

Dark Angel VS3

All Good In The 'hood

By Dawn, Kyre and willow



Episode VS3.02

Prologue

Max and Original Cindy's Quarters - Thursday Night

Original Cindy entered to find her roommate pacing restlessly around the room. "You gonna wear a hole in this floor, you keep that up."

"I feel like moving around," Max answered distractedly. "We've been here a week and not much has changed."

"Gettin' claustrophobic?"

"I miss my bike."

Original Cindy looked at Max for a moment, her expression mixing amusement and sympathy. "I bet that ain't all you miss." She waited for Max to stop pacing and turn to her in wonder before continuing. "You said it's all good to the gracious with you and Logan, but I ain't seen you two together very much."

Max threw up her hands and sighed, turning to look out the window. "That's another thing. We've both been so busy. I've been trying to make some kinda order out of all the chaos around here...Logan's trying to figure out this Sandeman rune stuff, whenever he's not looking for equipment or helping out in Command...We're like two ships passing in the night."

"Speaking of that rune stuff, any new ones?"

"Not that I know of. Check my back, will you?" Max turned around and lifted the back of her shirt.

As she approached, Original Cindy commented, "Good thing a couple people went and fetched some of our

clothes on a supply run. No way Original Cindy would touch ten-day clothes." She checked Max's back carefully, then shook her head and lowered the shirt. "Uh-uh. No new ones since we got here."

"What the hell is up with these things, anyway?" Max whirled around to face Original Cindy and continued to pace in frustration. "A few quotes, something about the shroud of death, and then nothing! What kind of whack job was this guy?"

Original Cindy sat down on her bedroll, sticking her legs out just as Max circled by. Max gave her a look, but she didn't move. "Logan making any progress tracking the guy down?"

Max snorted. "No. We're all holed up in here, with hardly any equipment and about a thousand other things getting in the way."

"Sounds like you could use a break."

"What we could use is someone on the outside to help."

San Francisco

The alley was dark and wet from the earlier rain. The buildings were either abandoned or closed up for the night, and the few working lights cast shadows that made it very easy for Lydecker to keep out of sight to the side of one of the buildings.

He looked down at his watch, a concerned look on his face. Suddenly, his head snapped back up and his eyes cut to his left, toward the alley. He heard slow, cautious footsteps approaching him. He withdrew his gun from the holster at his back and leaned firmly against the wall.

A figure passed Lydecker's hiding place, so Lydecker

stepped out behind him, gun aimed directly at the figure's head. He cocked the gun.

Click.

The sound echoed up and down the empty alley.

"Turn around, slowly," Lydecker ordered.

The figure stopped, raised his hands up over his head, and proceeded to turn around very slowly, as ordered.

Lydecker's eyes narrowed and his finger tightened around the trigger.

As the figure turned around to face Lydecker, his face was illuminated under a dim street light: Krit.

Relieved, Lydecker lowered the gun and placed it back in its holster. Krit lowered his hands.

"You're late."

"Sorry. It couldn't be helped," Krit replied, looking and sounding uneasy. "I..."

Lydecker abruptly cut him off, "And you failed to contact anyone about your delay, soldier."

"There were... complications. I tripped the alarm and ended up being chased. Must've lost my phone along the way," Krit shrugged.

"That sounds like an excuse, soldier. You know I don't tolerate excuses. Don't let it happen again."

"Or what, Colonel?" Krit shot back. "This isn't Manticore. Manticore's history. We're not afraid of you anymore. 'Fear accomplishes nothing', remember?"

"Remember?" he smiled and stepped closer to Krit. The smile disappeared. "How could I forget? I taught you kids

everything you know. I also remember that it was you who reached out to me for help a few weeks ago." He got right in Krit's face. "We do this my way." He paused, "Now... did you complete your assignment?"

Flustered and clearly uncomfortable, Krit spoke up, "Yeah, I got what you wanted." He held up a disc in his hand.

Lydecker reached out and took the disc, then turned around and began walking away. He put the disc in one jacket pocket, and out of another pocket retrieved a phone. He turned around and tossed it to Krit, who was still standing where Lydecker had left him. Krit caught the phone with one hand.

"Check in and let her know we're en route," Lydecker ordered.

* * * * *

Act One

Terminal City - Friday afternoon

As she had done every day since they had arrived, Max walked the entire grounds of Terminal City.

Police and National Guard were still posted at the perimeter. She avoided going out in the open to check on them, instead creeping from outer building to outer building, using her heightened vision to peer through the broken, dirty windows. The guards were alert, but nonchalant. After a week of impasse, the tension had eased a bit.

"Guess they've finally figured out we're not gonna come out and eat them," she muttered.

Her perimeter check complete, Max toured the other buildings of the complex, walking the seven inner streets freely. The atmosphere was calm. A small group had arrived in the relative safety of the pre-dawn hours, and Max checked on them as she toured the buildings set aside as living quarters.

"You okay?"

One of the new arrivals answered with a sigh, "Yeah. We'd be better with a shower, though."

"This will have to do for now," Max declared sympathetically, pointing to a metal tub. "There's a couple of old labs around here that have decontamination showers. You can use those when you really need vertical water flow."

The walls of the rec center had been knocked down, and it now occupied the entire first floor of a small building. A radio boomed music over a large set of speakers. Several

transgenics were gathered around the TV, arguing whether to watch the news or a rap video. In the corner, one guy stood watch over the limited supply of beer. Max smiled as she heard Sketchy fruitlessly trying to con him out of a bottle.

"Sketchy, you know we've only got so much of that stuff. We made a rule, remember... no booze before nightfall. You want us to run dry?"

"Not to worry, Max," Alec assured her, not looking up from the magazine he was reading. "Nate's making a run for some more tonight."

"Just make sure he gets the other stuff first." Max pulled the magazine down from Alec's eyes to make sure he was paying attention. "We need food. Plus blankets, ammo, toilet paper..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Alec yanked the magazine out of Max's hand. "Just about everything."

"Beer can wait."

"Says you," Sketchy muttered on his way out.

Max rolled her eyes and moved on. A lone female transgenic stood watch at the bank of TV monitors in the Command Center. Max checked over the weapons supply in an adjacent room, and Dix entered to find her critically eyeing the ammunition stored there.

"We need more," she said, arms crossed. "That's all there is to it. We're okay for this standoff, but if anything goes down...Nate'll have to buy some tonight."

After a moment's hesitation, Dix replied, "Maybe he better wait on these and get the essentials. He'll be using the last of the money you scored last week, before we got locked

up in here."

"What?! Already?"

"We've been going through it like water. Stocking up isn't cheap."

Max smiled. "Guess we'll just have to relieve some more bad guys of their cash."

Terminal City

Walking down one of the inner streets with her daughter, Gem noticed Joshua sitting in a small grassy area, nose in a rosebush. "Hi, Joshua."

Surprised by the sudden voice, Joshua quickly backed out of the flowers, scratching his nose on a thorn. "Ow!" He rubbed it and stood up, breaking into a smile. "Hey, Gem. Hey, Elfie."

"This used to be an industrial area," Gem commented, looking around. "I didn't expect to find a yard with flowers in it."

"Some people have lived here for months now. Spruced it up."

"So I see. I'm glad I came exploring." The baby squirmed, and Gem caught Joshua looking at the child with a smile on his face. "Want to hold her?"

His eyes opened wide and he took a step back. "What? I... No... Don't think I should."

"You'll be fine. Come on, my arms are killing me anyway." She held out her daughter. After a moment's hesitation, Joshua took her awkwardly, and Gem showed him how to hold her. She spoke softly to the baby for a moment, then looked up at Joshua, who was clearly enchanted. "Look

how happy she is. She must really like you."

"I like her too." As soon as he spoke the words, Joshua's face saddened.

"What's wrong?"

"Memories." He said nothing for a few moments, gazing back at the rosebush. "I met a girl... before all this happened. Annie. She loved roses. But I had to let her go and... she died."

"I'm sorry." Gem was quiet, watching Joshua as he absent-mindedly rocked the baby. "But you know... at least you got to know her while she was around."

"I loved her."

"Even better. You had love for a while, Joshua. I never have." She stroked the baby's hair, smoothing it out, then placing a kiss on her cheek. "Elfie needs a father."

"You'll find someone someday," Joshua smiled, turning back to her with bright eyes.

"Someday we'll both have someones." Her reply was firm. Then her tone lightened as she joked, "Hey, how hard can it be?"

Secondary Kitchen

Logan stood staring at what must have once been a cafeteria kitchen. A mismatched assortment of old pots and pans hung from hooks on the walls, cracked china dishes cluttered the counters, and a few cases of bottled water lay under the scratched stainless-steel sink.

"Not exactly what I hear you've been used to." Luke was next to Logan in the doorway.

"Not quite," Logan agreed, attempting to turn one of the handles at the sink, "but I'll live." He managed to turn it through the rust, eliciting from it a screech as it moved, but no water came out of the faucet.

"We haven't been pumping water or running power into this building," Luke explained. "The mess hall we've set up in another building does the job, so we don't spend much time in this one."

Logan grimaced. "It shows."

"Anyway, I heard Max say you're pretty good at cooking; thought maybe you'd be itching to do some. Plus the other ordinaries would probably appreciate something besides Manticore-style field rations. What do you think?"

Smiling at the mention of Max's name, Logan nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Promising to route power and water into the kitchen, Luke walked out, leaving Logan to poke around.

While Logan was opening cupboards and sorting through cans, his cell phone rang, and he dug into his jacket pocket to answer it. "Hello?"

"Logan! You're all right! Thank God."

"Asha? What's up?"

"I went to your place after the S1W and I got back from our trip to Spokane. Your place was all trashed! I didn't know what to think. What happened?"

"It's dangerous working for the good guys," Logan answered with a rueful half-smile. "You know that as well as I do."

"So where are you now?"

Logan filled her in on the crisis at Jam Pony and subsequent flight into Terminal City. "Listen, Asha, do you think you could do me a favor? I didn't grab any of my stuff from Joshua's house..."

"Of course not," Asha agreed, chuckling. "You didn't expect to be holed up across town."

"Right. And that means I'm without ID. Plus I'm worried the same guys who took out my place might find their way to Joshua's."

"I got you covered. Just tell me what you need and I'll get it to you."

They arranged to meet the next day in sector 9. Max entered the kitchen doorway behind Logan as he said, "Thanks, Asha. I really appreciate this." Hearing her footsteps as he hung up, Logan turned and smiled widely at her. "Hey."

A smile grew on her own face. "Hey. Too bad I didn't catch you a few minutes sooner... coulda asked Asha to see if she could get her hands on some ammo for us."

"Makes sense. I'll talk to her about it tomorrow when I meet her to get my ID and spare glasses."

Max's brow knitted in concern. "I don't like the thought of you crossing that perimeter."

"I'll be fine," Logan reassured her, eyes following a rat crossing the kitchen floor. "Anyway, I might as well. Need to pick up some fresh food for this place. I'm getting sick of canned goods and nonperishable leftovers."

"Can't have Logan Cale going without his fresh vegetables, can we?"

Logan saw the joking look on her face, so rare these days,

and matched it with one of his own. "Well, we could. But then you'd have to listen to me complain all the time."

"Yeah, who wants that?" Max's eyes drifted toward the scattered pots and pans.

"Planning to cook, huh?"

"Trying to."

Her next words were quiet and wistful. "Feels like forever since you cooked me dinner."

Logan stared at her for a moment. "It hasn't been for lack of trying."

Max glanced at him briefly, then dropped her gaze to the floor. Logan's tone softened as he continued. "I know we still have the virus to worry about. But you need to trust me." He opened his bare hand briefly, then closed it again and looked around. Moments later, he was pulling on an old oven mitt and holding out the now covered hand.

She covered her hesitation with a nervous laugh. "That's a lot more porous than the latex."

"Max..."

After a look into Logan's eyes and a glance at her own gloves, she put her hand in his. Nothing happened, other than Logan breaking into a smile, so she did the same.

A few moments later, a can that had been teetering on the edge of the cupboard fell on Logan's foot. "Ouch," he said as his grin widened, and he reached down with his free hand to pick up the can. This time he made sure all the cans on the shelf were stable.

By the time he turned back to Max, her smile had faded back into concern. "I want you to take someone with you,"

she said. "An X-series."

"Sure," Logan agreed, giving her hand a squeeze.

He was about to add something, but instead looked over Max's shoulder. She turned to see Sketchy poke his head in the doorway. "Uh, Max, I don't mean to alarm you, but there is a very large transgenic dude demanding to know who's in charge around here. Since so far it seems to be you..."

Max sighed and rolled her eyes exaggeratedly. "Can't a girl get any peace?"

"I'd say this is peace nowadays," Logan smiled. "You're not playing escape-and-evade and you're not busy kicking anybody's ass."

"Yet." Max's grin remained as she reluctantly let go of Logan's hand. "Gotta jet. See ya later."

Seattle Waterfront

White checked his watch as he paced beside his car. By the time he checked his watch again, a second car was pulling up next to him. The priestess climbed out, closed the door, and peered intently at White.

"Fe'nos tol," she said, her face expressionless.

He responded in kind. For a moment they were tense and silent, until finally White spoke. "I'm arranging for a way to incapacitate all the transgenics inside Terminal City. Once that's done, we'll go in and destroy them."

"The same way you destroyed 452 last week?" the priestess replied, raising one eyebrow.

White opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. "You've had plenty of chances, Ames. The Conclave

doubts your ability to carry out this assignment."

"I think I've proven myself enough in the past," said White, crossing his arms. "And might I add that 452 is..."

"Enough excuses, Ames." A second voice came from the car as a male figure stepped out of it. The man who had been present at Ray's initiation ceremony closed his car door and approached the pair. "This job needs to be done, soon. If you can't handle it, someone else will."

White looked from one to the other, glaring petulantly. "It'll get done."

"See that it is." The priestess' tone left no doubt as to the threat implied in that statement. "452 is our primary target. What if she's not eliminated?"

White looked out at the harbor for a moment. "I've traced the ownership records of that penthouse Eyes Only was broadcasting from. It took a little digging, but eventually some poor slob coughed up the name... with the right motivation."

"Eyes Only is off the air. He's no longer trying to win the public over to the transgenics' cause."

"No, but 452 seems awfully fond of his presence," White said wryly. "Those records we traced included his driver's license. The photo matches a man who's been with her half the times I've encountered her. He was part of the fight last week." With a snarl, he added, "He helped her take my son."

"Ames..."

"I think the bastard knows what happened to Ray. I want to find out. I get this guy, 452 comes after him, 'cause she can't bear to see anything happen to him," White sneered

sarcastically. "He'll be her undoing."

"If not, this will be yours," the other man told him. "We can't have any more slip-ups."

The man walked back around the car and climbed in. The priestess took one more hard look at White before doing the same. "Fe'nos tol."

"Fe'nos tol," White was left to mutter as the car drove away.

Command Center - Friday Evening

Logan sat with Virgil at the bank of computers, his laptop open on the desk in front of him. "Way I see it, these sewers here are off-limits," he said, pointing at the grid on his screen, "now that the perimeter guard's aware they could be used as transportation routes. We'll have to take a different route, use tunnels they're not guarding."

Virgil nodded at this, then nodded a greeting to Max as she entered the Command Center. Max caught Logan's eye from across the room and exchanged grins with him before continuing over to the TV to check the news.

"As the standoff at Terminal City enters its second week, sources confirm that more and more transgenics are managing to filter into the area, evading the National Guard and police stationed at the perimeter. According to some reports, there have even been several instances when transgenics have come out and slipped back in, undetected. As a result, police are keeping a close eye on the activities of all citizens..."

"I'm really starting to get tired of that Channel 3 reporter," Alec remarked as he ambled into the Command Center, joining Max at the TV.

"You and me both," Max snorted, clicking off the TV and turning to him. "I want you to go with Logan to his meet with Asha tomorrow."

"What? Oh, no," Alec argued, hands raised in front of him. "No, no, no. The guy's still pissed at me for playing along with your little game. I'm not taking a field trip with him."

"Grow up. You're not in kindergarten." Max's tone blended exasperation with annoyance. "This is serious... it's dangerous out there. He shouldn't go out alone."

"Logan can take care of himself, Max. And, you know, even if he does need to take someone along, there are hundreds of soldiers here. Why's it have to be me?"

Max's face contorted with her sarcastic reply. "Because ya tried to kill him once and you still haven't worked it off."

Alec exhaled, rolling his eyes and looking away for a moment, then turned back to Max. "If you think I'm gonna be the one to tell him, you're crazy."

Max looked over at Logan, then climbed the steps to the platform. Logan greeted her from his seat in front of his computer. "Hey, Max. Virgil and I are planning our route out of here."

"I think you should take Alec instead," Max said in a rush.

Logan stiffened. "Max..."

"Said on the news they're cracking down on all movement in the city. Alec's gotten pretty good at sliming away from the law." Max looked down at him, eyes tender despite her 'no arguments' demeanor. "Besides, Asha trusts him. For some reason."

Logan closed his eyes briefly, setting his jaw. When he opened them again, he stood up and met her gaze, speak-

ing in a tightly controlled voice. "Fine. I'll take Alec. But for the record, I don't think it's a good idea."

"Noted," she said, voice still hard but shoulders relaxing.

He looked over her shoulder down at Alec, who was still standing on the lower level. "We're leaving at eight tomorrow morning," he snapped. "Don't be late."

Alec gave him a mock salute. "Yes, sir." Logan stepped around Max and left the room, and Alec laughed. "Wouldn't want to piss him off even more, now, would I?"

"Shut up," Max told him.

* * * * *

Act Two

San Francisco Waterfront

In an abandoned warehouse, Syl sat in front of one of several tables of various types of electronic and computer equipment. Her attention was focused on one computer screen in particular, when suddenly she jumped to her feet, gun in her hand, and pointed it toward one of the doors. The doorknob turned, and Syl hopped behind the tables and took cover.

The door opened slowly. Krit saw Syl crouched behind a table with her gun out, pointed at him. Krit and Lydecker stopped in their tracks.

"Geez, Syl, it's us. Take it easy and put that gun down," he said as he walked in. "I'm getting tired of people pointing guns at me today."

Syl lowered her gun and placed it on a table.

"It's about damn time you got back," she exclaimed.

Lydecker ignored them and walked over to one of the computers. He grabbed a chair, sat down, and slid the disc he had gotten from Krit into the computer.

"Maybe if you do your job right next time, there won't be any guns pointed at you," Syl teased.

"Stop being a smartass," Krit returned. "I got what we needed."

"Yeah, but you still screwed up. By the way," Syl raised her voice. "Seattle was on the news again. They're still trying to round up the transgenics. Seems they've called in

the National Guard."

Lydecker turned around in his chair and looked at Syl.

"Any news on Max?" he asked.

"No. They showed her picture again, but that's about it. Why?"

"Were you able to contact any more of your team?" Lydecker asked, ignoring Syl's last question.

"Yeah. Zane and Jondy," Syl replied, a hint of irritation in her voice. "You're always asking about Max. You gonna answer my question about what's up with you and Max?"

"No." He looked directly at Syl. "And I advise you not to pursue that line of questioning again."

A heavy silence filled the room.

"Whatever," Syl replied, rolling her eyes. "Keep your little secret for now. See if I care."

Still staring at Syl, Lydecker asked, "The other two...when will they get here?"

"Hey, I never said they were coming. They aren't exactly thrilled with the idea of working with you, and I can't say I blame them. Besides, they think we should be heading to Seattle."

"Fine, then, we proceed without them."

Syl's jaw tightened, and she shot Lydecker a look, but kept her mouth shut.

Krit spoke up, "What is it with you and this Sandeman anyway? If you worked together, why didn't you stay in touch?"

"We had differing opinions."

"But you need him now..." Krit countered.

Lydecker folded his arms and, with a hint of amusement in his voice, corrected Krit, "Actually, it's Max who needs him."

"All right, so Max needs him," Syl conceded. "Zane and Jondy were right, we should go to Seattle."

"Sandeman's not in Seattle."

"He can't do Max any good if she gets caught," Syl reasoned. "The National Guard has everyone surrounded."

A series of beeps sounded from the computer behind Lydecker. Reaching into a jacket pocket, he pulled out his glasses and put them on. His eyes narrowed slightly as he gave Syl and Krit one last look before he turned around and began typing on the keyboard.

"Max is very capable of handling that for now," Lydecker stated. "First we deal with the good doctor, then Seattle."

Living Quarters, Terminal City - Saturday Morning

Gem tried to ignore the crying baby as she sat hunched over a worktable, doing her best to splice together two razor-thin wires. A frustrated look crossed her face as she peered closer at the tarnished copper.

"You know, Elfie," she said, using the baby as a sounding board while trying to quiet her, "I knew there was a reason I specialized in undercover ops and not surveillance. Mole must've been smoking a different kind of cigar when he thought we could use these old wires in our communications grid."

After picking unsuccessfully at the rubber that encased one of the strands, Gem used the scalpel lying on the table

to peel away the material. At that moment, the baby let out a horrific shriek, in an attempt to get her mother's attention. All she succeeded in doing, however, was distracting Gem just enough for her to slice a deep cut in her thumb.

Swearing, she dropped the scalpel and jumped up to grab a rag lying on her bed to wrap around her finger. Hearing footsteps in the hallway, she went over and yanked open the door to reveal Joshua, who had his hand on the knob. He jumped in surprise.

"Joshua." Gem breathed a sigh of relief. "Listen, I just cut my thumb. Gotta go see Aveta. Can you stay with Elfie till I get back?" She looked back nervously at the beat-up wooden desk drawer that served as a crib.

"Me? You want Joshua to... to baby sit?" Joshua had heard Original Cindy use the term, but it rolled awkwardly off his lips, and Gem smiled hesitantly. "Uh, yeah. It'll just be for a little while. I think this..." she waved her wrapped hand in the air, "...needs stitches."

Joshua shuffled from one foot to the other and ran a hand through his perpetually disheveled hair. "Okay...okay, Gem. Joshua can baby sit. Don't know how to change diapers, though."

"That's okay, big guy. Elfie's just sleepy. Maybe you can pick her up and rock her to sleep. I'll be back as soon as I can." Reaching up to pat Joshua on the shoulder with her good hand, Gem smiled again and disappeared down the hallway, leaving Joshua to stare in apprehension at the drawer in the corner of the room, from which a loud wail emerged.

The Sewers Underneath Seattle

Alec pushed open the heavy iron manhole cover at the top of the ladder and peeked out, checking for signs of life or hoverdrones. Satisfied, he ducked back in and looked down at Logan. "Okay, let's do this."

Logan nodded tensely and grabbed the next rung of the ladder. They quickly and carefully climbed out into the sunlight, making sure to fit the cover back on the drain-pipe securely so as not to alert passersby or sector cops.

"Hey, how's my barcode?" Alec asked, pulling down his turned-up collar.

"Fine. You know, you might want to check that little detail before we leave next time," Logan said curtly.

"Yeah, well, not much I can do about it, anyway," Alec muttered. "Forgot to bring my laser with me when we hightailed it into Hades."

In silence, they walked down the trash-littered alley. Logan strode purposefully toward the market just ahead. They could hear people moving along the sidewalk and vendors calling out.

Alec looked nervously over at Logan, then stopped, grabbing his sleeve. Logan stopped and turned almost violently, with an irritated look on his face. "What? We don't have a lot of time here."

"Yeah, listen, Logan, I know you know and you know I know, so let's just clear the air, huh? I'm not used to getting death glares from anyone but Max, and I'd rather keep it that way," Alec said with a hint of a joking smile on his face.

Logan breathed a frustrated sigh. "Okay, you want to

know what I think, Alec? I think I've defended you to Max since the day you walked into my apartment and almost killed me. So I'm wondering why you didn't tell me the truth that day at Joshua's."

Alec opened his mouth to reply, then shut it again contritely, appearing to think before he spoke. "You're right. Hey, man, I went there to tell you. But... then I just figured it should come from her, not me." He grinned again. "And you were stomping firewood into little bits at the time, you know."

Logan sighed angrily, turned away, then stopped and whirled around. "Here's a tip, Alec. Real life isn't like Manticore. Out here you make friends by earning their trust, not by blindly following orders. Just for future reference." Although his face was hard, his tone had relented.

"Hey, it was your Manticore alum that dragged me into your twisted little soap opera and then forced me to go along with it. Come on, Logan, I know you've forgiven Max. Isn't it time to let it go? I know, I'll do your latrine duty for a week, whaddya say? Huh?"

Logan impassively regarded the younger man. After a moment, he sighed again and gave a resigned laugh as he turned away. "Come on. I wanted to pick up something at the market before we meet Asha."

Living Quarters, Terminal City

Joshua edged closer to the drawer where Elfie was sleeping, with a hopeful expression on his face. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully, and he sighed in relief. Then, somewhere down the hall, a door slammed loudly, and instantly the baby began to cry again. Joshua jumped in fear and backed away from the crib. He began to pace up

and down in the small bunkroom.

"What can Joshua do? Not good with babies." He continued mumbling to himself, then suddenly stopped in front of the crib. Slowly, carefully, he sniffed the air using his acute canine olfactory senses. Startled, he sniffed again, grimacing, then looked down at the baby with a horrified expression on his face.

"Oh, no..." he breathed.

A few minutes later, Original Cindy came down the hall, accompanied by a teenage X6 male. Her face was scrunched into a disgusted sneer, obviously unhappy with her current condition. She was wearing long, thick, black rubber gloves, carrying a mop in one hand and a bucket filled with cleaning supplies in the other. "That's the last time Original Cindy trips on a damn fine lickety-boo who's trying to sweet talk her into givin' up her cushy mess hall duty so she can scrub some medieval toilet," she muttered as much to herself as to the young soldier walking a half step behind.

"Um, ma'am? It's called a latrine," the X6 said hesitantly. "And...what's a lickety-boo?" the kid repeated in a confused voice. "I never heard that term at Manticore."

"Ask me when you're legal," Cindy retorted saucily. "And don't be callin' me 'ma'am'. Original Cindy ain't catchin' none o' that." They stopped in front of a closet and eagerly unloaded their supplies.

Hearing a commotion from the bunkroom behind them, Original Cindy recognized Joshua's grunting and whining, and rolled her eyes at the X6 before she stepped across the hall. "I got this, baby. You just go ten-hut the guys keeping tabs so they know we done our good deed for the day."

She waited till he was gone, then pushed open the door to see Joshua holding a carton of cornstarch, which Gem had been using as baby powder. He had managed to douse himself with it, and was furiously shaking his head and growling. The baby was lying on one of the cots, gurgling happily. She was stark naked, a dirty diaper rolled into a bundle off to the side.

Original Cindy cracked up laughing, and Joshua jumped again, realizing someone was in the room. "Cindy! You have to help Joshua. Gem cut her finger, had to go see Aveta. She said no diapers, baby just sleeping, but then Joshua smelled it and..." He scrunched up his nose and glanced over helplessly at the baby, then back at his friend, his eyes imploring her to help.

"Don't look at me. Original Cindy don't know nothin' 'bout changin' no diapers. One of the reasons I play for the all-girl team, all that typical male pressure to pop out a crying little mini-me." But the tender look on her face as she walked over to the child belied her harsh words. She turned to Joshua and held out her hand. "Gimme that. That stuff goes on her butt, not on your face."

Together they managed to arrange a fresh cloth diaper on her tiny body, and soon Elfie was fast asleep in Original Cindy's arms. Joshua sat timidly next to her and stared at her over the sheet she was wrapped in.

"Those people...out there," Joshua began, looking out the small, grimy window in the back of the room. "They don't see how we're just like them. Babies are just like them."

"Nah, boo, it don't matter to them how much like them you are. You were made in a lab, that's all they see. Scares 'em."

"Doesn't scare you," Joshua pointed out.

"True, but Original Cindy got the lowdown on you. None of them knows any of you, and people are scared of what they don't know."

"I know, I know." Joshua sighed.

Original Cindy looked at Joshua sympathetically. "Hey, you're the one s'posed to be doin' the babysitting here." At that, she stood and placed the baby in Joshua's hulking arms. "You're an uncle, boo," she declared.

Joshua looked frightened, but then relaxed a little and smiled at Cindy. He looked down at the baby, and laughed. "An uncle," he repeated happily, then looked up at her in confusion. "What's an uncle?"

Cindy just laughed and rolled her eyes.

Outdoor Market, Sector 9

They'd almost reached the agreed upon meeting place when Logan caught sight of Asha's tall, slender build and blonde hair. He grabbed Alec's shirt to stop him. "Okay, there she is. You stay here and play lookout. I'll just be a minute."

"Fine by me. Asha's not my biggest fan right now, anyway," Alec muttered. Logan gave him a strange look and started to ask, but then just shrugged and turned away. Alec halfway turned to the stall closest to him and pretended to pick through the fake Rolex watches, all the while keeping his senses on high alert.

"Asha," Logan said in a low voice as he approached, and she turned, startled.

"Oh, Logan, it's so good to see you. I'm so glad you're okay," Asha said, throwing her arms around him. Logan stiffened involuntarily.

Asha backed off. Logan gave her a quick smile then flicked his eyes nervously off to the left to see if Alec had seen them. Asha followed the movement and saw the transgenic watching them. Alec's eyebrows jumped at her and he smiled. "What's he doing here?" she asked Logan, sounding irritated.

"Chaperone," he replied shortly. "So you were able to get my stuff?"

"Oh, yeah." Remembering, Asha twisted around to pull a thick envelope out of her backpack, then handed it to him. "Good as new."

Logan took it and stuck it quickly inside his own backpack. "Thanks, Asha. I really appreciate it. Did it look like anybody had been in there?"

"Nobody other than you," she replied.

"Okay. Listen, I have another favor to ask. It's big."

"You know I'll do what I can. But Logan, why are you still in there? Terminal City is... they're saying on the news that it's toxic. And...it's dangerous. This thing can't end well."

"I know but...I have to do what I can. Max and I... we're..."

Logan trailed off, but Asha understood what he was trying to gently tell her, and she nodded, forcing a smile. "I told you she'd come around," she said quietly. She dropped her eyes to the ground, and suddenly looked back up at him, her eyes meeting his in confusion. "You're...where's the exoskeleton?"

Logan looked down then, too, and shrugged. "Long story. Joshua's blood, the transfusion, repaired my spinal cord."

"Wow, that's great, Logan. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks. Listen, about that favor. Need you to get hold of some things for us." Logan handed her a list, which she scanned then looked up at him with a skeptical expression.

"I can try, but some of this stuff is really expensive, even with the S1W's contacts," Asha admitted.

"There's an address there where I have some art in storage, and the customer ID number so they'll let you in. Take whatever you need and fence it."

Asha nodded. "Like I said, I'll try. And I'll need some time. Tell me how to get into Terminal City and I'll bring it to you."

Logan shook his head. "Too risky. Besides, like you said, it's pretty messy in there. If you can get the stuff by tomorrow, I can meet you again. Same time, same place."

"Okay. I'll call you if I have any trouble." Asha looked up at him. "Tell Max 'hi' for me. And Logan, take care."

He nodded and she disappeared into the crowd as Alec approached him, keeping his head down. "Sector cop at two o'clock," he said in a low voice, right near Logan's ear. "Let's do a little more shopping before we head back, give this guy a chance to find the nearest doughnut stall."

"Yeah." The two men strolled casually from stall to stall, pretending not to notice the cop who was standing on the corner, surveying the scene, baton in hand. Finally, he started moving in their direction. Alec and Logan both held their breath and tensed, ready to run at the slightest sign of recognition, but the cop passed within feet of them and continued on his way. As soon as he turned the corner, they looked around and headed back toward the alley

and the sewer pipe that would take them back to Terminal City.

Police Headquarters, Detective Clemente's Office

"Ah, Agent White, so good to see you again...I hope that duct tape didn't burn too much when you ripped it off," the detective said with a mocking grin. From the way White glared at him in return, it was clear there was little love lost between the two men. "I'm sure you've heard the mayor's put me in charge of the situation, with the full support of the governor." He emphasized the last word, remembering how smug White had been showing him the governor's letter at the Jam Pony hostage situation. Now the tables were turned. "There something I can help you with?"

"Actually, I'm here to help you." Ames White forced the words out despite the intense dislike clogging his throat. He dropped a manila folder onto the detective's desk, where it landed with a loud thump.

"What's this?" Clemente picked it up and flipped through it, then looked back up at the man in the expensive suit and trench coat standing in front of him with a barely disguised disdainful sneer. "How'd you get this information?"

"That's none of your concern," White snapped. "This man fired a weapon at law enforcement officers, then fought alongside the transgenics to overcome my team and escape with the hostages. I've brought you proof of that so you can put his picture on every lamppost in the city. We're bringing federal charges against him. I'll expect you to let me know as soon as you have him in custody."

Clemente regarded him stonily. Then he nodded shortly.

"Thank you, Special Agent White. I'll look into it." His tone was dismissive.

White seemed ready to say something else, but decided against it. He almost bumped into Matt Sung as he strode out of the detective's office. They exchanged passing glances, as White continued on his way, brushing roughly past Sung.

"What was he doing here?"

Clemente silently handed him the folder, and Matt flipped through, trying to disguise his shock and anger. Clear pictures of Logan jumping onto the police car, gun in hand, aiming at the snipers in the building above. Driver's license, credit record, newspaper articles about Cale Industries, even blueprints of his apartment. Articles he'd written over the years for various underground publications, harshly criticizing the military government, uncovering embarrassing scandals.

Matt's voice was tight. "The press will have a field day with this."

Clemente sighed. "I know. And I know he's guilty of aiding and abetting, and probably assaulting an officer, but damned if I wouldn't have done the same thing in his shoes. Those guys were going to shoot randomly. No way they could know which were the transgenics."

Matt managed a smile. "Most of them, anyway."

The two men looked at each other for a few moments. "Put our men on alert, distribute his picture to the National Guard and the sector police, beat cops. We only want him for questioning at this point. No need to get somebody riled up, ready to shoot first and ask questions later. And no press. We don't want any more vigilantism, especially

against a regular citizen."

Matt let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "I..." He trailed off, trying to decide whether or not to continue. "I'll get on this right now." He made an about-face and headed to the door.

"Detective Sung," the detective's bass voice rang out, and Matt stopped in his tracks. "Is there something else you wanted to say?"

Matt took a breath but didn't turn around. His face showed indecision and guilt and he knew it. "No, sir." He forced a small smile and turned.

Clemente regarded him much as he had Agent White a few minutes before. "Let me know what else you can dig up on our friend, Mr. Cale."

Sung nodded briefly and closed the door on the way out.

* * * * *

Act Three

S1W Headquarters - Lunchtime Saturday

Asha entered and closed the door carefully behind her, to the greetings of her fellow S1W members. She turned around, removed a thick envelope from its position next to the gun in her holster, and plopped it on the coffee table. The other members stared at it, then at her.

"Asha, what's going on? Why'd you call us here?" one of them asked.

"We need to get some ammo," she answered, choosing to remain standing rather than sit down with them. "I promised Logan we'd get hold of some for him. This money's his."

"What does Logan need with the amount of ammo this will buy?" said a brown-haired guy. "As I recall, he just carries a pistol."

"He asked me for a favor and I agreed to it," Asha answered. "Isn't that enough?"

"Doing him a favor sure didn't help us any earlier this year," he argued, standing up to tower over her. "We spent months in hiding because of that little stunt he had us pull at the VA office. If that White guy hadn't gone on TV in front of the Senate and outed the transgenics, we'd still be running with our tails between our legs. Or have you forgotten that?"

"Of course not," she snapped. "I also haven't forgotten all the times he's helped us, including when we got arrested and he bailed us out. Not to mention all the stuff he's

given to Eyes Only for us. We're lucky to work so closely with an Eyes Only operative and you know it."

"Eyes Only," a blonde guy snorted. "I bet he's one of those transgenics anyway."

Asha whirled to face him incredulously. "What?"

"Think about it, Asha. The guy never shows his face. He spends all his time defending them, and then he disappears during the hearings, just before they're outed? What does that tell you?"

"It tells me I'm going to be getting that ammo myself," she snorted, grabbing the envelope and heading for the door. "Anybody who's still got a head on their shoulders is welcome to join me."

Seattle Street

Later, while walking toward their car on their way to purchase ammunition, Asha and a couple of her colleagues passed by a group of police. "Keep an eye out for this guy," the leader of the group was telling the other cops, showing them a piece of paper. "Logan Cale."

Asha's eyes widened. She whispered to her colleagues that she'd catch up later, then casually slowed her pace and circled back, pretending to look into a shop window.

The cop continued, "...aiding and abetting. It's not supposed to be publicized, so no 'wanted' posters. If news catches word and you're interviewed, you got no comment. We just want him for questioning."

Asha remained frozen in place until the group of cops dispersed, then caught up to her own group as quickly and as inconspicuously as she could. "Plans have changed," she told them. "They got wind of Logan's un-

derground action. I'm going to have to take this stuff to him tonight."

Terminal City - Saturday Afternoon

Max was walking down one of Terminal City's inner streets. It was raining steadily, and she was soaked through, her hair now clinging to her ears and shoulders. A low rumble of thunder sounded as she spotted a figure leaving a building nearby.

"Logan!" she called out to him.

Logan looked over and left the shelter of the building's overhang. He was carrying some computer parts, doing his best to keep them covered with part of his jacket. "Hey, Max," he greeted her when he got close enough for conversation.

"Hey. I see you made it back all right." Logan had his collar upturned and was hunching a bit in an unconscious but vain attempt to stay dry. Max had long ago given up, and stood unflinching in the rain.

"Yep. Sure did."

"Did Alec? I mean, you didn't drown him on the way or anything?"

Logan chuckled. "Alec's okay. But let's just say there's a reason I'm not doing latrine duty right now."

"Ye reap what ye sow," Max said with a grin, and gestured to the bulge under Logan's jacket. "What's all this?"

"Just some extra hardware I found..." As Logan reached up and removed his fogged-up glasses, a piece of equipment slipped out of his grasp and dropped to the wet ground. He and Max simultaneously bent down and

reached for it. They came within inches of each other, Logan's bare hand nearly touching the part of Max's hand not covered by her gloves. As soon as Max realized what had nearly happened, she jumped back in horror, leaving Logan to pick up the part.

"What are you doing?!" she demanded. "Where are your gloves?"

"Back in my room," he answered a bit testily, rearranging the items under his jacket to get a better grip. "Can't wear 'em all the time."

"You'd be safer."

"Max, notwithstanding the fact that human hands were not designed to be covered in powder and latex twenty-four-seven, I gave the majority of my supply to Aveta. Supplies are low. She and her techs need them more than I do."

"What?" Max's voice was incredulous and laced with annoyance. "You could end up in a pine box without them! You don't call that need?"

"Much as I would like to hold you right now, I don't think it's right for me to let other people die for it," Logan hissed, his voice low. A flash of lightning overtook the sky, emphasizing the fire in his eyes. Her face took on the half-smile half-sneer she often used when firing one of her inevitable sarcastic replies.

"I'm sure they're thanking God for your sense of justice as they lie in mortal danger from a paper cut."

He exhaled, still adamant. "Fine. But you know as well as I do we're low on antibiotics and God knows what else. Any little infection could get big in a hurry. Better safe than sorry."

"Now you get it!" Max snapped.

Logan looked taken aback. He stood silent for a few moments, his anger suddenly gone, as rain cascaded off his ears and the end of his nose.

Her point made, Max dropped her shoulders and spoke in a much softer tone. "I just don't want you to die on me."

"Trust me," Logan quietly promised, looking into her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere."

Rec Center

Late that afternoon, an X-series entered and headed straight for the beer fridge. He pulled out a beer and had it open before the spiny female transgenic who had been keeping an eye on the fridge could stop him.

"Hey," she objected, yanking the beer out of the man's hand. "Does it look like sundown to you?"

"Does it look like I care?" the male retorted. "I just spent six hours setting up more living quarters and water lines, not to mention ripping out old toilets. You guys sure didn't have much concern for creature comforts before we came along. I'm having a beer."

The spiny transgenic blocked the way to the fridge with her large body and snarled. "That's easy for you to say. Before this siege started, you were able to go wherever you wanted, whenever you wanted. You ask me, it's made you spoiled."

"You're calling me spoiled? I've spent the last ten months living hand to mouth out there."

"Boo-hoo. We've had to sneak around to get what we needed, or else make do with what we've got. Now we

gotta share it with you creeps, who are too arrogant to understand that you're living in our space?"

"Now wait a minute." The X-series drew himself up to his full height, eyes flashing and looking up at her. "Terminal City is open to any transgenic who needs it."

"Wrong," the beer guard hissed, contempt oozing from her voice. "You Xs are staying here because we freaks are letting you. And as long as you're here, you follow the rules. Back off!"

By this time, the two were standing nose-to-nose, glaring at each other, and the other occupants of the rec center had gathered round. Some had chosen sides, Xs standing behind the male and inhuman-looking transgenics standing behind the female.

It was through this crowd that Joshua's loud voice boomed, "Enough!"

The subsequent wailing of a baby was the only sound as the small crowd parted to let him through. The X-series and the spiny transgenic both stared at the large man now standing in front of them, holding an infant to his shoulder and patting her on the back. He began to speak in a quiet but emphatic voice.

"Enough fighting. It doesn't matter, X or freak. We're people. She's people." At this he indicated the still crying child. "She doesn't need to grow up hearing this...this arguing."

"Kid's gonna learn about it sometime or another," the X-series muttered, chastised, kicking a stray penny on the floor.

"But we don't have to show her." Joshua's voice grew calmer and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

Original Cindy, standing unnoticed in the doorway, smiled as well. "Manticore didn't give us childhoods. They taught us to have enemies. But we can get along."

"I hope you're right," the spiny transgenic said, her voice still harsh but her fingers gently stroking the baby's cheek. Then she headed out of the rec center, walking backwards to finish what she was saying with a concerned nod toward the perimeter. "I hope they let us."

San Francisco - A warehouse on the waterfront

Lydecker was seated in front of the computer, still busy working with the information on the disc. The only disturbance was the whispers coming from Krit and Syl, who were seated on the opposite side of the room.

"How much longer do you think he'll be working on that?" Krit asked, nodding his head over in Lydecker's direction.

"Beats me," Syl shrugged, as she filed her fingernails. "Why don't you go ask him?"

Krit shook his head. "I don't think so," he answered, all kidding aside.

Syl laughed. "Don't let him get to you," she said, looking over at Lydecker who was still perched in front of the computer. She turned her attention back to her nails. "He thrives on that."

"Yeah, I know," Krit mumbled. He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "But you got to admit, the man gets to you."

Their conversation was interrupted when Lydecker got up from his chair and headed in their direction. They both watched him as he walked over.

"Speak of the devil," Syl muttered under her breath.

"Well?" Krit asked as Lydecker approached.

The look on Lydecker's face was not a happy one. He stopped a good five feet away from them, and his gaze fell upon Krit. He took off his glasses.

"The information is going to be helpful to a certain extent," Lydecker began. He played with his glasses, which he now held in his hands. "It wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but it will have to do."

"It sure as hell 'better do'," Syl interrupted, raising her voice. "You said it would have what you needed."

"Yeah, I got shot at for that information," Krit replied, pointing over at the computers. "So, why don't you tell us what's on the disc? We're getting tired of being kept in the dark."

Lydecker sighed. He glared at Krit for a moment before turning his back on both of them. He took a few steps away from them before speaking.

"The information you got is only one piece of the puzzle. I'm still putting all of this together. This kind of operation takes time if it's to be done right," he paused before continuing. "You'll be filled in at the appropriate time."

"We're wasting time playing your games, Lydecker. So, you say Sandeman has some answers we need. Great. Fine. I'm sure he's seen the news about the transgenics in Seattle. Let him come to us," Syl exclaimed.

"It doesn't work that way," Lydecker reasoned.

"Well, then, we'll make it work that way. Hell, we could have been in Seattle by now where we could really be helping!" Syl yelled.

Lydecker turned around, his anger evident by the look on

his face, but he spoke calmly. "Doing what? Taking turns playing sentry while the other one tries to figure out how long the supply of rodents will last?"

Syl was out of her chair and heading for Lydecker, intent on knocking him across the room. Krit was caught off guard by her sudden move, but managed to catch up to her before she got to Lydecker.

Lydecker didn't move. He didn't flinch at all as Syl was bearing down on him, standing his ground the whole time.

Krit reached forward and grabbed Syl by the arm, pulling her back a few feet away from Lydecker.

The warehouse fell silent except for the whirr of electronic equipment in the background. Lydecker stared at the two of them. The seconds seemed to stretch into hours.

Lydecker broke the silence. "You'd better keep those emotions in check. They only get in the way."

He put on his glasses and gave them each one last warning look and walked back to his computer.

Syl yanked her arm away from Krit.

"So, that's it? We're just supposed to sit here and follow your orders? We might as well be back at Manticore," she spat, walking after him.

Krit followed her. They took up positions right in front of Lydecker.

Lydecker looked at Krit and then at Syl. He took in a breath and straightened his back slightly as he began speaking. "You know that working with me is the only real option you two have. Once you accept that, we'll get a lot more accomplished. I have resources and connections

still at my disposal. Just about all of your connections are under siege in Seattle. You want to help them, to get them out. That's where I come in. And that means you play by my rules."

A short distance outside the perimeter guard - Dusk Saturday

Asha set her backpack on the ground, grunting at its weight, and dragged the grate off a sewer drain. After checking to make sure she was alone, she donned her backpack and climbed down the ladder. Once down, she pulled out a flashlight and a sewer map, and quickly headed down the tunnel.

Unbeknownst to Asha, a National Guardsman who had been smoking a cigarette some distance from the sewer drain had seen her enter. After waiting a few minutes for his fellow soldiers to leave the area, he discarded his radio, placing it in the middle of a nearby bush. Then he stepped down onto the ladder, replacing the grate above him. A wicked grin grew on his face as he quietly began to tail her.

* * * * *

Act Four

Sewers Beneath Terminal City

Asha crept along, hunched over in the sewer pipe, trying to suppress a disgusted grimace. The space was almost pitch black, and occasionally she could hear something squeal and move about around her. Finally she stopped and shined her small flashlight on the sewer system layout she'd brought, peering closely to try to figure out where to go next. Shining the flashlight around, she searched for the sewer line number, which she thought must be stamped on the wall somewhere. She jumped and barely restrained a terrified scream when her light fell on the face of a lizard mounted on the body of a human being.

The lizard was pointing an AK-47 automatic weapon at her, and said in a low, threatening voice, "You shouldn't have come here. Put your hands in the air."

Asha's voice trembled, the only outward sign of her fear. "I'm a friend of Logan Cale's," she said. "I'm just bringing some supplies for all of you. You know, guns and ammo?"

Silently the lizard motioned with his gun for her to keep walking in front of him. After a few minutes, they turned a corner at his gruff instruction, and then came to a halt in front of a ladder. The lizard banged the gun on the man-hole cover at the top in a repetitive pattern, and it slowly creaked open. The lizard pressed the gun into Asha's back, indicating that she should climb.

There were several more transgenics waiting at the top of the pipe as Asha climbed out, and they all had guns

pointed at her. She was relieved to see most of them were like Max, undifferentiated from the general population. She looked around at her surroundings. They were in the clearing of several condemned buildings, and junk lay scattered in piles. They led her inside one of the buildings, where activity hummed from floor to ceiling.

Asha nearly cried with relief when Max appeared at the top of a metal staircase, even though her expression was decidedly unfriendly. "Intruder," the lizard told her.

"It's okay, I know her. She's helping us out," Max answered. To Asha, she said, "I thought Logan told you not to come here."

"I had to come. Where is he?" Asha asked.

"Logan!" Max called, without turning her head, and a second later, Logan appeared behind her.

"Asha!" He looked at his watch. "What happened?"

Asha turned and glanced nervously at the lizard, who glared at her and then at Max before turning away in a huff. She carefully climbed the staircase and answered, "I was heading to the meeting place and passed by a couple of National Guardsman." She paused for emphasis. "They had your picture, Logan. You're a fugitive. They're looking for you in connection with the Jam Pony hostage thing."

Max and Logan exchanged apprehensive looks as Asha continued, "It's not safe for you to be out there, especially not carrying weapons and ammo. Got a map of the sewers and figured I'd come find you."

Logan sighed. "Thanks. Now we need to get you out of here as soon as possible."

“I’ll take her,” the lizard said from below. “And you better make sure no more of your friends follow you in here. One slip-up and we’re all toast.”

“That’s enough, Mole. Asha was just trying to help protect Logan. If he gets caught, you going to run our communications for us?” Max snapped.

“It’s okay, Max. I’ll go with Mole and we’ll get Asha out of here,” Logan told Max, and the three of them headed back outside.

Sewers Underneath Terminal City

Mole, his gun at the ready, led Logan and Asha back down the dank, empty sewer pipe and headed toward Asha’s entry point, Mole in the lead, his gun at the ready. Suddenly, somewhere down a corridor to the right, a manhole cover clanged shut, and Mole swore under his breath as they all froze. “Expecting any more visitors?” he hissed at Logan.

“Probably just someone making the rounds,” Logan said tightly, but even he didn’t sound convinced.

They continued on toward the sliver of light shining down where Asha had entered, but Mole stopped again and held out a hand. “There’s something up ahead,” he said. “Stay here.”

He walked off into the darkness, and returned a couple minutes later with a teenaged X6 limp in his arms, his face impassive. “Jared’s dead. Snapped neck. Someone followed her in. Come on, we have to go warn the others.” He roughly shoved them back the way they’d come, but neither Logan nor Asha complained.

Command Center, Terminal City

Max was deep in conversation with Alec and a couple of X5s, sorting out the ammunition that Asha had brought them, when she heard a commotion down below. Looking over the railing, she was surprised to see Asha trailing along behind Logan and Mole, and she realized they were shouting her name. "What's wrong?" She got to her feet, instantly going into battle mode.

"Found Jared dead near where the blonde came in, tunnel 6, section 5-E-9. Whoever killed him is already here. We heard him exit the manhole that comes up right around the corner, between here and the mess building. She led someone straight to us," Mole snarled. Two X7s, who were unable to communicate verbally with the rest of the group, came forward and gently took the corpse from Mole.

"How do you know there's only one?" Max asked him.

"He heard us coming and took off. If it'd been more than one they'd probably have tried to take us out, too," Mole replied. "He's good, though. Hard to sneak up on an X6 and kill him with one move. Real hard." He chomped unhappily on his ever-present cigar.

Asha remained silent, but one look at her told Max she felt awful. Max's gaze flicked to Logan, who was standing behind Asha, a comforting hand on her elbow. Their eyes met, and she seemed to make a decision. "Okay, everyone, listen up!" Max yelled, and everyone in the building fastened their eyes upon their unofficial leader.

Clearly and calmly, Max dispensed instructions to the various soldiers to search the surrounding buildings and tunnels and to alert the Terminal City inhabitants who weren't in the Command Center building. "Logan, you

stay here with Asha until this thing is done.”

Finally Max looked back at Alec. “You’ve got command. I’m going with Mole.” For once, Alec didn’t argue, just nodded once at Max.

Max gave Logan a look as they passed and he reached out to her, briefly touching her black jumpsuit with his gloved fingers. “Be careful,” he said hoarsely, and she nodded, smiled a little and pulled away.

Mess Hall, Terminal City

Max was the only unarmed transgenic as she, Mole, and three X5s headed out of the Command Center and turned toward the mess hall. “Why would he come here instead of Command?” Mole wanted to know.

“Maybe he heard about our burgers and fries,” Max said flippantly, but her face betrayed no humor as she searched the windows of the building they were about to enter for any movement.

“More likely he’s hiding out until he can call for reinforcements,” Mole continued. “I know we should have never...”

“Shhh!” Max silenced him as they pushed open the door and stepped inside. She motioned to each member of the group to go in a different direction, then she headed up concrete stairs to the unused second floor. It was crowded with boxes and old furniture, and some heavy machinery that they had been appropriating as necessary.

The staircase Max stealthily crept up topped out into a large, open space, with a third level overlooking the space. No sooner had Max stepped into the space and looked up to the balcony above, than a window on the third level

banged shut. Turning on the speed, she leapt up to grab the railing and swung herself easily up, not breaking stride as she ran to the window. It opened onto the second-floor roof, and immediately she spotted the intruder as he made a superhuman leap to the next building's roof. He looked back and their eyes met. Amazingly, he smiled at her arrogantly, then turned and disappeared around the side of the building.

Max slipped through the window and jumped lightly to the roof, following the intruder's exact path. She soared through the air onto the next building, landed gracefully, and ran around the side of the rooftop storage room, frantically scanning ahead, hoping to catch sight of him.

So focused was she on the next roof that she almost didn't notice him approach her from behind. At the very last second she threw an elbow back and caught him in the face. He staggered from the blow, but didn't fall, so she turned, and with a lightning quick move she kicked his handgun out of his hand. It flew several yards and skidded on the rooftop.

He smiled again, a Cheshire-cat grin that made Max's insides curdle, so she turned her attention to the rest of him. He was in his 20s, dressed in standard military fatigues, sleeves rolled up, pants tucked into combat boots. His handsome but mocking face barely registered with her as her gaze zeroed in on what she'd been half expecting to find since she watched him soar between the rooftops...two snakes wound around a staff, the tiny symbol firmly emblazoned on the inside of his arm.

Finally he spoke. "X5-452. He said you were good. Too good for him, anyway." He laughed, but it was an ugly sound. "He's going to throw a fit when I bring him your dead body."

“Put up or shut up,” Max sneered. She tossed her hair out of her eyes and crouched, arms up and ready for anything. He had barely gotten into position when she attacked. Fast and furious, she jumped up in a series of spin-kicks before he could get his bearings, and he went down. In an instant, though, he was back on his feet and returning the favor by knocking her feet out from under her, then kicking her in the ribs while she lay there.

Max knew she wouldn’t last long on the ground, and she quickly rolled into a crouch. He came at her again and she simply moved out of the way, then stepped behind him and pushed him against a nearby wall, shoving her arm flat against his back and twisting one of his arms behind him. “Move and I’ll break your arm.”

“And what, that’s supposed to scare me?” he said, and a look crossed her face as she remembered that he wouldn’t feel pain.

Just then, another of the recon teams bounded out onto the roof, having heard the commotion from below, and pointed their weapons at the Guardsman. “Guess that dead body thing isn’t gonna work out, huh?” Max said, pulling him roughly away from the wall and shoving him toward the door.

Command Center, Terminal City

Followed by several search teams that had converged on the Command Center, Max pushed the Familiar ahead of her until she caught sight of Asha and Logan, sitting with Alec at the main communications grid. They got to their feet and came down the stairs to face the gathering crowd.

“He’s a Familiar,” Max announced. “One of White’s guys.”

“So they really are everywhere,” Logan said. “First the nurse at Harbor Lights, now the National Guard.”

Asha piped up from behind Logan. “I’m sorry, Max. I thought I was protecting Logan. I never heard him come in behind me, I swear.”

“Who cares whether you heard him or not!” Mole said, brandishing his gun. “You shouldn’t have come in here. And you...” he pointed the gun at Logan, “shouldn’t be asking for help from people who can’t be trusted.”

“Give it a rest, Mole. Try to keep your eye on the ball. We got the guy; he’s not going anywhere.” Max held up a cell phone. “And smarty here didn’t even call for backup, either.”

“Damn straight he’s not going anywhere. He killed one of ours. Forget the Geneva Convention! Due process in here is giving him a last cigarette before we put a bullet in his brain,” Mole snapped. The other transgenics murmured assent, and Max looked at Alec, motioning him to her with her head. When he walked over, she shoved the Guardsman at him. “Take him to that old meat locker in the mess hall and post two X5 guards,” she said in a low voice, then turned to face the group.

“Killing him in cold blood makes us as bad as they are,” Max started once she was sure Alec was gone and the Guard was out of earshot. Immediately the crowd started to voice its dissent, but Max interrupted them.

“Let me finish,” Max continued sternly. “I’m not going to fight all of you. You can do what you want with him. But he’s mine for the next 48 hours. “Who here is PSYOPs?” A couple of transgenics in the crowd raised their hands. “Okay, bright and early tomorrow morning you guys are havin’ a heart-to-heart with the prisoner. And *nobody*

touches him till I say so.” She looked hard at Mole and the rest of them, then turned away.

Mess Hall, Terminal City

“So what’s so special about this Ordinary that they need both of us to guard him?”

As ordered, two X5s were standing outside the gray metal door of an old, nonfunctional meat locker in the back corner of the mess hall. The hallway was silent except for the echo of the young, olive-skinned soldier’s comment to his partner, a female with cropped red hair and an upturned nose.

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but playing night watchman isn’t the worst duty we coulda pulled.” She stuck her hand into her pocket and withdrew a deck of cards. “Look what I swiped. Alec left his cards on the table after his last poker game with Mole.”

They grinned at each other and sat down in front of the door, against the opposite wall, and the redhead started dealing. They were talking and laughing, paying no attention to the meat locker whatsoever.

Inside, the Familiar glared out at them through the thick pane of glass stuck into a tiny window in the door. He had remained quiet since his capture, his face stony except for an occasional sneer. “Transgenic filth,” he hissed, watching them at their card game. Then he closed his eyes and seemed to meditate.

The two X5s remained oblivious when the thick slab of wood that threaded through the bent iron posts on either side of the door began to tremble. Finally they heard it and looked around, then back at each other in horror. That split second of hesitation was all it took for the beam

to slide out of the iron posts and go flying off into the corridor.

“What the hell...” the male X5 swore as they got to their feet, drawing their handguns from the crude hip holsters they’d fashioned from leather scraps.

Those were the only words that escaped their lips before the door blew right off its hinges and came flying toward the transgenics. They jumped out of the way, but by the time they’d scrambled back up and gotten their bearings, the intruder had fled down the hallway. The redhead X5 took aim and fired an expert shot, but to their amazement, the soldier took the bullet in the calf and didn’t even break stride. He was moving so fast they knew they wouldn’t catch him, but the redhead took off after him anyway, listening to her partner madly radio for help behind her. As soon as she burst through the mess hall doors into the night air, she knew her pursuit was fruitless. He was gone.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she muttered grimly, “I guess now we know why they wanted two of us.”

Rec Center, Terminal City – Sunday Afternoon

Gem sat on an old, beat-up couch in the rec center, cradling Elfie, who was once again wrapped in a sheet. A couple of younger transgenics hovered around her, staring at the tiny baby with a mixture of awe and confusion. All of them looked up at Joshua approaching, and the kids wandered away as he perched on the crate that was serving as a coffee table.

“Hi, Gem. Your thumb better today?” he asked, trying not to be obvious about peering over the sheet to get a glimpse of the baby.

“All better today, Joshua. I really appreciate your taking care of Elfie for me while I was gone. You did such a great job, I may ask you to babysit again, if you want.”

Joshua looked surprised, as if he hadn’t considered wanting to do it again. “Diapers are not as hard as Joshua thought, but...you sure you want to leave Elfie with Joshua?” he asked.

Gem giggled. “Sure, although...did you do something with the cornstarch besides using it on the baby? ‘Cause I swear I had a full box, and now it’s more than half empty,” she told Joshua, puzzled.

Joshua glanced upwards and around the room, trying not to look guilty.

At the same moment, Max wandered into the rec center and sat down on a stool next to Original Cindy at the makeshift bar. Original Cindy was sipping a beer, trying to make it last. She looked Max up and down before speaking. “You know, it’s a funny thing. Coulda sworn my bunk was right next to yours, but I ain’t seen you anywhere near there for...” Original Cindy thought for a moment, counting on her fingers, “...at least three days. Now don’t be telling me ‘bout how you don’t need sleep. Don’t you forget, I been livin’ with you long enough to know how much sleep you need, and you ain’t gettin’ it.”

Max shrugged. “Too wired after last night. You hear what happened?”

“Yeah, Lizard Lick over there been tellin’ the story over and over to any fool who will listen.” Original Cindy nodded her head toward Mole and a group in the corner.

“They’re pretty pissed off that I didn’t let ‘em hang the guy right off,” Max told her. “Gonna make it harder next

time I want them to listen to me.”

Original Cindy slung her arm around her friend and squeezed. “One thing I know for sure, it’s that you’re the leader of this Odd Squad, for better or for worse. No gettin’ around that.”

Max exhaled a grim laugh and managed a smile. She glanced up and noticed Joshua and Gem talking in the corner. She raised her eyebrows in surprise as Gem stood up and put the baby in Joshua’s arms. “What’s that all about?” she asked Original Cindy.

Original Cindy followed Max’s gaze and laughed. “Joshua just realized he an uncle,” she said. “Gem asked him to babysit yesterday; now all of a sudden he’s Mary Poppins. All he need is a little umbrella.”

The girls laughed together, but Max’s expression quickly turned solemn again as she regarded the infant. “You know, it’s bad enough they got us cornered in here like a pack of wild dogs,” she said with a mixture of sadness and anger.

Original Cindy nudged her friend in the shoulder. “Hey, boo, you already got the weight of the world on your shoulders. Don’t be takin’ on a momma’s guilt too. Situation’s just temporary. You made it so that baby’ll never be property of the U.S. military. Gotta count for somethin’.”

“But still...” Max sighed and rose to her feet, getting ready to go back to work. “Kid deserves better than this. Terminal City’s no place for a baby.”

Secondary Kitchen, Terminal City

“Hey.”

Logan looked up from the pot of boiling pasta in front of him and smiled at Max, who had just poked her head into the kitchen. “Hey yourself.”

“What’s up? I left Alec in charge; don’t wanna be gone too long.” She came in but stopped several feet away from him.

“I told him to send someone for you if anything happens, so sit down and relax for a minute,” Logan replied, waving her to an old metal stool at the counter.

She sat, but then sighed heavily. “Can’t relax, especially now. White or Clemente or both are probably planning to bust in here any minute and I can’t even get half these guys to take out the trash, much less fight a war.”

Logan smiled at her self-pitying frown as he donned the oven mitt again and carried the pot to the sink. Carefully he emptied the water, holding a plate over the top to prevent the pasta from spilling out. “I don’t know about that. Seems like to me you’ve done a good job of whipping them into shape. They know what happened wasn’t your fault; they’re just looking for someone to blame it on.”

Max shrugged, then looked at him curiously. She looked down at the counter, where she noticed the two chipped plates and tin cups for the first time, then back up into Logan’s smiling eyes.

Logan raised his eyebrows and his grin widened. “Made a little pit stop yesterday on the outside. Picked up some pasta and tomatoes. No olive oil, but I made do.” He reached over and picked up an old cast-iron skillet, holding it front of her as he removed the lid.

Max took a deep breath through her nose and smiled a genuine smile. "Smells incredible. Gonna be hard to go back to field rations tomorrow." She watched him with a half-tender, half-amused expression as he readied the rest of their dinner. "Thanks," she said as he started spooning pasta onto her plate.

Logan paused, wooden spoon in the air, and met her gaze, and they both knew she was thanking him for more than the serving of food now in front of her. "No problem," he said softly.

They stared into each other's eyes for another silent moment, then Logan slowly resumed his task. Then he put the pot aside, reached into a lower cabinet, and brought out a small bottle of wine. Max laughed in disbelief. "You are amazing, Logan Cale. Pasta's one thing, but where did you find a bottle of red wine and manage not to have one of the goons running around here wrestle it away from you?"

Logan was focusing on trying to open the bottle with a small and rusty corkscrew, but he paused to look up and smile mischievously. "I'll never tell. But I will say this: I can run pretty fast with the exoskeleton."

They laughed, then settled into a comfortable silence, for a few minutes, until finally Logan poured them both a glass and handed Max her glass. She almost reached for it, then remembered, and put her hand in her lap. He set it down at her plate, and they shared a wistful sigh.

"We're gonna get through this, Max," Logan said softly. "And...next time we won't take anything for granted."

Her quiet one-word reply was infused with agony and hope at the same time. "Yeah." Their eyes met again, they shared another tentative smile, and sat down to enjoy

the meal.

An office somewhere in Seattle

“The gas is ready and waiting.” Ames White listened to a voice at the other end of the phone, then spoke again. “I know, but it doesn’t last very long. We have to wait to release it until the toxin is ready for distribution, and those idiots in the lab don’t even...”

A sharp knock at the door interrupted him, and he looked up crossly. “What is it?”

“Daniel just checked in. You need to hear this.” White’s assistant, a young man dressed in a suit, was nervous at interrupting his boss but White could see him quivering with excitement as well.

“I’ll call you back.” White put the phone down as Daniel entered his office, still dressed in his National Guard fatigues. “I thought you were supposed to stay with your unit. What happened, you blow your cover?”

“No, sir. My unit got off shift this morning and I stayed with them until I could get away.” Daniel paused a beat. “I heard you talking about the gas you’re going to use on the transgenics.”

“Yeah, what about it?” White sneered impatiently.

“I know how to deliver it right into the heart of Terminal City.” Daniel smiled the same smile he’d given Max on the rooftop. “I had an interesting night last night.”

White absorbed the soldier’s words, then allowed himself a rare smile in anticipation. “I want to hear *everything*.”

* * * * *