

Chapter One: Inauspicious Beginnings

The wolf whistle was singularly impressive, not only because of its purity of sound and the fact that it then continued on into the 1812 overture, but also because it originated from the thick, brown lips of what looked like an enormous orangutan, dressed in a shiny, white spacesuit, and holding a helmet under one hairy arm.

As Lieutenant Grace Alexandra Lord M.D. stepped off of the Conglomerate space shuttle, arrayed before her in a disorderly, lounging group were a wolfman, two tigersmen, a grizzly bear human, and the whistling, male orangutan soldier. They were all enormous in stature, broad of shoulder, attired in combat space suits and clasping space helmets, which presumably fit their massive heads. Each of them stared avidly at Grace, their gazes so alarmingly intense, that Grace felt like she was the next course to be served up on their dinner plates. The sight of their glistening white fangs, exposed in various permutations of bestial leer, sent a shudder down her spine.

These were combat soldiers, with genetic adaptations giving them the enhanced appearance and massive strength of fierce predators. They all seemed to be grinning at her, but perhaps that was just the animal adaptations they possessed. She could swear a couple of them were actually winking at her. Inanely, the little voice in her head wise-cracked that the wolf whistle should have come from the wolfman. Following on the heel of that thought, the man who

was genetically enhanced with the attributes of a wolf, tipped back his white and silver-furred head and emitted a yip-yip-yipping yowl.

The initial shock of seeing such a ferocious-looking menagerie, wearing combat spacesuits designed for human soldiers, was not only disorienting, but daunting indeed. At least the intimidating ‘incisor’ display was short-lived. When the genetically-modified, animal-adapted combat soldiers finally noticed the shoulder bars on Grace’s own spacesuit - indicating her rank as Lieutenant - they instantly snapped to attention, becoming serious and respectful, their eyes suddenly staring straight ahead and thankfully no longer all over Grace.

These enormous military combatants of the Conglomerate, who had physical enhancements chosen to make them bigger, stronger, faster, and fiercer, formed a disciplined line. They stood almost shoulder to shoulder, with rank ascending. They all crisply saluted Grace. At full attention, these men were even more intimidating than before, and they towered over her.

Grace examined their faces perfunctorily, not wanting to gawk. They were all handsome men, but two had the facial coloring and eyes of a tiger, one had the silver-grey markings of a wolf, and the orangutan had the stringy, reddish hair and large brown eyes, characteristic of that species, along with the long arms and bowed legs. The grizzly bear sergeant had the large round head, brown fur, and massive build of that fearsome mammal. To Grace, they all looked very frightening.

Grace was about to return their impressive salutes, when off to Grace’s right, there came a deafening roar, as if from some colossal beast in horrible agony. She had no time to look in the direction from whence the bellow came, before she was grabbed by a very strong pair of hands

and launched straight up into the air. Her duffel bag, which she'd been carrying over her right shoulder, tumbled out of her grasp, as she flew upwards, somersaulting towards the dark, shadowy ceiling above.

Grace was shocked speechless. She sensed a huge rush of air pass beneath her, as something enormous motored through the space she had just vacated. Had she still been standing in that original spot, she would have been trampled!

The question was, by what?

As the low gravity of the space station pulled Grace back down towards the Receiving Bay floor, she was caught by another pair of muscular hands that whipped her sideways, just before the mysterious, hurricane-like force flew by her again, missing her face by a fraction. Grace felt the gale of the behemoth's passage gust passed her cheek. She was being thrown around so violently, her head was spinning, and Grace had to clench her jaws to avoid vomiting. She had still not gotten a good look at whatever was charging at her, when she was flung upwards again, by another strong pair of hands.

A savage, enraged roar erupted. It shook the walls of the space station's Receiving Bay. Whatever it was that was howling, was on a murderous rampage, and it seemed single-mindedly determined to attack Grace. She was like the proverbial red cape to this raging bull and she had no idea why. Finally, after her eyes stopped whirling for a second, she got a brief glimpse of what was targeting her, just as she was being snapped into the air again. If her eyes were not deceiving her, it was a gigantic, gorilla-adapted soldier in a muddy, torn spacesuit, with broken chain restraints lashing from both wrists and ankles.

Blazing, maddened, scarlet eyes turned to focus on Grace out of the depths of black wrinkles. The sclerae of the gorilla soldier's eyes were a brilliant red, his irises a deep, dark brown. His pupils looked huge. Grace knew immediately that this soldier had been exposed to trifluoroquinthiomataze, a gaseous weapon used in biological warfare which, when inhaled, caused psychosis, paranoia, eventual blindness, and, ultimately, death.

Grace was suddenly shoved flat to the ground, her right cheek bouncing hard off of the rough floor. The enraged gorilla soldier dove over top of her, like a rocket whizzing by. She realized that this delusional gorilla soldier had probably just been brought in from a battlefield where Tri-FQ had been released. In his gas-induced psychosis, there was no telling what he was seeing or thinking. He desperately needed the antidote.

The torn chains flapping from his limbs clearly indicated that he had broken his restraints. Those restraints had been for his own safety, as well as others. Grace suspected the medics had run out of the antidote for Tri-FQ in the field. They were always prepared for its possible release. Unfortunately, this powerful gorilla soldier had managed to wrench himself loose in his madness. Space only knew what was going on in the soldier's mind. The bright red sclerae indicated that the gorilla soldier was heading rapidly down the road towards insanity and irreversible disease.

It was paramount that Grace get the antidote into him as quickly as possible!

“Get me a syringe full of 100 milligrams of Antiquint along with 1 gram of Stilzine, stat!” Grace screamed at a silver, humanoid-shaped android, standing off to one side of the engagement, as the two tiger soldiers leaped on top of the infuriated gorilla soldier and attempted to hold him down. They were both flung away, as if they were mere insects, and the Tri-FQ-gassed gorilla again made a charge straight for Grace.

‘Why me?’ a little voice in Grace’s head wailed, as she watched this enraged gorilla soldier stampede straight towards her. All she could focus on were the reds of the combat soldier’s eyes, as she tensed for the inevitable impact. A split second before he slammed into her, the grizzly bear sergeant leaped into the gorilla soldier’s path and threw a right hook that Grace thought would have crumpled a space shuttle.

The gas-crazed gorilla soldier just shook off the punch and threw one of his own. The sergeant just grunted with the impact. Grace stared as the two titans began swinging their massive fists at each other, striking their opponent with hammering blows. The wolfman dove at Grace and tackled her out of the way, just as the grizzly bear sergeant was forced backwards by the advancing gorilla. The sergeant stomped onto the spot Grace had just vacated; she would have been crushed.

The two genetically modified soldiers, grizzly bear versus gorilla, roared deafeningly at each other and continued rapidly launching lethal punches, kicks, and blocks, inhumanly and powerfully fast. Staccato-like, the impacts of those furious assaults rang out loudly in the Receiving Bay. Grace could barely see the movement of their swinging limbs, they flew so fast. She knew that any one of those punches, connecting with her body, would have left her in a puddle of broken bones.

Skidding across the floor, wrapped within the wolfman’s arms, Grace came to rest at the feet of the silver android. Silently and gracefully, it bent down and offered her a filled syringe with a long, large bore needle. On the side of it was neatly printed Antiquint and Stilzine, with the accompanying milligram dosages. It was enough drug to fell a creature twenty times Grace’s size and weight. With no time to thank the android, Grace found herself air-born again. Tossed

from the wolfman to the orangutan soldier, who then whipped her up over his shoulder - almost making her drop the syringe! - she was carried up the side of the space shuttle.

Quick on the orangutan's heels was the incensed gorillaman, who had managed to throw his grizzly bear opponent out of the way. Grace stared directly into maddened, blood red eyes, as the gorilla soldier shrieked his frustration, lunging after her. She saw the two tiger soldiers then leap onto the crazed gorilla soldier's back, grabbing an arm each, while the wolfman dove to wrap his arms around the gorilla's legs. The grizzly bear sergeant then rushed up between the tigers and locked his great arms around the drug-crazed soldier's chest, pinning the gorilla's arms in a tight bear hug from behind. The sergeant began slowly squeezing the chest of the huge gorilla soldier while the other three men held on, pinning him in place. The psychotic gorilla struggled, but the grizzly bear's arms held firm, the sergeant's face etched with strain.

"Hold him tight!" ordered Grace, in a loud, commanding voice. "And put me down!" she hollered at the orangutan. The apeman released Grace so suddenly, she slid off the side of the space shuttle and almost fell to her knees. Cursing, she raised the precious syringe high in the air to protect it.

"Trying, . . . Lieutenant," grunted the sergeant, groaning under the stress of trying to restrain the struggling gorilla soldier, whose body surged and bucked and fought the grips of all four soldiers.

"Hurry, ma'am . . . please?" the wolfman panted.

With the syringe poised in her right hand like a dagger, Grace leaped up onto the bent back of the wolfman. She grabbed, with her left hand, the grizzly bear's right forearm and drew herself up into the bellowing face of the deranged gorilla soldier. As he bared his enormous fangs

in her face - trying to bite her - she drove the needle, containing the Antiquint, an antidote for trifluoroquinthiomataze, and Stilzine, a major tranquilizer, into the gorilla's jugular vein (or at least she hoped so). The plunger activated and the drug shot into the gorilla's neck, as Grace held it there as firmly as she could.

The thrashing, enraged soldier screamed his spittle-laden fury straight into Grace's face. As she squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face to the side, Grace prayed the gorilla soldier carried no communicable diseases in his saliva. She suspected her hearing would never be the same.

The next thing Grace knew, the gorilla soldier had broken the grizzly sergeant's bear hug, throwing his arms out wide, and Grace was again airborne. Unfortunately, this time there was no soldier quick enough to catch her and she landed hard on her back, the wind knocked out of her.

As she lay gasping and struggling to get some air into her winded lungs, the gorilla soldier took three bounding steps towards her, the empty syringe still protruding from his neck like an indictment. His eyes blazed with murderous intent. He reached out long, curved black claws towards Grace, when suddenly one eye, then the other, rolled upwards and back in their sockets. So slowly it would have been comical if Grace was not afeared for her life, the gigantic mountain of muscle keeled onto his face.

There was a moment when no one moved. All eyes were on the gorilla-adapted soldier, laid out on the floor. Muscles tensed, ready to spring into action at the slightest quiver of fur, they all waited anxiously. When a large snore escaped the gorillaman's lips, everyone else took a breath. With the next rumbling snort, the other soldiers all gratefully collapsed to the ground in

exhaustion and relief. They all just lay on the Receiving Bay floor for a few minutes, inhaling some deep, gulping breaths.

Grace was so thankful to still be in one piece! She was bruised, lacerated, abraded and sore, but at least she was alive!

“Fucking ‘A’, Lieutenant,” someone panted. That was followed by a series of acknowledging grunts and nods.

“Apologies, Lieutenant,” the sergeant rumbled, his basso voice vibrating from deep within his enormous chest. “We should have been able to handle that guy better than that, even if we are all recovering from surgery.”

“He was pumped up on Tri-FQ,” Grace said to the air above her, as she lay on her back and stared at the distant dark grey ceiling. “It gives the person the strength of ten men . . . or, in this case, the strength of ten gorilla-modified combat soldiers. You guys were amazing! You saved that gorilla soldier’s life and mine as well! And protected this space station’s Receiving Bay! Thank you!”

“Glad to be of service, Lieutenant,” the orangutan said with a huge grin, as he helped Grace up off of the Receiving Bay floor. “Looks like you may be hurting for a few days.”

“A few weeks is more like it,” Grace muttered, rubbing her back. “Thank you, soldier.”

“My pleasure, Lieutenant. Private Haywood, at your service. That was quite the display of courage you showed there,” the orangutan soldier said, with a solemn nod of respect.

“Just doing my job,” Grace mumbled, her face feeling hot. She did not meet the orangutan soldier’s eyes.

She limped over to check that the gorilla soldier was still breathing. She had given him enough Stilzine to stop an army in its tracks, or so she thought. The gorillaman's breathing was deep and regular, and his pulse was steady and bounding. All good signs, she decided. She raised one of his black eyelids. The redness of his sclera was already starting to fade back to a pinkish hue. A very good indication that the antidote, Antiquint, had still been administered in time.

"Don't know too many lieutenants who would have jumped on a raging berserker like that, male or female, ma'am," one of the tigermen offered, with a sidelong look at Grace.

"Yes, well, I am a surgeon and it is my duty to care for the sick and battle-wounded. Unfortunately for this soldier, he is both. Thank you all for not harming him." The little voice in Grace's head made gagging noises and asked her if she could be any more nauseating.

"He could have easily been one of us, Doc. We look after our own. I am sure we've all seen the effects of Tri-FQ before. Some of us have likely experienced it, too," the grizzly bear sergeant grumbled. There were a couple of furry heads nodding around Grace. "We will look after him and make sure he gets put on a pallet and off to Triage, Doc."

"Oh, no. That should be my job," Grace protested. "Aren't you fellows supposed to be getting on that shuttle?"

Already, Grace could see androids approaching with an anti-gravity pallet. A pinch-faced man, whom Grace assumed was one of the medical station's doctors, stalked towards them, his shoulders back, a prim expression on his face. When he got within hearing range, he demanded, in a very condescending tone, "Who stuck that syringe in this soldier's neck?"

"I did," Grace said, coming forward to speak to the doctor and finding herself confronted by a mask of outrage.

“And who are you?” the pinch-faced man demanded, looking at Grace as if she were some vile contagion that had somehow sneaked on board the space station.

“Doctor Grace Alexandra Lord, surgical fellow to Dr. Hiro Al-Fadi,” she said. Curiously, she noted everyone’s heads suddenly swivel towards her. At the mention of Dr. Al-Fadi’s name, they had all cautiously moved back from her a step, the doctor included.

Nevertheless, her interrogator sniffed, cleared his throat, looked down at the tablet he was carrying, and then glanced up at her with a suspicious glare. Pettiness apparent in his high voice, he said, “I have never heard of you! You are not on our doctors’ roster! You are not even registered here on the station’s manifest as ‘arrived’! You are not authorized to give any medication aboard this station until you have been registered and admitted to Staff! This is a flagrant breach of medical station policy! I am going to file an incident report about this!”

“She may have saved a lot of lives, Doc, by treating this berserker gorilla soldier,” the grizzly bear sergeant growled threateningly. “The soldier was hopped up on Tri-FQ.”

“Oh . . . and you are a doctor, also?” the man said, in a very sarcastic tone of voice.

Grace began to wonder if this man was actually a physician. Any doctor would not have questioned her actions, nor reprimanded her for immediately treating a Tri-FQ-gassed soldier.

“And you are . . .?” Grace asked, politely.

“Tristan Pflug, Chief Ward Clerk of Receiving Bay Five,” he replied, with his receding chin in the air and a haughty stare for Grace and the other animal-adapted soldiers.

“Well, Chief Ward Clerk Pflug,” Grace said, calmly, “in the case of medical emergencies, a doctor is allowed to offer whatever assistance he or she can give, in order to protect the patient and any other individuals at risk. Being a lieutenant, I ordered these men to assist me, as I

endeavored to treat this patient. I will be happy to defend my actions in this case to the upper echelon, if it comes to that.”

“Oh, it will! Believe me, it will! Because I am reporting this! You had better have made no mistakes, whatsoever, on what you injected this man with, Doctor Lord!”

“If I had made any mistakes, this Receiving Bay would have been trashed by now and a lot of people injured, Clerk Pflug” Grace sighed.

“*Chief* Ward Clerk Pflug! Well! We shall see about that, Dr. Lord!” the officious man said, with a sniff, his slit-like nostrils flaring in the air. He spun around and stalked off to the pallet, to take charge of the gorilla soldier and to order the attendant androids around.

“That is one uptight and annoying human,” one of the tigermen drawled.

“Like to Tri-FQ him,” someone muttered. The wolfman, perhaps? This was followed by some snorts and hoots.

“We will all file a report, Lieutenant, before we leave, commending your actions,” the grizzly bear sergeant offered. “We are all from different squads and regiments, but I am sure I speak for all of us, when I say that we will back your actions one hundred per cent. The truth will be told.”

“Thank you all, gentlemen. I appreciate your support and your bravery. I don’t think I would still be in one piece were it not for all of you,” Grace said, her cheeks feeling very flushed.

“We look after our medics, Doc. After all, you guys have to look after us,” the wolfman said, with a very toothy grin.

“We try,” Grace said, trying to ignore the sight of those long, sharp fangs, “but I think your job is a far tougher one than mine. Thank you all again, gentlemen, for saving my life and

for helping me get the antidote into that poor soldier.” Grace saluted them all. She then hobbled over to her dropped duffel bag and gingerly picked it up. She hoped they were not all staring at her butt. She spun back to face five pairs of intense animal eyes.

“I suppose I had better report in and announce that I have ‘arrived’!” Grace said, with a shaky laugh. “I suspect they know I am here!”

“Can we help you with that bag, Lieutenant? You look pretty banged up,” the orangutan soldier asked, grinning.

“Absolutely not!” Grace said with a mock frown. “I’m fine.”

The little voice in the back of her head whimpered, ‘No, we’re not!’

“By the way, none of you were re-injured in the skirmish, were you?”

They all shook their heads.

“Good. You guys put on a terrific show here and I have the bruises to show for it. That gorilla soldier is one lucky man!” Grace said. She saluted them, formally. “Fly safe.”

The five soldiers all lined up and crisply saluted her, in return.

Grace tried to walk away from the group without limping or wincing with each step, although her body was crying out to do so. Pride was the only thing that kept her strides smooth and confident, her body straight and tall. She knew they were watching her, so she felt she had to put up a brave front. It was a little difficult, when her entire body felt like it had been hit by a comet. With what she was sure was a bruised hip, a twisted back, a swollen right knee, abraded hands, a bruised right cheek, and definite whiplash, it was no easy task faking non-injury, especially when the little voice in her head was screaming: ‘I need drugs! I need analgesia! I want them! Now!’

Grace told the little voice to stop whining.

Overall, Grace was pretty happy with herself. She had tried her best to appear professional and relaxed, as if she ran into walking, talking bears, tigers, wolves and apes every day. In the heat of battle, she had got a close-up view of how effective these animal adaptations had performed. These men were mightier, faster, more agile, and much more aware of their environment than a normal human. They were built to be swift, powerful, efficient killing machines, but their minds were still human and their decisions were compassionate and caring. Grace could not help but be very, very impressed.

The heavy duffel bag made her right shoulder ache and, as she looked around the Receiving Bay, her neck cried out in pain. She noticed that the anti-gravity pallet carrying the gorilla soldier had already disappeared. She had not even gotten the patient's name!

Limping towards the nearest exit, Grace realized that she had left her space helmet somewhere behind. Scanning the ground around the space shuttle, she spotted it beneath a large vehicle. She almost wailed at the thought of getting down onto her bruised hands and knees and crawling under the cargo truck to collect it. If it were not for the fact that the cost of replacing it would have been exorbitant, she was sorely tempted just to leave it.

As she was about to drop the duffel bag and lower her aching body to the floor, a little, round, turtle-shaped robot scooted out from under the cargo truck with her helmet balanced on its back. The tiny, cleaning robot ratcheted up its carapace until it was level with Grace's hands and then it extruded small appendages, which picked the helmet up off of its back and offered the helmet to her.

Grace smiled in astonishment and thanked the robot, as she gratefully accepted her misplaced space helmet. The robot bobbed a little curtsey, then it ratcheted back down to its original height, and skittered off.

Just shifting the large, round space helmet under her left arm sent needles shooting up into her left shoulder. Grace started moving towards the medical space station entrance again, but slowly. She forced herself to walk erect and told herself to show a little dignity. With that thought, a large flap on the front of her spacesuit flopped forward and a piece of hardware fell off of her right boot. Grace belatedly noted that the right sleeve of her space suit was torn, from her shoulder right down to her elbow, exposing the shredded sleeve of her underlying absorbwear. The damaged sleeve dangled as she limped. She had no memory of when that tear to her suit had occurred. She thought these suits were supposed to be indestructible!

‘Oh well,’ Grace thought. ‘Far from auspicious, this first day on the *Nelson Mandela*, but things could only get better from this point onwards, couldn’t it?’

Now. . . if she could just get some painkillers - ‘DRUGS!’ the little voice in her head howled - she could, hopefully, get through the rest of the day.