almost a year now. It's so hard to work with him and be around him all the time. In a crisis situation like this — his pompous behavior makes it even worse."

I wanted to reach out and rub her back and stroke her hair, but I couldn't bring myself

to do it. I wanted to comfort her, but at the same time, I wanted to give her personal space.

I knew she was frazzled by David enough as it was. I didn't want to add to her stress by making unjustified moves on her. However, I was still thinking about the magic of that kiss we'd shared, and it was making my cock hard.

"David seems like the impulsive type," I admitted. "Although I don't know him very well but?—"

Grace glanced up at me. Her expression was fretful. Her eyebrows were knitted with concern. Her big brown eyes shimmered with uncertainty.

"No, you nailed that one on the head. David is very impulsive, and when he gets upset about something, he makes uncalculated decisions that hurt others."

"I hate to even say this, but I feel very unnerved by him," I confessed. "I fear that he might do something stupid that could put all our lives in jeopardy."

Grace gave me a somber nod. "You're right. From now on, we need to keep a better eye on him and what he's doing — and we need to find a way to get Mike on board with that plan, too. The more people we have on our side, the better our chances for survival will become — with or without the support from David."

One thing was certain. I was not going to take the fall for that asshole, nor his stupidity about the situation. He could fuck around and be jealous all he wanted, but millions of lives were at stake. There were far too many other important things to worry about — and David wasn't at the top of my list.

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CHAPTER 12

GRACE

" I just finished my rounds," I said as I approached Tarax. "Everyone who needed help has gotten it tonight."

He was in the main lobby, refilling the bullets for the blasters and cleaning them out. I loved to watch him work.

He was so studious about it, yet it relaxed me to watch the methodical way his hands moved. I bet he was magical with his hands in other ways. I took a deep breath and tried not to think about it too much.

His smile lit up the room when he saw me walking toward him, which was a nice consolation prize given the shit day I'd had today.

"That's great news," he said. "Good job."

He was still beaming and looking at me as if I were a superstar and not just an ordinary firefighter who happened to be caught in a world of apocalyptic destruction.

I sat down beside him with a long-winded sigh. I was exhausted, but there was still so much to be done. Collapsing on a bed and passing out were no longer an option.

"How are the wounded doing?" Tarax asked, glancing at me as he worked.

I propped my elbows on my knees and leaned forward, taking a few moments just to unwind and watch him.

"Healing as best they can, given our current circumstances," I said. I sat up straight and inhaled a deep breath, glancing up at the lobby ceiling. "They need better, proper medical treatment and care, though that I can't give them."

Tarax gave me an empathetic smile. "You're doing the best you can."

"Yeah well..." I trailed off, feeling suddenly overcome with emotion.

My eyes burned with tears. I paused so that Tarax wouldn't be able to hear the misery in my voice. "Sometimes I feel like my best isn't good enough."

Tarax immediately stopped what he was doing. He set the bullets and the blaster down on the floor beside him. He took one hand and placed it on my thigh. He took his other hand and cradled it with mine, squeezing it endearingly.

He stared deep into my eyes. His teal eyes were etched with affection. He was so handsome. It hurt to look at him because I was so attracted to him — yet — the situation we were in was so dire. It felt like there was no place for romance when there were so many others out there suffering.

"Hey..." he whispered. "Don't cry." I couldn't ignore the compassion in his voice.

"I'm not crying," I lied and sniffled. I wiped a single tear away from my cheek, feeling betrayed by my own emotions.

Tarax softly stroked my thigh, but he was careful. He didn't reach very far up my leg. I couldn't tell if it was because he was afraid to do it or he was trying to respect me.

It was probably more to sooth me than anything else, but it still turned me on a little and made me feel tingly and relaxed all over.

"Everything is going to be okay," Tarax promised. "We're safe in here, and we have the supplies we need to get by for now. We'll keep hanging on in here for as long as we can until a better opportunity presents itself." There was so much assertion in his voice and confidence in his face that I believed him.

I took a deep breath and snapped myself out of it. "Thank you." I managed to offer him a smile. "It means a lot when you try to comfort me."

"Are you feeling comforted now?" Tarax asked, arching a doubtful eyebrow.

I sat up straight and debated that. "For now, yes."

He patted my knee softly. His smile broke my heart and put it back together all at once. "Good."

I glanced over my shoulder. I didn't know why I did it, but I just felt that weird feeling like someone was watching us and listening in our private conversation.

Sure enough, my instincts proved right. I saw David in the shadows, tucked behind a corner. He was glowering at us.

I could tell just by the scowl on his face that he was seething. I was in no mood to go at it with David right now, so I stood up and made the executive decision for myself to walk away from the situation before it escalated into something worse.

"Where are you going?" Tarax asked.

He was still sitting on the ground. He glanced up at me with a disappointed frown as

if he wanted to keep enjoying my company.

As much as that boosted my ego, I knew that if I stayed out here, David would inevitably bait me into an argument that I didn't want to have in front of Tarax.

"I'm going up to the roof." I pointed to the ceiling. "Jennifer has been up there a while. I might see if she wants to take a break in her shift."

"You need a break yourself," Tarax said, giving me a concerned glance.

I shrugged. "Fresh air will do me some good right now." I smiled. "Although I appreciate your concern for my wellbeing."

Tarax nodded, seemingly accepting my answer. "Alright. Well let me know if you need anything. You know where to find me."

He reached up for my hand and took it, giving it a tender squeeze. I felt David's gaze burning on my back and it was making me rigid and uncomfortable. "Thanks, I really appreciate that."

I started walking away, fully aware of the echo my footsteps made as I walked across the main lobby floor. I made sure to take the front access stairs to the roof. That way, I had less chance of having to encounter a resentful David along the way.

Once I made it upstairs, I pushed the access door open for the roof.

Jennifer was there, sitting in a folding chair we'd brought up here for our shifts at the lookout point. A rifle was sitting beside her, ready to be aimed and fired, just in case.

I approached her and smiled. "Hey."

She turned her head and glanced up at me and straightened her posture, looking surprised to see me.

"Hey, Grace. What are you doing up here? It's not your shift yet." She gazed down at the watch on her wrist.

"I dunno. I just thought you could use some company," I said and sat down on the stone edge of the wall beside her.

"Oh." Jennifer smiled. "Well, that's very nice of you."

"How's it going up here?"

Jennifer shrugged. "Nothing exciting to report."

"I suppose that's good news," I said with a chuckle.

Jennifer laughed too. "Yeah. You're telling me. I'd rather be bored up here with no action rather than having to fight off those weird alien fuckers. Although, as scared as I am of them... I'm also kinda fascinated by some of them."

"Yeah... I get what you're saying." I gave her a warm smile.

Jennifer was one of the survivors in our group that I'd befriended. She was sweet and had a gentle way about her. She was also smart and was proving herself to be a very a fast learner. She seemed willing — eager even — to help us out in any way we needed her.

Jennifer was three years younger than me, at twenty-three years old. She was petite, but she didn't let that stop her from being feisty and spunky in the heat of the action. She had a saucy attitude and didn't hesitate to use it when it was needed most.

Before the world went to shit, she had been working as a local blogger — attempting to make a name for herself in the world of journalism. She was a jazzy go-getter.

She was the type of person who tried to see the world through rose colored glasses no matter what the circumstances were.

We all needed a little positivity in our lives. I found myself uplifted every time I was around her. She was easy to talk to and get along with. I felt that was probably one of the main reasons why we had become friends so quickly.

Jennifer breathed in deeply and gazed out at the city of Chicago. "It's not the same." Her voice was melancholy.

"I can't look at it," I admitted.

Jennifer gazed at me with wide, gray eyes. "Yeah... I know what you mean. It's a painful sight."

"I want to remember Chicago for what it was before all this happened," I said.

Jennifer smiled. "There's nothing wrong with that."

She was wearing her blonde, curly hair in her usual pigtails. She adjusted her positioning on the folding chair. She had curvy hips, on a short and otherwise petite frame.

"I was just downstairs," I mentioned.

"Doing what?" Jennifer eyed me expectantly and took a sip from her water bottle.

"Talking to Tarax."

"Uh-oh." Jennifer's grin was a mile wide. She playfully swatted at my arm.

I laughed and studied her. "Uh-oh, what?"

"Nothing..." Jennifer trailed off with a naughty smirk. "It's just... I have been noticing some chemistry budding between the two of you."

I arched my eyebrows and matched her grin. "Oh really ?"

"What's so bad about that?" Jennifer gave me a harmless shrug and pretended to be innocent.

I looked away. My cheeks felt hot. "I don't know... I could think of someone else who thinks it's a bad idea."

Jennifer wrinkled her forehead. "Are you talking about David?"

I nodded. "Yup."

Jennifer clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Oh, fuck him."

I laughed. "He is certainly letting his opinions on the subject fly any chance he gets."

"For what it's worth, I think Tarax is very handsome," Jennifer said. She gave me a mischievous wink. "Which means I think you should go for it with him."

"Really?" I gave her an uncertain smile but thinking about a relationship with Tarax sure excited me.

"He's strong, brave, muscular... he's really very kind. He's super nice to you and I think it's because he's really into you. I don't see what the problem is. He's the total

package."

"I suppose you're right?—"

"He's a fucking alien freak ."

Jennifer and I both spun around, startled to see David walking up on the roof, approaching us with a heated expression.

"Did you follow me up here?" I asked, feeling appalled.

"You need to stop whatever you're doing with that alien before it's too late," David said, deliberately ignoring my question.

I gave him a sour glare. "It's none of your business."

"Yeah, David," Jennifer said, wasting no time to jump in and defend me. "This doesn't concern you." She looked at him sullenly. "So why don't you just go away and bother someone else?"

David cast her an indifferent glance and focused back to me. "I will treat you better than he ever could."

I scoffed at the audacity of his ironic statement. "You treated me like shit when we were together, David."

David frowned, taking offense. "I could prove you wrong if you would be willing to hear me out and give me another chance."

I set my gaze to the concrete floor. "No thanks. Been there, done that. It didn't work out the way either of us wanted." I lifted my head and stared up at him. "We were

both miserable. Why would you even want to go back to that kind of stressful relationship?"

David took a step closer to me. There was a certain flicker of desperation in his eyes that made me feel momentarily sorry for him until I reminded myself that David was a professional manipulator, especially when it came to me.

"Because I believe that we can do it right this time... you know... learn from our mistakes," David explained.

I laughed. "The only mistake I made was not breaking up with you sooner than I did."

David gave me a horrified look as if I'd just cut him through the heart with a knife and then stabbed the wounded area repeatedly.

"You're a bitch."

"Hey!" Jennifer stood up and protectively stepped in front of me.

"Jennifer," I began and stood up, standing beside her. "It's okay. I appreciate what you are doing but I can handle David and his name calling."

Jennifer planted her hands on her hips and gave David a stony expression. "You better watch who you're talking to."

"Or else what ?" David roared with laughter, slapping his knee. He shot Jennifer a berating glance. " You really think you have the power to do anything, midget?"

"I may be short, but I make up for it in other ways," Jennifer said stoically.

David laughed condescendingly. "I bet you do."

"Leave her alone, David," I urged, glaring at him.

"I don't give a shit about her, " David said and edged closer to me, bridging the gap between us, and making me increasingly uncomfortable. "I want you — but you are too hung up on that bastard alien. Maybe I should have my way with you and remind you about what you've been missing this past year."

I took an instinctive step backward, giving David a firm stare down. "Do not do this, David. And you need to keep your voice down."

I paused to gaze out at the open skies. It was dusk. The sky was a mixture of gray and pink. I had an apprehensive feeling. The air felt different. It was ominous, a little eerie. I felt haunted by these android beasts.

David scoffed. "Why?" he shouted on purpose, just to get a rise out of me.

"Because," I hissed sharply through clenched teeth. "These androids respond to noise. I don't know what it is about them, but it like... wakes them up or something. If they hear any noise at all , they are going to pursue it. I feel like if they don't hear us, they can't see us."

Jennifer nodded vigorously. "I agree."

"What a crock of shit ," David said, still raising his voice way too loudly. "Do you two actually believe that?"

"I do," I said, giving him a defiling stare. "Given what we know so far."

"Which is not much," David mocked.

"Me too," Jennifer said. "So why don't you do us all a favor and shut the fuck up

before you get us all killed?"

"You think I'm scared of those fucking things?" David exclaimed. He lifted his good arm by his side. "Come at me, then, you fuckers. He began spinning around in a circle as he shouted. The veins in his neck bulged. His eyes shadowed with sinister darkness. He looked deranged. "Bring it, on!"

"David," I hissed, jogging up next to him. "Stop throwing a tantrum just because you aren't getting your way. There are other people you could hurt with the impossible way you are behaving."

"So what?" David continued shouting. "What does that have to do with me?"

I reached my arm up and drew it back, slapping it hard against David's left cheek.

I was even more astonished than he was that I had done that. David slowly reached his hand up to clutch the tender area. I had slapped him so hard across the face that it had left an instantaneous red mark of my fingers on his skin.

"What the hell did you do that for?" David asked, staring at me with enormous, baffled eyes.

My jaw dropped. I was at a loss for words, but thankfully now, David was too. At least he was no longer yelling.

"I didn't want you to draw the attention of those sickening things," I said defensively. "You just wouldn't stop shouting."

David began backing up slowly, walking toward the exit access door. He was still giving me that dumbfounded stare.

"This isn't over," he called out.

I stiffened and swallowed hard. I straightened my shoulders and stared at him defiantly. I would take his warning seriously — but I was relieved that he was going to leave me alone — at least for now.

CHAPTER 13

TARAX

"What have you heard about the siege? Are we still planning to attack and take over the warship that is hovering above Earth? If so, when is that happening and what is the protocol involved?"

I felt out of the loop and a little disconnected from my fellow Knights. I tried to remind myself that even if we were separated for now, we were all working diligently for the greater good of mankind on Earth.

It felt good to be getting an update from Merrix and Norin through our secure communication line. It was nice to hear their voices and have that assurance that they were safe and alive.

I was sitting up on the roof doing my shift at the lookout point, discussing an update on the situation with them.

I preferred to talk to them while I was up here alone on my lookout shifts, because it gave me extra privacy. I didn't always want the other survivors with me in the bank to hear what we were talking about.

I was also nervous about rumors. There would be nothing worse than false information getting spread about the status of the world. I wanted to make sure I had all the facts straight before I informed everyone else in our group about what was going on — and that included Grace. There was no point in creating a panic situation.

It wasn't like I was deliberately hiding anything from Grace, but why put her through unnecessary worry for nothing?

"The Knights that are still in space are preparing for that overthrow as we speak," Merrix informed. "It is my understanding that they are going for the heart of the warship — as you already know — where the A.I. is located."

I took a deep breath and glanced out over the edge of the building. It was a clear night. The sky was pink and gray, just after dusk. Soon a blanket of darkness would cloak itself over the ruined city, and that was when we had to be the most alert.

"It's not going to be easy to take that thing down," I mentioned.

"No, it's not, but the good news is, the attacks from the androids might stop occurring on Earth once the team of Knights hits the warship."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"The A.I. is going to want to keep all its reserves once it realizes it's the target," Merrix explained.

"Right." I nodded and glanced down at the ground several stories below. "That makes sense. It's going to do whatever it can to protect itself."

"That's right," Merrix agreed. "And in order to protect itself, it's going to need whatever remaining androids it has left on its warship, and maybe the Earth can get a break."

"We sure need a break down here," Norin said grimly.

"Godspeed to them all," I said with a sigh. "Those Knights in space have their work

cut out for them."

"All of us have the same challenges we're going to have to face," Norin reminded me. "We all play an integral part to cleaning up the damage from this massive raid."

"That's true," I said, feeling a pang of tension in my stomach that twisted into an uncomfortable knot.

I missed my twin brother. I couldn't wait until we had the opportunity to reunite, but I knew he was doing the best he could to keep his group of survivors alive and safe, just as I was.

Down on the streets below, the aftermath of the android attacks had left the entire city in shambles. It looked like an Earthquake, a tornado, a hurricane, and an atomic bomb had all gone off simultaneously.

I had never seen any of those things happen in my lifetime, but I'd heard about them all and knew that they were all natural disasters — aside from the atomic bomb — which I also knew was a manmade radioactive weapon used in a war hundreds of years ago.

I was sort of a history buff, and human culture fascinated me. It was quiet down there on the city streets. No one was out walking around. The silence was almost deafening.

The streets were empty and still. It was certainly a haunting scene that left shivers jogging up and down my spine.

It was like a crime scene everywhere you looked. It reminded me of my own home planet of Telanis. Resources were scarce there too, because we too were under constant attack and torment by a corrupted monarchy.

The Spacing Guild took advantage of their power over the king and his debts, but in the end, it was the commoners who suffered the most. The ripple effect of the attacks was still trembling through the entire city of Chicago, much like they did on a constant basis back home.

The devastation was soul crushing. You couldn't look out the window without seeing the debris and gaping craters in the asphalt, cars flipped over, dust settling over any and every inanimate object.

You couldn't ignore or avoid any of it.

People were hungry. They were confused and angry. It could make for a lethal type of combination. Pressures and tensions were mounting. Soon, I feared that the human race would be pitted against each other just in order to survive because they would feel that they had no other option other than every man for himself.

I had seen these types of problems evolve in the past, but I would do my best to keep our own group as united as possible.

"The odds seem bleak right now, but I know we can get through this together," Norin mentioned after a few moments of silence between the three of us.

He was trying to inspire us to think ahead to the future. I didn't have any problem with that, but we still couldn't afford to let our guards down.

"There is the twin brother I know and love so much," I said, appeasing him. "Always looking for the positive outcome in any situation."

"There is a lot of clean up to do," Merrix said as if the mere thought exhausted him.

"At least we don't have to worry about any more of those fuckers raining down from

the sky," I said.

Merrix chuckled at the irony. "No, the A.I. will keep its reserves for itself...the fucking selfish monster."

"The Knights ambushing the warship have their work cut out for them," Norin said somberly.

"I'm confident they can handle it," Merrix said, making me wish I could tap into some of his positivity.

Of course, I wanted to believe that we weren't all doomed, but how could I really think otherwise whenever I looked around?

I didn't voice my fears to Merrix and Norin. Not here on this roof, not over the communication lines. We all could use a little boost in morale. Our spirits were down but not crushed.

I knew these communication lines were relatively safe and secure, but I didn't want to risk talking too deep about our plans and hopes for the future.

We couldn't show any signs of weakness or vulnerability in front of these wretched robots, wherever they might lurk in the shadows. Unfortunately, there were still going to be plenty of them to deal with here on Earth.

"We'll be able to reunite as soon as all this is over," Norin said optimistically.

I scoffed. "When will that be?"

"Try to think with an open heart and an open mind, dear brother," Norin said. His voice had a certain element of sadness to it. "I can battle my way to you any time."

"I feel like I'm going to be stuck here in this bank hiding out forever," I said.

"You aren't hiding out," Merrix advised. "You are keeping the humans in your group safe, and that is what you have been trained and instructed to do for now. All of you are still alive, so you must be doing something right."

"Thanks," I murmured, staring out at the blackness of the night sky, but my mood still felt sour.

There was no electricity because all the power grids had been knocked out. I didn't know when it would be restored, but I assumed it was probably going to be a long time.

I appreciated Merrix and Norin giving me this pep talk to help me dig myself out of this trap of doom. Perhaps I needed their encouragement more than I initially realized.

"I can fight my way back to you within the next day or so," Norin suggested.

"What?" I shook my head vigorously. "No, Norin. You need to stay where you are, too. It isn't safe to go out there. Grace and I were nearly killed when we were ambushed and assaulted by six enemy androids. All we were trying to do was simply head one or two blocks down the street to a local corner store to get supplies. It turned into this horrible fight to the death, crisis situation in seconds. Those robots are ruthless. They are programmed to destroy anyone and anything that isn't themselves. They consider everything and everyone their enemy that gets in their way."

Norin paused. Merrix didn't add his two cents to the argument. Norin sighed, loud and long. "We will figure out a plan. We need to join forces before it's too late."

"I have to agree with you on that," I said. "Strength in numbers will be easier to tear

down the remaining androids — at least in our area of the map. For now, I am going to keep working with Grace and Mike to figure out what to do next while we're still seeking refuge in this bank."

"At least you have humans that will cooperate with you," Merrix advised. "It could be worse."

I glanced over my shoulder at the roof entry door. Speaking of which, Mike and Grace were walking across the rooftop toward me.

"Yeah..." I trailed off, watching them march my way. "You're right about that. I've got to go."

I hung up with Merrix and Norin and stood up to greet Mike and Grace.

"How are things downstairs?" I asked.

Grace pushed her wavy black hair away from her face and exchanged a wary glance with Mike. Mike had an apprehensive look on his face and his large, black eyes looked worried. He was wearing a tight t-shirt with his firefighter station's logo on it. The shirt was skin-tight, accentuating his boulder-like biceps.

"Well..." Mike began, shifting his weight uncomfortably as if he had something to tell me that wasn't to be of popular opinion. "People are stressed and arguing down there a lot more than usual."

"At least they are alive ," Grace mumbled under her breath. She folded her slender arms over her chest and frowned. "For that, at least... they should be grateful."

"Sounds like there's trouble in paradise," I joked to lighten the mood and smiled at Grace.

She stopped frowning and her features relaxed. Her big brown eyes shimmered with amusement.

"Yeah... I suppose you could say that." Grace returned my smile. The olive shade of her cheeks was briefly replaced by a rosy blush.

Mike didn't seem to get the subtle, lighthearted banter between me and Grace — or if he did — he ignored it.

"We need to find a way to divvy up the food before these selfish savages down there eat it all in one night," Mike said as if he believed it was going to be an impossible challenge.

"Maybe we should hide it from them and portion it out ourselves," Grace mentioned with an ironic chuckle.

"You know that won't go over well," Mike said grimly. He stared at the ground. "Especially with David."

"Well, I'm just happy to see that you are finally starting to understand what a massive jerk he is," Grace said.

Mike nodded but sighed with solemnness. "Yeah... I'm coming around to that unfortunate reality. My wife isn't real happy with the way he's been acting either." He looked down, as if ashamed that he'd defended David at all.

Grace met my gaze. "Anyway, we didn't just come up here to talk about the food rations. Although it is still a problem that needs to be worked out."

"What else is going on?" I studied both of them.

"We need to talk about the shifts up here on the roof," Mike said. "And how long each person should stay up here on their watch."

I pondered. "I think between four and six hours is a fair rotation speed."

Grace shivered and rubbed her arms with her hands. "Yeah... especially the night ones. It gets so chilly up here."

Mike nodded and glanced around the enormous rooftop block of concrete we were standing on. "Yeah, and the wind really seems to be picking up tonight."

Grace grinned. "I think we should assign David to rooftop duty tonight since it's so cold. Serves that asshole right."

Mike laughed. It was the first time I'd seen him show much emotion other than anger and frustration. He looked carefree, even if it was only for a fleeting moment. There was kindness reflecting in his dark eyes.

"I say that's the best idea anyone has had yet."

"I have about an hour left in my shift," I said. "I'll stay up here for that time and finish up my allotted time, and then we can tell David he's on duty next. From there, maybe we can congregate as a group and explain to everyone that they really need to ease up on the snacking."

Grace gave me an assertive nod. "I agree one-hundred percent."

"Me too," Mike said. "We can't tolerate weakness in our group, but we also need to stick together. I know it's hard with the kids being part of this. My wife is trying to keep them occupied. We all need to work together. It's a very intricate process to keep things from breaking down. If we have any glitches in the operation, we are

bound to fail and crumble and I don't want to see that happen."

I was grateful to have Grace and Mike to vent to. I was happy to see that Mike was finally seeing the light and realized how dire the situation was — and just how important it was that we kept boundaries and rules in place, even if it seemed his realization came about through his wife and Grace.

"Come get me in an hour," I advised them. "From there, we'll have the uncomfortable conversation with the others about the changes that we need to make around here."

It was something that had to be done, whether the people downstairs wanted to hear it or not.

CHAPTER 14

GRACE

It was the middle of the night. I was staring out the window, wide awake and feeling restless. Most of the other people in our group were sleeping, aside from David, whom we had successfully finagled up to the rooftop to cover most of the night duty watch.

"Hey," a male voice whispered from behind me.

I turned around. It was Tarax. He was standing there like an alien stallion, looking rogue and determined.

His bronze toned skin was effervescent in the glow of the moonlight shimmering in from the window. His lean, perfectly toned body was sculpted with beautiful muscles that excited me. His teal eyes cut through me. His short teal hair was handsome and complemented his complexion perfectly.

"Hi." I gave him a coy smile and tossed him a slight wave.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Nothing really. Just staring out the window at my ruined city."

"You shouldn't look at it too much," Tarax said. "It will upset you."

I looked at the ground and nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"Why aren't you sleeping?" he asked, frowning with concern. His jaw line was so sexy and tight that it made my heart ache with longing.

I shrugged. "I can't sleep."

His features softened. "Me either." He paused and studied me a moment. "Come with me."

"Where?"

"To the back office," he said. "We can talk in private."

"Sure." I started walking toward him. My heart pounded with desire. I hoped we could do more than just talk. I wanted him so badly it hurt.

I followed him into another room that had an office with a door that we could close for extra privacy. As soon as I was alone with him, I instantly got all hot and flushed, wanting to kiss him again, but I resisted. I was too afraid to make the first move.

Tarax reached out and softly brushed his thumb against my cheek. He gently stroked his fingers through my hair. He looked at me with those alluring teal eyes of his. Everything about him was irresistible.

"You're very pretty," he whispered.

I blushed and flickered my gaze away, coyly. "You sure know how to make a woman feel good."

"There's more where that came from," Tarax said with a flirtatious grin.

He was a heart-throb, and he knew it. I didn't even care at this point if he worked his charm on me. He could do with me what he wanted. I was captivated by him. Everything about him appealed to me in a sexual way.

"I would love to introduce you to the rest of the Knights," he said, still gazing at me with that look of affection that made me feel intoxicated with yearning.

If he ripped my panties off and fucked me until I screamed and couldn't see straight — right here — on the floor of this private office... I'm just saying... I wouldn't stop him. If anything, I felt like I needed to do whatever I could to encourage him to ravage me.

I wanted this macho alien hunk. I wanted to see what his cock looked like. I bet it was huge... throbbing... thick... everything I needed to fill me up and make me forget that the world I once knew has been shattered to bits.

My imagination ran wild. I was so excited that it felt like a current of bubbles was fizzling through my veins.

"I'm happy to be alone with you right now," I confessed, gazing dreamily into his eyes. "And I'd be honored to meet your fellow Knights."

Truth be told, all I cared about now was sex with him, and I hoped it was going to lead in that direction.

Apparently, me saying I was interested in meeting his fellow Knight soldiers was all it took. I must have said the right thing... because Tarax went straight into feverishly kissing me. He pinned me against the wall and brushed his lips with mine, devouring me with a showering of hungry, urgent kisses.

Tarax completely rocked my world. He sent me to oblivion. His kisses were

sensational. He caressed my tongue with his and brushed his fingers through my hair. He kissed my neck and cradled my chin in his hands. I was dizzy with lust. All I saw was him — and all I could think about was the incredible pleasure he was bringing me.

His hard cock throbbed and bulged against my inner thighs as he desperately reached for my pants and unbuttoned them. He undid the zipper and pushed my panties down off my hips. I shoved them off my ankles and tossed them aside with a single flicking motion.

Tarax had less clothes to strip down because he already wasn't wearing a shirt.

My fingers traced and explored over his sculpted body and his carved muscles. However, it was the hard muscle between his legs that captured most of my attention.

As he removed his pants, my eyes curiously roamed to sneak a preview of his cock. It was better than I could have ever expected.

It was enormous, and the same bronze color of his skin. I no longer had to be curious about what it looked like in real life.

It was like a human cock too, only bigger, thicker, and a little veiner. I almost wondered if he was going to be too big for me — but I was a woman who always appreciated a challenge. A surge of adrenaline sparked me to life and gave me a craving for adventure with him.

"When all the dust has settled on this war, we could use a medic like you on our force," Tarax murmured softly in my ear as we ravenously continued to make out with each other and intimately caress each other's bodies.

"Seriously?" I was so drunk with lust that I had trouble connecting the dots of what

he was actually suggesting.

"Yes," he said breathlessly. His hands brushed against my nipples. He gently squeezed my breasts. I was so turned on by the tender and erotic way he touched me that I could barely see straight. "You are a valuable asset, Grace... and I don't want to forget just how important you are."

If he kept talking like that... he could do anything he wanted to me.

He groaned and pushed his chiseled body against mine. His kisses became more aggressive and assertive. I didn't mind. It was intense and thrilling. Endorphins rushed through my veins.

"It sounds like a great adventure," I said, because I was lost in the moment. "I don't know though... my team needs me — although the prospect of putting some space distance between me and David sounds too good to pass up."

Tarax and I made eye contact and laughed. My clit throbbed. There was a special bond, an intimate connection we shared. Even though we were from literal worlds apart, we appreciated each other's sense of humor, and I felt like lust and attraction knew no boundaries as far as that was concerned.

I wanted him to put his hands between my legs. I wanted him to touch my pussy and fill it up with his swollen cock. I was getting impatient. I didn't want to have to wait any longer to be slayed by that sensational tingle that spreads like erotic stars popping through my body.

"I want to fuck you if you'll let me," Tarax said, almost as if he had been reading my mind.

I grinned at him and snaked my arms around his neck and massive shoulders. "I

thought you'd never ask."

I was poised but part of me was nervous for him to take me. I knew it would feel good, but I was afraid of him forgetting that I was human and being too rough with me I wanted to ask him if he'd ever had sex with a human before, but I didn't. I just decided to let things unfold naturally and see where they went.

Tarax put his right hand on his cock and started stroking it, while he reached one hand between my legs and pushed my engorged pussy lips apart with two fingers. He slid a finger across my clit and caressed it with mind-blowing circles that all but raptured me.

I moaned when he pushed his index finger inside me. He groaned too, and his eyes rolled back in his head as if he were being fed a continual stream of pleasure.

"You're so wet," he said, sounding impressed.

"You're really turning me on," I told him. "Especially when I look at that huge cock of yours."

He grinned and continued to jerk himself off up and down. "Do you like to watch me touch it?" A translucent, weblike film of pre-cum began to drizzle and slowly drip out of the tip of his erect penis.

"Yes," I said breathlessly, staring at it with wonder.

"Do you like it when I finger you and rub your clit?" he asked.

"It's amazing," I moaned again, this time a little too loudly. I clamped my mouth shut. I felt my cheeks burning with humiliation.

"Don't worry," Tarax said with an endearing smile. "No one can hear us in here."

"I hope you're right." I chuckled, although I was still going to try to be quiet anyway.

It gave me a sexy thrill... just thinking about the fact that Tarax and I were going to fuck in here while the others were sleeping, unaware and unassuming in another room.

"I like being naughty with you," Tarax confessed.

"It's an adrenaline rush," I agreed. I was having so much fun I couldn't even explain it. "I want you to fuck me," I said, making bold eye contact with Tarax. "Your fingers feel good, but I want the real thing. Put that hard cock inside me, you sexy boy."

A wild and devious smile stretched across Tarax's lips. His teal eyes glistened with arousal. I was turning him on too, and I loved it.

"You'll get your wish," he said. "Have patience. I was just opening you up a little. Aren't you a little nervous for me to feed your tight little pussy this large cock?"

I gave him a playful smirk as he gave me handsome, hazy bedroom eyes. "Not in the slightest."

Tarax groaned. "You are all woman and I love it."

"You better believe it," I told him.

Tarax gently laid me down on the carpet on the floor. He opened my legs and straddled himself over my hips.

The tip of his cock brushed up against my sensitive pussy lips. I moaned and arched

my back, letting him have my way with me. I opened my legs wider, spreading them further apart, sprawled out on my back on the floor.

Tarax was laying just above me. He held eye contact with me the entire time as he pushed his cock through to my warm, wet, hole. His shaft rubbed up against my clit. I moaned again.

"You're so wet, I might not have trouble getting my whole cock inside you," he said.

"Try your best," I whispered seductively. "I'll take what you can give me."

"You're insanely hot," he said. "I'll give you everything if you let me."

I grinned and arched my back again, wiggling my hips as he fed his giant cock to me one swollen, glorious inch at a time.

When he reached the point of penetration to where he couldn't go any deeper, he began to grind our hips together. I moved with him, rocking back and forth.

He moved slowly at first to get me used to his size. Once I adapted to his girth after a few minutes, he started to thrust harder. Our bodies were pressed together, naked... sweaty... glorious. The entire room smelled like sweat, sex, and pre-cum.

I cuffed my hands around his muscular arms, enjoying every minute of him fucking me. Deeper and more urgently, he destroyed my pussy and I loved it. Still, I could tell he was holding back.

"You're not hurting me," I reassured him. "It feels so good."

Tarax seemed encouraged. He gave me an adoring look as he fucked me a little more dominantly. His eyes beamed friskily. Every sense I had was at peak. Euphoria

dripped through my veins and made me feel buzzed.

Tarax's cock was enormous. His shaft kept rubbing up against my clit and engorged pussy lips. I had never experienced sex this phenomenal in my entire life. I was blinded by lust. I was wired with pleasure; my inhibitions had all but vanished.

My back rubbed against the carpet as he opened me up and fucked me, but I didn't care. I didn't mind a little bit of pleasure mixed with a little bit of pain.

He was almost all the way inside me, but he was so large he couldn't fit it all the way. It still filled me up, and he burrowed inside me over halfway in. His cock tip blissfully slammed into my g-spot. Tarax was undeniably the best lover I'd ever had.

I was soaked. It was a sweaty mess between my legs. My pussy had all but formed a river of lust and a steady stream of arousal pooled inside it.

Tarax groaned with satisfaction. "It feels amazing."

Without warning, he hit it in just the right position and at just the right time. I came so violently that my entire body started trembling.

I thrashed under Tarax's powerful control. I started bucking my hips wildly and screaming with pleasure as the orgasm ripped me in half.

At this point — I didn't even care who heard me out there. I was too enveloped by the ecstasy. Vibrant light flashed behind my eyes. I moaned loudly, feeling like I was being launched to the stars.

Tarax didn't stop, even though the intensity of my climax. He relentlessly pounded into me, fucking my brains out until he was assaulted by his own orgasm.

He groaned and his body went rigid as he finished. He stared at me with those gorgeous teal eyes of his as he slaughtered my pussy and came at the same time.

After he came, he collapsed on top of me, but he didn't put his entire body weight on me. His cock was still hard and bulging inside me, pulsing. It felt good and added to the intimacy. It was really sexy to be finished, but yet, still acting so close to him and still having his thick cock inside me.

I started rubbing his back. I didn't know why I did it... I just went with it. It felt organic in the moment. I loved to touch him anyway, and his back muscles were so sexy.

He sighed contentedly. We didn't talk. We didn't need to. We were just blissfully climbing down from paradise together, relaxed, and exhausted, holding each other through the night.

CHAPTER 15

TARAX

I was in love with Grace, and there was no denying it now. Having sex with her sealed it for me. I knew exactly what I wanted, and it was her. She embodied everything I could ever want in a woman. I felt like I would die without her — even for as short a time I had known her.

She was courageous and full of spirit. She gave me hope for the future and made me want to fight even more for the cause of humanity on Earth.

I wanted to protect her and be her fearless Knight if she needed me, but at the same time, I knew she was already extremely brave on her own, and she was also compassionate.

She was a skilled medic for her firefighter unit, and I hoped that because of her situation with David, it would make her more inclined to take me up on my offer to put her skills to good use in space as one of our Knights on the force.

Being madly in love with Grace was going to come at a price, but now I understood just how enticing that love could be.

I'd fallen hard for her in such a short time frame. Now I finally could understand what it was like for Garlin, Merrix, Shan, and the others when they too fell in fast love with a woman from Earth.

I had no control over these emotions. I wanted Grace all the time. When I wasn't with her, I missed her, and I was thinking about her all the time.

When I was with her, I embraced every moment, and appreciated her warmth and femininity. She made me want to be a better version of myself, too.

Everything about her exuded confidence and kindness. She was amazing. Maybe I was selfish for wanting her all to myself, but as it stood right now — I couldn't bear to be apart from her. I didn't even want to return to space without her.

Part of me was scared that she would want to remain on Earth even after all the androids were killed off — because that was just the type of person she was. She put everyone else's needs in front of her own, and I knew that her firefighter unit would need her to stay and pick up all the pieces.

How could I blame them, really? She was an amazing medic. She was also their only medic — so that made things even more challenging for me if I wanted to be able to find a way to convince her somehow that she belonged with me instead.

It was a tough life out there too, as a Space Knight. We were out there in the open universe roaming and patrolling the skies as we fought our way to other freedoms and had to loot in order to get the supplies and resources we needed. We were fast. That was our best defense against those who constantly preyed on us.

It was much like the situation here on Earth. We always felt chased and hunted. I wasn't sure Grace was ready for that lifestyle. It was like going from one extreme to the next, but Earth would never be the same — at least not for a long time to come. I wasn't sure if she knew that or not. We hadn't really talked about it in detail, yet.

I was still considering ways to entice her to go with me — ways to make it more appealing out there in the galaxy than on Earth — when Mike walked past me in the

hall.

I flagged him down. "Hey... uh... Mike? You got a second?"

Mike retraced his steps and paused in front of the open door frame. "Uh... yeah?" he stated apprehensively, and then took a reluctant step inside the room with me.

"I need to ask you something. It's err... it's about... Grace."

"Oh yeah?" Mike walked further into the room. The curiosity was enough to keep him interested, which was good for me. He folded his arms suspiciously over his chest and cut me a skeptical glance. "What about her?"

Well, I'm in love with her .

I knew I couldn't admit that to Mike, so I opted for an easier gateway to be able to talk to him one on one.

"I... like her," I admitted.

Of course, it was more than that... but I was hoping that admitting this to Mike would gain me some respect and maybe if I was lucky — even a little empathy.

"You like her?" Mike asked, his voice shrill.

"Yes, I do. There is something between us. It's this mutual attraction. We've talked about it a little," I added.

"You and Grace ?" Mike asked in disbelief. I mean... I heard rumors that there might be something going on between you two... but I was trying my best to ignore it?—"

"Well, it's not rumors," I affirmed. "I am really falling in love with her."

Mike stared at me with a dumbfounded expression. "Is this shit for real or are you just fucking with me?"

"No one is fucking with you." I fervently shook my head.

Mike was already extremely guarded around me because he was still trying to come to terms with the culture shock that surrounded these circumstances, and I didn't want to spook him any extra than he already was.

Mike's eyes narrowed. He looked disgruntled. "Can you make your point already? I've got rounds to do and my wife to get back to."

I was cleaning blasters and reloading them for tonight. I set them down beside me.

I made eye contact with him. "I've given a proposition to Grace. I'm waiting to find out her answer."

"What kind of proposition?"

There was no point in beating around the bush here.

"I asked her to come with me back to space."

Mike burst into laughter, but when he realized I wasn't laughing too, he swallowed hard and put on a somber front. "You asked my medic to return to space with you?" He stared at me as if he couldn't believe I'd have the audacity for something like that.

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because I am falling in love with her," I repeated.

Mike looked horrified. "Does she feel the same way?"

"She has spoken of the same, yes."

Mike ran a hand through his dark, curly hair. "Wow... I uh... I don't really know what to say... she wants to leave Earth?"

He sat down and stared at the wall as if he needed a moment to process. I gave him a minute to think.

"She hasn't said yet."

Mike glanced up at me. "What do you want from me, then?"

"I'm afraid that she is going to feel obligated to stay here and help with all the aftermath after we kill all the androids."

"So?" Mike shrugged coldly. "What's wrong with that? We are her people. Not you. Are you asking for my help to try and convince her to go to an otherworldly alien place in God knows where?"

"That's harsh," I said, matching his icy expression. "I'm not saying she has to leave right away. I'll be here, too... helping with the restoration."

"Oh really?" Mike scoffed, giving me a sardonic gaze.

"Yes." I nodded. "I'm sorry if I haven't been able to prove my loyalties to you and the

other humans as of yet but as far as Grace is concerned?—"

"You just have to get her in bed, and she'll do anything you want?" Mike asked, cutting me off.

"It's not like that at all." I returned his callous stare.

My sexual relationship with Grace was none of his fucking business.

"Well, I have some concerns," Mike informed.

"But ultimately , it's not your decision," I reminded him.

Mike frowned. He knew he couldn't argue that.

"I will have to find another medic for my team," Mike said. "She's the best, and she's the only one we have."

"I understand that, and I thought about that too," I admitted.

"And you said you would be willing to wait it out to make sure that most of our city has recovered before you head back to space?"

"That's the plan for now," I confirmed.

Mike pondered quietly a moment. "What about the androids? What if more come? Surely the source will send more when we least expect it. It seems fitting that after we clean up and start getting back to our normal lives and routines — that would be a perfect time for them to try and strike again."

"We are working on taking out the source," I reassured him.

Mike gave me a look as if that answer wasn't good enough for him. "What if another source comes along? What if they have hundreds, if not thousands of androids to unleash on Earth that are hiding out and just waiting to take their shot when we're holding our dick in our hands?"

I didn't have an answer for that. I didn't want to lead Mike on. We could take out this particular warship — but in the end Mike was right. We had no way to predict just how many others out there might try to do a copycat attack at any given time.

"If something like that happens in the future, we can make preparations here on Earth before we leave to ensure that people are safer," I offered.

Mike raised a cynical eyebrow. "Example?"

I contemplated. "Barracks underground, underground bases, camps... the option for people to sign up for militia teams as sort of a reserves army to back up the regular military," I suggested.

"Hmm..." Mike trailed off as if he were seriously considering jumping on board with a plan like that. "A lot to think about."

"Yes."

"So... what about Grace?"

"It's her decision," I confirmed. "Not mine to make, not yours."

Mike started backing toward the door. "Should I talk to her about it?"

"No." I immediately jumped up, hating how urgent I sounded. "You can't mention that we spoke of this. Please... I beg for your discretion."

Mike looked pleased to have the upper hand for once. "Alright. I won't say anything." He pointed his finger at my chest and gave me a steely look in the eyes. "But you owe me, motherfucker."

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:20 am

CHAPTER 16

GRACE

"My brother Norin will be here soon," Tarax told me as we lay cuddling together the next morning.

"He's your twin brother, right?" I asked, curious about what it was going to be like when he arrived. "Does he look exactly like you?"

"For the most part," Tarax said. "Although he wears his hair long. He usually has it tied back in a single braid."

"That will be interesting to see," I said.

"You will like him," Tarax admitted. "He is the calm glue that holds our Space Knights together. He is analytical. He thinks before he acts — which as you know is quite important, especially in the world we live in right now."

"Yes, it is," I agreed.

Tarax's eyes canvased my body. He stroked my arm with one finger, tracing it up and down and giving me pleasure inducing tingles and goose bumps.

"Mmm..." I trailed off contentedly. "Keep doing that. It feels so good."

"Your skin is so soft and warm," Tarax admitted. "I wish we could lay here like this

together forever."

I snuggled up closer into his neck, nestling, pressed up against his body. "Me too, darling."

Tarax started rubbing my back.

"Be careful," I said. "That might lead to other things."

"Is that a problem?" Tarax chuckled.

I gazed up at him and smiled affectionately. "Not at all."

Tarax leaned down and started kissing me. He made me feel fuzzy all over. His hands began to explore where they wanted to go, roaming down my naked body.

Electric tingles sent a shiver of euphoria jogging up and down my spine. Tarax repositioned me, gently laying me down on the floor. We had a few blankets, but it wasn't much. All of us in the group were just trying to make-do with what little supplies we had.

It was hard to deal with, but the hardness between Tarax's legs made it slightly easier to forget about our worries and our problems — at least for a little bit.

Tarax's stiff erection pulsed against my bare inner thigh. It excited me to feel its hardness. He stroked my cheek and tenderly brushed my hair away from my face, gazing down at me with an outpouring of affection shimmering in his teal eyes.

He leaned in again and kissed me. I was floored by the passion. I arched my back under him and moaned, snaking my arms around his neck to draw him closer.

"You're so sexy," Tarax said, gazing dreamily into my eyes. "I love it when you moan like that."

"I want you to fuck me again," I said in a desperate voice.

My clit throbbed with excitement. His hard cock still bulged on my inner thigh, just beckoning me to let it glide like butter inside me.

"I want to fuck you too," Tarax said. His eyes burned with lust.

He started kissing a trail of delightful kisses down my body, between my breasts, sucking on my nipples. He rubbed my stomach as he continued a row of sensual kisses down to the top of my pubic bone. I was so aroused I could hardly breathe through the pleasure.

I instinctively parted my legs, opening them enough for Tarax to have his way with me.

"Your pussy is gorgeous," he said, staring at it with a ravenous expression. He glanced up at me with hope glazing in his eyes. "Can I kiss it?"

"Yes," I said breathlessly.

I thought I was going to die if he didn't kiss it — or at least touch it — within the next ten seconds.

Tarax put his head between my legs. I held his hands as he guided his mouth to my vagina. He started gently kissing it, softly brushing his lips on my engorged lips.

As soon as his mouth made contact with my sensitive flesh, I cried out with ecstasy, wiggling my hips and bucking them up in the air.

Tarax held me in place and directed my hips back down to the floor. He slid his tongue between the soft folds of my pussy and licked each and every crevice. He left no part of my female anatomy untouched.

His mouth wandered where it wanted, skating deliciously across my folds and creases until he found my clit. He began to suck on it, and that was when I started to feel like I was riding on a euphoric, sexual high. I was blinded by the passion. It felt so good.

Tarax alternated between licking my clit and sucking on it. Then, to drive me even crazier, he gently gave it these light kisses, just barely brushing the tips of his lips across it. I was quickly descending into sexual madness. My head was spinning. It felt like stars were bursting inside me. Everything went warm and dark.

I let out a scream of ecstasy, and then I lost all control. An explosive orgasm shook me from within. It raptured me. Tarax was ruthless as he slaughtered my pussy with his mouth and tongue. He knew exactly what he was doing.

After a moment or two, I was recovered enough to move, but I was still breathless and feeling hot, sweaty, and sticky with my own cum.

My cum was dripping down Tarax's mouth and chin. He licked up every last drop as if it were the most delicious nectar he had ever tasted.

He did this all while holding eye contact with me. It was a bold move. I was completely enthralled by him. He was exotic and smolderingly hot. He leaned in to kiss me again.

"Now that I've had the pleasure of going down on you and watching you come, I can fuck you," he said with a pleased smile.

I was still a little fatigued from the intensity of my orgasm, but I was soaked and

ready for him to fill me up.

I was already laying on my back, spread out like a starfish on the floor. My legs were spread wide open. I was vulnerable and enticed, excited for him to bury his swollen cock inside me.

Tarax started to guide his cock in. I was wet enough that it didn't cause any friction. It felt easier this time, but he was still massive as he pushed his way into his claimed territory.

As soon as he filled me to the tip, he hit my g-spot. I made a spontaneous groaning noise and felt my face get hot. My mouth twisted with ecstasy and tried not to moan too loudly, but it was too late.

I was coming... again... already.

"Wow," he said... staring at me in awe after I had finished. "I am impressed. That has to be a record time."

I couldn't speak through the climax. I continued moaning as it hit me at a million miles an hour. As Tarax began to thrust, it made it feel completely dynamite.

He ground on me, rubbing our hips together.

"You are so big," I whispered. My legs were in the air and Tarax was cuffing his hands around my ankles as he drilled into me with his enormous cock. "That is impressive in itself."

"I'm glad you like it," Tarax said with a pleased expression again.

"Keep going in deeper," I moaned. "Right there... that feels so good." I arched my

back again.

"I'll fuck you until you forget who you are," he said, giving me an enamored stare.

"Please..." I trailed off with a whine. "Never stop... make that a promise you'll never break."

"I'll never break any promise to you," Tarax said with a groan.

His eyes rolled back in his head. He looked like he was ready to come too. I hoped he meant it, the thing about the promises. I couldn't stand it when guys made empty promises.

It didn't matter in the moment. All that mattered was how fucking insanely good sex felt with him.

I was practically paralyzed with ecstasy. I squeezed my vaginal muscles tightly around Tarax's hard shaft and then I released them. Then I contracted them again.

Tarax loved it. He groaned and whimpered. His body went rigid. I continued to do Kegels while he fucked my brains out with his giant shaft that felt like it was made of steel.

"Tarax..." I whispered breathlessly in his ear. "It feels so good, baby."

He leaned in close to me, groaning with excitement.

I squeezed my thighs around his torso and dragged my hands through his hair. I raked my nails up and down his muscular back.

He stiffened again and let out another whimper. I felt a hot gush and then he pulled

out right before he came. His warm seed went spraying all over me like a busted out paintball. It was slimy, sticky and felt so good as it hit my skin.

"I... you... that... amazing..." Tarax trailed off breathing violently.

He couldn't even form a complete sentence. Even as big and strong as he was, he was still destroyed by the pleasure, too.

I hugged him close. "Yes, baby... I know what you're trying to say. That was incredible. You fucked me good."

"Here," Tarax said, attempting to push himself up to his knees, but he was a little wobbly. He reached for part of the blanket lying beside us. "Let me clean you up."

"You made quite a mess on me this time," I teased, giving him a heartfelt smile.

"Sorry about that," he said sheepishly and began to mop up the loads of semen that had puddled on my stomach.

"It's okay," I said, watching him as he did it. "I like it."

He grinned and kissed me. "Good."

I was getting ready to tell him that I still wanted to cuddle for a few extra minutes before we got up for the day when a shrill alarm sound went blaring through the room.

"What the hell is that?" The blood drained from Tarax's face. His eyes went huge, and his jaw dropped. He immediately reached for his armor, and at the same time I reached for my clothes.

"It's a fire alarm," I said. "It's our sirens. It's coming from our trucks that are parked outside," I explained as the fierce noise wailed through the city.

My heart froze, and then went into an instant panic. "What does it mean?" Tarax asked, ogling at me.

"It could mean a lot of things," I said, jumping to my feet. "But I can guarantee that none of them are good. Come on. We have to get out of here and see what is going on out there. Something triggered the sirens to go off. They don't just go off on their own."

I sprinted for the doors leading out of the lobby. This was the first time that I'd actually gone outside besides the roof, of course, since Tarax and I had been ambushed on our corner store raid.

As soon as I got there, Tarax drew me back. He gripped my arm and yanked me back with such tenacity that I actually skidded on my heels as he jerked me toward him and away from the doors.

"What?" I asked.

Now that we were closer, the siren alarm blared through my eardrums, making it feel like they were going to shatter. I didn't care how long you worked as a firefighter, you never got used to that emergency sound.

"Don't go out there." Tarax vehemently shook his head.

"But the sirens?—"

"It's not safe," Tarax panted. His eyes were alarmed and alert. "It could be a trap. You don't know what's out there."

I looked through the lobby windows at the fire trucks. "I don't see anyone out there."

"Let's go to the roof and look down to see if we can get a better view from that angle, first," Tarax said. "If we don't find anything, we can go back out there and turn them off. " I'll go... or Mike or David. Someone ... " He trailed off with a pause and looked at me with worried eyes. "But not you. "

I didn't have time to argue with him. "Alright fine ."

I started racing toward the stairwell. I charged like a bull up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I burst through the emergency exit door that led out to the roof like I was a bat out of hell.

Tarax was hot on my heels. On the roof, we found Jennifer and David standing in front of each other. Jennifer was waving her arms animatedly. She was standing with furious posture. She had a stern scowl on her face. She was glaring at David, and from the looks of it — she was giving him a strong reprimanding, too.

David looked defensive as always. As we got closer to them, I realized that they were screaming at each other.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked as I jogged up to them.

So much for a relaxing and enjoying a post-sex cuddle with Tarax. The drama and the danger had gotten off to an early start.

Jennifer briefly halted her raging to look at me. She was huffing and her eyes were bloodshot. "The idiot David here turned the sirens on." She pointed an accusatory finger at him.

I looked at David, searching for meaning. "Why the fuck would you do that, David?"

I glanced over the top of the roof. There didn't appear to be any activity around the fire trucks, but the sirens were still screaming on a continuous, mind-fucking loop.

There was also a small blaster fire in the decorative bushes that lined the street about a block away.

I whipped back around, realizing that David hadn't provided an answer for his sickening behavior yet.

David's dark eyes were full of wrath. "David!" I screamed at him, uncertain at this point as to whether he could even hear me. "Why did you turn on the sirens?"

David stared at me, but his eyes were empty. He was staring through me. He just shook his head. He didn't say a word.

I looked at Jennifer, feeling frustrated. My blood pressure had reached a boiling point.

"Do you know why he did it?"

Jennifer shook her head. "I just saw him do it. He won't give me a reason."

"You're going to draw the attention of the remaining androids?—"

As soon as I said that — the silver, daunting robots began clustering together and hovering in the sky about thirty feet above the roof. They were curled up in their signature little 'flight ball' positioning, but I knew they were about to jump to our roof and start fighting us. We had to be ready for that.

"Dammit, David. We're supposed to be hiding from these fucking things, not inviting them over here."

Our remaining robo Knights began to uncover themselves from the sides of the building and the roof. They bravely began soaring to the sky, ready to be on the front lines and battle these aliens to protect us. That's what they were programmed to do — and come hell or high water — that was what was going to happen.

One by one, the hostile androids began to shoot at the robo Knights, obliterating them, shattering them, turning them into shards of giant robot pieces that began raining down from the sky. We had to jump out of the way to dodge a few of the bigger pieces.

"The androids are going to lay siege to the building soon," Tarax warned. "We need to get ready to fight for our lives."

CHAPTER 17

TARAX

" I can't even begin to express just how enraged I am at you, David, for doing something so reckless," Grace fired accusingly at David.

Jennifer had made it clear that she wasn't too happy with the asshole either. As for me, I was absolutely dumbfounded by this twisted turn of events and how David could be so callous.

"David...you are going to have to start giving us some answers," Grace began impatiently. "As to why you thought it would be a good idea to endanger the lives of everyone in this bank and in the near vicinity. I mean, what the hell were you really thinking? You are crazy, David. You know that by turning on the sirens, you put your own life in danger too , right?"

"Stop screaming at me!" David yelled. The veins in his neck bulged furiously. He balled his good fist with rage.

Grace took a step backward, looking flustered. David looked ready to hit her. I protectively took a step in front of her.

"Why don't we all just try to calm down and figure this out," I suggested, knowing in my heart that it had gone too far and that was probably a farfetched answer.

"Speak for yourself," Jennifer hissed. "I'm ready to tear the fucker's head off his

shoulders."

David stepped forward, giving Jennifer an icy glower. Then he looked at Grace with scary obsession flaring in his eyes.

"It's all your fault." He glared at Grace accusingly.

" My fault?" Grace pointed to herself, looking appalled and baffled. "How is it my fault? Are you somehow saying I prompted you to turn on the fire truck sirens? Are you insane ?"

"You shouldn't have been a whore ," David said.

" What ?" Grace looked like David had just punched her in the stomach. She frowned, clearly insulted by David's brazen name calling. "How dare you speak to me that way."

"You need to take it easy," I said, more as a warning than anything else, to David.

He stepped toward me. He and I both knew I was much bigger, muscular, and brooding. He thought he was intimidating, but David was a fucking wimp. He didn't seem phased in the slightest. He didn't even look in my direction, as if he were unbothered. He just stared at Grace with these eyes of pure, vile hatred.

"You need to shut the fuck up and mind your own business ," David hissed through clenched teeth, glancing at me through the corner of his eye.

I tightened my jaw too, feeling stressed about the whole situation and worried that a physical fight was going to escalate. Meanwhile, we still had to worry about the murderous androids hovering thirty feet above our heads.

"Be careful, asshole. I don't have any reservations about punching you so hard in the jaw your head spins off your neck. Then when you recover from that , I'll punch you in the throat until you can't breathe," I said to the deranged David.

David finally gave me a horrified glance — right before he went ballistic.

"Fuck you, man," David fired back, charging toward me, even though he didn't have a shot in hell of being able to successfully win any physical battle against me. "You stole my woman!"

"He stole your woman? What is this... the third grade, David? Or a bad tabloid talk show? I'm not yours to steal," Grace cut in.

"You shouldn't be his either!" David fired back.

"He didn't steal me," Grace retorted. "I'm a person , not a handbag."

David proceeded to ignore Grace and went flying toward me, his good fist balled, arm outstretched, sadistic expression on his face. He wasn't letting his broken arm stop him as he really went all out — the whole works. I wasn't scared of him, but I didn't want him to hurt Grace or Jennifer who were now hovering behind me.

He was so scrawny that if I just flicked his arm with my fingers, David would probably fall over. That was how audacious David was. He was blind to his rage. He couldn't ever see clearly because he was always so angry at everyone — accusing everyone around him of doing him wrong.

I was glad that David was showing his true colors though. It just went to prove just how torturous his mind actually worked, and how he had no problem inflicting and projecting that internal torture of his onto others. I knew Grace and Jennifer had no problem seeing it, either.

As David went rushing toward me, I realized what he was trying to do. He was trying to corner me so that I'd be at the edge of the building. At the last second, I jumped away before David could slam into me and cause me to go flying over the roof.

David's torso hammered into mine. His eyes were full of rage and madness. He belted me with a solid punch. It hurt — I'd give him that — but I held my own. I was solid on my own accord, and I was able to maintain my balance through his intense thrashing.

I quickly gained the upper hand and started throwing punches at David too — landing far more than he was at me, seeing as he only had the one good hand to punch with. I clocked him right in the jaw, and then swiftly put him in a headlock and slammed my elbow into David's temple.

Grace and Jennifer were screaming behind us. Grace was trying to be scrappy too and get David off me.

David was stuck to me like a monkey to a tree. I started scratching and clawing at his back, trying to get him off me. I ripped his shirt in the process, and it hung haphazardly off his shoulders.

'I'm going to kill you,' David growled. He barred his teeth like an animal. His eyes were red and sick.

I lifted my knee and sucker punched him straight in the gut. David gasped for air and clutched his stomach with his bad arm, reeling back a bit. He was in enough pain to loosen his grip on me, and then David let go of me completely.

I was able to avoid being knocked off the ledge, but David was sure as hell ready to boot me off and watch me tumble to the concrete below — quickly to become roadkill to be scraped off the sidewalks.

In the scuffle, David lost his balance. He was closer to the edge of the building than I was. The androids hovering above us had finished off the robo Knights, unfortunately. They began scrambling toward us, flying at us with determined, homicidal intent.

We just didn't have enough of robo Knights left to fight them off anymore.

I looked at Grace. "We're going to have to fight them head on."

Grace looked terrified. "Don't fall off the ledge."

As soon as she shouted it, one of the androids clipped David in the leg. It burned a hole right through his thigh like it was nothing but dust. It was enough to significantly injure David.

David, screaming in pain, flailed about near the edge.

It all happened so fast — but it also felt like slow motion.

I heard Jennifer scream first. I couldn't reach for him in time. He was already halfway over the edge. I tried to snatch him by his shirt, but it was already ripped and when I grabbed for him — it tore the rest of the way.

David went plummeting over the side of the building with his bleeding, searing, raw leg that the androids had blown a hole into only seconds before.

I stared over the edge, watching as David cried out with terror. It was a fearful scream that I would remember for the rest of my life. It was a helpless situation and there was nothing I could do. I felt bad for him — but he had tried to kill me — so I quickly reminded myself of that.

As soon as his head smacked into the pavement, his body went limp, and he screamed no more.

Grace rushed into my arms. She was sobbing with distress and terror. I cradled her head in my chest.

"Don't look down there," I told her and tried to sooth her momentarily by stroking her hair.

David was dead. He was gone — but the threat to our safety that he ultimately had created was still looming large all around us.

CHAPTER 18

GRACE

I couldn't believe that David was dead. For several minutes, I couldn't move. I was frozen in time, rooted to where I stood on the roof concrete.

I couldn't believe that he died from his own stupidity. Yet again — somehow it didn't surprise me. David was rash and temperamental. His lit fuse put us all in jeopardy, but he ended up paying the ultimate price. It was almost darkly ironic the way it played out.

Sometimes things were inevitable, no matter how you tried to stop the moving train. David's death shook through me. I didn't like the guy and he bugged me all the time, but that didn't mean he deserved death. It was just one of those accidents that could have been prevented if David hadn't let his temper get the better of him. It was a real shame that it had to end this way.

I didn't have time to mourn David or his death. We had much bigger fish to fry — or we were going to end up just like David had — at the bottom of this building on the asphalt with our heads squashed like melons.

Tarax was holding me to console me, but after a minute or so, I gently backed myself away from him and stoically put on a brave front. What other choice did I have? We had to protect ourselves because death was knocking at our door, too. Standing here wasn't going to bring David back, and it certainly wasn't going to get the androids hovering in the sky to leave us alone.

"Give me your backup weapon," I said to Tarax. "I know you brought one. I left mine in the vault room. And the more help you have, the better our chances become. I can help you shoot them down."

Tarax didn't hesitate. He reached for his second blaster and handed it off to me without a second thought.

"We need to hold off the rest of these androids from belting out at us from the sky," Tarax said.

"I'm afraid it might be too late for that," I said. "They look like they are ready to pursue the hunt."

Tarax glanced around his surroundings with a fearful expression that did little to ease my mind.

"We at least need to try to prevent them from breaching the building. Once they're inside, there is no hope for any of us," he said.

"How the hell are there so many of them?" I shrieked. "It seems like they are reproducing by the minute, and by the thousands."

"I know it seems overwhelming but?—"

I scoffed. " That's an understatement."

"We need to do something ," Jennifer cut in from behind us. "We just watched David fall to his death off that ledge." She pointed a shaky finger at it. Her face was pale and shocked.

"I know, sweetie." I reached out and hugged her and stroked her back for a moment

to comfort her. "It's tough having to go through this... and watching someone fall off the side of the building, even if it was David — is still really difficult to process."

"Grace, you need to start shooting," Tarax warned. "The longer we hold them off the better we are going to end up. Hopefully, we can continue holding them off until Norin and his group arrives."

"He's right," I said, looking at Jennifer. I had briefly forgotten about Norin and his team — but it was like a new breath of fresh air remembering that at least we had some back up on the way.

"Go downstairs and warn the others. Let them know what happened to David and tell them that Tarax and I are up on the roof trying to shoot as many of these androids down as we can," I instructed Jennifer, meeting her gaze. I had my hands clamped over her shoulders and gave her a fiery look of determination.

"I don't want to leave you guys up here alone..." Jennifer trailed off apprehensively.

"It's going to be okay," I reassured her. "I am grateful for your concern. It's safer for you downstairs. Go around the building with Mike and the others and make sure all the windows and doors are locked and secured."

"I'll ask Mike to cover the internal doors," Jennifer said with a nod. There was some spark coming back to her features and she looked a little more resilient.

I clamped my hand over her shoulder again and gave it an encouraging squeeze. "There you go. That is a big help. Take the rifle with you, you might need it."

Jennifer grabbed the gun, hustled toward the exit door, and was gone, closing it behind her.

"Stay near the door," Tarax advised once she was gone. "Try not to let any of them near the door."

"If they see me guarding it, they are going to want to get in there," I said worriedly.

"It doesn't matter," Tarax said, adamantly shaking his head. "They're going to figure out it's a door soon anyway. You be the gatekeeper. Keep them off it."

A second or two later, dozens of androids began soaring toward us with their black slitted, menacing eyes. I wasn't sure I was going to succeed at this mind-altering challenge.

I didn't want to look at them because every time I did , a shiver of terror raced up and down my spine. I feared these monstrous robots more than anything else in my life. I just didn't know if we had the resources or physical capabilities to fight all of them off.

There were just too many of them. I didn't express my fears out loud, however. I didn't want Tarax to think I couldn't handle the situation or that I doubted us or him too much.

"Grace?" I heard Tarax's voice shouting to me, but I couldn't see him.

It was as if my mind went suddenly blank and all emotions were erased from within. It was as if I were seeing the world through a tunnel or a hazy filter. I heard Tarax's voice, but it sounded far away, like an echo that was calling out to me faintly in the distance.

The androids started pounding down to the roof. They were moving in slow motion. I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't move or breathe. My body was numb from head to toe. I was compartmentalizing every emotion I had. The androids were on the move,

but from my perspective — it was still happening in slinky, slow motion. Why couldn't I do anything? Why couldn't I jump into action? My mind was screaming at me to get moving, but my body refused to listen.

"Grace!" Tarax's voice roared through my eardrums.

The urgency in his voice finally snapped me out of the dazed delirium I was experiencing.

I shook my head to gather my thoughts and composed myself in a split second. I braced myself into a fighting stance, preparing for impact. I lifted my blaster, surprised that my arm and hand wasn't shaking.

I aimed at the robot charging toward me at full steam ahead. It was like the fucking thing had zoned in on me and was hell bent on taking me out.

I squeezed the trigger. The gun fired and the bullet expelled from the barrel. The blaster bullets were made to incinerate whatever it hit.

I hit the android directly in the chest. It flew backward and slammed into the ground. It was withering in agony or whatever senses it could feel, I had no idea. Either way, it didn't look like it was having fun being hit by the blaster bullet.

Its metal body was melting and burning. The wires inside it hissed and a weird, sludgy black, inky substance began to ooze out of its body and pooled on the rooftop pavement.

The android went rigid, then limp a few seconds after that and ceased moving altogether. I stared at the deceased machine.

It can't die. It's not real. It doesn't have flesh and blood, or emotions. It's just a

fucking robot trained to kill.

My mind was protectively locking itself in a trance again.

"Behind you, Grace. Watch out !" Tarax warned.

I jumped and scrambled out of the way just in time before I was hurled to the ground by yet another android.

I shot this one in the face, and it died instantly. The same weird, black sludgy substance leaked from its mouth and eyes, pooling at the injury site.

I looked at Tarax, feeling like I was on the verge of tears.

"There's just too many of them," I shouted, hearing the panic laced in my voice.

As soon as I said the words, we heard whirling in the sky. We both glanced up to see that Norin and his forces had finally shown up, just when we were starting to feel the most overwhelmed and needing them the most.

They began flying down and landing on the roof to help us, jumping into action without a word. Now we had better strength in numbers and the odds were more in our favor.

After a break in the action, I watched Norin and Tarax hug each other and give each other brotherly slaps on the back. I could tell that the pair seemed relieved to be reunited.

Tarax had been right. They did look a lot alike, except for the different style that Norin wore his hair — in that long braid that Tarax had described.

I vaguely remembered meeting him that first night of attacks, but my mind was so traumatized by all the events that had happened since then that I had trouble remembering or picturing his face until I saw him again today, here on the roof.

"I brought reinforcements from the naval base," Norin advised. "True military men."

"It's amazing," Tarax said. "I think we can kill off the rest. Thank you so much for making it here in time. Grace and I were really struggling up here."

Norin looked at me and smiled. He had a warm presence about him. He cast me a little wave — then out of the corner of his eye he must have seen another android coming his way because he lifted his blaster, pointed it over his shoulder beside him and fired. The android fell to the ground — wasted with one shot.

I was impressed. That was a badass move. Norin and Tarax were a set of badass twins, no doubt about it.

We then set back to work to destroy the remaining androids. We continued firing at the androids one by one as they attempted to breach our secure hiding spot. It was exhausting. At one point I got into a physical squabble with one of the androids and it pushed me to the ground. I tried not to be crippled with fear.

Defend yourself. Fight for your life, my brain yelled at me.

I fell to my knees and busted them up a bit, but I could still walk. They were scraped up pretty bad — but it was nothing a little antiseptic and some decent bandaging couldn't fix.

"Are you okay?" Tarax asked, helping me to my feet. He was there in a flash, ready to help me and pick me back up off the ground.

It was then that I realized just how brave and compassionate he really was, and that he would always be there to pick me up when I fell — metaphorically speaking, of course.

He had proven to me that he would always keep his promises, just like he said. I had no problem believing the power of his words, because he showed it to me with his incredibly courageous actions.

CHAPTER 19

TARAX

"A lright... he's officially gone," Grace said after we had come out of the coroner's office, after having dropped David off there. "They are so backed up in there. I feel so sorry for the people that have to be working around the clock trying to do something with all these bodies."

"It's a terrible situation," I agreed. "How are you holding up with everything?" I roped my arm around Grace's waist to try and comfort her, holding her tight if she needed the extra affection.

Grace shrugged and sighed deeply. She brushed her hair off her face and looked nostalgic for a moment.

"I mean... it sucks that he had to lose his life. I never wanted David to die but?—"

"His careless, hot-headed actions made it inevitable," I finished her sentence for her.

Grace gazed up at me with a sad smile. "Yes... well put. His temper got him in trouble a lot. I guess he had to pay the ultimate price for that."

"Well, may he rest in peace," I said, trying to sound empathetic. The guy was a jerk, but it sucked that he had to die before we could work things out.

Grace laughed softly. "I sure hope that wherever David is — the man finally got

some peace."

Norin approached us and nodded to me. "We are going to bring the survivors to the naval base. Are you going to accompany us?"

Grace and I exchanged a glance and we both nodded at the same time. "Yes, that's the plan," Grace confirmed.

She looked stoic and worn down. It ached my heart to see her this way. I wished I could revive her spirit somewhat. I supposed that time would heal all wounds.

I knew she was also traumatized by the android battles we'd had to endure so many times, but we'd still conquered every last one of them.

The terror was over, but the residue of the nightmare still brought a lot of suffering and heartache.

It was all over now. The dust had settled, and now that the calm had finally arrived after the storm, it was my responsibility to prove to Grace that I could provide her with a better life out there in space, starting with our current base on Mars.

However, I still feared that she might be reluctant to leave Earth now that David was out of the picture, and she didn't have to worry about him bothering her and stalking her anymore.

On the way to the naval base, we took tanks to drive back there — driven by the military soldiers.

This ride gave me time to formally introduce Grace to Merrix and Norin. She seemed eager to know all about our lifestyle and our current base on Mars. She was extremely curious about the role the Space Knights played, and what we did to keep the space

lanes and Earth safe.

"We failed at keeping Earth safe on this particular tragedy," Merrix said with a somber expression. "We extend our deepest sympathies to all the humans here who lost someone important to them during these awful attacks."

"We appreciate that," Grace said, returning his kind smile. She looked between me, Merrix and Norin. "What is your next move going to be after we finish cleaning up the mess that the androids left behind?"

"Well," I said, jumping at the chance to readdress my proposal for her to join us on the force. "We... or should I say I was wondering if you had given any more thought to joining our Knights team."

I could hardly breathe as I waited for her to respond. My muscles were stiff with stress. I couldn't bear to live without Grace, but at the same time, if she said no, I was going to have to figure out a way to move on with my life. I couldn't even bear to think about it.

Grace gave me an endearing smile. She placed her hand on my leg and squeezed it affectionately.

"I'm thinking about it."

I allowed myself to breathe again. "That's better than a flat out no."

Grace laughed. "Yes... I suppose you're right."

"Tarax tells us you're a medic?" Merrix asked.

Grace nodded humbly. "That's right."

"She is amazing at her job," I added. "She is a real natural... incredible at what she does."

"Oh, stop it," Grace said, waving her hand dismissively.

"Give yourself more credit. You are amazing," I told her.

Grace beamed. I could tell she liked the compliments and attention, but she was too modest to acknowledge her worth. She was the sweetest woman I had ever met. If she agreed to return to Mars with us, I would be over the moon with excitement.

"It's just a big decision..." Grace trailed off apologetically.

"Take all the time you need," I said. "I'm not going to rush you. I am just opening the conversation for possibilities."

Grace smiled up at me as we sat next to each other in the tank. "Yeah. I get that. I also appreciate you giving me some time to mull it over. I mean... don't get me wrong." She paused and faced me. She took my hands and cradled them with hers. "I do care about you so much. I can't imagine you leaving to go back to Mars and me still being here on Earth."

"That's promising." My heart drummed optimistically.

"It's just... I have so many responsibilities left here on Earth. I can't just leave my firefighter unit high and dry to clean up this mess by themselves. They need me."

"No one asked you to do that," I said gently, offering her a kind smile. "Don't forget, we as Knights will be here to help with the clean up too."

"That's reassuring to hear," Grace said with a fatigued sigh.

"We aren't just going to wrap things up and fly off into the galaxy." Merrix chuckled.
"We aren't assholes."

Grace softly smiled and gazed at her lap. We were still holding hands. "No, you all are the furthest thing from assholes. You are brave and victorious. We couldn't have won this android battle without you."

Then, I thought about something that might persuade Grace to join us. It was something that Mike and I and I had discussed earlier in the bank.

"Mike and I... had a discussion before the final attack," I mentioned once Norin and Merrix were locked in conversation and weren't paying attention to us anymore.

"About what?" Grace frowned curiously and stared at me expectantly.

"About you actually." I chuckled nervously.

"Me? What about me?"

"I told him that we had been discussing the prospect of you returning with me to Mars — and space in general."

"Wow." Grace looked a little surprised. "What did he say?"

"He said it was ultimately your decision — which of course you already know I agree with."

"I can't believe it." Grace looked astonished.

"He said you were a fantastic medic, but if you really wanted to return to space with me, it wouldn't be the end of the world. He wouldn't put pressure on you to stay, and

he said he would be able to find another medic to replace you," I explained.

Grace pondered a moment, staring at her lap. She clamped her hands together in a ball. "Well...that certainly alleviates some of my pressure to... to feel needed by my team."

"Don't get me wrong," I said. "Your team does need you. It's not like Mike was immediately going to write you off or something. He'd of course be sorry to see you go."

"Well, that makes me feel better." Grace grinned.

"And I'm not trying to manipulate you either," I said. "I'm not telling you this to try to sway you in one direction or another." Even though part of me was doing exactly that.

"No... it's okay," Grace said quietly. "I mean... I understand. It certainly helps that you did tell me. It makes the decision somewhat easier to make."

I kissed the top of her head. Her hair smelled nice. "I'm glad to hear it. Perhaps I can propose a compromise to you."

Grace took my hand and lightly squeezed it. It felt good to hold her close to me. She was warm and comforting to me too.

"What kind of compromise?"

"After you tie up all your loose ends on Earth, you could make your final decision about whether you want to go with me or not. I want to be with you, I've fallen in love with you — but I'll understand if you don't feel the same way?—"

"I do want to be with you," Grace chimed in with enough eagerness to give me hope. " Really I do. I've fallen in love with you too, Tarax, and I think that sounds like a great plan."

I stared at her without blinking. My entire soul was pumped with adrenaline now, just hearing her say that. "You... do?"

Grace nodded vigorously. She was grinning with an enormous smile. Her eyes sparkled with happiness.

"Yes. I love you too."

"So... that's it? You don't need to think any more on it?" I asked.

Grace contemplated. The suspense was killing me.

"I don't think so. I want to be with you." She grinned as if she loved teasing me and making me wait for her answer. "I was already ninety-percent on board anyway."

I hugged her close and kissed her. There was enough spark and passion in that kiss to set the whole world on fire.

"Hey guess what?" Merrix said excitedly, cutting through my make-out session with Grace.

"What?" I Grace and I asked simultaneously and focused our attention on Merrix.

Merrix was pointing to his communicator headpiece in his ear. "I just got word from the Knights in lower Earth's orbit. "They successfully destroyed the warship. The siege has come to an official end."

Everyone in the back of the tank with us erupted into cheers and claps of joy. Grace and I hugged and kissed each other deeply again.

"See?" I told her, staring into her eyes with desire. "I told you everything would work out in the end."

"You were right," Grace said, nestling her head against my chest. "What a relief to have that confirmation that the terror is truly over."

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:20 am

GRACE

It had been two months since the attacks in my beloved city of Chicago, and a lot had happened since then. I had just finished training my replacement medic. It was another woman — which I was happy to see put into motion.

She was young and sweet — a girl named Amanda, but she was also determined and resilient. She was smart, and I knew I would be leaving my unit in capable hands as far as she was concerned. I wasn't worried about her disappointing Mike in the slightest.

"You're a fast learner," I told her. "I think you will fit in just fine, here."

"Thanks, Grace." Amanda smiled proudly. "It really means a lot to me, coming from you."

"I mean it, too. You catch on quick. I have to say — I was pretty impressed."

"What can I say," she beamed. "You have been an excellent trainer."

As far as putting the city back together, everyone had worked tirelessly — long nights, long days... they all blended into each other for so long. We had finally made it over the hump. We'd climbed to the top of the metaphorical mountain. We were dirty, sweaty, and even a little bloody, but we'd made it to the light at the end of the tunnel.

It had been a long time coming, but we'd recovered most of the city from the

destruction it had endured, and we'd had a ceremony for most of the deceased, along with a parade in their honor going through the city streets that happened just last week.

We had lost thousands of people to those android attacks, but we were strong, and we overcame the biggest battle of all — the cleanup and the healing that came afterward.

While I was standing in the garage talking to Amanda, I noticed my handsome Tarax approaching me.

"Ready to go?" he asked, slinking his arm around my back as he tossed Amanda a friendly wave. "Jennifer is waiting on you," he said to me.

"Yep." I nodded. "I'm ready." I shook Amanda's hand. "Good luck. I know you'll do great. If you'll excuse me, I have to get going. I'm going to give a good friend of mine an exclusive interview about the siege. She's an up and coming reporter."

"Sounds great," Amanda said. "Thank you so much for all your well wishes about my career here, too."

I began walking away with Tarax. As soon as I stepped foot out of the garage, I felt free.

"How are you holding up, baby?" Tarax asked.

"I'm doing surprisingly better than I thought I would," I said. "I am excited to start the next chapter of my life with you." I took his hand and smiled up at him adoringly. "New beginnings are always exciting. I'll always remember my life here and where it all started, but I know I'll be much happier with you."

"You're right." Tarax grinned. "I feel the same. Oh, and guess what?"

"What?"

"Merrix told me that a few world governments are working on creating alliances with the Space Knights. They learned about several of the new Knights — yourself included, bravely put your own lives on the line to protect Earth from the hostile androids. I think this union was what sealed the deal and steered them in a mutual direction with us."

"That's wonderful news," I exclaimed. "We need all the help we can get. If we all become allies, then we can wipe out our enemies faster."

"My thoughts exactly," Tarax said and lightly kissed my cheek as we walked over to Jennifer's office that was only a few blocks away. Luckily for Jennifer, her office building remained virtually intact, so she was able to get right back to her job within several weeks after the android ambush.

"I'm proud of you," Tarax added, giving me a doting smile.

"Really?" I glanced up at him. "For what?"

"All your hard work over the last couple months. You are going to fit in great with us in space."

I was exhilarated for the future. "I know. I can't wait."

We approached the office. Jennifer was already standing outside, waiting for us with an eager expression on her face.

"Hi, guys," she said, waving animatedly.

She was wearing an olive green dress that complimented her curvy figure. Her flaxen hair was long and wavy and in her usual pigtails. It was comfortable to be around her

again. She was a friendly and familiar face that reminded us that the world wasn't all lost.

I embraced her in a warm hug.

"It's so good to see you again," I said. "You look well."

"So do you." Jennifer smiled. "As always, of course."

After a few minutes, Jennifer set me up in front of the camera and the interview commenced.

"This is an exclusive interview," Jennifer said proudly into the camera, grinning at me to make me feel at home.

"Yes, that's correct," I said, sitting up straight and formal.

She asked several questions about the raids and how things played out, even though she already knew the answers, she wanted me to tell our story to her audience. I went through everything that occurred over the course of the five day siege.

"I know I can honestly say, I don't think we would have survived without your help, Grace, thank you." Jennifer smiled.

"It took all of us, and you know it." I smiled back.

Jennifer winked and then leaned forward. "Do you mind telling us about your plans for the future?" Jennifer asked, leaning close and staring expectantly at me as if she were riveted by everything I said.

"Not at all," I obliged. "I plan to marry Tarax, my handsome fiancé from the planet Telanis and help the Space Knights as their medic."

Jennifer, who had already heard this news, pretended to be surprised. "That is an incredible bombshell," she exclaimed.

I laughed. "Yes, well... we were together during the raids, and we realized how much we loved each other. We worked as a wonderful team and continue to do so. I will be joining him in space, along with his Space Knights task force. The Space Knights will remain in the solar system to protect Earth from any further threats."

"Well, I wish you a lifetime of health and happiness," Jennifer chimed. She seemed authentically excited for both of us.

"Thank you so much, dear friend," I said.

After the interview ended, I stepped out onto the Chicago streets with Tarax for what would become the last time in a while. I was feeling somewhat sentimental.

"Remember — I can always bring you back if you are ever homesick," Tarax mentioned. "Our space bikes travel at the speed of light. We could have you back here in no time."

"Thank you, darling." I smiled and kissed his lips. "That helps make the goodbye process a lot easier."

"You will love space," he promised me. "It's so liberating to be riding out there in the open."

"I can't wait to experience it," I admitted. My stomach pattered with excited butterflies.

"Let's go, then..." Tarax trailed off, taking my hand as we walked to his space bike together, hand in hand. Merrix and Norin would be waiting for us with our life support armor. It was time to put this adventure behind us and start a new beginning

together.