

Dark Angel VS3

There's No Immunity Like Community

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Episode VS3.04

PROLOGUE

Command Center, Terminal City

As chaos swirled around her, Max stood frozen, staring at Logan, slumped at the keyboard. Her dark eyes scanned his body for some sign of movement, finally resting helplessly on the tousled blonde head that she couldn't touch.

Alec saw the look on Max's face and his body responded before he completely processed the thought. He rolled the desk chair back and gently lowered Logan to the floor.

"Logan! Buddy! Stay with us!" Alec bent over Logan, begging him to stay conscious. The scene was eerily reminiscent of the one on the floor at Crash just a few months earlier. Alec looked around desperately, but this time there were no paramedics to help.

"Vitals are weak," he offered, a helpless look on his face.

"Might as well write him off," Mole said matter of factly. "We can't help him here. And we don't have the manpower to get him outside."

"Fine. We'll bring someone in," Alec snapped at Mole, then looked away, seemingly startled at the intensity of his own response. "Max! Doctor's number from last time. What is it?"

Max heard herself repeating Dr. Shankar's number.

"Alec, please don't let him die."

Max's plea was interrupted by the TAC team leader's frantic voice.

"Base, please respond! Over."

Max remained frozen, her eyes darting from Logan to the monitors.

“Max, they need their CO. You take care of them, and we’ll take care of Logan.” Alec pushed Max toward the monitor screens.

Max gave Alec one final desperate look then picked up the mike. “Base here. Now listen up...”

“Might as well get him to the infirmary,” Mole said, picking Logan up with ease. “This happened before?”

“Yup, and care of our former employer, too. Virus targeted to his DNA,” Alec answered as he flicked open his cell phone.

“Makes a person wonder who the real freaks are,” Mole spat.

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Act One

Harbor Lights Medical, Seattle

“We’ve really appreciated your help!” Dr. Colleen Harrington shouted to Dr. Beverly Shankar as they fought their way down the overcrowded corridor at Harbor Lights Medical.

“There aren’t too many doctors willing to do *pro bono* work these days. Why did you decide to join us?” she continued when they finally found a break in the traffic.

“It’s a welcome change from the ME’s office,” Beverly Shankar explained to the dark-skinned woman beside her. “I was hoping to prevent a tragedy or two instead of always dealing with the consequences. To tell you the truth, I wasn’t sure the hospital would accept me.”

“Why would you say that?” Dr. Harrington asked.

“I haven’t worked much with living patients since my residency,” Beverly laughed nervously. “Forensic pathology isn’t exactly the perfect training ground for emergency medicine. After all, you can’t kill a corpse.”

“Are you kidding? We’d pay to have someone of your caliber,” Dr. Harrington reassured her as they turned the corner toward Dr. Shankar’s office. “But since we can’t, the least we could do was give you your own office.”

“I appreciate it. One thing never changes, though,” Dr. Shankar smiled ironically as she waved at the stack of files on her desk. “Paperwork.”

“Yeah,” Dr. Harrington rolled her eyes in understanding. “I’m going to grab a bite. Want to join me?”

“No, I’d better get this finished,” Beverly sighed, walking to the desk and picking up a patient file.

“Catch you later then,” Dr. Harrington smiled and headed out the door.

Dr. Shankar watched her colleague walk away, then buried her head in the file, determined to finally make a dent in the stack on her desk. She didn’t even bother to look up when the phone rang a few minutes later, just shot out a hand and groped around until she found the receiver.

“Dr. Shankar,” she answered absentmindedly. A second later, the file was completely forgotten as she rattled off a rapid-fire list of questions to the voice at the other end of the phone. As she talked, she pulled out a couple of bags and filled them with everything she had in her sporadically stocked cabinets, mentally kicking herself for not keeping more supplies on hand.

“Do you have any medics on site?...any equipment?...drugs?...Okay, you’re going to need IV tubing, several bags of saline drip, transfusion kits, and intubation kits... I’ll bring everything I can. Get him on saline right away. Keep him hydrated. Watch his breathing. He could go into respiratory distress at any point...Have a volunteer prepared to provide a transfusion. How do I get in?...Okay, I’ll be there in twenty minutes.

“Oh God!” The words involuntarily escaped from her mouth as she snapped the phone shut and raced out the door at a dead run.

The Bates Hotel, Sector 5

“What’s up with those charges, Reese?” Glory yelled over the sound of the flash grenade reverberating against the walls. “That grenade isn’t going to hold them back for

long!”

“I’m on it!” the demolition man yelled back while still applying charges to the metal door.

“You...what was your name?” Glory turned and pointed at Original Cindy.

“Original Cindy, sugah. What you need?”

“You stay on the radio.”

Glory addressed the rest of the crew. “Okay, here’s the drill. Joe and Mite, you continue to provide cover. We need to keep them back, but I don’t want human casualties. Just give us a minute or two and we’re out of here. Use the grenades, shoot over their heads, but *do not*, and I mean *do not*, hit anyone.”

“Okay, we got direction here,” Original Cindy shouted to the TAC team leader as Max’s rapid-fire instructions came over her comm unit. Original Cindy looked up to find the rest of the group ready to move out.

Cain grabbed Reggie’s good arm and prepared to run. Kit and Kat advanced to guard their backs. Glory quickly organized the other transgenics from Jam Pony into a flank unit, to monitor the situation. Joe and Mite continued to exchange fire with the guard troops, watching for cans of tear gas and tossing flash grenades up the stairs to protect their position.

Boom!

Reese was thrown back as the door opened, filling the hall with dust and metal shards. At the bottom of the stairs, Joe took a direct hit and fell back against the wall.

“Go, go, go!” Glory shouted as she and Mite continued to provide cover fire for the retreating group. Suddenly, a

high-pitched scream pierced the air as a piece of shrapnel sliced open Trig's thigh.

"Down here! Down in the hole," Original Cindy called, remembering what Logan had told her about the route back. They hustled around the corner, pulled up the access panel and half climbed, half fell down the ladder into the sewer. Kik grabbed Joe and threw him over her shoulder. Chica and Tia worked to get Trig down the hole without injuring him further.

Time was running out for all of them. Cutting short another fierce exchange with the National Guard, Glory and Mite came rushing down the ladder and pulled the access panel closed behind them.

"We lit your second charge, Reese," Glory reported. "It should give us enough time to get lost in these tunnels."

"We're clear, Max, but the results ain't pretty. Over." Original Cindy reported, turning to survey the scene in front of her. "Where's Logan, boo?"

The TAC team leader turned back to the human. "Take attendance later. We need to move, now!"

Still wondering why Max had responded instead of Logan, Original Cindy grabbed the makeshift litter the TAC team had brought with them and helped Kik settle Joe on it.

"This one's bleeding pretty badly," Tia shouted, trying to stem the blood spurting from Trig's leg with her hands. The medic looked down at the gaping wound in front of her. Bright red blood was spurting between her fingers. "Shrapnel hit an artery."

"Tia...Joe isn't breathing!" Mite sounded almost frantic.

"I can take this one, boo," Cindy shouted racing over to Trig. "You go save that boy before he turns blue."

Tia paused for a split second to wipe her bloody hands on her pants and then raced over to Joe's still form. After several long seconds of rescue breathing, Joe finally coughed and began breathing on his own. Tia leaned back for a moment closing her eyes with relief.

Original Cindy half knelt, half fell next to Trig. She reached into her hair and yanked out the long scarf tying back her tight curls. In a matter of seconds, she wrapped the scarf tightly above the wound, then looked up at the team leader. "We've got to get Trig back before he loses his leg."

"It's not his leg I'm worried about," the TAC team leader replied gravely before urging the others forward. "Let's move!"

"Here, we found another transportation device," Mite called, hauling an old door down the tunnel.

Chica thrust her weapon at Original Cindy and assisted Mite in putting the now unconscious Trig on the make-shift litter.

"Okay, double-time now!" called the team leader as they headed back toward Terminal City.

Infirmary, Terminal City

Alec pushed through the doors of the infirmary, followed closely by Mole, who was still carrying Logan.

"Who've you got for me?" Aveta asked, moving quickly to meet them.

"Ordinary," Mole said. "Doubt he'll make it. He's already

half dead.”

“Name’s Logan,” Alec interjected. “Mole’s right, I’ve seen this before, he barely made it the last time.”

“Yes, I know him. His respiration is labored. No, don’t lie him on his back,” Aveta directed Mole. “Place him on the gurney over there. Raise the back to semi-sitting. It will help his breathing.”

“Prepare the intubation kit,” she shot over her shoulder at her assistant, who raced off to retrieve the equipment.

“Hey, Logan. What are you doing here?” she asked softly while checking his heart rate and blood pressure.

“You!” she continued more aggressively, pointing at Alec. “Help me strip him down to his shorts. His temperature is shooting through the roof. We need to cool him off. Somebody get me a fan. Now!” she shouted, sending the assistant scurrying off again. Then she turned back to Alec. “Keep talking. What do you know about this?”

“He was infected by a retrovirus,” Alec explained while he held Logan so Aveta could pull off his jacket, shirt and pants. “Designed specifically to target his DNA.”

“I’ve never seen anything this virulent. Don’t know how much I can do for him. Human physiology is not my area of expertise. Neither are viral diseases. My usual patients are immune to 99.9% of what’s out there.”

“Got an outside doctor coming in. She’ll be here any minute. Last time, she transfused him using Joshua’s blood. Seemed to work,” Alec offered tentatively.

“What are you waiting for?” Aveta glared at Alec. “Get him in here, stat!”

Command Center, Terminal City

“TAC team report please. What’s your status? Over.” Max spoke sharply into her comm unit.

“Two minutes to designated rendezvous location,” the TAC leader replied succinctly, then added with more intensity. “We need medical help. We’ve got casualties, two critical with significant blood loss. It’s a miracle we’re keeping them alive at all. Over.”

“Acknowledged. Over.” Max replied while simultaneously hitting the intercom to the infirmary.

“I need Aveta at sewer entrance number five now. No, another medic won’t do.” Her voice left no room for argument. She turned off the intercom and spoke into her comm unit again.

“We’ve got you covered. Just get them here,” Max reassured the team leader as she ran toward the entrance. “Over and out.”

“This had better be important. I’ve got a very sick man back there,” Aveta challenged Max when they met at the sewer entrance a minute later. She didn’t notice Max blanch at the words as the manhole cover flew open and the TAC team hurriedly carried the most seriously wounded through.

Accompanying the first litter was a tall, red-haired woman, who on first impression appeared to be Aveta’s mirror image. The women caught each other’s eyes and a moment of silent communication passed between them.

“Okay, this is what I need you to do,” Aveta said, quickly taking charge.

South East Perimeter Fence, Terminal City

An exhausted Beverly Shankar arrived three hours later at the Eastern perimeter fence of Terminal City, having run the gauntlet of protestors, sector police and National Guard troops that had made it nearly impossible to get anywhere near the place. She'd finally abandoned her car and resorted to walking the last couple blocks, taking cover between the abandoned railway cars scattered in the rail yards that flanked Terminal City.

She dropped the bags that she had been hauling with her and wiped her forehead for a second. Just as she was about to knock, the steel reinforced door in the fence flew open.

"You're late! Should have been here three hours ago." A very impatient soldier pulled her and the bags inside and slammed the door.

"Tell me about it," Beverly gasped as she looked around frantically. "Which way?"

"Follow me," her escort said, grabbing the bags and taking off at a good clip.

"I hope to God someone's bagged him. There's no way he'll be breathing on his own at this point," she said with undisguised concern. "How much longer till we get there?"

"Two minutes," her escort replied.

"Then let's go faster," she pushed him. She barely reacted to the fact that a cigar-chomping lizard man was escorting her. Those two minutes might mean the difference between life and death for Logan.

Her escort turned a corner and slammed through a couple

of double doors into the infirmary.

Logan was lying unconscious on an ambulance gurney that had definitely seen better days. Beverly noted quickly that the medics had somehow managed to rig an IV line and get some fluids into him. She bent down quickly to check his vitals. She looked at the readings, verifying them a second and a third time, then took a deep breath and checked Logan's vitals a final time. Beverly looked up in confusion at the tall, auburn haired medic who had been hovering over her shoulder.

"Which one of you transfused him and when did you extubate him?"

The medic returned her confused look.

"We didn't. It's been a zoo around here. Wounded coming in. Not enough manpower. Not enough supplies. We jerry rigged one transfusion kit. Had to use it on Trig over there. Bullet nicked the femoral artery. Severe bleeding. He almost lost his leg. Hell, we almost lost him. Had to make a choice. All we gave Logan was some saline. We considered intubating him, but it wouldn't have done much good with the limited manpower we've got. Can't bag him indefinitely. We've been monitoring his vitals. They dipped precipitously in the first twenty minutes, but they've since stabilized. He's still in rough shape, but he's not getting any worse."

"Can't believe it," Beverly whispered. "He's fighting this thing off on his own."

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Act Two

Living Quarters, Terminal City

Max stood outside the barracks, watching the scene in front of her as the residents of Terminal City settled in for the night. Her eyes glazed over as other scenes began flashing through her mind.

Eva was standing in front of her, then with the crack of the gun, her sister was dead. She turned and followed the others, going out the window with Jondy by her side. When she got to the outside, she found out that Zack, just a kid like them, had sacrificed himself so they could escape.

“Anything’s better than going back. You said so yourself.” She could hear Zack’s words, but she could also see Brin lying on the park bench ...dying, the helicopter coming to take her back to Manticore.

Ben was on the ground...hurt. She needed to help him. “Don’t leave me here. Don’t let them take me,” he pleaded with her. She couldn’t take him with her...She couldn’t leave him...she couldn’t save him. Realizing it was her only alternative, she snapped his neck and ran away.

“Please don’t let him forget me,” Tinga called back to Charlie. Max watched as her sister crossed to the other side of the fence, into the hands of Lydecker, Renfro...all the people they had fought against their whole life.

“We’re going to get her out somehow” was Zack’s promise. But they didn’t get Tinga out, because Max let everyone she cared about go. She let them get hurt.

Logan...lying on the floor, again, his throat closing up, his breath growing more shallow every moment. Again Max turned and left him. Left him like she had left everyone.

“Everybody’s in, fed, watered, and bandaged up.”

At the sound of Alec’s voice, Max turned. “Huh?”

“Everybody’s set, Max. You did a good job. Now get out of here and go find Logan.”

She didn’t move for a moment, until Alec pushed her lightly with his hand.

“You did your job here. Go.”

Max walked across the compound toward the infirmary. She stood at the doorway for a few moments, watching Dr. Shankar and Aveta work on Logan.

“How is he?” She said quietly, almost afraid to ask.

“Breathing on his own, vitals have stabilized. Logan’s a real fighter,” Beverly reassured her.

“Yeah.”

“I’ve given him some antivirals to help him along,” Beverly commented, and then shivered a bit as a cool breeze from a nearby fan hit her.

“Great idea using convection to lower his temperature.” The doctor turned to the medic who was standing behind them. “I’m sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Aveta,” the medic replied, placing a gentle hand on Logan’s forehead and sweeping his hair away from his face. “He spiked at 105.5. Currently at 103.9.”

Beverly checked the LCD readout on her thermometer, which read 103.9. She regarded Aveta quizzically for a

moment, then continued, “We’ll allow the fever to run its course. It’s a natural immune response. But if it spikes past 105 again, we’ll have to get him on ice.

“Do you have ice?” she asked Aveta abruptly.

“No, but we can make it,” Aveta replied.

“I suggest you get on it then. Oh, and check my bags. I brought some stuff I thought you could use.”

“You heard her. Move!” Aveta turned to an assistant, sending him scurrying out the doors. She picked up the bags and began to rifle through them as she headed toward the supply room.

“Can’t believe it! Clean needles! Dressings! Sutures!” she blurted out in surprise. “Hey! When you’re done here, you think you could make another supply run? Got a list as long as my arm!”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Beverly smiled before turning back to Max. “Okay, now all we can do is wait. We’ll need to keep a constant watch, though, things could still go south rapidly.”

Infirmary, Terminal City

Moonlight, shining through the upper windows, slowly traced an arc across the floor, lighting Max’s steps as she paced the hallway outside Logan’s isolation room. Several hours had passed since Dr. Shankar had transferred Logan from the infirmary to the smaller, adjacent room. Max had spent most of those hours in the hallway, pacing with worry. She would pause periodically to watch Logan through the room’s glass door, trying to reassure herself that he was still alive, then she would resume her pacing.

“Logan doing okay?”

Max turned to find Joshua standing next to her.

“Yeah, Logan’s doing okay.” Max glanced at Joshua, and then pressed her forehead against the glass door and continued softly to herself, “If I keep saying it, it will come true, won’t it?”

In reply, Joshua placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Thanks for helping him again, Joshua. I don’t know what we would have done without you...” Max sighed.

“I didn’t help Logan. I was helping Gem,” Joshua replied with surprise. “We took the baby for a walk.”

“Huh? Who transfused him then?” Max wondered out loud as she leaned back against Joshua’s tall frame.

“Whoever it was, Joshua says thanks, too.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Max answered.

“So, why is little fella here in the hallway? Why is she not with Logan?” Joshua asked.

“I don’t know. I’m scared that if I go in there, I’ll never be able to come back out, but I tried staying away and that didn’t work. I tried running away, tried lying about my feelings for him, and none of it worked. Not sure why I’m here now...except, I can’t leave. I can’t leave him again.”

“Max loves Logan. Logan loves Max.”

“Yeah, if only it were that simple,” Max answered.

“Is that simple.”

Max turned and hugged Joshua. “You’re a smart guy, big fella.” She turned and pushed the door to the room open.

“He doing okay?” she asked Dr. Shankar.

“Holding his own. Best thing we can do now is let him sleep. I’m going to try to catch a quick nap too. Call me if you need anything.”

Pulling her legs up in front of her, Max huddled on the chair next to Logan’s bed. She trained her eyes on his sleeping form, watching his chest rise and fall as he slept on and the moonlight continued to work its way across the room.

A Small University Bookstore

Soft moonlight reflected on the door of the small university bookstore, highlighting the letters on the tarnished brass sign, slowly revealing the words ‘Sanderson’s Rare Books.’ The light continued on its path, streaming through the front windows, highlighting the ever-present dust that lingered in the air.

A tall, well-dressed, old man dusted the books displayed in the windows, sending more dust to join the specks already rising in a thousand tiny points of swirling light. He picked up an old leather volume, caressed it in his hand and placed it back in the window. His work finished for the night, he pulled on his coat and hat, locked the door behind him and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

He paused for a few moments to admire the moon and the rare shooting stars that lit the sky. As he watched, he absentmindedly fingered the lion’s head figure on the end of his cane. He waited until the clouds drifted in, obscuring his view. Then, leaning on his cane, he slowly made his way down the sidewalk.

Infirmary, Terminal City

As the gray light of dawn replaced the fading moonlight, Logan opened his eyes to see Max and Beverly sitting in a couple of chairs at his bedside. Both women had dozed off and were leaning tiredly against each other.

"Hey, you," Logan whispered hoarsely.

Max was up like a shot and Beverly followed right behind her, intent on checking Logan's vitals once again.

"Hey," Max replied tentatively. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a truck ran over my chest," he smiled weakly. "Otherwise, I feel perfectly exhausted."

Max smiled sadly at his feeble attempt at humor.

"You've been through a lot," Beverly explained. "Try to get some rest." Her advice fell on deaf ears; Logan had already fallen asleep.

"Why don't you guys stretch your legs," Aveta offered. "I can watch him for a while."

Max led Beverly to the roof of the building. They stood there silently for a while, watching Joshua's flag waving in the early morning light.

"If I lose him, I'm not sure any of this will be worth it," Max said, facing the flag.

"You're not going to lose him. But it's going to be a difficult recovery. He'll need some time to get back on his feet."

"He can't stay here, but I'm not sure where to send him. His place is compromised and I don't want him staying at my dive. Who's gonna take care of him?" Max was on the verge of tears.

"I wouldn't recommend transporting him right now. Let him regain some strength first," Beverly advised.

"Terminal City's not exactly the healthiest of environments," Max retorted with undisguised concern.

"Let's deal with one thing at a time. If he can make it through this, we'll deal with residual exposure issues later. You've got a great team here, Max. They'll take good care of him."

Beverly paused for a moment, then continued. "There's something else you need to know."

"What?"

"We didn't transfuse him."

"What do you mean, you didn't transfuse him?" Max turned to face Beverly.

"Logan appears to have acquired some antibodies. He's fighting this on his own, Max."

"How...?"

"Joshua's transfusion appears to have been more effective than we first anticipated."

"He's developing immunity?"

"Yes."

Max turned back to the flag, a trace of a smile gracing her lips.

"You know, Logan and I told each other we would beat this," Max said, her face sobering once again. "Truth was, it felt like a dark hell we'd never get out of. This is the first glimmer of light I've seen in months," she continued softly.

“That’s good, Max.” Beverly smiled.

“Yeah,” Max replied, continuing to stare at the flag. Then she realized that Beverly was still talking.

“Max, once he’s feeling better, you’ll have to deliberately re-infect him.”

“Are you nuts?! He’s not exactly skating through this.” Max gave Beverly an incredulous look.

“Repeated exposure builds immunity. The sooner you do it, the better. Let’s not give the virus the opportunity to mutate. We don’t know how sick Logan will get or even if he will get sick next time, but you need to take the risk.”

Max took another look at the flag, wondering if the promise it held would ever come true for her and for Logan.

* * * * *

Act Three

Mess Hall, Terminal City

Max headed for the mess hall, hungry and more than ready to sit down, if only for a few minutes. All the stress was getting to her and she'd actually thought about sleeping, a rare thing for her. Just as she reached the mess hall, the door crashed open. She was barely able to step out of the way before a body flew by her, slamming into a nearby post and sliding to the ground. The short, brown-haired X5 got up, her eyes full of anger, and started back toward the door. Max hurried after her.

Absolute chaos greeted Max. She didn't know how or why, but it seemed that the two groups who usually worked hard to stay segregated from each other, the Xs and the transhumans, had come together for one purpose: to fight. Max barely dodged a very feline looking transhuman man, who stumbled backward toward her, only to run straight into the group of fighting transgenics.

"Hey!" Max shouted, as she pulled at clothing and arms, separating hostile combatants. "Cut it out! Cut it out!" She grabbed the nearest X5 by his collar and yelled, "What the hell is going on here?"

He started to jerk away; his angry eyes fixed on the transhuman with whom he'd been locked in battle a moment before, but Max held him tightly, giving him a shake.

"I said, what the hell is going on here?"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mole, who was sitting off to the side, watching the entire scene and looking almost amused.

“You want to give me a hand here?” she yelled at him, but he ignored her and just sat there chewing on his cigar.

Max shoved the X5 away from her and reached again into the fray, pulling and separating transhumans from X5s, X5s from transhumans.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she shouted over the noise of the group.

Max’s extra-sensitive hearing picked up the sound of a knife being unsheathed. She whirled to see an X5 pinning a transhuman against a table. The X5’s knife was only inches away from his opponent’s throat. Zeroing in on the X5, Max kicked out, catching him in the ribs and sending him reeling. She went for the knife, trying to grab it out of his hand, but he recovered his balance almost immediately and fought her blows for several tense seconds before her hand came in contact with his arm. She twisted, bringing his arm up and around, hearing a sharp ‘snap’ before the knife clattered to the floor and the X5 grunted in pain, his arm hanging limply at his side.

Silence invaded the room as the others paused in their fighting, turning to look at the X5 whose arm she’d just broken. The unexpected move seemed to suddenly jar them back to reality. Slowly, they relaxed from their fighting stances, eyeing each other warily. None of them would meet Max’s angry gaze. She stooped, picked up the knife, then hurled it so that it embedded in the wall close to Mole’s head, vibrating slightly beside Mole’s ear.

“You!” Max peeled the still-shaking transhuman off the table and pushed him toward his adversary. “Get this idiot to the infirmary.”

“Are you kidding? He was ready to slit my throat!” the transhuman protested.

“He’s not your enemy. The enemy is out there!” Max glared at him in frustration. “When are you people going to learn that?”

The two transgenics caught something in Max’s gaze and the fire in their eyes dimmed. They left together, still maintaining a cautious distance from each other.

Mole started to rise just as Max yelled. “Now someone tell me, right now, just what the hell you all thought you were doing!”

“They’re soldiers, Max.” Mole’s fed-up voice came from beside her before anyone else had a chance to respond. “They’ve been bred to fight. They need a mission.”

Max whirled on him. “Oh, they need a mission, do they? Have a little excess energy to burn?”

She paused and scanned the fight’s participants with her best scornful look. The two groups had already drifted apart, the X5s congregating on one side of the room, the transhumans on the other.

“Fine,” she said abruptly. “You and you, latrine duty.” She singled out the X5 and the transhuman who seemed to be in charge of the two groups. They just stood there, eyes smoldering, so she took a step toward them. “Move!”

It took several moments for either of them to budge and when they did, they left without even looking at one another, disappearing through different doors and heading separately toward the latrines.

“And you two,” Max continued, motioning to the feline transhuman who’d stumbled into her earlier and the X5 who’d been thrown out of the mess hall. “You’re on garbage detail,” she said, shoving them away. They left just as grudgingly as the first pair.

Max singled out one more from each side and informed them, "I hear they need some help scrubbing floors in the infirmary. Tell Aveta 'hey' for me." She turned on the others and saw them quickly straighten, all disrespect gone from their eyes. "The rest of you can hunt rats for all I care," she said bluntly. "Just don't let me catch you fighting again." She dismissed them and turned away. Once they were gone, Max sank into one of the chairs, completely exhausted.

"Make-work projects aren't going to do it, Max." Mole's reproving voice startled her. She looked up at him wearily and glared.

"Then do something about it," she hissed.

"You're not cutting it, Max." Mole challenged her in frustration. "You're way too focused on that guy."

"His name is Logan."

"You've got hundreds of people relying on you, and you're taking off to play nursemaid to Looogggaaaannn." Mole dragged out the name with disdain. "You need to keep your head in the game."

"You do your job, and I'll worry about my head. You got that?" Max asked, her voice low as she rose, staring Mole down. "I'm going to see Logan. You got a problem with that?"

"No, ma'am." Mole backed down and walked away.

Roof, Terminal City

"Hey, girl, Original Cindy has turned this town upside-down looking for her boo. You been sittin' up here all day?"

Max turned to her friend and sighed. “No, just needed a couple minutes to myself.”

Original Cindy sat down next to Max and took her hand.

“Damn, and I thought your needles were all raggedy when you were just doin’ the Jam Pony gig.”

Max smiled and laughed lightly. “Yeah, no need to worry about nails here, that’s for sure.”

“What’s on your mind, girl?” Original Cindy asked.

Max shook her head. “It’s not what I thought...not what I expected. Mole’s all over me. Thinks I don’t cut it...and he’s right. What do I know? I left Manticore when I was nine. I can’t run this place, can’t promise to keep these people safe...I nearly killed you today, let alone the others.”

“Original Cindy takes on danger on her own terms. Don’t be thinkin’ you got me in somethin’ I don’t want to be in,” Cindy challenged her.

Max sighed again. “Then there’s Logan. He’s a whole other set of problems I’m definitely not ready to deal with.”

“What’s goin’ on, boo?”

Max turned so she was looking at her friend. “I don’t know. Maybe everything I ever wanted, maybe not. Dr. Shankar thinks he’s developing immunity to the virus, but we won’t know unless I infect him again. I’ve nearly killed him three times now...what if I actually do this time?”

“Girl, you gotta get some faith,” Original Cindy replied.

“He’s so sick and it’s killing me to watch him like that...I need to be with him, but I’m useless around him. I need to

be taking care of these people. I need to be figuring out what we're doing next...I need to get you out of here before the toxins kill you." Max's head slumped into her hands.

Original Cindy began to slowly rub her right hand over Max's back.

"You take care of your peeps, boo. Original Cindy can handle your man," she smiled gently while continuing to work on Max's back.

"Sides," she added with a bigger grin. "You put your mind to it...these transgenics won't know *what* hit 'em."

Infirmary, Terminal City

Beverly had been monitoring Logan for over twenty-four hours. He had slept most of the time, turning periodically in the bed, partially opening his eyes, but always falling back into an even deeper sleep. His body seemed to be conserving every resource to fight the virus.

Beverly found herself craving sleep as well. She rubbed her eyes tiredly in an effort to fight off the drowsiness.

"Thanks for covering for me, Aveta. Even this pathetic excuse for a chair can't keep me awake anymore." Beverly turned toward the medic. "You don't seem to need much sleep yourself."

"I can make do with less," Aveta explained and then quickly returned to the task at hand. "His vitals are slowly improving. When did you administer the last dose of anti-virals?"

Beverly rubbed her eyes once again. "About an hour ago."

"Looks like we've exhausted our repertoire of interven-

tions," the medic continued.

"Yeah," Beverly confirmed quietly. "Not much else we can do but pray."

"You do that?" Aveta looked up in shock.

"Never used to..." Beverly began, and then faltered, looking away for a moment. "...My usual gig is in the ME's office, forensic pathology...I've seen stuff..." She looked back at Aveta and recognized something in her eyes, "... You have, too..."

"The handiwork of our fellow human beings...kinda shreds your faith..." Aveta paused a moment, then gestured cynically toward Logan's silent form. "So what is he? Some kind of religious guru, guaranteed to restore your faith in God and all of mankind?"

"Nah!" Beverly chuckled. "It's just his attitude, the way he feels about people. He thinks anything is possible, never gives up. I don't know, watching him work...He can change your whole worldview. Makes you want to believe there is something good out there."

"I was wondering what he was even doing here. We're a pretty sorry lot," Aveta voiced her curiosity. "Guess I'll get my chance to find out. Looks like our boy is waking up," she added, nodding toward Logan.

"How do you know that?" Beverly asked in surprise.

"His breathing pattern changed a minute ago and his eye movements have slowed down. He's coming out of REM sleep," the medic stated simply.

"No. I mean you aren't using any instruments," Beverly clarified. "I hadn't noticed any change at all."

"Don't need a stethoscope to hear heart rate and respira-

tion. Enhanced sight, hearing and tactile sensitivity can be very useful out in the field. Can't always rely on having equipment on hand," Aveta explained. "His heart rate is 120. A little fast, but not bad at this point."

"Wow, I've heard of enhanced senses, but yours must be off the charts." Beverly stared at Aveta in amazement.

"Tested at the top of the class at age five. Was streamlined into field med training at that point," Aveta admitted and then continued with uncharacteristic nervousness. "Can I ask you a favor?"

"Shoot."

"Just don't talk too loudly, because I can hear that too."

"I'll try to remember that." Beverly smiled, and then turned to watch Logan again. As she listened to Logan's breathing, there wasn't much noise to distract her, just the muffled sounds of the other patients next door and the medics that were tending to them. Despite the buzz of activity outside its doors, Logan's room was surprisingly quiet, even peaceful. Beverly suspected that Aveta had selected this room for just that reason.

As Aveta had predicted, Logan gradually began to show signs of consciousness. Only minutes later, he opened his eyes and regarded Beverly tiredly. She held up a cup of water so he could take a few sips.

"How are you feeling?" Beverly asked gently.

"Okay. How's Max?" he asked, still struggling against sleep.

"She's good. Keeping very busy around here. She comes by often."

"I remember seeing her earlier."

“That’s good. Do you have any questions about what happened?”

“Got infected again,” he answered, fighting to keep his eyes open. “I just feel so tired this time. Did something go wrong with the transfusion?”

“We weren’t able to transfuse you.”

“Then how am I still alive?” he asked, blinking hard to stay awake.

“I’m not certain of the full extent, but it appears you are beginning to develop your own immunity. Possibly you acquired some antibodies from Joshua.”

Suddenly, Logan was wide-awake.

“What?...Does Max know?” he asked sharply. “She needs to know.”

“She does.” Beverly smiled.

“Okay,” he smiled back weakly, his energy waning once again. “God, I’m so tired,” he mumbled as he finally let sleep claim him.

Jam Pony Messenger Service, Seattle

“This is it, guys! Listen up!” Sketchy shouted to the Jam Pony crew while he turned up the volume on the television.

A crowd quickly surrounded the TV waiting in nervous anticipation. Even Normal left his domain behind the cage to lean against a post near the set.

“Channel 3 news has learned that the National Guard pursued a group of transgenics two days ago. Witnesses reported hearing multiple gunshots and a massive explo-

sion in the basement of the Bates Hotel. A member of the National Guard confirmed to Channel 3 that several transgenics were wounded, but once again the transgenics appear to have eluded capture."

"YESSsssssss!" Sketchy shouted, high-fiving the messenger beside him as a cheer rose up around them.

Normal sniffed with satisfaction at the news and then turned back toward the cage as the announcer droned on.

"In other breaking news, Channel 3 reports a devastating tragedy in the remote Himalayan village of Dugar. It appears that the entire village fell victim to an unknown toxin or viral agent. The horrific scene was discovered yesterday by an unsuspecting truck driver making a weekly supply run."

"Now that's a story I'd love to get an exclusive on," Sketchy said yearningly.

"Idiot. World's falling apart on your doorstep and you want to do a story on something happening God knows where," Normal shouted from behind the cage. "Get a move-on with these packages or you'll be reporting on what it's like to be without a job."

Infirmary, Terminal City

Logan awoke to find Original Cindy sitting beside him.

"What day is it?" Logan asked, trying to sit up.

"Friday. You've been out for a couple of days. You hurtin', boo?" Original Cindy asked softly as she helped him sit up.

"Pain I can deal with. It's the exhaustion...deep-boned tiredness...makes talking...blinking...thinking...difficult

to do..." Logan tried to explain, struggling to get the words out.

"Need to get some energy into you," Original Cindy nodded sympathetically. "You hungry, boo? I can fix you something. My mama says this girl can cook. And none of that high-falutin', five-course, too-beautiful-to-smell-let-alone-eat stuff that you serve my girl, but real food that will put meat on your bones."

"I don't really want anything right now," Logan replied tiredly.

"How you expect to get your strength back, you don't eat?" Original Cindy prodded gently, then continued as if the decision had already been made. "What's your flavor? Vegetable or chicken noodle? I met this prime female specimen once who could whip up a mean pot of chicken soup. Will cure whatever ails you. Showed me the secret ingredient...among other things," she added with a wicked grin. "But we won't go into that."

"Look, Original Cindy, I'm not really hungry," Logan replied quietly, the intent of the previous monologue completely eluding him. He didn't have the energy to eat right now, let alone to make decisions about what to eat. He barely had the strength to sit up, even with Original Cindy supporting him.

"Who you talking back to?" Original Cindy tried to glare at him, but her face softened involuntarily as she gently helped Logan ease back onto the cot. "Lay your sick ass back in bed and let Original Cindy take care of you."

"God save me from Original Cindy's ministrations." Logan mumbled under his breath as he painfully complied with Original Cindy's orders.

“Don’t think I didn’t hear that.” Original Cindy eyed him threateningly. “Don’t make me set you straight, ‘cause if you think you’re hurting now, Original Cindy’ll teach you a whole new definition of pain!” And with that she was gone, in search of the secret ingredient and maybe a prime female specimen to go with it.

Logan groaned. Every muscle, every joint, ached beyond belief.

“What was I thinking trying to get up?” he began to ask himself, but before he could even complete the thought, a dark blanket of sleep enveloped him once again.

Mess Hall, Terminal City

“Hey, staff only in the kitchen. And no eating between meals!”

Original Cindy turned to find a tall, red-haired woman standing with her hands on her hips. She looked about Max’s age...an X5.

“Settle, girl. Original Cindy is just here for a little sustenance for a patient. You make any soup today? Never mind. Get me some chicken and I’ll show you how to make the mother of all chicken noodle soups.”

“What do you think this is, Ma and Pa’s Country Kitchen?” the transgenic replied sarcastically. “You think we keep a coop out back and butcher them on demand?”

Original Cindy grinned. “Not a bad idea, boo.”

The transgenic smiled a little, adding matter-of-factly, “Infirmary patients are all sent trays at mealtime, as approved by the medical staff. Didn’t your patient get his tray?”

“Might have...also might have been unconscious when they brought the tray. So what if a certain friend was watchin’ over him and happened to eat his food ‘cause she was unable to get here for her own meal,” Original Cindy answered, sliding a couple of feet closer to the red-haired woman. “By the way, I’m Original Cindy...friend of Max, caretaker of Logan...at your service, sugah.”

“Yeah, I heard about you...the human who won’t leave.” The woman answered, her tone getting a bit warmer.

“Hard to leave friends in their time of need, don’t you think?” Original Cindy asked.

“I might have a chicken stashed somewhere in here,” the transgenic offered, her face softening.

“Could also use some salt and pepper and whatever spices you got. Not too much spice for my guy, he still in bed, but as for me...I like more.” Original Cindy grinned mischievously, “What’s your name anyway, girl?”

“You can call me Ginger,” the transgenic replied, returning Original Cindy’s sassy look.

Infirmary, Terminal City

Max ran into Original Cindy in the hallway. She was carrying a meal tray, like the ones kids used to serve breakfast in bed to their moms in sappy Mother’s Day commercials on TV. Where in the world had Cindy found that?

“Bringing your boy some soup. You comin’, boo?”

“Yeah,” Max answered tentatively, stalling. “But you go ahead. Got a couple of stops to make first.”

She stood there for a couple of minutes, then followed Original Cindy’s footsteps to the infirmary. When she got

to the doorway, she hesitated, silently leaning against the doorframe to watch for a few minutes.

“Oh man, you should have seen that chica. She was fine... finer than fine,” Original Cindy drawled as she helped Logan sit up.

Max barely heard Original Cindy, her whole focus was on Logan. She flinched when she saw him struggle to sit up, even with Original Cindy’s help. Max had never seen him accept physical help like that.

“So, Original Cindy, you finally found yourself a real live Spice Girl,” Logan smiled weakly, gasping slightly from the pain as he moved. “Man, my cousin used to have those CDs when we were kids. What was the redhead’s name?” He began to laugh, then stopped, his hand coming to rest on his sore ribs.

“You’re not denying Original Cindy a little spice in her life, are you?” an uncharacteristically flustered Original Cindy challenged him.

“Of course not,” he answered, feigning innocence. “What was her name again? Ginger Spice or Licorice Spice?”

He tossed Original Cindy a charming smile, then turned his focus to the meal tray she had brought him. His arm shook each time he reached for the spoon. Even with Original Cindy unobtrusively supporting his elbow, he was using every last bit of energy just to eat.

Once he’d finished, Original Cindy helped him lie back on the cot. Another wave of pain washed over his face as he settled against the makeshift pillow she had fashioned out of a blanket.

“God, we don’t even have pillows,” Max whispered to herself.

Renfro's face quickly flashed before Max's eyes, her words replaying painfully in Max's head.

"This is all your fault, Max. You did this to him, tangled him in your messed-up life, dragged him into your war and trapped him in this godforsaken place. You're poison, Max. You kill everyone you love."

Just as Max was about to leave, Logan saw her. His face instantly lit up as he caught her eyes, giving her a look of pure joy. Max had seen it countless times, even after she had nearly killed him with this virus. And each time, along with the joy, the look included an almost desperate plea for her not to go.

She had known she wouldn't be able to leave if she saw that look again, so the last time she'd infected him, she'd run away. Max had avoided him, and then deliberately hurt him, because she knew she couldn't resist his eyes. They drew her so powerfully to him, just as they were doing at that moment.

"Hey," she whispered.

"How long have you been standing there?" he asked with surprise.

"Couple minutes," she shrugged as she sat down beside him, a cautious smile teasing her lips.

"Your girl makes great soup," he grinned. "It'll put hair on your chest, though I'm not sure Ginger Spice would appreciate that," he added, looking toward Original Cindy.

"Name's Ginger," Original Cindy rebutted. As an afterthought, she added, "Though she is pretty spicy. And on that note, I'm heading back to the mess hall. Help Ginger feed the troops. Can't believe how much transgenics eat,

and they all want something different. We ain't no short-order restaurant," she drawled.

Original Cindy turned to Max, her face softening. "You okay here, boo?" she asked gently.

"Yeah," Max smiled back at her.

"Then Original Cindy's going to whip herself up some Ginger dessert!" she grinned as she took off.

"You okay?" Logan looked at Max in concern.

"I should be asking you that," Max answered.

"I feel like crap, but I'm happy to know I'm not going to die, at least not today." Logan said with typical humor.

"How can you kid around about this, Logan? I almost got you killed again," Max said in frustration. She got up abruptly. "I have to go."

"Please. Stay," Logan asked softly.

Max was looking into those eyes again, those pleading eyes. She could clearly see the exhaustion that was overtaking him, but he was fighting it with all his strength.

"You don't need to be afraid anymore, Max. We've beaten this thing."

"We don't know that for sure," she replied wearily.

"I promise, Max," Logan mumbled softly as he closed his eyes. "Just hold on..."

Hallway, Terminal City

Three hours later, Max walked out of the infirmary. Logan had slept the entire time. He had barely even stirred. Max hadn't moved either. Her eyes had remained fixed on

Logan as she counted his every breath. Only with Aveta's encouragement was she finally able to pull herself away. She stretched painfully, trying to release the tension in her body.

The sound of shattering glass down the hall pierced the clouds of worry that accompanied her every time she left Logan's side.

"What now?" she thought out loud. "Another brawl?" She reluctantly turned in the direction of the commotion when a voice boomed down the hallway toward her.

"Soldier, you are a disgrace to your unit and your nation! How will you explain this mess?"

Typical drill sergeant. His voice grated on her nerves. She had heard those words far too many times in her years at Manticore. Most of the residents of Terminal City continued to order each other around. They seemed ready to bow before anyone who wanted to exercise authority over them. It drove her crazy that they were willing to give up their freedom that easily.

She turned the corner to see what looked like a seven- or eight-year-old child looking down in shame.

"Eyes front!" the sergeant screamed, his face almost touching the child's.

The words triggered a fury in Max. In a split second, she had the sergeant slammed against a post and her hand shoved into his throat.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Max screamed at him in rage.

"Ma'am, the private was careless and caused significant damage to a sensitive piece of equipment," the sergeant

replied, completely confused. He knew he was absolutely in the right.

"He's not a private, he's a child! A child!" she exclaimed.

"But, ma'am..." the sergeant began again, unable to accept that what he had done was an infraction of any sort.

"I ever see you treating one of the children like that again, I'll kill you," Max interrupted, with cold fury in her voice. "Make no mistake about it. Now get out of my face."

She shoved the sergeant aside, and then knelt down to talk to the child. She smiled and her face instantly softened. "Hey. What's your name?"

"X8-621, ma'am," the child replied timidly.

"Haven't picked a name yet?"

"No, ma'am." The child looked flustered.

"Why don't you take a couple of days to decide, and then report back to me at the Command Center," she smiled at him.

The child's eyes grew huge at the idea of visiting the Command Center.

"Yes, ma'am!" He saluted sharply and took off at a dead run.

"Hey, kid!" Max shouted after him, causing him to stop short. "It's 'yes, Max!'"

"Yes, Max!" he repeated breathlessly and raced off again.

Max grinned happily, then turned and noticed that Mole had been watching. Her face fell instantly.

"Why didn't you stop this?" She threw the words at him accusingly.

“You’re not one of us, Max.” Mole replied harshly. “You don’t understand their need for order, for a command structure to rely upon. You talk about freedom, Max, as if it’s a simple thing you can just pick up at the store. But these people have no concept of freedom. Who’s going to teach them that?”

“I’m heading back to the Command Center. Just make sure it doesn’t happen again,” Max challenged Mole.

“Yes, ma’am!” Mole gave a sarcastic salute just as Max turned to leave.

* * * * *

Act Four

Infirmary, Terminal City

An extraordinary hush had descended over the already quiet infirmary. Every pair of eyes was fixated on the two men hunched over a chessboard set up in the middle of the room.

The X5's right leg was supported in a sling hanging from a metal frame that had been jerry rigged over his bed. He was propped up awkwardly by a couple of bedrolls placed behind his back, but he seemed completely oblivious to his own discomfort. His whole focus was on the blonde man sitting in a battered wheelchair on the right side of his bed. He watched the blonde man's eyes and his hand as it reached out to move a pawn on the chessboard balanced precariously on the edge of the bed. The man's hand shook slightly, betraying his physical weakness, but his eyes revealed a steely focus.

"What are the odds?" One observer leaned over to ask another, all the while keeping his eyes on the match.

"5-to-1 in favor of the X5 over the ordinary," came the bookmaker's hushed reply.

"I'll take a piece of that action," the man whispered, handing the bookmaker some cash.

A short while later, a quiet but confident 'Checkmate' triggered a collective groan of disappointment.

"How did you do that, man?" The X5 asked in shock. "You sure you don't have any strategic training?"

"Yeah," Logan grinned happily. "But I have been playing

against a master for over a year and a half.”

“And getting his butt kicked, I might add!” came a provocative remark from the doorway. All eyes turned to see Max smirking in amusement.

“Speak of the devil,” the bookmaker mumbled under his breath after catching the smile that lit Logan’s face.

Max sauntered in and nodded to each patient as she made her way to the bed.

“Hey, Trig,” she smiled at the X5. “How’s the leg?”

“Healing fast,” Trig replied, shifting a bit in the bed.

“Good.” Max responded sincerely, then turned to Logan. “How are you doing?” she asked with unrestrained concern.

“Better. Temp’s down to 101,” came Logan’s pleased reply. Then he caught Max’s gaze and continued to smile until the tentative lift in the corner of her mouth finally expanded into a wide grin.

His mission accomplished, Logan turned back to Trig. “I’m about ready for another round. Up for a rematch?”

“You bet!” Trig instantly replied.

“I’ll leave you to it then.” Max continued to smile as she turned to leave.

On her way to the door, she paused for a split second beside the bookmaker. “Fifty bucks on the ordinary,” she said, not even bothering to look at him as she continued on her way.

Sanderson's Rare Books

The stillness of the bookstore was almost palpable as the afternoon light filtered through the windows. Even its proprietor, seated at the counter, barely moved while he carefully turned the pages of the book in his hands.

SLAM!

The proprietor looked up in alarm as the door of the bookstore suddenly flew open, slamming against the front of the building. But when he saw who was entering his shop, his frown quickly changed to a grin.

"Thanks so much for waiting for me, Mr. Sanderson," said a breathless young woman with windswept brown hair as she rushed into the store. "And sorry about the door," she cringed with embarrassment, walking toward him.

Sanderson reached under the counter. "Not to worry, Susan. I've heard worse. Your book is right here."

"I can't believe you got it already," Susan gushed, barely pausing to take a breath.

"Early editions of *Tom Sawyer* are difficult to find," Sanderson admitted. "But I have an excellent source who has never steered me wrong."

Susan beamed. "Thank you for finding this for me so quickly."

"My pleasure," Sanderson smiled. "I had the time to do the necessary research since it's been relatively quiet here the last few weeks."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologized.

He was quick to reassure her. "Nothing to worry about, my dear. The end of the semester always brings with it a

mass exodus of students, instructors and, of course, customers,” he smiled. “But I welcome it. It gives me the opportunity to focus on my research and even make a few purchasing forays to replenish my stock.”

Susan grinned, caressing the book in her hand. “This means a lot to me.” They both looked down to admire the book, not noticing the door silently opening or the man slipping in to disappear behind a bookshelf.

“Let me see you to the door,” Sanderson offered after a few minutes.

“Thanks again, Mr. Sanderson.” Susan held up the book for emphasis as they walked to the door.

“You’re welcome, Susan. Enjoy your summer.”

“I will. You too.” Susan smiled a final time before turning and heading down the sidewalk.

He watched her for a moment, then shut the door, turned the sign to ‘Closed’ and returned to the counter. He worked for a few minutes, tallying the receipts of the day. Then he glanced up almost imperceptibly.

“Hello, Donald,” he said quietly.

Donald Lydecker appeared from behind the bookshelf with an old book in his hand. He walked silently to the counter.

“You always did appreciate a good book, Richard,” he finally replied. One corner of his mouth turned upwards to reveal an indecipherable smile.

Terminal City

As Max walked through Terminal City, she noticed a marked difference from her previous rounds. Buildings that had been empty shells now buzzed with purposeful activity. Room after room revealed more soldiers training, drilling and studying.

She turned a corner and was surprised to see the word 'SCHOOL' painted on a wall with an arrow pointing down the hallway.

Her curiosity getting the best of her, Max continued down the hall, then stopped at the doorway of the first 'classroom'.

There were about a dozen X6s and a few transhumans in the room, sitting on an eclectic collection of tables and chairs. Some had even claimed the floor as their domain.

They were paying varying degrees of attention to Dix, who was standing at the front of the group. Some had the 'at attention' posture that was required at all Manticore training sessions. Their eyes were apprehensive, hinting at the fear of more Manticore-style indoctrination. Others seemed more relaxed, curious even. And others just looked thoroughly bored.

"You've all watched the news. They say we're freaks, that we shouldn't have any rights," Dix continued with the subject of the day. "Maybe they're right. Just look at some of us.

"Look at me," he challenged the class.

Suddenly all eyes were on their instructor and a murmur of disagreement spread throughout the room.

"So, what are we? A slave race of warriors or legitimate

citizens of this nation?" Dix asked.

A few of the X6s exchanged glances, not sure if they should say anything.

"Speak up, soldiers!" Dix commanded, causing a wave of arms to shoot into the air. Spotting Max, he greeted her with a nod, and then pointed to one of the raised hands.

Max nodded back and walked to the next classroom. She was stunned to see Joshua standing at the front of the class.

Ten small children sat at perfect attention around two large tables.

"At ease, little fellas," Joshua encouraged them. "This is not a training session, this is school. No soldiers here, only children."

The children were confused by his explanation, but complied anyway.

"You, little fella, what's your name?" Joshua asked, pointing to one of the boys.

"Cam, sir!" the boy jumped to attention.

"Nooooooo," Joshua growled. "My name is Joshua, Teacher Joshua."

"Teacher Joshua," Cam repeated shakily.

"Good, Cam," Joshua smiled and the boy sat back down, relief showing on his face.

"Father said very smart men wrote this," Joshua continued, handing a sheet of paper to Cam, and then turning to look at the other children. "If you have questions, please raise hands."

“Please read, Cam.” Joshua smiled at the boy encouragingly.

The child stood up and began reading in a shaky voice. As he continued, his voice strengthened, drawing the attention of the other children. They didn’t really understand what they were hearing, but somehow they were aware of its importance.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

A very nervous six-year-old girl raised her hand tentatively in the air.

“Your name, little fella?” Joshua asked.

“Lexy, sir!” she answered smartly, but remembering Cam’s mistake, immediately tried again. “Teacher Joshua.” Emboldened by Joshua’s smile, she asked softly. “What is liberty, sir?”

“Liberty, freedom,” Joshua answered just as softly. “Not forcing, not ordering, not running, not hiding, but choosing, living out there, upstairs people, outside people,” he continued as ten huge pairs of eyes focused on him in amazement.

“Hey, boo,” Original Cindy whispered, leaning into the doorway beside Max. They both stood there silently for a few minutes as Joshua continued to explain freedom to a group of children who had never been taught the concept.

After a while, Original Cindy gave voice to the satisfaction she read on Max’s face.

“Things are coming together.”

“Yeah,” Max smiled tentatively.

White’s Headquarters, Seattle

“Things are coming together,” White sharply addressed the tall, short-haired brunette who accompanied him down the hallway.

The brunette echoed his satisfaction as they pushed through a set of doors and made their way toward a conference room. “I’m glad to hear that, Ames. The Conclave will be pleased with this turn of events.”

“Daniel provided us with sufficient intelligence on the Terminal City facilities,” White continued, gesturing to a man hunched over a set of blueprints.

“Sir. Ma’am.” Daniel stood up quickly. “We’ve been developing a map of the area.”

He pointed toward the center of the blueprint. “The transgenics have been congregating in these buildings here. Once the gas is dispersed, our team will enter via the sewers. They will take the entrances in these locations, effectively surrounding the transgenics.” He pointed to the map, indicating several entrances marked in red.

“We’ll take out 95% of them in the first sweep.”

The shrill ringing of White’s cell phone interrupted them.

“Yes?” White snapped. He listened for a moment and abruptly ended the conversation.

Looking back at the brunette, White smirked with satisfaction, “Our field test results just came in. The delivery was 100% effective. It’s time to mobilize.”

A Workroom, Terminal City

Logan was seated at a worktable in a room crammed with computer equipment. Monitors lay stacked in one corner while computers in various stages of assembly were lined up in another. The walls were decorated with an assortment of cables and small parts that had been hastily hung up to get them out of the way.

"We should add a second hard drive, build in some redundancy," Logan directed, looking at Luke, who was seated beside him.

"Good idea. Got one somewhere around here," Luke replied, scanning the computer parts and equipment that were scattered all over their worktable.

They were both so engrossed in their work that it took them a full minute to realize Max had walked into the room and was standing beside them.

"Logan, what are you doing here?" Max asked in amazement when Logan finally looked up at her.

"Luke needed a little hands-on help with this server." Logan motioned toward the half-dismantled computer on the worktable.

"You should be in the infirmary," Max looked at Logan with concern.

"Got tired of playing chess for three days in a row. A man can beat only so many transgenic asses before he needs a change of scenery." Logan said wryly.

"You can barely stand on your own two feet," Max insisted.

Logan couldn't help smiling. "Hey, most computer repairs are done from the seated position." When Max's face re-

mained clouded with worry, he added gently, “I really am okay.”

“I just don’t want anything to happen to you,” Max whispered.

“Hey, I’m about ready for a break,” Luke interjected. “How about I escort you two back to the Hallowed Halls of Health?” he added, finally eliciting a smile from Max.

Luke reached out his hand to Logan, who used it to lever himself out of the chair. Then, with Luke’s arm wrapped around Logan’s waist, they slowly headed down the hall to the infirmary.

“Thanks for your help, man.” Luke shook Logan’s hand after helping him sit on his bed.

“My pleasure.” Logan smiled. “Remember to create a mirror drive in case of system failure.” Glancing up surreptitiously, he added in a hushed voice, “Come back anytime you feel like springing me from this place.”

“I’ll take you up on that.” Luke smiled and turned to leave.

“He’s all yours,” he said to Max, who was waiting hesitantly in the doorway. Certain she had heard every word of Logan’s request, he whispered conspiratorially. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure he takes it easy.”

Nodding at Luke, Max sauntered into the room to set Logan straight.

Sanderson’s Rare Books

“How is she?” Richard Sanderson asked thoughtfully while examining a book in his hands.

“Beautiful,” Lydecker replied with an intensely serious

expression on his face. “Stronger than any of us could have ever imagined.”

“Why are you here, Donald?” Sanderson asked abruptly, looking up at Lydecker.

Lydecker met his gaze. “I need your help.”

“You made serious mistakes, Donald.”

“You made some yourself,” Lydecker replied.

“Regrettably, yes.” Sanderson looked down at his hands. He studied them for a few seconds, and then looked up again. “I’m sure you know that I have nothing anyone would want.”

Lydecker challenged him. “She might disagree.”

“She doesn’t need me,” Sanderson replied with conviction. “I’ve already given her everything that she needs.

“So,” he added, standing up suddenly. “Would you like to purchase a book or shall I see you to the door?”

“No, I can see myself out,” Lydecker responded sharply, then walked quickly to the door. He turned the lock, then regarded Sanderson one final time.

“I won’t let this go that easily, Richard,” he continued with intensity, then opened the door and walked out.

“You know where to find me, Donald,” Sanderson sighed, looking at the already closed door.

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Epilogue

Infirmery, Terminal City

In a corner of the isolation room, Logan sat on a cot, clad only in a loose cotton t-shirt over a pair of boxers. He stared intensely at the floor a few feet in front of him. Max stood to the side, still keeping a safe distance from him, but watching his every move.

Logan looked up and exchanged a nervous glance with Max.

“Nice outfit,” she teased.

“Thanks...I was saving it for this event.”

Doctor Shankar pushed open the door to the room, Joshua following behind her.

“Everybody ready?” she asked. Max and Logan nodded.

“It’s been eight days since you were infected, Logan,” Beverly Shankar began. “Your recovery has progressed much faster than I anticipated. I don’t see any reason why we should wait any longer to take the next step.”

Logan nodded in understanding.

“I’ve asked Joshua to join us,” she continued. “If we need to transfuse you, I’d prefer to have him right here.”

“If you’ll give me your left arm, please,” she directed Logan. “We’ll begin a saline drip now. At the least, it will prevent you from becoming dehydrated, and if we need to deliver medication in a hurry, the line will already be in. Shall we proceed?”

Logan nodded again, giving Beverly the go ahead. He focused on a spot on the floor as she prepared the IV, wincing when she inserted the needle in his forearm and taped the line into place.

"I know my technique isn't that great, but does that really hurt so bad?" Dr. Shankar teased.

"Hate needles," Logan grunted, his teeth clenched.

"Max, Logan, you can go ahead," Beverly prodded gently, her eyes shifting from one to the other as she stepped away from Logan.

Logan stood up and reached out his right hand to Max. His eyes drew her to him and she placed her right hand in his. He gently covered her hand with his left, all the while holding her gaze.

For a moment, nothing happened, so they just stood there, their eyes locked on each other in a terrified, hopeful gaze.

Then, in an instant, Logan's knees buckled and he sagged back onto the cot. He continued to hold Max's hand, pulling her toward him.

"You can let go now," Beverly directed as she moved in to check Logan's heart rate and respiration. Logan did not even notice her, his eyes remaining fixed on Max.

Max watched him just as intensely. She could see the color draining from his face and the fever beginning to inflame his eyes. Panicked, Max tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let go. He continued to focus on her, unwavering.

"Logan, let go," Max pleaded, but he held her hand with the same intensity that held her gaze.

Eventually, he relaxed his hold on her, but continued to lock his eyes on hers.

“I’ll never let go, Max.”

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