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## Activation Day

Elena Uhlenkamp

Riley's heart pounded in his ears and chest. The hisses and crackling noises around him chilled his blood. He dragged his body forward, trying to find some form of salvation, wherever it was in this hell. Something sticky and warm covered his hands and face, most of it leaking from his abdomen. It smeared on the freezing floor in a trail behind him. Darkness surrounded his vision, and he could barely breathe through the pain.

Claws then dug deep into his scalp, yanking his head up, before it slammed his face into the ground with a sickening thud. He cried out weakly; his vision filled with stars and his ears were ringing. A coppery taste filled his mouth as the same warm liquid dripped from his lips. He choked and hacked, weakly pushing at the weight on top of him. Small, sharp teeth sank into his throat. He let out a gurgled scream, which was quickly silenced as the darkness devoured him.

Riley screamed himself awake, his body jerking upwards. Metal screeched at his sudden movement as he was forced to stay in place. His body burned like hot metal, a thousand knives slicing his insides. He settled back and gasped painfully, staring at the fluorescent light hanging above him. It blinded him with cold, white light that seemed to burn. It hissed and sputtered like an angry cat, excruciatingly loud in his ears. Riley tried to move again but realized quickly that he couldn't. His arms, legs, chest, and neck were restrained.

"Hello?" The single word crackled in his mouth, mashed into something unintelligible. It was his voice, but it also wasn't. It was foreign. Inhuman. The light continued to blind him as his body stiffened.

He jerked his body side to side, struggling to get free. Screeching and banging metal grew louder and louder until it was the only sound bashing inside his head. He let out a cry that reverberated in the dark, something long and animalistic.

A heavy door groaned open beyond his feet, the suddenness causing Riley to stop struggling and go silent. He breathed hard, trying to turn his head towards the light that cascaded in. His restraints soon reminded him that he couldn't. "Who's there?" he asked, or at least tried to. All that came out of his mouth were stuttering sounds of his distorted words.

"He's awake," a woman said. Footsteps came up and around him, the light from outside the room disappearing as the door was shut. He couldn't see any of the people's faces in the blinding light. "Mr. Kooris," the woman said over his head in the darkness. "Can you hear me?"

"What's wrong with me?" Riley asked, his words clearer, but still had a slight glitch. "What's going on?"

"Just relax, Mr. Koo—"

"Riley!" The sound of his voice was harsh. He took in a shaky breath and said more softly, "Just Riley."

"Riley," the hidden woman continued. "Everything is going to be fine."

Voices murmured around Riley, but he was too panicked to try and understand what was being said. They removed the metal strap that laid over his chest, and it made a thunk on the side of the bed. There was an abrupt click followed by a hiss near his chest. His chest lurched upwards as his body suddenly burned with cold instead of heat. "What the hell!" Riley cried out, struggling again in his restraints.

"Easy Riley," the woman said quickly over the startled voices of the others. "It's nothing to worry about."

"Who are you?" Riley's mind began to spin, fearing the worst.

"I'm here to fix you."

"Fix me? What did you do to me?"

"Just hold still, Riley. It's going to be all over soon."

"This is just a dream," Riley gasped, closing his eyes with a click.

"Either that or I'm dying." Flashes of teeth and pale bodies crossed his mind. His breaths became short and sporadic. His body shook, and he pulled at his restraints. "The bastards—"

"Breath, Riley. I understand your fear, but everything is going to be alright. This isn't a dream, and you're not dead," the woman said in monotone. Under her breath, she whispered, "Not exactly."

He opened his eyes to the blinding light, trying to find the woman's face but failing. "What do you mean 'not exactly'?"

"Get me the Shadow Reader."

He jerked under the restrictive hold. Metal screeched under him. "Answer me, dammit!"

Whoever was around Riley ignored him as they did whatever they were doing. Beeps and whirling sounds came from near his chest, rivaling the hissing lights. "297.3," the woman said when the sounds went silent. "That's good. That's higher than the others."

"Others? There are others?"

There was a click near Riley's chest again. He grunted as the stabbing pain intensified, but the cold had passed. "Alright," the woman continued, "I need you to move your fingers."

Riley clenched his hands shut. "Why won't you answer my questions?"

"Please, just move your fingers."

He strained against his restraints, jerking side to side. "Answer me, you bastards!" He could hear the metal groaning around him. Whatever was holding him down rocked slightly. Metal groaned.

"Mr. Kooris, if you don't comply, you will be shut down."

He paused long enough to say, "Shut down? I'm not a damn machine!" He needed to get out of his restraints. Now. He continued to struggle.

"Mr. Kooris—"

The sound of metal breaking was followed by Riley's left arm suddenly flying upwards and hitting the hanging light. The light promptly went out with sparks, the room swallowed up by the darkness. Then his right hand and neck were freed with the same breaking metal sound. He

momentarily froze, surprised by the metal bonds breaking so easily. Yells and curses around Riley snapped him out of his momentary shock. He ripped the metal bands on his legs off without a second thought. Metal moaned underneath him as he slid off the bed and got onto unsteady feet. He walked quickly away like a drunken man, groping around in the dark for the door or a wall.

Clicks and zaps of electric guns filled the darkness around him. The beams of bright, crackling energy kept missing him, hitting the walls and floors with scorching heat. The whole scene seemed to come straight out of a horror movie, and he was the monster the men were trying to kill.

Riley's hands slammed against a wall. He followed it blindly, finding the door swiftly. He groped the handle, vaguely noticing it was smaller than what a normal door handle should be. Ignoring the fact, he opened it and went out into the bright light of the hallway. People yelled behind him, but Riley ignored the sounds and ran out of the room, not sure where he was going. His unexpectedly heavy footsteps boomed against the walls of the hallway.

Riley blindly went down corridor after corridor, metal banging and grinding against itself and the concrete floors and walls. Where the hell was the metal? There wasn't any except for the door and pipes on the walls and ceiling. Why did the sound keep following him?

The glint of light off his hands caught his attention. A quick glance revealed the dull metal that covered his hands. They gloved his hands in metal? He didn't have time to look or think about it. He had to find a way out first.

"Mr. Kooris!" a male voice boomed through the loudspeakers above him. "This is Director Parris Reiman. Stand down."

Riley paused at a t-section. "I never heard of you!" he yelled at the voice before taking a left. The clunks of combat boots echoed around him as he continued to run.

"Mr. Kooris," Director Reiman said over the speakers. "I need you to trust me and stand down."

Riley took another left, finding three men with automatic weapons coming down the corridor. In a stiff motion, they lifted up their guns

and pulled their triggers. Riley backtracked, zips of bullets flying past him. They hit the cement walls, ricocheting around him. Stinging pain slammed at his torso and thigh as bullets sounded off of something metal. Riley vaguely noticed the sound of bullets hitting metal were right on top of him. They must have covered more than just his hands with metal. Riley shoved the realization to the back of his mind and took a different corridor, the gunshots and yells of men following him.

“Mr. Kooris, stop before someone gets hurt.” Reiman’s voice was strained and hard to hear over the gunshots.

Riley took a sharp turn, his momentum causing him to slam full force against a wall. The sound of metal being crushed joined with his side aching. He gripped his side, quickly glancing around. Next to him was a metal door with no noticeable label on its blank surface. It had a card slot, but there wasn’t a light indicating if it was unlocked or not. He glanced back, hearing men running his way but not seeing them. Why were they so far back? They should have caught up to him, especially in his condition.

The men suddenly appeared around the corner, and they quickly shot at him. Not taking his eyes off them, Riley blindly opened the door and stumbled backwards into the room. He slammed the door shut behind him with a boom, the world around him suddenly becoming dark and silent. He found the bolt lock and turned it. He then sat back against the door and closed his eyes, trying to pull in deep breaths. His breaths sounded unnaturally hollow. It was unnerving.

Riley finally opened his eyes, noticing the room wasn’t completely dark like he first thought. A single string of lights shined from the other side of the room, the warm glow reflecting off the dark glass that panned the wall beneath them. He stared at the glass, a pair of glowing green eyes locking onto his. They didn’t move.

Cautiously, Riley pushed himself off the door, approaching the glass and the thing in it. The eyes came closer, their glow fluctuating in brightness. As he got closer, the figure belonging to the glowing eyes became clearer.

The figure was robotic in nature, taking a strange humanoid shape.

It appeared half made; plates were missing from its torso and head, exposing the pistons and wires used to make it move. The plates that were on it were a dull gray, black and yellow numbers visible on their surface. A stubby section of what must have been a partial tail was visible behind it. It looked like some sort of prototype.

The incomplete head was similar to an exposed skull of a reptile. The eyes glared out of their housings, unnerving. Riley noticed shadowy tendrils wound around the mechanisms inside the robot, pulsating like veins. What the hell is it?

Riley finally paused a few feet from the glass, completely submerged in the light. The thing in the glass had followed suit. His eyes widened. So did the green eyes staring at him from the glass. What Riley was looking at was a reflection. It wasn't just a prototype. It was him.

Slowly, he moved a hand up. The robotic reflection followed. He turned his hand. The reflection did the same. He dropped his hand to his side, cursing. "What the hell did they do to me?" he breathed. His reflection didn't answer.

Dazed, he looked down at himself. His eyes and his reflection were not deceiving him. He became dizzy, and his metal hands shook as he gripped the edge of the—his—chest plate. He pried it open. The metal plate groaned, and it was as painful as pulling his own ribs out, but he needed to know what was behind it. He almost screamed in pain when it finally opened with a grating sound.

Riley barely held it together when he saw the inner mechanical workings inside his chest. There was no flesh, bone, or skin to be seen inside. Just wire, metal gears, and hydraulic lines. This wasn't even an elaborate suit. There wasn't anything human about him anymore.

Where his heart should have been was a strange otherworldly stone. Hundreds upon hundreds of wires and ghostly black tendrils congregated at it, and it pulsed a blackish glow in something resembling a heartbeat. Its blue-gray granite surface was rough and raw. He touched it with a shaking hand, the new claws at the end of his fingers glinting sharply in the light. The stone was warm under his fingers. Riley glanced at himself in the glass, staring at the stone-of-a-

heart in his chest. Something about it was vaguely familiar...

He then slammed his chest plate shut and stumbled back from the glass, cursing under his breath. "This can't be happening." He pressed his hands against his unfinished head, his limbs tingling like they were losing circulation. "This can't be happening!"

The clack of the bolt lock made Riley whip around, ready to fight or run. The door burst open, and half a dozen men and women in full body armor raced in, aiming their various guns at him.

"Stop! Everyone just stop!" the woman's voice, from when he woke up, yelled from behind the group. Still training their weapons on Riley, the people parted and created a path. A slim figure noticeably shorter than the average adult stepped forward, their hands up by their head in a non-threatening manner. Through his panic and anguish, Riley realized it was a woman. Her hair was cut short and styled in a way that made her silhouette look more masculine at first glance. "Riley," she said gently, more emotion than what she gave before, "you're alright. Just relax."

Riley laughed bitterly. "Relax?" He gestured to himself. "How can I relax like this?" The lights behind him flickered.

She cautiously came closer. "It's alright. I can explain everything that's happening." She paused a few feet away and extended a hand, palm facing upward. "I just need you to come back with me."

Riley glanced down at her hand but stayed where he was. "Why should I trust you? I don't even know you."

"I'm Doctor Aryonna Reiman. I'm the one who saved you."

"I would have taken death over this," Riley growled. His limbs began to go numb and he suddenly became lightheaded.

"I understand you're scared—"

"Scared doesn't even begin to describe how I feel!" Riley suddenly felt a ghost of himself surge out of him. Warm, shadowy tendrils exploded and lashed out from his back. They hit the lights above him, and the lights burst with sparks. He collapsed in sudden exhaustion, landing hard on his hands and knees. The shadows still extended a few feet from his back, stiff as cobras.

He lifted his head to look at Aryonna, eyes blazing. She stared at



him silently. "Why the hell did you do this to me?" he asked, his voice breaking. "What good reason was there to do this? I died, and I wish you left me dead." He pressed his forehead to the ground, squeezing his eyes shut. "You should have left me dead!"

Riley wanted to cry, but he couldn't. Not anymore. He could only scream, and that's what he did. The power and pain that created that sound cracked the glass behind him.

***Elena Uhlenkamp** is an English major from a small town in the heart of Minnesota. She enjoys reading and writing fiction, especially fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Besides writing fiction, she likes trying her hand at photography and writing poetry, along with enjoying escape rooms with family and friends. Elena is working on a series that mixes sentient robots with demons from another dimension.*