



Alien in Chief

By Gini Koch

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Sci-fi action meets steamy paranormal romance in Gini Koch's Alien novels, as Katherine "Kitty" Katt faces off against aliens, conspiracies, and deadly secrets. • "Futuristic high-jinks and gripping adventure." —RT Reviews

As Kitty can tell you, it's not easy being the wife of the vice president—especially not when he's an alien from the Alpha Centauri system. But she and her A-C husband, Jeff, have learned how to roll with whatever life and the bad guys throw at them—they think.

When the Alpha Centauri Planetary Council requests a visit with the president and vice president, things look politically dicey. When the most dangerous prisoners in the most secure supermax prison escape with ease, things look bad. But when the Mastermind releases a virus that kills people in a week, things go to Defcon Worse fast.

Now it's up to Kitty to save everyone important in the U.S. government—including her mother, her husband, and herself—before the virus spreads through the rest of the country, and then the world. Plus she's facing invisible attackers, crazed assassins, a teenager in hiding, the most dangerous train ride ever, the disappearance of her beloved flyboys, and a mysterious alien who could be an enemy or the ally she needs.

And this time, the Mastermind's made it very personal. Either he's going down...or Kitty is.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Alien series:

"Gini Koch's Alien books **remind us why we read**: it's fun!" —*Kirkus*

"A series that shows **no signs of slowing down**." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Aliens, danger, and romance make this **a fast-paced, wittily written sf romantic comedy**." —*Library Journal*

"For those craving futuristic high-jinks and gripping adventure, **Koch is an absolute master!**" —*RT Reviews*

"This **delightful romp** has many interesting twists and turns as it glances at racism, politics, and religion en route. It will have fanciers of cinematic sf parodies referencing *Men in Black*, *Ghost Busters*, and *X-Men*." —*Booklist*

"Campy, hyperactive, implausibly entertaining, there's a lot of fun here, and more fun to come in future installments." —*SF Site*

"Gini Koch has created a monster with the Katherine 'Kitty' Katt **series that continues to grow**." —Gizmo's Reviews

"Twelve books into the Katherine 'Kitty' Katt series and Gini Koch is still able to deliver a **fast-paced, action-packed thrill ride** that stays true to what faithful readers love about the series but still manages to throw in some unexpected twists and turns." —Under the Covers

About the Author

Gini Koch writes the fast, fresh and funny Alien/Katherine "Kitty" Katt series for DAW Books, the Necropolis Enforcement Files, and the Martian Alliance Chronicles. She also has a humor collection, *Random Musings from the Funny Girl*. As G.J. Koch she writes the Alexander Outland series and she's made the most of multiple personality disorder by writing under a variety of other pen names as well, including Anita Ensal, Jemma Chase, A.E. Stanton, and J.C. Koch. She has stories featured in a variety of excellent anthologies, available now and upcoming, writing as Gini Koch, Anita Ensal, Jemma Chase, and J.C. Koch. Reach her via: www.ginikoch.com

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Raves for the Alien novels:

"From alternate realities to alternate galaxies, Koch takes us on the wildest adventures. But it is the camaraderie between the characters that keeps the over-the-top tale grounded and compelling."

—*RT Book Reviews* (top pick)

“Koch still pulls the neat trick of quietly weaving in plot threads that go unrecognized until they start tying together—or snapping. This is a hyperspeed-paced addition to a series that shows no signs of slowing down.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Aliens, danger, and romance make this a fast-paced, wittily written sf romantic comedy.”

—*Library Journal*

“Gini Koch’s Kitty Katt series is a great example of the lighter side of science fiction. Told with clever wit and non-stop pacing . . . it blends diplomacy, action and sense of humor into a memorable reading experience.”

—*Kirkus*

“The action is nonstop, the snark flies fast and furious. . . . Another fantastic addition to an imaginative series!”

—Night Owl Sci-Fi (top pick)

“Ms. Koch has carved a unique niche for herself in the sci-fi-romance category with this series. My only hope is that it lasts for a very long time.”

—Fresh Fiction

“This delightful romp has many interesting twists and turns as it glances at racism, politics, and religion en route . . . will have fanciers of cinematic sf parodies referencing *Men in Black*, *Ghost Busters*, and *X-Men*.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“I am a huge fan of Gini Koch, and this series. I adore the world building. I love the sarcasm, banter, romance, mystery, action, and a slew of superhero-like characters that stand up against evil wherever they go.”

—Gizmo’s Reviews

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CAMP ALIEN

(coming in 2016)

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This is dedicated to the ones I love. All of you.
You all know who you are.

Raves for the Alien Novels

Also by Gini Koch

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Copyright

Dedication

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Special Excerpt from CAMP ALIEN

About the Author

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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followers, the fabulous bookstores that support me, and all the wonderful fans who come to my various book signings and conference panels—you're all the best and I wouldn't want to do this without each and every one of you along for the ride.

My list of those I want to give special thanks to is normally pretty darned long, but time is tight (I'm late again, what were the odds?) and so I'm going with the time honored "If I thanked you before I'm thanking you again, even more so" approach. So, if your name is not listed, I still love you and thank you for all you do, I just ran out of time to shout your name from the rooftops again.

So, special love and extra shout-outs to: my awesome assistants, Joseph Gaxiola and Colette Chmiel for continuing to always keep me sane, on time, and efficient; Adrian & Lisa Payne, Hal & Dee Astell, and Duncan & Andrea Rittschof for continuing to always show up everywhere, with smiling faces and books (and Poofs) in hand, ensuring anywhere I'm at is always a warm, fun place to be; Scott Johnson for being the nicest bed & breakfast spot and the oasis of calm in my book tours; Tom & Libby Thomas, Pat & Barbara Michel, Koren Cota, Chrysta Stuckless, Missy Katano, Christina Callahan, Amy Thacker, Jan Robinson, Mariann Asanuma, Koleta Parsley, Mikel Dornhecker, Carien Ubink, Terry Smith, Joan Du, James Du, Michael Shelton, Janet Armentani, Colette Chmiel, Anne Taylor, Heidi Berthiaume, and Shawn Sumrall for bestowing beautiful, supportive, wonderful, and delicious things upon me what seems like all the time; Robert Palsma for continuing to like everything I do; all the fans who travel from far away to see the me, like Missy Katano, Michele Ogle, and Paul Sparks; and for a ton of physical labor and emotional support during cons, special love to Duncan and Andrea Rittschof, Terry Smith, Missy Katano, Brad Jensen, Joseph Gaxiola, Edward Pulley, and Kathi Schreiber.

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AH, TO SEE THE WORLD, travel to exotic locations, and meet interesting people. Sounds great, doesn't it?

Of course, most people get to plan their exotic trips and exciting vacations. I get yanked into mine, almost always against my will and often through literally being dragged there by powerful forces unknown to man. Well, okay, known to some men, and women, too. Hey, can't blame a girl for adding a little drama.

Anyway, vacations are a little different when you're seeing new solar systems, traveling to exotic planets, and meeting lots of interesting aliens, many of whom are trying to kill you. Well, of course, as I look at my life over the past six years or so, that just kind of sounds like business as usual.

Oh, it's not all negative, though. I've gotten to save the world so many times I've lost count. Saved the galaxy at least once. Saved other solar systems, too. I'm just that kind of can-do girl.

And though discovering aliens were living on Earth came as a shock six years ago, nowadays it's almost commonplace. Almost.

"My" aliens are all from Alpha Four in the Alpha Centauri solar system, and they're all drop-dead gorgeous, super brainy, and come loaded with a lot of special talents including hyperspeed, faster regeneration, super strength, and then some. They really are all that and a Bag of Super Deluxe Just Like the Justice League and the X-Men Chips.

Other aliens seem split between the Friends of Earth or Want To Destroy All Other Life Forms factions. So far, we and the Friends of Earth side have been doing okay, despite the fact that Earth itself has a plethora of

cackling evil geniuses, multinational crime lords, and cuckoo megalomaniacs. We could export them, we have so many.

Not that I am for one minute suggesting we should. We have enough problems out there, why give our enemies a chance to gang up on us? I mean, more than they already do.

One of those evil geniuses in particular is the proverbial thorn in our sides: The Mastermind. Someone we all trusted. Someone we all wanted to eliminate with extreme prejudice. And someone who—until we can find all his strongholds, and all his plans, and all his cohorts, and make sure that he doesn't have some awful doomsday plot or three that will activate if he dies suddenly—we cannot touch.

I'd thought I'd have taken him down a year ago, but the cosmos had other plans and, instead, we got to avert a gigantic system-wide civil war over in Alpha Centauri while also stopping yet another huge invasion of Earth. We did get some cool parting gifts in the bargain, including two clones of former enemies who are now on our side, plus some alien pigdogs and foxcats. I'm in the minority in thinking these made everything else worthwhile, but some people just can't see the roses for the trees. Or some such.

We also made a lot of new alien friends. Many of whom want to visit Earth. Because, to them, Earth is that exotic tropical island way out in the middle of nowhere where a person can just relax and get away from it all.

Yeah, I know, right? They're thinking they're going to waste away in "Margaritaville," but we're a whole lot more like "Welcome to the Jungle." After all, there's a reason it took Axl Rose twenty years to write "Chinese Democracy." And a classified reason for why it had to suck. But I digress . . .

CHAPTER 1

"MOMMY, why is that car floating?"

For most mothers, the answer would be "special effects" or "just watch the movie, honey." For me, it required a different explanation.

"Ah, Jamie, well . . . I think it's because your little brother, um, wants it to. Charlie? Charlie, honey, put the car down, please. Now."

Thankfully, the car in question was one of the toy cars that my son was far too young to play with. That didn't stop him from wanting them, however. And, because he wanted them, well . . . Charlie took them. By making them come to him.

In the past years I've gone through so many changes that you'd think change would be commonplace, something I didn't even think twice about.

You'd be wrong.

Becoming an alien superbeing exterminator? Handled like a boss. Becoming the Ambassador for an alien principality? So four years ago. Being the wife of a still-unwilling but going to do his best for his people and country politician? Got it covered. Finding that the Mastermind of the majority of our problems on Earth was a good friend? Still plotting the revenge. Swapping places with another me and visiting another universe? Check. Averting a whole solar system's civil war? Double check.

But none of these changes prepared me for my biggest battle.

Being the mother of two.

Two alien hybrid children with, oh, shall we say, unusual abilities. Don't get me wrong—I love my kids. They're great and, frankly, I have tons of help, a super supportive husband, totally there parents and in-laws, and a plethora of Secret Service agents following us everywhere. I mean, I have no right to complain at all.

I just have to say that, sometimes it felt like averting an alien civil war was a lot easier than parenting. Times like right now, for instance.

My daughter Jamie of course knew why the toy car was floating. She was just asking so that she could point out that her little brother was doing something I didn't want him to in a way that might mean she wasn't a tattletale.

Of course, since Charlie's birth six months ago, we'd actually needed Jamie's tattling, because Charlie's very unusual talent had manifested at birth.

Being the family of the current Vice President of the United States meant that we were under microscopic scrutiny. Seeing as my husband, Jeff, was also an alien whose parents and family were originally from Alpha Four of the Alpha Centauri system meant we were under scrutiny at subatomic levels.

The A-Cs, as they called themselves on Earth, were religious refugees when they came in the 1960s. And they'd integrated into the world, sort of, and stayed hidden, almost completely, as citizens of the United States first and the world second. Now, thanks to a just-barely-foiled alien invasion from four years ago, the entire world knew that aliens were real, and that the best looking ones in the galaxy had chosen to live with us.

Perks aside, our A-Cs were here to protect and serve. Could not say the same for at least half of the alien races out there we'd encountered so far.

The A-Cs had two hearts and, as such, this gave them faster regeneration, hyperspeed, and super-strength. Some of them also had special talents, like Jeff, who was the strongest empath in, most likely, the galaxy. Besides the empaths, there were imageers, who could manipulate any images, static or live or whatever, dream readers, and troubadours, who were the actors and public speakers of the bunch.

All female hybrid children, of which we still didn't have all that many, were especially talented, with skills far surpassing the A-C norm. But before now, no hybrid boys had exhibited exceptional talent. They'd gotten normal talents, or none at all—the only exceptions were those children who were the progeny of Ronald Yates. For whatever reason, the newest crop of male hybrid kids were all talented in some ways, but nothing like Charlie. Because until now, telekinesis hadn't been an A-C trait.

I'd gotten pregnant on a world where telepathy and telekinesis were normal, though, which was the only explanation we had had for Charlie's abilities. Psychic osmosis? I'm at a point where nothing surprises me, so yeah, maybe.

You'd think that, with all the other things the A-Cs could do, Charlie being telekinetic would be no big to anyone in the A-C community.

And you would be wrong.

The car was still floating, and now it had company. "Charlie, put the cars down, please and thank you." He

grinned at me—he totally had his father’s smile—and yet the cars continued to fly away from the other kids in the American Centaurion Embassy School and Daycare Center and fly right to Charlie. “All the cars down, please, Charlie. Now.”

Counted to ten. Listened to the music while I did so—my rule was that music needed to be happening as much as possible wherever I was, inside the Embassy and in whatever car I was in in particular.

Other people’s rules were that the music in the daycare center couldn’t be hard rock or be loaded with suggestive lyrics because others were far more into censorship and keeping cool things from kids than I was.

But I still managed to get good music of all eras piped in for the little ones, because the term “hard rock” was subjective and complex lyrics helped young minds to grow and learn. Jethro Tull had just finished “War Child” and Paul McCartney and Wings were now singing “Children, Children.” And cars were still flying. It was time to channel my mother.

“Charles Maxwell Martini, you return those cars and put them right down this instant, young man.”

No more grinning from my son, but the cars zoomed back to the kids who’d been playing with them and landed nicely. One for the win column.

Denise Lewis, whose husband was my mother’s right-hand man in the Presidential Terrorism Control Unit and our Embassy’s Defense Attaché, smiled at me. “Good job, Kitty.”

Managed not to say that Jamie hadn’t been this much work. She had been, she’d just been different.

Was saved from having to respond in any way by Kyle Constantine and Len Parker sticking their heads in. I’d met them in Vegas when they were still playing football for USC and they’d helped me out in a big way. They could have both gone pro, but instead they joined the C.I.A. right after they graduated. Len had been assigned as my driver and Kyle as my bodyguard, and both had done a great job.

But right before some of us took a trip to the Alpha Centauri system to avert a variety of civil wars, evil plots, and yet another alien invasion, Kyle had been put in charge of the Second Best Lady’s Cause.

Actually, I still had no idea what my official title was as the wife of the VP. No one around seemed to know, or care. I’d searched the papers for clues, but stories written about me tended to focus on all the madness that surrounded us on a daily basis, with adjectives tending more toward “outspoken,” “blunt,” and “trigger-happy.”

Anyway, a politician who’d been aligned with all of our enemies during the presidential campaign that had put Senator Vincent Armstrong into the White House, dragging Jeff along kicking and screaming, had somehow managed to become our ally. The slipperiness of political bedfellows and changing alliances never ceased to amaze me. It truly made fighting alien invasions, mad super-geniuses, and crazed megalomaniacs seem like such clean work.

“Kitty, Gideon Cleary’s here,” Kyle said. Speaking of the devil I’d just been thinking about. “We need to brainstorm the next ad campaign.”

Mommy Time was over. Time to get back in the saddle and handle grown-up things.

“And,” Len added, “we have news, too. News you’re not going to like.”

CHAPTER 2

HUGGED AND KISSED JAMIE and Charlie, handed Charlie to Denise, petted all our animals—of which we had so many, both Earth and alien, we'd all lost count—grabbed my purse, and headed out.

Once we got out of the daycare center even better music was playing. I kept us tuned to the Aerosmith Channel, and while other bands were allowed and even encouraged, my rule was at least one song from my Bad Boys from Boston for every ten on the playlist.

“What’s going on?” I asked as “Back in the Saddle” was, possibly prophetically, playing softly in the background and we got on the elevator and headed down for the meeting. “New issues with The Cause?”

The Cause was protecting campus co-eds from being attacked and raped. When we'd met, Kyle had been drunk and suggested that I might like to get to know half of the Trojan football team intimately. Len had stopped that—well, Len and Harlie.

Harlie was a Poof, aka the best wedding gift ever. Poofs were alien animals that looked a lot like tiny, fluffy kittens with no visible ears or tails, but with shiny black button eyes. They were fluffy balls on tiny legs and paws and I and everyone else loved them. They were also incredibly great protection because they could go Jeff-sized with tons of razor sharp teeth when danger threatened, so they were wonderful personal protection bundles of cuteness.

Supposedly they were pets for the Alpha Four Royal Family only—which I'd somehow married into—but the Poofs were androgynous and mated whenever a royal wedding loomed. Supposedly.

In reality, the Poofs were Black Hole Universe animals, and apparently our Poofs had decided to go forth and multiply. We had tons of Poofs, and more seemed to show up with a lot of regularity.

In the Poofs' world, if you named it, it was yours. And the Poofs made the call as to what they considered a name—and therefore who they considered their “owner”—so a lot of people had scored Poofs simply because they'd said something like, “Look at that, how adorable is that?” Which is how one of our friends, Representative Nathalie Gagnon-Brewer had gotten a Poof. She called hers Dora for short.

Harlie had gone large and in charge way back when and scared Kyle straight, and to prove it, totally without my even knowing, Kyle had started a Take Back the Night program while he and Len were still at USC, which created a service where anyone on campus could call to get a security escort back to wherever they called home, and led info sessions to teach girls how to avoid date rape situations and how to get out of them safely.

Many colleges had these programs, but Kyle's had been particularly effective, in part because he'd gotten all the jocks involved in a positive way. He'd been one of the representatives for USC's sports program's preventative counseling service, which worked with athletes to keep them from becoming the kind of men who thought women were playthings made to be dominated. He'd been, from all Len said, quite intense about it.

All this had made him the man for the job when Cleary had come to us asking for support with putting a similar program in place in all the colleges and universities in Florida, where he was still governor. He'd also suggested it as my Cause, and I honestly had no objection.

Cleary had thought up The Cause, however, because he was intimately involved in a scandal that we had, so far, managed to keep under wraps.

“No, not an issue with The Cause,” Kyle replied. “Though I’m sure that’s the reason we’ll all give for why he’s here. We think we have a hit on Stephanie.”

“Really?” Think of the scandal and it appeared. Or something like that. Maybe I still had some telepathic resonance from Operation Civil War. Or maybe Charlie had done a mother-and-child feedback with me like Jamie had and I just wasn’t fully aware of it yet. “How confirmed of a hit?”

“We’re not sure,” Len said, as the elevator opened and we headed off for one of the smaller salons. “Governor Cleary didn’t want to tell us a lot without you in the room.”

“For a guy whose state isn’t next to the Beltway, he’s sure up here a lot.”

“He’s going to run for President again,” Len said. “We all know it. He’s keeping his ties tight. Can’t blame him for that.”

“I can guarantee he wants to activate Clarence, though,” Kyle added. “So if you still want to tell him no, you’d better call Jeff.”

“Why?”

“Because Mister Reynolds sounds like he’s on Cleary’s side,” Len said. “Not sure why.”

Speaking of one of my son’s namesakes and my best friend since ninth grade. “Chuckie’s here? When did he get here?” Normally I knew when he or Jeff were coming to or in the Embassy during the work day. I pulled my phone out and sent a “get home now, please and thank you” text to my husband. It sounded like the boys were right and we were going to need him here sooner as opposed to later.

Chuckie was the head of the C.I.A.’s Extra-Terrestrial Division and, thanks to what we brought back from Operation Civil War, the Golden Boy of the Agency. Which meant that he had even more enemies within the Agency than he had had before.

Chuckie lived in the Embassy now, because his apartments kept getting trashed by people trying to kill him. And his emotional state hadn’t been stable since we’d gotten back from Operation Civil War, because of the horrible things that had happened to him out there, and the fact that the guy he’d thought was his best friend had turned out to be the Mastermind and therefore the guy directly responsible for the death of his wife. Crap like that can affect a person for some reason.

“He came with the governor,” Len answered as we reached the salon and the music changed to Mötley Crüe’s “Chicks = Trouble.” “And they came in with Mister Buchanan. And they were all vetted by the Secret Service.”

We had a lot of Secret Service agents with us, more than the VP normally got. Because of me. Oh well, I was keeping people employed. Go me, creating jobs. We had less Secret Service tailing us inside the Embassy because we were in one of the most secure buildings we could be, and because we had other internal protection.

Malcolm Buchanan had been assigned by my mother to be my personal shadow and bodyguard when we’d first come to D.C. And there wasn’t a day I wasn’t grateful for Mom’s prescience. I insisted Buchanan had Dr. Strange powers because he came and went like the wind and if the man didn’t want you to see him, you didn’t see him.

I saw him now, though. He was standing at the back of the room, clearly on guard, leaning against the wall in

a way that I knew meant he could propel himself wherever he wanted, instantly. The boys moved to similar positions within the room.

Chuckie and Cleary were sitting, and they both looked rather stressed and grim. So, it was going to be that kind of meeting. Oh goody.

“Missus Chief,” Buchanan said with a small smile. “In case you haven’t already guessed . . . we have a problem.”

“I took the leap, Malcolm. Chuckie, Gideon, why so serious?”

“Someone just tried to kill me,” Cleary said, voice shaking. “And I’m pretty sure it was Stephanie.”

CHAPTER 3

STEPHANIE WAS JEFF’S NIECE, his eldest sister’s eldest daughter. Her father, Clarence Valentino, had been an A-C traitor of the highest order. And I’d had to kill him. But not before he’d turned Stephanie.

Understandably, she’d blamed us for her father’s death and joined the Mastermind’s team with gusto. That had gotten her arrested at the end of Operation Defection Election. But that hadn’t kept her down.

During the campaign she’d somehow been released into Cleary’s custody—partly because she’d only been nineteen, partly because the case had been made for extenuating circumstances and insanity due to grief over her father’s death and all that jazz—meaning a lot of strings had been pulled, undoubtedly by the Mastermind, who we all knew Cleary had been working with.

And, because of that pull, her record had been wiped clean, at least her record with the government. With us, not so much, but the A-Cs were all willing to forgive if she wasn’t going to try to kill everyone again.

Stephanie had seemed semi-normal for a while and appeared to be toeing the legal line, though she’d avoided all the A-Cs, even her mother and siblings. Cleary had seemed to think he and his family had rehabilitated her, and they’d treated her like family, though Cleary was still on the side of the Mastermind at the time.

But unfortunately, the best laid plans of mice and men and all that, she’d also started sleeping with the Mastermind. And then he’d had her kill eight of our Secret Service detail during Operation Bizarro World.

Stephanie had freaked out and disappeared, which we’d discovered right at the start of Operation Civil War. There were two theories about her disappearance. One was that she was faking us out, so that we’d come after her and walk into a trap. The other was that she was afraid of the Mastermind and hiding from him. The longer she was gone—and she’d been gone for over a year and a half now—the more credible the second theory seemed.

There was also the theory that said Stephanie was dead, killed by the Mastermind. While we never discounted that one, if she’d been sighted, that would be a good thing. Barring her once again trying to murder people.

“Are you sure it was her?” I asked as I sat down at the small conference table we had in this room.

“Fairly sure,” Chuckie said.

“Very sure,” Cleary said.

Looked to Buchanan. Who shrugged. “I didn’t see any of it, Missus Chief. I was just near enough that when Reynolds called I could get to them the quickest.”

Wondered why Buchanan had been near to Chuckie, versus near to me, for this particular situation. Chose to table the question for later. “What happened?”

“The governor was finishing a meeting with several lobbyists,” Chuckie said. “I was . . . observing the meeting.”

“He was spying on us, he means,” Cleary said, without a lot of animosity. Chuckie just shrugged.

“What was the meeting about?”

“Whether or not to close NASA Base,” Cleary replied.

Well, that was new. And now it made a lot of sense why Chuckie had been “observing” this meeting. “Why would anyone want to close NASA Base?”

“I have no idea,” Cleary said. “I certainly have no desire to do so.”

“But you did, during your Presidential campaign,” Chuckie pointed out, as the music changed to “A Letter to Both Sides” by the Fixx. “And the people who you met with are still pushing for it, even though you’ve dropped it to have a better chance of success in the next election, or the one after.”

Cleary nodded. “That’s very true. At any rate, we finished the meeting, and as we were leaving the restaurant, I saw Stephanie across the street. As soon as she saw me she disappeared. I thought she’d run away from me. But then someone took a shot at me.”

“Excuse me? No one’s mentioned that Florida’s governor was attacked on our streets.”

“The restaurant lets out into the back, where there’s an alley and a small parking lot,” Chuckie explained. “So that people can leave without being seen together, if needed.”

“Gotcha. But still, shots tend to draw attention.”

“Not,” Chuckie said dryly, “when they’re done with a bow and arrow.”

“What, Stephanie’s become Green Arrow or Huntress? I don’t buy it.”

Sure, Stephanie was a traitor and a murderer, but she was still a young woman, only twenty-one years old. Maybe she thought Cleary wanted to shut down the Base and so was trying to protect her family. Maybe not. But she was so young, there was a chance she could be salvaged, saved, redeemed. Again.

And we’d brought just the person to do it home from another solar system.

On Beta Eight we’d discovered a clone of Clarence. The Clarence Clone had been created quickly and without all the bells and whistles our Earth clones had. And he’d lived on a world where a large number of us—Jeff, Chuckie, and myself included—were somehow considered gods. And he still thought we were gods, even though we’d told him that we weren’t.

He had some of the original Clarence's memories and mannerisms, but otherwise, he'd been a lonely, simple but not stupid, living Secret Sentry. He'd proved his worth and loyalty, and we'd brought him home with us.

Sylvia and their other children had been overjoyed. And, despite our explaining that this was a clone, they'd chosen to ignore us and act as though it was the original Clarence, who'd just had a terrible head trauma and memory loss.

The Clarence Clone had none of the mean or the evil that the original had developed in spades by the time Jamie was born. The Clone was more like the guy Sylvia had fallen in love with. So I could understand the desire to play pretend.

However, TCC, as we called him in shorthand, was the one person who could probably bring Stephanie in from the cold, and potentially even get her to confess. Because without her confessing to the fact that Clifford Goodman was the Mastermind, we had no solid proof that could convict him of anything in a court of law.

Of course, Cleary had been in the Mastermind's Inner Circle during Operation Defection Election. However, he hadn't known that Cliff was the Mastermind, or at least so he'd told us when he'd come fully over to our side after the events of Operations Bizarro World and Civil War and, frankly, we believed him. In part because Cliff hadn't launched whatever his Doomsday Plan might be against us, meaning Cleary hadn't told Cliff that we all knew who the Mastermind really was.

Cleary knew now, and had given us what intel he had, but because he *hadn't* known that Cliff was the Mastermind, he didn't have any information that worked as actual proof. Cleary couldn't confirm that Cliff was the Mastermind, or that Cliff had done anything illegal, ever. It was all the "we were at this meeting together" or "he gave me a sealed letter" type of circumstantial evidence that would, at best, prove that Cliff had been one of the Mastermind's flunkies, but nothing more.

We had to take Cliff down definitively, and that meant we needed someone who'd seen him get his hands really dirty and who would also actually say so in a court of law. And that someone was Stephanie.

"No, I don't think she's become some amazing archer," Chuckie said. "But she was close enough when she shot—using a crossbow, so stick with your Huntress analogy—that if I hadn't seen Cleary react to something I wouldn't have been near enough to knock him out of the way."

"Are you okay?" I was asking Chuckie. I cared a hell of a lot more about him than I did Cleary. And, crap, I'd told Jeff to come home and that meant he could be in danger from whoever our Huntress actually was.

He smiled. "Yeah, I am. I alerted Jeff, by the way. He'll be coming home soon, alert and aware, and via a gate. Just in case. And yes, on my order." Gates were alien tech that looked like airport metal detectors but could transport you thousands of miles in seconds. They were great, but still made me nauseous to use.

However, I wasn't the one using the gate, and they were safe. I relaxed. Always nice to have the smartest guy anywhere on my side and thinking ahead. "Good. So, I'm going to guess the next questions. Do we bring in outside help or not?"

Chuckie shook his head. "That's not the question, but nice try. The question is, do we activate TCC or not? I feel it's time. He's acclimated, he's willing, and if the governor really did see Stephanie, then she's active in some way and we need to try to catch her before the Mastermind, other enemies, or even the police do."

We'd made it a point to refer to Cliff as the Mastermind so that we didn't give away that we knew who the

Mastermind was to anyone we might not be able to trust. Sure, everyone in this room knew, but the concern was well-founded. We'd had a Secret Service agent working for the Mastermind who had been discovered just in time.

Sam Travis had been in C.I.A. custody for a long time now, with no access to anyone other than Mom and Chuckie. They'd made up some excuse that seemed to have appeased Cliff, in part because he'd been transferred out of Homeland Security around the same time. And apparently Dear Sam wasn't nearly as important as Stephanie, because no one had pulled any strings to get him out. Fine with me. I wasn't a fan of someone who'd been sleeping in my home while trying to destroy us, call me a Mean Girl.

"The police aren't going to catch an A-C, or at least not the human police." Heaved a sigh and sat down. "Look, I know you think TCC is ready. But . . ."

"But you don't want to risk him getting hurt because you care about him," Chuckie said gently. "However, he does understand the risks and, more than that, Stephanie and potentially many others are at even more risk of getting hurt."

"Couldn't we call in Nightcrawler and my 'uncles'?"

Benjamin Siler was the son of our first Mastermind, the Ronald Yates-Mephistopheles in-control superbeing, and one of our female Brains Behind the Throne biggies, Madeleine Cartwright. This probably made him our first hybrid. We hadn't discovered him until Operation Defection Election, but he was, until this generation, one of the only exceptionally talented male hybrids.

However, that hadn't been good enough for these people. His parents had done horrific experiments on him, turning him into someone who aged very slowly, among other things. One of those other things was his ability to "blend"—he kind of went chameleon and you couldn't see him, or anyone he was touching. He made no noise and didn't reek of sulfur, but Nightcrawler still fit as a nickname.

His uncle had rescued him and trained him in said uncle's profession—assassination. In a nice merging of situations, I'd been sort of adopted by the two best assassins in the business, Peter "The Dingo" Kasperoff and his cousin Victor. They considered themselves my uncles, and, due to a variety of favors I'd done for them, they worked with Siler to protect me and mine.

"They're advised," Buchanan said. I had a feeling he'd become an honorary member of Team Assassination during Operation Defection Election. "However, since we don't want her killed, I'm in agreement with the others—it's time to utilize the weapon you brought home from your trip to another solar system."

"Yeah, about that," Jeff said, coming into the room to "Hot" by Avril Lavigne. Considering he was tall, broad, the handsomest thing on two legs, with wavy brown hair, light brown eyes, and the sexiest smile in the galaxy along with the best naked body, the song was totally apt.

"Glad you're here, Jeff," Cleary said, as Jeff nodded to him and the others.

"Thanks. I realize you're thinking of TCC as a weapon. Hi, baby," he kissed my cheek as he sat down next to me and I did my best to wrench my mind from mentally undressing him and get it back onto business. "But the reason why Kitty's hesitant, and why I agree with that hesitation, is that, clone or not, Clarence is a real person. And he's a real person my sister and her kids are in love with and really can't emotionally handle losing again."

"Yeah, I'm honestly far more concerned about the potential closing of NASA Base than Stephanie."

Jeff nodded. “So is Vince. But on top of all this, we have another issue that is, I think, going to take precedence.”

CHAPTER 4

“CAN’T WAIT,” Chuckie said in a tone indicating that he really could.

“No, it can’t.” Jeff sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “We’ve received a message from Alpha Four. And by ‘we’ I mean me, the Office of the President, the Cabinet, and all the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Expect a call from Angela at any time.”

“We’re all always happy to hear from Mom and I know we all want her take on the latest fun and frolic. But since you’re already here, Jeff, what’s the good word? I mean, I doubt they were sending springtime greetings or asking if this was a good time to drop by and see the cherry trees in bloom.”

Jeff laughed. “No, they weren’t, at least as far as I know. And I don’t know if I can call the word ‘good,’ baby. Apparently the new Planetary Council—which includes representatives from Beta Eight, Alpha Seven, and Beta Sixteen, as well as the usual suspects—wants to visit Earth.”

“So,” I said as Fountain of Wayne’s “I Want an Alien for Christmas” came over our airwaves, “they *do* want to see the cherry trees.”

“When?” Chuckie asked, expertly ignoring me. Decided to be a grown-up and not hum along with the song. Too loudly.

“Soon. From what we can tell, very soon. The request was in the usual overly formal vagueness that seems to be something the Alpha Four leadership loves to use.”

“They’re not declaring war, right?” Cleary asked.

“No.” Jeff shot him a glare almost worthy of his cousin, Christopher White. Christopher was the unequivocal champion of glaring on this or any other world, but Jeff was really giving it a good shot for the silver medal. “They want to visit Earth. On a peace mission. At least as far as we can tell.”

Chuckie’s phone beeped, he took a look, and grunted. “Angela just sent me the text. Yeah, it does sound like all they want to do is visit.” He looked up. “However, I’m not sure we should say yes.”

“I’m not sure we should, or can, say no,” Jeff countered. “I can’t even begin to imagine the chaos another giant spaceship hovering overhead will cause, but it’ll be worse if they use a warp gate of some kind and just show up on the steps of the Capitol building.”

“Why not announce it to the general public?” As soon as the words were out of my mouth I put my hand up. “Never mind. I can think of all the reactions, and so many of them will be utter panic, with a lot of alien hating and alien worshipping thrown in.”

“Right.” Jeff sighed. “Even though everyone knows aliens are here and out there, it’s been four years since the invasion. People have finally stopped jumping when they look up at the clouds.”

Operation Destruction seemed both very far away and, if I let my memory wander even a little ways, as if it had happened yesterday. “And this will only give Club Fifty-One and all the rest of the anti-alien lunatics

something new to get all fired up about.”

Chuckie rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m honestly not sure how we get out of this. Insulting the Alpha Centauri system will never be in Earth’s best interests.”

“Can you read the message? Just so the rest of us can know what you and Jeff do and feel all special, too.”

Chuckie barked a short laugh. “Sure. ‘To our honored relative and those he holds in esteem, we request the opportunity to come and welcome Earth fully into our galactic community. The Planetary Council, which now includes members from all our sentient worlds, will arrive at your convenience, in the manner most appropriate to the comfort of your people. We await your formal invitation. Yours in solidarity, Emperor Alexander the First.’”

“Emperor?”

Jeff nodded slowly. “Technically, he’s the king of Alpha Four and, since we managed to keep that solar system from destroying itself, he’s the leader of all the planets. That would make him the emperor.”

“They’ve never used that term before. The late and totally unlamented King Adolphus was the kind of dude to revel in the title of emperor, but he didn’t use it, ever as far as I know. And he was far more controlling than Alexander is.”

“I think the wording comes from Councilor Leonidas,” Chuckie said. “And I’d imagine that wording is for us. Not ‘us’ us, but for Earth. As in, the guy who rules all these planets is dropping by to say hi to his relatives. Toe the line.”

“Did Leonidas give you any secret Super Smart Guys Only message in this?” Probably sounded a little too hopeful, at least based on Buchanan’s grin.

“Sadly, I don’t think so.” Chuckie rubbed his forehead as Tears for Fears’ “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” came on. “I’ll study it, though, just in case I’m missing something.” All of a sudden, relatively soothing music or no, he looked like he was about to have a migraine.

In the olden days of about fourteen months ago, it would have taken a lot to get Chuckie headed for Migraine Land. After what had happened to him during Operation Civil War, however, his migraines hit fast and hard these days. And he had mood swings that came right before or right after. Sometimes both.

I stood up. “Chuckie, I need to talk to you about something in private.”

Everyone in the room, Cleary included, had experienced Chuckie’s mood swings and migraines. So no one argued. It was a fiction—what I needed to talk to him about was getting him to lie down and take the medicine that our Embassy doctor, Tito Hernandez, had come up with to help ease the pain. But it was a fiction we all used.

Chuckie shook his head. “I’m fine.”

“No,” Jeff said gently, “you’re not. Go with Kitty, Chuck. We’ll focus on all the issues, and we’ll consult you before we do anything, I promise.”

Buchanan moved off the wall, and Chuckie saw him do it, presumably because Buchanan had wanted him to see him do it. Chuckie sighed. “Fine. You don’t have to force me. Sure, Kitty, let’s go talk about whatever.”

I gave Jeff a quick kiss, then took Chuckie's arm and led him out of the conference room and to the nearest elevator.

"I'm okay," he muttered.

"You're not. The infirmary, or your room, which would you prefer?"

He sighed. "I'd prefer not to feel like a helpless detriment."

"You're neither. But you were hurt, badly, and all of us want to help you get better as fast as you're able." It had been fourteen months, so the term "fast" was kind of ridiculous but he didn't call me on it. "And none of us want to see you in pain, either."

We got into the elevator and he leaned against the back wall. "I know." He closed his eyes. "My room, I guess."

I hit the button for the third floor. Not that this meant anything. The infirmary and the general housing and guest quarters were all on that floor.

"You know, I know she's out there somewhere, Kitty."

"Who? Stephanie? I think we're thinking she's out there close by, aren't we?"

"Maybe, but that's not who I meant."

"Who did you mean?"

"Mimi."

CHAPTER 5

MIMI WAS THE NICKNAME he'd given to Naomi Gower, who was the half-human half-A-C he'd fallen in love with and married. And then she'd died, before they'd even been married six months.

The trouble was, I knew Chuckie was right. Naomi had taken so much Surcenthumain—what I called the Superpowers Drug—in order to protect the rest of us from the Mastermind, Chuckie and Jamie in particular, and to save ACE, that she'd become something very other than human. She'd become a superconsciousness. And she wasn't allowed back here, ever.

I'd never told Chuckie this. He didn't need to think his wife was out there somewhere where he could find her. "What do you mean?" I asked carefully, as the elevator doors opened.

"I mean I saw her, when I was strapped to that machine. She's out there, somewhere. And I know I can find her, if I just look in the right way and in the right place."

This was the very definition of "not good" for more reasons than I could count. The biggest ones were that Naomi wasn't allowed here by older and far more powerful superconsciousnesses, and they would hurt Earth if she came back. And they'd do it by hurting ACE, the benevolent superconsciousness that was now housed in my daughter. And they'd probably out Algar in the process, which would be bad for, potentially, our entire galaxy.

Algar was a Black Hole Universe being who had the biggest hard on in the multiverse for Free Will and was, therefore, on the run for crimes against his people's laws, which were more along the lines of not letting the lesser races destroy themselves. He'd taken a shine to the Alpha Four royal family thousands of years ago, and when Jeff's family had been exiled to Earth he'd come along for the ride. He was the entire Operations Team, which I'd nicknamed the Elves. There were only a handful of us who knew about Algar, and Chuckie wasn't one of them.

However, the very human reason why it was bad for Chuckie to think Naomi was alive and out in the universe somewhere was that he'd focus on trying to find her. Meaning he'd never move on and find someone else to love.

This wasn't idle speculation on my part. Chuckie had been in love with me for years—not that I'd been aware of it for most of the time, my romantic density being somewhat legendary by now—and it had taken him a long time to get over my choosing to marry Jeff. That he'd literally waste his life away searching for Naomi was a possibility that had real potential.

Time to be the worst and, at the same time, best best friend in the world and do the right thing: Lie.

I took his arm again and led him out of the elevator. "I think you saw what you wanted to see," I said gently.

"You don't believe I saw her?" He sounded confused. A mood swing was looming on the horizon.

"I believe that you believe you saw her, Chuckie. But that makes sense."

"It does?"

"Yes." We reached his room and I opened the door and led him inside. Because I wasn't a dictator, everyone was able to listen to whatever they wanted in their own rooms. Most of the staff didn't leave music going when they weren't in their living quarters, and Chuckie was no exception. But I wasn't certain silence was what he needed.

"How so?"

"You were being horrifically tortured, watching your friends being hurt, wondering if you were going to hold out or if your mind was going to be destroyed. No matter how brave a person you are—and, trust me, I know you're incredibly brave—that had to have been terrifying as well as horribly painful. When we're that hurt and scared, it's natural to see a person we love and hope that they're coming to save us."

"But . . . it was so *real*. As real as everything else I saw. Like—" He stopped speaking. Wasn't sure, but I had a feeling there was something else he wasn't telling me. But now wasn't the time to push him about whatever that might be.

"Dreams almost always feel real." I got his medicine and went to the small fridge in his room. "Water, please," I said to the fridge, aka the Elves, aka Algar. Opened it to find a bottle of Dasani waiting. Algar was always on the job. "Thank you." Algar appreciated that I was polite, and knowing that made me want to ensure I kept my record intact.

Chuckie closed his eyes. "Yeah." He swallowed hard and opened his eyes. "I don't want to take the pills."

"The medicine Tito's made for you helps you with the pain."

He shook his head. "I hate taking drugs, you know that."

“Yes, but it’s non-addictive. Tito made sure.”

“I just . . . what if the medicine is making me worse?”

Here it came. Paranoia was the first phase of his mood swings. It was normally followed by anger, then rage, then listlessness, remorse, and utter despair. All while he felt like his head was breaking apart.

“Why would I give it to you, if that was the case?”

He stared at me, and I could see the suspicion coming. But he didn’t say anything.

I put the pills and water bottle on his nightstand. “Look, this has been going on for months now. No one in this Embassy, heck, no one currently on Earth is responsible for what happened to you.”

“*He* is,” he snarled.

“Yes, in a way, Cliff is the one responsible. For so many bad things. However, he isn’t the person who strapped you into that mind-expanding torture device. The people who did are dead.”

“Some of them will be visiting.” He sounded ready to go join Club 51. Normally when he was like this we tried to calm and soothe him. It rarely worked.

I was the one he responded to best, which made sense. I was also the one who’d spent the last many months insisting that we not rush his recovery in any way. Basically, I was willing to coddle him because I felt that he needed it.

Maybe it was the stress from him telling me he thought Naomi was alive. Maybe the worry about our impending visitations combined with the worry about everything else that was going on. But I just couldn’t handle coddling him today. It hadn’t been making any positive change in over a year, after all. So maybe it was time to try a new tactic.

“And I suppose you’d like us to kill them as soon as they step out of the spacecraft? Or maybe in the air?”

Chuckie stared at me. “What?”

“You’re hurting, you’re angry, and you’re snarling. I’m all for killing Cliff Goodman. The problem with that is that we know he has clones of himself and LaRue the Clandestine Ancient Alien and Leventhal Reid all over the place. You’re the first person to mention that he also probably has a doomsday plan in place if he’s killed. So killing him right now is out.”

“I know that, but—”

“*But* the Rapacians who put you into that machine are all dead, and the ones that will be coming to visit will be on the tightest leashes around because they’ll either come that way or I’ll be the one putting said leashes on. So, aside from the pain, I’m just wondering if you want us killing people, or if you’re just actually enjoying wallowing in pain and sorrow somehow.”

He stared at me again. “Why would you think that?”

“Because the medicine you don’t want to take relieves your pain and calms your moods. I realize that this means you’re not getting to be all natural. On the other hand, you’re going to be more like you actually are. So unless you’re really set on no longer being Batman but instead being the Incredible Hulk twenty-four-

seven, I think taking your meds, lying down, and taking a nap is what a mature, intelligent adult would do.”

“What . . . why are you mad at me?”

“I’m not. But, seriously, we need Normal Suave and On Top of Things Chuckie back, not Mister Emotions’ Wild Ride Chuckie hanging around, moping, whining, threatening, and generally playing into all our enemies’ hands.”

He blinked. “I’m helping our enemies?”

I shoved him gently onto the bed. “Dude, think about it. If you’re out of commission, then the best mind we have is out of commission. Why do you think Cliff centered all his evil crap on you? Sure, because of the insane rivalry, but it’s there *because* you’re smarter than he is.”

He shook his head. “He’s been three steps ahead of us for years.”

“Because we didn’t know who the hell the Mastermind was. We know now. Sure, we have some catching up to do, and we have to hide that we know he’s a freaking backstabbing traitorous loon, but we *are* catching up. And our allies, such as the President, are aware of who and what Cliff really is, and he doesn’t know that they know. But we need you, the real you, in order to catch up all the way. And that means we need you focused on getting better and on doing what you do best, which is thinking, not going off on a wild wife chase that will only end in heartbreak all around.”

He was quiet for a few long moments. “Why are you saying this to me today?”

“Versus at any other time over the last fourteen months? Because you told me today that you think Naomi’s still out there somewhere. I could be spitballing here, but I think that means you’ve been trying to find her all these months. And that’s probably contributing to all your health issues in a big, nasty, negative way. And I’m telling you that you need to stop it. For you, for us, for Earth. And for the two people Naomi sacrificed herself to save—you and Jamie.”

Chuckie stared at me for another few moments. “What if I can’t?”

CHAPTER 6

HEAVED A SIGH AND asked the key question. “Can’t or won’t?”

Chuckie managed a wry smile. “Either.” He heaved his own sigh and reached for his meds. “You’re right, you know. I don’t want to stop looking for her. And yes, I have been. Desperately. Which is pathetic.”

“No, it’s not. It’s human.” I turned on his iPod and selected the Soothing Songs playlist I’d created for him. Melissa Etheridge came on, softly singing “Sleep.” “You loved her and she was taken from you. Why wouldn’t you want to find her again?”

“Yeah.” He took his pills and lay down. “But I think you’re also right—I may have imagined it.” He didn’t sound convinced of this.

“Look, let’s say you’re right. What, exactly, can you do?” Hoped his answer wasn’t going to be to take a lot of Surcenthumain and become a superconsciousness. Or die.

“Nothing. Because if she’s still here, it isn’t *here*, you know? I don’t think she’s anywhere on Earth. Or really on any planet. I just feel like she’s out there, somewhere.”

“That’s how a lot of people feel when they lose someone—that the person’s spirit is still out there, watching over them. And if that’s true, then I know Naomi’s watching over you. And I also know that she doesn’t want you wasting your life away, allowing her family and friends, her goddaughter, and the husband she loved so much to be destroyed.”

This I did know to be true, so I wasn’t lying so much as protecting all of us, Naomi included, from the Superconsciousness Supreme Court.

Chuckie nodded and his eyes got droopy. Had to hand it to Tito, the medicines he created worked fast. And if Melissa Etheridge wanted you to go to sleep, you went to sleep. “You’re right, Kitty.” He reached for me and I took his hand in mine. “Thanks for always being there for me.”

I kissed his forehead. “Always, and right back atcha. Now, get some rest and feel better—I’m going to go back to Stress Central and figure out our next moves.”

He heaved one more sigh and then his hand went lax. He was asleep. I covered him up with a throw blanket, turned the music down a little more, then, as his Poof, Fluffy, and Naomi’s Poof, Cutie-Pie, crawled out of his pockets and snuggled on either side of his neck, I quietly left.

Decided to take a quick look in at the kids, mostly because any time Chuckie was like this I had a strong suspicion Jamie knew somehow and was upset by it. So I used hyperspeed, which I had thanks to giving birth to Jamie, and headed upstairs one floor to the daycare center.

To find Seraphim’s version of “Baby Face” on the airwaves and Amy Gaultier-White in da house, playing with the kids. A year ago this would have been odd—Amy loved all the kids, but she wasn’t someone who was going to drop everything because a baby was nearby. Then.

But Amy and Christopher were finally pregnant and, since her second trimester, Amy had been spending more and more time with the kids, particularly in the daycare center. This was fine with Denise and all the rest of the parents, but since Amy was also still fighting off the rest of the Gaultier Enterprises board members—well, the evil ones, which I kind of assumed were all of them until we discovered differently—her attachment to the kids was kind of freaky.

It was definitely freaking Christopher out. But Jeff wasn’t overly concerned about it, and since we were reasonably sure that we’d gotten rid of all the emotional blockers and overlays our enemies had planted everywhere, if he didn’t feel Amy was off the deep end, then the rest of us didn’t need to worry.

“Hey Ames, how goes it?”

She was holding Jamie in her lap. Unlike me—both times—Amy hadn’t turned into Henrietta Hippo during pregnancy. She looked great, though there was definitely a baby on board. Also unlike me, her long red hair really looked more luxurious, her skin was clear and glowing, and she had a Madonna and Child look going with Jamie. She was one of my oldest and closest friends, so I chose not to hate her.

“Okay. Kitty, is Chuck okay?”

Well, that explained why Jamie was in her lap. “Migraine.” Which was our code for Chuckie’s Delicate Condition.

“We figured.” Amy hugged Jamie. “I’ll bet your mommy got your Uncle Charles all taken care of.”

Trotted over and gave Jamie a kiss. “I did. He’ll be fine.”

“I miss Auntie Mimi, too,” Jamie said.

Not good. I had no idea if she was reading Chuckie’s mind, if they had some sort of mind-link due to what had happened during Operation Civil War, or if she just knew why Chuckie was always sad these days. But still, of all of us, the one most likely to be able to contact Naomi was Jamie—because she housed ACE inside of her.

ACE was a superconsciousness that had been created by those on Alpha Four who’d wanted to keep all their exiled people firmly on Earth. During Operation Drug Addict, when we’d discovered ACE and what he was supposed to be doing, I’d originally filtered ACE into Paul Gower, Naomi’s older brother and the current Supreme Pontifex of the Earth A-Cs.

ACE had always been our protector, and after Operation Destruction, Alexander had ensured that any imposed restraints ACE might still have were removed, essentially freeing ACE to protect Earth as he saw fit. But due to events that happened during Operation Defection Election and some other, extremely interfering superconsciousnesses, ACE had had to move into Jamie, for both his protection and hers.

I knew that ACE, like Algar, knew Naomi was still around, so to speak. Whether this meant Jamie knew for sure or not I didn’t know. And I was afraid to ask.

“We all miss her, Jamie-Kat.” I stroked her hair as “Mysterious Ways” by U2 came on. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Auntie Amy’s here.” She patted Amy’s stomach. “And Becky’s here, too.”

“Excuse me?” This was a new one.

New to Amy, too. She looked confused. Well, not about the sex of the baby—since Jamie, the “no finding out the sex prior to birth” rule the A-Cs had had was struck from the rulebook. But to my knowledge, Amy and Christopher hadn’t settled on a name.

“Ah, we haven’t picked the name yet, sweetie,” Amy said, right on cue.

“She likes Becky,” Jamie said as if she was stating that water was wet.

Amy and I exchanged the “oh really?” look. “Ah, well,” Amy said slowly, “that’s one of the names we’ve been talking about—Rebecca Ann. But it’s not the only one.”

“It’s the one she likes,” Jamie said. “And she wants to be called Becky by her friends.”

“Well, as I remember,” I said carefully, “this generation all likes to be named early.” Jamie had certainly responded to her name while in utero, and we’d had to assign names to some of the other hybrids during labor for their safety and the safety of their mothers. “Apparently you’re having a talented girl.”

Amy nodded. “But we knew that.” True enough. All of our crop of hybrids had shown their talents early. Though none as much as my children, at least so far.

Speaking of which, Charlie crawled over, looking indignant for being ignored this long. I picked him up and hugged him while he cuddled into my neck. “I guess you need to tell Christopher that the name is set.”

Amy managed a laugh. "I guess so." She hugged Jamie. "Thanks for letting me know."

Jamie hugged her back, beaming. "You're welcome, Auntie Amy." If I ignored Jamie's continuing ability to communicate with other children while they were still in the womb, some of which was probably due to ACE, everyone seemed fine, and I had a meeting I needed to get back to. Hugged Amy, kissed Jamie, kissed Charlie and handed him off to Amy, and headed off again.

Used hyperspeed to get back downstairs quickly. Christopher still worked with me regularly on my skills and control, and I almost never slammed myself into walls anymore. At least, not very often.

". . . so, I think we're going to have to say yes," I heard Jeff say as I rejoined him and the others to Flo Rida's "Club Can't Handle Me."

"To visitors or to activating The Clarence Clone?" I asked as I seated myself to the beat.

"Both, honestly, baby." Jeff sighed. "By the way, I didn't want to say this while Chuck was in the room, but Cliff knows about the message from the Planetary Council."

"How so?"

"We were having a meeting with the Cabinet and their top people. Cliff's the head of FEMA now, he was there."

"Fantastic. What's his stance on the NASA Base situation?"

"Out loud? Total support for keeping the Base open."

"Is that the general viewpoint?"

"Most. Shocking no one, the Secretary of Transportation is against it. A few others. Some not for anti-alien reasons, at least out loud."

Cleary nodded. "I understand the issue, in that sense. The issue is that with you all out in the open, why have a special base at NASA just for A-Cs?"

"Because the majority of our tech comes from there?" I asked with only a hint of sarcasm.

Cleary shrugged. "Just as much comes from Dulce. However, I don't want to say yes to closing NASA Base."

"Then that's going to be on you, Gideon. Because you're the dude who started the whole 'shut it down' movement in the first place."

"Yes, I know, Ambassador."

"Why so formal? All of a sudden, I mean." Looked around. Nope, no one of importance had just arrived via Stealth Mode.

"He's trying to focus you on the fact that you're going to have to take an active role in preserving NASA Base," Jeff said. "And he's not wrong."

"What about the Stephanie the Huntress situation?"

“That we’re leaving to me, Missus Chief,” Buchanan said. “And the boys are going to make sure that happens,” he added, nodding at Len and Kyle, who nodded right back with super-serious expressions. Apparently what had been discussed in my absence was me and my expected roles. And how to prevent me from doing anything too active.

“Fine, fine. Well, I guess that means some of us are heading to Florida.” Meaning Jamie, Charlie, Len, Kyle, and I were definitely heading to Jeff’s parent’s house. That would make Alfred and Lucinda happy, so that was one for the win column. “Jeff, are you coming with us or do you have to stay up here?”

“It’ll depend on what we determine we’re doing about the Planetary Council.”

“We’re in a damned if we do and damned if we don’t situation,” Cleary said. He and Jeff started discussing the various options, with Buchanan and even the boys adding in. No one was thrilled.

Considered the option they hadn’t. “You know, why don’t we just kill two birds with one spaceship?”

CHAPTER 7

GOT THE ROOM’S ATTENTION with that one. All the men stared at me for a few long seconds.

“Excuse me?” Cleary asked finally.

“If we have the Planetary Council arrive at NASA Base, it would make a statement that the Base is necessary, plus keep the Planetary Council out of D.C.”

“They want to chat with the President, I’m sure,” Jeff said. “I don’t think we want to drag Vince down to Florida for this.”

“Why not?” Cleary asked. “I mean that seriously. It’s his home state, too, and, frankly, I like the Ambassador’s idea.”

“And if things get dull, we can always take them to Disney World.” The entire room ignored this statement. Always the way.

“I’m not sure about the logistics, Gideon,” Jeff said, as if I hadn’t spoken. “And a spaceship over Florida is no better than a spaceship over Washington.”

“Have them show up via the Alpha Five Transport System.” This one got the room’s attention, go me.

“They’re all comfortable with that method, and as long as no one’s trying to stop them their trip here should be relatively smooth.”

“You just don’t want to be away from the action,” Jeff said. Accurately.

Not that I was going to admit that. “I think we solve several problems by doing this all at NASA Base, and if Gideon’s with us, then he’s away from Stephanie. And The Clarence Clone is in Florida, too.” “Road Runner” by Aerosmith came on, as if to solidify the rightness of my train of thought. “Really, I think it’s road trip time.”

Jeff sighed and pulled his phone out. He looked at Kyle. “Turn the music off. I don’t want to talk to the President with rock music screaming in the background.”

“Spoilsport,” I muttered.

Kyle grinned and sent a text, presumably because Jeff was dialing and Kyle didn’t want to use the intercom system therefore. The music stopped. Did my best not to pout. Failed, if Buchanan trying not to laugh was any indication.

“Hey Vince. Kitty’s suggested we have the Planetary Council arrive via phasing transport, meaning no spaceships. Yeah, I agree. Also, she’s suggested that they arrive at NASA Base.” He was quiet for a bit. “Yeah, that’s her thinking, too. It’ll allow us to easily activate TCC at the same time as well.” He chuckled. “I’ll tell her.” He hung up and turned to me. “Vince likes your plan.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He said that suggestions in these matters from the woman who averted the total destruction of Earth at least twice probably should be listened to.”

“Vince is my favorite. But I think it’s been more than twice.”

Jeff heaved a sigh. “You can argue with him about it on Air Force One, baby. We’re flying down there. Tonight.”

Let that sit on the air for a bit. Then found the right words. “No way in hell are we doing that.”

Before Jeff or anyone else could argue, I quickly explained why it just wasn’t that simple. In part because we had a huge entourage if it was just going to be our family unit going to Florida. And seeing that it was us, there was no way that only Jeff, the kids, and I were going. Half the Embassy was going to want to go and, once Jeff let Alpha Team know what was going on, they were all going to want to come, too.

Most embassies didn’t clear out half their personnel when the Ambassador was going on a short trip. But most embassies probably weren’t packed to the gills with personnel and family members like ours was. And most embassies also didn’t expect their ambassadors to get attacked merely by crossing state lines. We were just special that way.

“We could tell them all no,” Jeff said finally, in the tone of voice of a man who already knows he’s lost that battle.

“As if. We’re going to have far too many people who have *legitimate* reasons to come along to fly them down unless we take not only Air Force One and Air Force Two but also Air Forces Three through Twelve as well. Which, even if they exist, would be okay, as long as we aren’t racing down there like our parents are coming home from vacation a day earlier than we expected and we’re desperately trying to clean up the house from the all university kegger we threw the night before.”

“I’m not even going to ask why you used that as an example.” Jeff heaved a sigh and dialed again, this time putting us on speakerphone.

Repeated my issues, kegger example included. Armstrong didn’t seem to have any issues with it. Then again, I knew he’d been in a frat. “Vince, it’s insane to drop everything and race down. And I doubt the Planetary Council expects it, either. Let’s get ready, as in really ready, prepped to do double duty or more on the way there, and let’s go in such a way that we don’t appear to be running.”

Heard a sneeze.

“Bless you. Are you getting a cold?”

“Maybe,” Armstrong said. Was fairly sure I heard him trying to discreetly blow his nose. “If so, it just came on in the last hour. But anyway, you have a good point, Kitty. Several of them, really. Fine. As you say, we won’t race like panicked maniacs. We’ll plan an impromptu campaign trip down to Florida that will provide us a safe political reason for the trip and allow us all to be at NASA Base whenever we ask the Planetary Council to meet us there. Gideon, you’ll get things set up on your end?”

“Yes. We’ll be ready with whatever you need, whenever you need it.”

“Excellent, my office will coordinate with yours.”

“How are we going down?” Jeff asked.

“I don’t recommend the plane,” I said quickly. “In part because we’re going to have so many in our entourage that the plane might not be able to get off the ground. And a lot of planes flying down sort of screams that the king is fleeing the palace. Plus, if you do have a cold, being up in the air isn’t in your best interests.”

Armstrong chuckled. “True enough, and I anticipated your entourage. And, happily, I have a solution that will do the double duty you’re so fond of—we’re going to take Rail Force One.”

That the President has his own railroad version of Air Force One shouldn’t have come as a shock to me when I first found out, but it had. However, it was extremely cool, too, and in ways far different from the mighty plane heralded in song and Harrison Ford movies.

“Awesome!” I loved the train. The Vice President had Air Force Two and Rail Force Two, and we’d used it a few times, but not often enough in my opinion.

“I assume we’ll need Rail Force Two as well,” Armstrong said.

We discussed logistics, and the plan was to hook both trains together, hopefully giving us enough space to bring along everyone who felt they had to join us or die trying.

In the olden days, before the A-Cs were outed as being on Earth, this never would have happened. Having the President and Vice President both traveling together was considered far too dangerous, because there had been people trying to kill leaders as long as humanity had had leaders. And, realistically, it still was pretty dangerous.

However, since the VP and most of his entourage were all A-Cs or, in my case, enhanced, the risks were different. It was actually safer for the President to be with us, since an A-C could, and definitely would, grab him and get him to safety faster than anyone else could have a hope of doing.

From a PR standpoint, Armstrong was all for making the “the A-Cs are our people now” statements as much as he could, and that included showing that he hadn’t asked Jeff to be his running mate just for show. So we were gaining several advantages by traveling in this way, including potential stumping stops along the route, since winning office meant that whatever politician had won his or her office immediately had to start campaigning to win said office again.

I was all for the train. Not only did that mean we’d get to actually see some scenery, but the food was always far better than on the airplanes. And the added bonus of no one being able to blow us up while in the air was huge, too. Not that I didn’t think that we weren’t at risk from some lunatics trying to blow up the train tracks,

but we would be on the ground, essentially, and that gave us far more of an advantage.

Calmer Plan B in place, we got off the line and went over what Cleary had to do. We needed him back in his home state to prep things for the imminent arrivals and be there to greet us when we disembarked in Orlando. Sadly, not to go to Disney World, despite my suggesting it again, but to head across to the Kennedy Space Center and NASA Base.

After reassuring Cleary that we weren't going to allow him to be assassinated, we sent him home via a gate. We also sent three Field teams with him. He was the easy one. We had a gigantic entourage coming along for the ride and we weren't taking gates.

But before we could discuss our team's logistics, my phone beeped. "Huh. Lillian Culver wants to grab me for a late lunch."

"Why?" Jeff asked. Rightly. Culver was the head lobbyist for the top defense contractors, most of whom were our enemies. However, due to a variety of things that had happened, my "uncles'" intervention being one of the biggest, she'd become an ally. However, she wasn't one to want Girl Time.

"She says she heard something that may or may not be significant, but if it is, then she wants me forewarned and herself advised. She's suggesting we go to the Teetotaler so that it looks like we're really having a fun time together, rather than her coming into the Embassy."

The Teetotaler was one of our favorite little restaurants near the Capitol and Rayburn House, where Jeff's offices had been when he'd been a Representative.

"She want me there, too?"

"She hasn't said, should I ask?"

"No. If she's coming to get you, I'll wait with you and take you to her car. If she wants me along, then it'll look like she was always getting both of us. If not, fine, I'll just go back inside."

"I'll be tailing you in a car," Buchanan said. "The boys are required to go with you. She's aware of that, I know, but has she figured on it?"

"No idea, but she'll be here in five minutes so we're going to find out together."

CHAPTER 8

CULVER DROVE A very nice Bentley, which pulled up in front of our Embassy exactly as promised.

I wasn't really Dressed for Bentley Success, seeing as I was in jeans, my red Converse, and one of my newer Aerosmith shirts that had just Steven Tyler and Joe Perry on the front. Normally I preferred to roll with all of my boys in the band on my chest, but I hadn't been expecting action. Hopefully the only action I'd have is the hard decision about what tea to have at the restaurant.

I'd had just enough time to run upstairs at hyperspeed and grab my purse, ensuring that it had my Glock, several clips, and anything else of vital importance in it, and get back down before Culver had arrived.

Jeff, Len, and Kyle all went down the walkway with me. Culver left the car running but got out. "Jeff, nice to

see you. Gentlemen, I'll let you do what you do best."

She was dressed as I was used to—in red, which was “her” color. Her lipstick always matched. Culver was one of those women who, when you first looked at her, seemed very attractive. But, the longer you looked, the more you realized she was all bones and angles, and when she smiled widely, she always reminded me of the Joker after he'd pulled a particularly nasty stunt on the people of Gotham. I called her Joker Jaws to myself for this reason. However, not nearly as much these days as when we'd first met. Go D.C. politics.

Len grinned. “I like your style, Miz Culver.”

She was married to Abner Schnekedy—who I'd had the “fun” of meeting in my Washington Wife class along with many other people who were now either still my enemies, dead or, somehow, my friends—but had wisely kept her maiden name for business.

Len got into the driver's seat while Kyle trotted around and opened the driver's side rear door for her.

“You want Jeff, too? Or is this just girls and bodyguards only?”

“I think just the four of us, if that won't offend you, Jeff.”

“Not at all. Just make sure all four of you get back in one piece.”

“Wow, optimistic much?” I leaned up and kissed him goodbye. “I'll text or call if we need you, I promise.”

“I'll be monitoring you, baby, don't worry.” He tucked me into the car as Kyle came around and took shotgun.

We waited to drive off until Jeff was back in the Embassy. Once we were rolling, Culver leaned back and sighed. “Having a driver is a wonderful thing.”

“Yeah, the boys are great. Why are we hanging out?”

“To pretend that I haven't given you the information I'm about to give you.” She looked behind us. “Is that your Mister Buchanan behind us?”

Looked as well. There was a taxicab behind us that seemed to be following us. “Yes,” Len and I said in unison.

Culver laughed. “Good. I feel much safer.”

“You normally don't feel unsafe, Lillian. What's up?”

“Several things. There's a new player in town. European, I think. I haven't met him yet. But Thomas is working a business deal, and from the little he's told me, it could give Titan Security the edge in the weaponized robotics field.”

“You mean more of an edge than they, Gaultier Enterprises, and YatesCorp have already?”

“Yes. I have no idea if it's related to the supersoldier program, or the androids that you've told me about, but it's the first time I've heard of this player. His name is Gustav Drax.”

“That has freaking got to be a made up name.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. I haven’t been able to find anything on him, so I can’t say.”

“Is he an arms dealer?”

“I’d assume so, until proven otherwise.”

“Fabulous. Well, I guess it’s good to be forewarned and all that.” Heard what sounded like a really loud motorcycle. The Bentley’s soundproofing was good, meaning that either its engine was about to die or we had the mother of all Harleys next to us.

“That’s only one thing,” Culver said, as I turned to look at what was indeed a Harley coming up fast. “The other is—”

She was interrupted because Kyle shouted a warning and Len swerved so fast and so hard that she and I were both tossed to the side and down. Which was a good thing, seeing as an arrow hit the seat rest her head had just been leaning against.

My reflexes were fast, and I was used to being under attack. Plus, I’d gotten a glance at the Harley’s rider, so had seen it was a blonde chick. So while Len floored it, and Kyle continued to shout at us to get down, I was already on the floor, pulling Culver down there with me.

“Glad the glass is shatterproof. Lillian, are you okay?”

“Yes.” She looked up. “That was intended for me, wasn’t it?”

“I think so. Um, were you going to tell me that there’s a rogue assassin in town who’s a chick who’s using a crossbow?”

“Yes, I was. She tried to kill Gideon Cleary earlier today.”

“Yeah, Chuckie saved him.”

“Don McMillan wasn’t as lucky.”

My body went cold. “Is he okay?” Senator McMillan was the senior senator from Arizona and someone we all considered one of the few honest politicians out there. And he was a good friend.

“Yes, but only because he still has a soldier’s reflexes and intuition. She only winged him.”

“So that’s two of our allies, and you make number three.”

“Count us as three through seven, Kitty,” Kyle said. “Because she’s following us.”

“Where’s Malcolm?”

“Not keeping up,” Len said tightly, as he weaved us in and out of traffic. At least, that was what I assumed he was doing, since Culver and I were sliding back and forth on the floor, hearing a ton of people honking at us and the sound of screeching breaks. “This car’s got a lot of power, thank God.”

“Head for somewhere with a lot of security.”

“I’m open to ideas,” Len said.

“Andrews. Get us to the Air Force base.”

“You got it, we’re close to the Beltway.”

I could tell when we hit the Beltway because apparently the Bentley had more power than Len had been using on the surface streets. We were going much faster, though still weaving, and I didn’t hear nearly as many honking horns.

“She’s still in pursuit,” Kyle said. “Andrews is prepped for our arrival.”

But before we could get there I heard a sound. I’d heard the sound before. And it was never a good sound when you were going really fast.

We’d blown a tire.

CHAPTER 9

“SHE’S SHOT A TIRE OUT!” Kyle shared, as we spun. Heard another explosion. “Two!”

Because Len was a great driver, we didn’t flip and somehow we also didn’t hit anything and no one hit us. But we did come to a stop, after a few dizzying seconds.

The Harley was nearby, I could hear it. And that meant the four of us were sitting ducks.

I didn’t really think about it. I was the only one with hyperspeed in this car, and if Huntress was on a motorcycle, then she wasn’t an A-C. A-C’s had reflexes that were so good they couldn’t handle human machinery because they’d destroy it. So whoever Huntress was, she was a human. Or, based on Culver’s recent revelations, an android. And I’d fought androids before and won.

I put my purse over my neck. “Protect Lillian and call for backup!” I shouted as I leaped out and slammed the door behind me.

We were actually on the off-ramp, which was probably why we hadn’t been hit by anyone else. And the Harley was coming right for us, its rider’s crossbow aimed right for me.

The chick was in black leather, so totally into the whole look. She was definitely blonde. And she was also definitely wearing a mask that covered the top half of her face. Always the way.

Users Review

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