

Dark Angel VS3

Reunion

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and willow*



**Episode
VS3.05**

Prologue

Seattle Street

Krit and Syl, accompanied by another young man and woman, walked down a crowded side street in a run-down neighborhood, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible.

Krit pointed to a sign that read *Chin Wo*. “That’s got to be it, Syl. *China Wok*. It’s just missing a couple of letters,” he said, keeping his voice low.

“Yep, let’s go,” Syl ordered, her tone professional, as the four crossed the street to the restaurant.

Krit opened the door and they entered.

It was dark and musty inside, the air thick with smoke. Krit coughed and squinted as he adjusted to the smoke-filled room. There were a few empty tables, but all in all, the place was pretty crowded.

Syl surveyed the room while Krit read the menu on the wall.

“There he is,” she reported.

They walked to the back corner, where Lydecker was sitting at a table, close to the rear exit. He had a good view of the only two ways in or out of the building. An empty bowl and a half-finished cup of coffee sat on the table in front of him.

Lydecker had a cell phone to his ear, but he motioned for his four guests to approach. They stood at the table as he finished his phone call.

"I see. Just make sure you are discreet about it," Deck spoke into the phone. "I don't want you compromising your position. I'll be expecting your next update in two hours."

Lydecker turned off the phone, setting it on the table, and looked up at the four of them. "Have a seat," he offered. "I assume you had no trouble finding the place."

As they sat, Krit looked around. "This *place* is a dump."

"The noodles here are pretty good," Lydecker replied.

Syl cleared her throat and rolled her eyes at Krit. "No, we didn't have trouble finding it. It took a while longer because we had to be careful. If you didn't notice, there are *a lot* of sector cops out there."

"I didn't expect you'd have trouble with them," Lydecker stated.

Syl nodded toward the phone. "Who was that?"

"He's one of yours," came Lydecker's quick reply. He then added with the smallest hint of a smirk creeping up on his face, "Actually, one of mine."

Syl just glared at him through the smoke.

"X5?" Krit asked, suddenly interested in the conversation.

"That would be correct," Lydecker answered. "He's handling an assignment for me. I have him set up to keep an eye on things in Terminal City."

"You got any more X5s working on this thing?" Krit pressed.

"That's a possibility," Lydecker replied, his tone making clear he wasn't going to elaborate at that point in time on the subject. "I see you finally convinced these two to join

us, now that we're in Seattle," he said, pointing at the two who had yet to say anything since their arrival at the restaurant.

Syl bristled. "That's right. Zane and Jondy. Two more of your little science projects that got away."

Lydecker's eyes narrowed, but he replied with an eerie sense of satisfaction in his voice, "And who have now returned."

"Let's get one thing straight right now." A voice unfamiliar to Lydecker's ears made him swivel his head to the right, to see Jondy's angry blue eyes boring into him. "We're here for one reason, and one reason only. To help Max and everyone *holed up against their will in Terminal City!*"

A few customers sitting nearby looked their way, curious about the sudden outburst.

Lydecker shifted slightly in his chair. "We'd better leave before you attract anymore unwanted attention," he remarked dryly. "There're some rations at the house if you're hungry."

Lydecker placed some money on the table, and then the five of them left the restaurant without further incident.

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Act One

Mobile Police Headquarters, one block from Terminal City gates

"Hello, Detective Sung." Ramon Clemente looked up as the door opened and Matt Sung, in khakis and a button-down shirt, entered the tiny, crowded trailer that served as "temporary" headquarters for the Seattle police at Terminal City.

The place was a mess. Abandoned cups of curdled coffee sat perilously close to the banks of surveillance monitors and communications equipment. Sung's elbow bumped a stack of papers as he edged his way toward Clemente, sending it cascading onto the grimy floor.

"Afternoon, Commander," Sung returned, squatting to retrieve the papers, some of which stuck to the muck on the floor. "By the way, sir, congratulations on the new title."

"Thanks, Detective." Clemente smiled wryly. "Can't see what I've done to earn such a fancy title, considering that I haven't managed to catch a single transgenic coming or going, but the Mayor seems to think this is my new full-time job."

"It *has* been three months, sir." Sung stood, putting the papers back on the table.

"Don't I know it. And do me a favor. Skip the *sir*." Clemente looked Sung up and down. "Thought you were going to dress casual today. Mix with the crowd out there."

"I did," Sung objected, sounding offended.

Clemente shook his head. "That's not casual. *This* is casual," he said, indicating his own dark-blue jeans and leather jacket. "Isn't it?"

"Well..." Sung hesitated, looking at the monitors. The largest showed the main gate of Terminal City, where a group of clean-cut, earnest-looking protesters held a banner bearing the logo of the American Civil Liberties Union. Nearby stood a larger group of teenagers in dirty military surplus gear and other cast-off clothing, holding a smaller, hand-lettered sign that read, "Freaks Rock!" A nervous-looking detachment of National Guard troops kept a wary eye on everyone.

From one of the monitors came a background roar, growing steadily louder. "What's that?" asked Sung, suddenly alert.

"Let's see." Clemente leaned closer. "Well, well. Look at that. Hells Angels." Down an empty street rode at least thirty of them in formation, toward a police barrier.

"Whose side are *they* on?" Sung asked.

"They're flying the black, red, and white," Clemente replied.

On the largest monitor, a reporter approached the crowd at the gates and held out the microphone. "Turn that up," Clemente told Sung. "Let's hear what the pro-transgenic folks have to say."

"...so you believe that the so-called "Freaks" have the same rights as Americans?" the reporter asked.

The slender, red-haired young woman holding one side of the ACLU sign frowned. *"We shouldn't use words like*

'freak' or 'trannie,'" she said stiffly. "And the transgenics ARE Americans. Genetically enhanced Americans..."

Jam Pony

"What did I tell you? *What* did I tell you?" Normal exulted, though no one appeared to be listening – even Sketchy, who leaned on the dispatch desk, staring at the television. "You got that right," Normal addressed the screen proudly. "Some of my best employees are genetically enhanced Americans."

"Were, you mean," Sketchy said. "Hey, check that out! Hells Angels riding up to Terminal City! Man, Alec would love one of those bikes."

Idle messengers began to crowd around the monitor, cheering. "Hey!" shouted Normal above the din. "Don't you go getting any ideas about joining the motorcade! No matter which side you're on! Jam Pony messengers stay above partisan politics while on duty! Is that clear?"

The Infirmary, Terminal City

Max paced back and forth. "What time is it?" she asked Logan impatiently.

Logan, sitting in an ancient rolling office chair, checked his watch. "Two o'clock," he said calmly.

"She's late."

"She's a medic. They're always late," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Max swung around and looked longingly at the door. "Look, maybe we should do this tomorrow, okay? I've gotta get back to Command—"

Just then the door opened and Aveta entered, carrying a blood pressure cuff, an ear thermometer, and an IV bag of saline. "Sorry," she said briskly. "All set?"

Max shot an appealing look at Logan. "Could you give us just a second?" Logan asked Aveta.

Aveta nodded, understanding.

"Thanks," Logan told her. As the door closed, he turned to Max. "What's wrong?"

"The usual," Max began. "I hate this. I feel like I'm a petri dish and you're a lab rat."

Logan stood, moving as close to Max as he could without touching her. "This is our fourth time," he said gently. "This could be the time we finally beat the virus. You really want to wait till tomorrow for that? I don't."

"I can't do this. I can't stand seeing you so sick."

"I wasn't even that sick last time. No worse than a bad hangover." He smiled.

She didn't smile back. "What if they're wrong? What if this time you drop dead?"

"Max. Look around us. We may not even have a tomorrow. I don't know about you, but given the givens, I'm kind of in a hurry."

She looked up at him for a moment, terror and uncertainty in her face. "Okay," she said finally. "Aveta?" she called softly. Aveta immediately opened the door.

Logan waited. After a moment, Max reached out and touched his hand, unwillingly.

They braced themselves.

And nothing happened.

"Are you—" Max began.

"I'm not—" Logan said at the same time.

They looked at each other, hardly daring to breathe. Then Logan began to laugh. "Max!" He held out his hand. His skin was unmarked.

Max jumped back. "No! It's too soon! Give it a few more minutes!"

"Max. We've wasted enough time already."

She stayed where she was, and then without warning, rushed into Logan's arms. Eyes closed, he buried his face in her hair. A single tear ran down Max's cheek. They held each other until Aveta quietly cleared her throat.

"May I?" she asked, and after a quick check, pronounced Logan's vital signs completely normal. "Congratulations," she told them.

"That's it?" Max asked.

"That's it. I'm going back to my patient. Call me if you need anything, but my guess is – you won't."

After she left the room, Max began to speak, but Logan gently put a finger to her lips. "I know. You really do need to go check in at Command. I'm giving you one hour. Meet me in my quarters?"

"Yeah," Max whispered. Her voice shook. "One hour." She turned to go.

"Hey."

"What?"

Logan reached out and wiped away the tear that still

trailed down her cheek.

"Thanks," she whispered, eyes shining.

An Office in Seattle

The Phalanx strode into White's office, led by Thula, a snarl on her lips. "Are we ready to move?" she demanded.

White leaned back in his chair and pressed his fingers together. "The gas is ready and waiting. Now my plan is for you to—"

"I'm not interested in hearing *your* plan," Thula sneered, cutting him off. "*Your* plan left us all naked and ridiculed by that idiot detective. We're doing it *my* way this time."

White's eyes narrowed, but he was silent for a moment, then replied calmly but firmly, "You don't know what you're up against. I do. My father was good at what he did, and so are his...creations."

"We're better. If you just stand back and let us do it right, we'll have those man-made freaks dead by the end of the day." Thula crossed her arms and stared down the man in front of her.

"All right," White said. "But let's get one thing clear: we can't afford any screw-ups this time, whoever makes the call. The Conclave has made it clear that the New World Order is upon us."

A nasty smile appeared on Thula's face. "And 452 will be the first one we send to hell," she promised him. "This is how it's going to go down..."

Lydecker's Safe House, Seattle

A freight train barreled along a set of tracks in the middle of downtown Seattle, roaring past a neighborhood that had seen better days. The majority of the houses were crumbling skeletons, but one stood intact, a dim light barely visible around the boards covering its windows.

Krit, Syl, and Zane slept on cots in a back bedroom. Jondy came into the room and nudged Zane, who sat up and stretched, loosening his stiff muscles. The cot squeaked with every move he made, and the noise attracted the attention of the others, who also began to stir.

"Morning," Zane mumbled. He got up and walked out of the room, the wooden floor of the house creaking under his weight.

Lydecker was in another room, poring over a map laid out on a three-legged table. The floor creaked and Lydecker looked up to see Zane standing in the room, staring at him. He stared right back at the young man.

"You got something you want to say, soldier?" Lydecker challenged.

Zane clenched his jaw. A few seconds passed as he wrestled with what to say. Finally, he spoke up. "No."

"Good. Get the others," he ordered. "It's time to start."

Lydecker grabbed a few papers from under the map and walked to a room where four young men in black fatigues were sitting. They all came to attention when Lydecker entered.

"As you were," Lydecker said as he walked to the front of the room.

The soldiers took their seats.

Krit, Syl, and Jondy followed Zane into the room and sat down in vacant chairs, staring at the other soldiers. They remained facing forward, their attention focused on Lydecker in the front of the room.

“Now that you’re all here, we can address the current situation and get everyone up to speed,” Lydecker began. The room was very quiet.

“First, there are two more of you currently on assignment for me. They have infiltrated the National Guard surrounding Terminal City. They report in periodically on the situation there.

“I’m still in the process of tracking down and recalling all my other X5s who were on deep cover missions for Manticore. Rest assured, they will all return to me.”

Lydecker slipped his glasses on and began flipping through the papers he had brought with him.

“As for what we’re up against, the National Guard consists of...”

Syl slumped in her chair, stretching her legs out in front of her. She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, letting out an audible sigh.

This drew a disapproving frown from Lydecker.

“...So,” he went on, raising his voice, “you will have no trouble handling these pitiful excuses for soldiers who make up the National Guard force around Terminal City. They are lazy, sloppy, and easily distracted. They have incompetent leadership. *All* things we can use to our advantage.

“You, on the other hand, are the best group of fighting soldiers the world has ever seen. Under my command,

you will see for yourselves that there are no limits." He paused, placed his hands behind his back, and walked over toward Syl and her group. "Some of you questioned the training methods used in the past," he continued, looking directly at Syl. "It is *that* training which will make success ours.

"Now, as if having the whole city – practically the whole world – against us isn't enough, we have a new enemy. A formidable enemy. An enemy that wants each and every one of you dead. An enemy which, given time, would achieve its ultimate goal of world domination by its superior species."

Lydecker paused to let that sink in. He now had everyone's full attention.

"This enemy, a group known as Familiars, has a stake in what happens at Terminal City. They want you, the transgenics, the only viable threat to them, *gone*. So, you can count on them showing up sooner or later here in Seattle. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they are already here.

"I wanted the perfect soldier. Their goal is a perfect human race. Only one will be left standing...and I *never* lose."

He put up a picture of Ames White on the wall.

"Commit this face to memory, soldiers. Ames White. He's their point man, their go-to guy in the field. Consider him enemy number one. He will not hesitate to kill you. I suggest you take on that same mindset if you run into him.

"Some of you have not been in a structured military environment for some time. This is exactly what has been established here. I'm the CO. I expect your full cooperation. Your duty is to carry out any and all missions. Your loyalty is to this team.

“What we have going for us right now is anonymity, which allows for surprise. No one knows who we are, or that we’re here. They have no idea we are mobilizing a strike force. When we strike, we will do so covertly. We will be quick and efficient. And we must be ready to move at a moment’s notice. No mistakes. Understood?”

Lydecker’s four soldiers immediately replied in the affirmative. “Yes, sir!”

Syl, Krit, Jondy, and Zane shared a look, and nodded in agreement, appearing very unsure of their reply.

Lydecker let out a breath. “Very well. Success depends on having a well-thought-out and carefully executed plan. And that’s exactly what I want from you. Dismissed.”

Command Center, Terminal City

“Pay attention!” Alec’s head whipped around from where his gaze had been locked on the television that blared news coverage of the pro-transgenic rally. The Command Center was quieter than normal, since almost everyone in the building was transfixed by the unexpected show of support manifesting itself before his or her eyes.

Max glared at him and waved a handful of papers in his face. “I can’t do this by myself, Alec. None of that—” she waved her free hand at the television set, “—matters if White gets in here and blasts us all to hell.”

Alec sighed and shook his head slowly, a lazy smile creeping across his face. “I know what your problem is,” he told her. “Sex. Namely, sex with Logan. No virus, and yet somehow, you’re *still* not getting any.”

Max’s eyes narrowed threateningly, and she looked about ready to punch him in the face. Her grip tightened on the

bundle of papers. "I'll say this one more time. Logan and me are none of your damn business." She looked away from him, then caught his gaze again. "Anyway, it's not like we've had time. Aveta just gave us the all-clear a few minutes ago."

Alec's grin widened. "So I guess that means I better go have a birds-and-the-bees kinda talk with my man, huh?"

"Shut up," Max growled. "If you say *anything*, and I mean *anything*, to Logan about this, I'm gonna personally hand you over to White and Company. Now, could you at least pretend you have an ounce of responsibility and help me figure this out?" She sighed and looked down at the papers, which seemed to be a layout of the sewers underneath Terminal City. "We need to step up patrols here, and here. White's goon isn't gonna keep his mouth shut any more than you can, so it's probably only a matter of time before they try something."

"Aye, aye, sir. I'll let Mole know we're gonna do double duty."

Max finally set the papers down and started to turn away.

"Hey," Alec added, "you seen Original Cindy around anywhere? Ginger was asking about her a few minutes ago." He wiggled his eyebrows leeringly.

"She's in the infirmary...again," Max told him wearily. "The rash is back, doin' double duty this time. We gotta get her out of here."

"Yeah, maybe," Alec agreed. "It'd be nice if we had someone out there in the crowd, working for *us*." He paused for a minute. "Which reminds me, I've been meaning to ask you – you got any idea where the others are? The ones that escaped with you back in '09? You'd think they'd

have shown up to pitch in with the rest of us.”

A shadow of pain crossed Max’s face. “I hope they’re far away from all this,” she said softly. Suddenly she seemed far away, but just as quickly she snapped back into commander mode, seemingly embarrassed. “Get those patrols stepped up. I’m going...on a break, so make sure things are covered here. If you can keep your eyes off that garbage and your lips off a bottle of beer,” she added, then whirled around and walked away.

Alec watched her go, grinning. “Booty call,” he sang to himself.

Living Quarters, Terminal City

Max stood nervously outside the closed door to Logan’s room. Her hand went toward the doorknob, but didn’t quite make it. She shifted her feet, looking up and down the hallway to make sure no one else was around. Her hand went again to the knob, and she jumped, startled, as it suddenly turned and the door opened.

Logan was standing there, a crooked smile on his face and a book in one hand. “You comin’ in or not?” he teased, a questioning look on his face.

Max managed a tense laugh. “Yeah, sorry, just...”

“You don’t have to explain anything, Max,” Logan interrupted in a gentle voice. “It’s scary for me, too.”

They stared at each other for a moment, then Logan tossed the book onto the floor and reached out his bare hand to her. She looked at it, then back up to him, worry evident in her gaze. “No excuses this time,” he said. “The quarantine’s been lifted.” The corners of his mouth turned up.

“Are you sure? For all we know—”

“Max...shut up,” Logan whispered, glancing down to his outstretched hand. Max still hesitated, then reached out her hand and placed it in his. Slowly, he drew her to him and put a finger under her chin, turning it up to his waiting lips. They both smiled as their lips met in a sweet reunion, and Logan dropped her hand to bring his up to cup her cheek.

Finally, they broke apart, and Logan shut the door and turned the rusty lock before leading her over to his bed-roll. They sat down, closer than they had been in months. Again, Logan leaned toward her and kissed her tenderly.

Max pulled back gently. “Remember...what I said to you about...” she looked down at her entwined hands, “about not wanting to blow it on a quickie?”

Logan laughed. “How could I forget?”

“I...I can’t leave Command for very long. It’s just...” Max struggled to find the words but nothing came out.

“I understand. We’ll wait,” Logan replied. “I just want to...you know, actually touch you, now that I can.” He took his glasses off and set them on an upturned cardboard box that already held his wallet. Then he reached for her and gently pulled her down so they were lying side-by-side on the narrow mat.

They lay there, staring into each other’s eyes, enjoying the moment. This time it was Max who leaned in for a hungry kiss. Then, without warning, she broke away roughly from Logan’s touch and shook her head, a shiver running violently through her. Breathing hard, she struggled out of his embrace and sat up.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, a look of frustration and a hint of annoyance crossing his face.

"I...I don't know," she admitted, looking confused and turning away from Logan's piercing gaze to hide her discomfort.

He sat up and ran a hand over his hair. "Max...we never...last year, when we...we didn't get a chance to talk. We just...it just happened. I mean, if we're going to make this work, it's not gonna be a walk in the park." He paused, waiting for a response that didn't come. "I guess this is where I ask you if you *want* this to work."

She turned to him, her expression apologetic. "You know I do. But...I have an army to lead out there. White could be on his way right now, and I'm..." her sentence trailed off, unfinished.

Logan remained motionless, then ran a frustrated hand through his hair and sighed heavily, thinking. "Okay...I'm sorry, I'm being selfish. After all this time...listen, why don't we just slow down, okay? Go do what you need to do. Let's meet back here tonight after dinner, and maybe then we can relax a little."

Max nodded slowly, then let out a shaky laugh. "Guess I gotta kiss you goodbye again," she said, then turned to him and leaned over to kiss him softly on the lips.

Logan hadn't moved, and still didn't when she pulled away reluctantly and stood up. "No more goodbyes after tonight...right?" he asked, hesitantly.

She turned, her hand on the doorknob, and gave him a sweet smile. "Right," she replied with conviction, and then she was gone.

The Infirmary, Terminal City

Original Cindy sat on a makeshift exam table as Aveta carefully checked her arm. “The antihistamine should be taking effect soon,” the medic said softly. “If the rash doesn’t go away, come back tonight.”

“Anything you say, boo,” Original Cindy replied, then they both looked up at a soft knock at the door. Ginger was standing there, her eyes locked on Original Cindy.

“Just came by to see if you were okay,” the tall, redheaded X5 said. “Hi, Aveta,” she added as an afterthought.

“Hi, Ginger.” Aveta looked back and forth between the human and the transgenic and seemed to understand. “Could you accompany the patient back to her bunk for me?” she asked slyly.

“Sure thing,” Ginger replied.

They walked slowly through the hallways and then outside, around a corner and down a barren street. “Don’t you got some slop to be servin’?” Original Cindy asked as they headed into her room.

“Nah, I’m in charge. It’s called delegating,” Ginger answered with just as much spunk. “Got the evening off, as a matter of fact.”

“You got somethin’ in mind?” Original Cindy asked with a saucy grin, sitting down on the bedroll.

Ginger sat hesitantly next to her. “How are you feeling?” she asked softly.

“Original Cindy’s feelin’ fine. Don’t worry your fine self ‘bout me.”

“I don’t want to see anything happen to you ‘cause you

stayed in here too long.” Ginger raised her hand to brush it against Original Cindy’s cheek.

“Hey, I ain’t going nowhere tonight, you can count on that,” Original Cindy drawled, and they leaned toward each other for a tentative kiss.

An Alleyway, Seattle

Ames White stepped out of the doorway he’d been waiting in and approached the black assault vehicle that had just sidled up to the curb. The window glided soundlessly downward and White made eye contact with Thula, the leader of the Phalanx. “The advance team is moving into place,” White told her in a low voice. “I’m waiting for confirmation.”

Darkness was rapidly descending on the city as White led the Phalanx down a garbage-strewn alley to a beat-up metal dumpster. In contrast to White’s proper suit and tie, the strike team was dressed all in black: combat boots, cargo pants, and tank tops that showed off every defined muscle in their taut abdomens.

Just then, White’s cell phone rang and he answered. “Yeah.” He listened for a moment, then said, “You know what to do,” and hung up.

“Our brothers in the National Guard just gave the final go-ahead. The team is moving in. That absurd rally’s working in our favor – it’s the perfect cover. The police won’t have any idea what’s going on until we’ve taken care of their little problem,” White told the Phalanx.

“*You* aren’t taking care of anything,” Thula corrected, checking the position of a 9mm handgun, a large, sheathed knife, and a flashlight, all attached to her wide belt. Then she slowly took a pair of black gloves dangling

from a pocket and slipped them on, pulling them tight. “Just remember that, Ames, when I bring you 452’s head.”

White smiled in a way that left no doubt as to what he thought of that, and hit the side of the dumpster. “Your entry point is under this thing, but I wouldn’t head in until you get the call; the rats are as big as cats down there.”

He started backing away, then added, “*Don’t* underestimate these people. That would be a mistake.” He held out the cell phone mockingly. “Call me as soon as it’s done, so I can inform the Conclave that we can proceed.”

* * * * *

Act Two

Main Building Rooftop, Terminal City – nightfall

Alec, off-duty and bored, wandered out of the rec center and on impulse, went up to the roof where Joshua's flag still flew. Wind had shredded the edges, but the colors were still strong, even in the fading light. Below, at the front gates of Terminal City, the rally was still going strong. The cops had brought in floodlights that illuminated the whole block-long front of the fenced-in area. National Guard, sector police, Hells Angels, a few ACLU stalwarts, and a lot of onlookers mingled in front of the gates, like a crowd at a carnival.

There was a sudden movement in front of Alec and he tensed, startled, until the huge figure of Joshua emerged from the rooftop shadows.

"Hey there, hero," Alec said in a relieved tone.

"Hey there, uh – I don't know. What's your job?" Joshua returned in his deep voice.

"Beats me, man." Alec walked over to the edge of the roof and leaned up against the chest-high brick parapet. "What 'cha looking at out there?" he asked.

"Bikes. Lots of them. Reminds me of Jam Pony," Joshua said nostalgically.

"Yeah," said Alec quietly. "Hey, look at that. They're flying your flag."

"They like freaks," Joshua observed.

Alec laughed. "They *are* freaks, to most people."

“Why do they like us?”

“They’re all about being free, man.”

“Us too,” Joshua said. “We’re all about being free.”

“Something like that,” Alec said. They stood for a while in silence, listening pensively to the distant sounds outside the fence. Then Alec said, “Hey, cheer up, man. Good news for Max and Logan.”

“What?”

“He’s cured. Or is it, she’s cured? Whatever. No more virus.”

“Virus bitch went down? For real?” Joshua asked excitedly.

“For real.” Alec stretched. “Man, I’m glad that monkey’s off my back. One less thing that’s Alec’s fault.”

“Max and Logan are gonna get busy now,” Joshua predicted.

“My friend,” Alec said, reaching up to clap Joshua on the shoulder, “It’s about damned time.”

Together they turned and left the roof.

Living Quarters, Terminal City

Max, freshly bathed, and as girly as OC could make her under the circumstances, approached Logan’s door hesitantly. Her hand shook a bit as she reached out to open it. Then she saw the note taped there.

Meet me at the railroad yard. That was all it said.

“Hope you mean me,” Max told the note, tearing it from the door and stuffing it in her jacket pocket. She slipped

out the back exit of the living quarters, saying hello to the guards on duty there, and made her way along the scruffy, overgrown area that had once been green space for the workers in the now-abandoned labs and offices. Max moved confidently through the shadows until she was well into the railroad yard, among the abandoned boxcars. A flickering light came from inside one of the cars. Silently, she slowed her step, edging to the open door, and peering in cautiously.

Logan sat there on a faded old comforter. Around him, at a safe distance, burned a few candles, mostly the fat little white ones they used in churches, and one in a tall glass painted with an image of the Virgin Mary. On the blanket were a bag of potato chips, a package of cellophane-wrapped chocolate cupcakes, and two bottles of very cheap beer. A battered plastic bottle held a bunch of purplish clover blossoms.

Max jumped in. Logan looked up.

“Private suite, candles, wine, flowers – nice,” she told him, smiling.

“Well. It’s not Fogle Towers, but it’s as close to perfect as I can make it, considering that a thirteen-year-old X6 rounded all this stuff up for me at the last minute.”

Max looked outside. Over the fence two blocks away shone a single streetlight, pinkish-yellow. “Even moonlight,” she smiled. “I’m impressed.”

“Would you like a drink?” he asked gravely, opening the beers and holding one out to Max. She sat down next to him and accepted the bottle. Logan raised his own bottle in a toast.

“To Aveta.”

“And to Beverly,” Max returned, touching her bottle to his. They sipped. Their eyes met.

“You know, suddenly I’m not very hungry,” she said softly, setting her bottle down on the blanket.

“Funny. Me neither.”

“So...where were we this afternoon?” Max asked, reaching out to touch his cheek.

He caught her hand, held it, kissed it, his eyes never leaving her face. Then, fiercely, he buried his hands in her hair and drew her to him. Max closed her eyes and caught her breath as their lips met. For a few moments, the candlelit boxcar was silent. Then, without warning, Max jerked back, eyes wide.

“What’s wrong?” asked Logan, startled.

“I...dunno. I just feel weird all of a sudden.” Restlessly she moved away, shaking her head as if to clear it.

“Again? Because that’s the way you used to look before you had a seizure,” Logan said, watching her carefully.

Max shook her head. “I haven’t had one since I was back at Manticore. I just feel so...paranoid or something...” she trailed off.

Logan tried a little joke. “Maybe it’s an anxiety attack. If anybody deserves one, you do—”

Max cut him off. “My skin feels funny,” she said irritably.

“Okay, let me check your runes.” Logan took off her jacket and lifted the back of her shirt. “Nothing.” He tried gently stroking her back, but she pulled away.

“Look – I’m going back to Command.” She picked up her jacket.

“Now?”

“Now.”

Logan’s hurt and frustration showed clearly on his face. “The world will still be broken in the morning, Max. When is this going to stop?”

“I’m sorry, I...I just have to. Later.” In an instant, she was out of the boxcar and into the shadows, leaving Logan alone in the yellow candlelight.

“Yeah. Later,” he said to the darkness. There was a trace of bitterness in his voice. He began to extinguish the candles.

Above the boxcar, a shooting star flashed by, then went out.

Sanderson’s Rare Books

Sandeman closed the door of the bookstore and lowered the metal gate that protected his plate-glass display windows at night, securing the gate to the building with a combination lock. Finished, he stood and began to walk slowly down the street, a book under one arm, as if he were very weary. At the intersection he paused, waiting for the light to change. Then he glanced up. Overhead, a shooting star blazed across the sky, disappearing on the dark horizon.

Sandeman stood for a moment as if frozen, then, heedless of the oncoming traffic, crossed the street, and hurried away as if he were running out of time.

Command Center, Terminal City

The Command Center was so quiet that Max could hear her own normally inaudible footsteps. Two soldiers were on duty. They turned at her approach.

"Hey, Gem. Where's the baby?"

"Joshua's watching her. I'm just here to cover a dinner break. I'm getting ready for full duty again. My maternity leave's over."

Max nodded at the transhuman sitting next to her. "Hey, Dix. Got enough to read?"

"No, but we can talk about that later. I'm glad you're here. We've got five coming in by sewer."

Max frowned. "Escorted?"

"Nope. On their own." He indicated glowing blue dots on the computer screen, moving steadily along the main tunnel.

Max shivered, and Gem asked immediately, "You okay, Max?"

"Yeah," Max said brusquely, watching the screen. "But I want to talk to them when they get in."

"That'll be at...manhole 4," Luke told her.

"Radio the guard that I'll meet them there. And send a couple of extra X5s. There's something I don't like about this."

As she left the Command Center, Alec and Mole were just leaving The Last Stop, where something boisterous and noisy was going on. Max sniffed.

"How many?"

"One beer each," said Alec patiently. He and Mole exchanged glances.

"You sure? I need you sober. We've got five coming in at manhole 4 and I want you to meet them with me."

"Why? We gonna take them to bed and tuck them in?" Mole snickered.

"Humor me," said Max coldly.

Mole shrugged. The three soldiers strode down the hallway, Mole and Alec flanking Max. As they stepped out into the night, Alec grabbed Max's arm, holding her back.

"So, I, uh, thought you and Logan were getting busy tonight," he said in a low voice, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

Max scowled. "What are you, some kind of whack job voyeur? You're, like, obsessed with my love life." Yanking her arm away, she moved to catch up with Mole.

Alec's jaw dropped. "For crying out loud, Max, tell me I'm not hearing this. You stood him up again, didn't you?"

Max glanced ahead. "Shut up!" she hissed angrily. Alec rolled his eyes.

"Max, please, put us all out of our misery. Just do it already."

"What's your problem?" Max shot back. "You're not getting any in here, where you can't impress the chicks with your transgenic charms, so now you like to watch?"

Mole looked over his shoulder. "Hey, do I have to come back there and separate you two?"

Max shot a furious look at Alec and caught up with Mole in two steps.

"I don't want any more slip-ups," Max said. "We already let in crazy old CJ and his snake buddy, and that phony National Guardsman, too."

Now it was Mole's turn to scowl. "Hey, don't look at me.

Go get after Logan about that rent-a-cop."

Max's cheeks flushed angry red, and Alec said hastily, "Thank you, Mole, I've been telling her to get after Logan for a long time now."

Mole shook his head. "Max, I can't believe you dig ordinaries."

"Please don't start talking her out of it," Alec groaned. "I've spent the last six months trying to talk her into it!"

"Time to get your heads in the game," Max snapped as manhole 4, and a small detachment of X5s surrounding five strangers, came into view. One of the X5s turned and, seeing them, silently motioned them back behind the building they were passing. Immediately, all three fell silent, melting into the shadows. The X5 joined them.

"Listen, I'm not sure about these guys," he said in a low voice. "Could be ordinaries trying to sneak in."

Mole was looking around the corner of the building at the group, eyes narrowed. "Wouldn't be the first time," he said.

"Yeah, we've had all sorts trying to get in. Even a few freak groupies looking for love," answered the guard.

Max made a face. "I won't even ask," she said. "So what's the story?"

"Nothing specific. They're barcoded, but that's easy to fake. They just don't seem...I don't know...desperate enough. Too clean. Too rested. Not hungry."

"They headed straight in too," Max said thoughtfully. "Let's go see what they have to say for themselves." She stepped out around the corner.

"Hey. Welcome to Terminal City."

"Thanks," said the young man who was apparently their leader. "Glad to be here."

"So, what's your story? Chased in by a mob with burning torches?" The new arrivals didn't seem to catch the undertone of menace in Mole's voice.

One of the women answered, "No. We've been lucky. But we heard this was the place for people like us."

"Heard from who?" Max challenged.

The new arrivals exchanged glances. "You know, out there. After Jam Pony, everyone knows what the deal is," answered the leader, giving Max a meaningful look.

"Everyone?" said Mole in the same menacing tone. Max cut him off.

"You look like you could use some water and a rest," she told the group. "Let's head inside." The new arrivals bent down to pick up their gear, and Max silently signaled the guards to surround them. Two X5s remained at the manhole; the rest discreetly moved into position.

Max motioned with her eyes to Alec and Mole, and the three of them moved off to the side as the group prepared to leave.

The leader of the new group reached out for his backpack. "Cool tattoo," said the X5 standing nearest.

The leader looked startled, then smiled sheepishly. "Yeah. Don't know how I got it – I just got trashed one night and woke up in a tattoo parlor." They shared a laugh as the group began to move toward the building complex.

Max, Mole, and Alec followed behind more slowly.

"Well?" Max asked in a voice too low to be audible to an ordinary.

"What was that guy saying? Did he mean Normal sent him here?" Alec responded.

"Good question," Max said grimly. "Let's call Normal and get to the bottom of this."

They followed the escorted group inside.

* * * * *

Act Three

Mobile Police Headquarters

For the second time that day, Matt knocked on the door to Clemente's police trailer. The sun had long since set, but the rally was still going strong, and the chants and screams swirling up into the air suddenly became muted as Sung went in and pushed the door closed behind him.

"Sorry it took me so long to get here," he apologized to the grim-faced Clemente, sitting behind his desk just as Sung had left him hours earlier, watching the rally on the bank of monitors. "Took me a while to convince the National Guard that my badge wasn't fake." He perched on the lone visitor's chair. "It's a zoo out there."

Clemente shrugged, obviously distracted. "Seem to be all talk and no action. I'm willing to let them ride it out." He sat up straighter and clasped his hands on the desk in front of him. "Detective, I paged you because I received an anonymous call today, and I'd like to discuss it with you."

Sung barely blinked. "A break in the case?" he asked.

Clemente smiled serenely. "You could say that." He paused for effect. "The caller said that you're well acquainted with Logan Cale. That you're *friends* with our prime suspect."

Sung remained frozen, then let out a breath. "Commander, it's not what you—"

"Do you understand the importance of what's happening here, Detective Sung?" Clemente interrupted harshly. "The nature of our existence is changing before our very

eyes. You and I are the only thing standing between order and chaos in this pathetic excuse for a city." He stared fiercely at the man sitting across from him. "I could fire you right now. But something tells me there's more than meets the eye here. So talk to me."

"I...my relationship with Logan is strictly professional, and - I thought - strictly confidential. Logan works...*worked* for Eyes Only."

This time it was Clemente's turn to hide his surprise. He leaned back into the chair and began rocking slightly back and forth.

"I'm probably throwing my career away here, but I believed in the man's cause, and I still do. I'm all for standing between order and chaos, but there's a lot of corruption within our own ranks. Look, I told you the truth when I said I didn't know much about Logan, and can't find much, either. The man's a mystery. But...I was also telling the truth when I said I don't think he's done anything wrong. He's one of the good guys."

"Is Cale involved with Max?"

Sung sighed again. "They are friends, yes. Beyond that, I don't know."

Clemente nodded. "Well, good man or not, I have pictures showing him shooting a firearm at law enforcement officers. And he's suspected of impersonating an officer and aiding and abetting the transgenics who held an entire business at gunpoint."

"He must have had a good reason," Matt insisted.

Clemente cleared his throat. "Detective, if I find out you're hiding anything else, you're off this case, and off this force. Do I make myself clear?"

Matt nodded contritely.

"Okay, then," Clemente continued. "Someone left me a present outside my door this afternoon." He pushed a manila envelope across the table to Sung. "The plot thickens."

Matt Sung pulled some glossy photos from the envelope and stared down at them. Logan's apartment – that much was obvious from the red sheen of the walls, even bullet-ridden. They seemed to be taken from above, and the images were clear: in the first, several men in suits with big guns were shooting up the place. And in the second, Ames White, standing in front of a white board of some type, an expression that almost looked like amusement on his face.

Crash

The music was loud, the beer pitcher was full, and the crew from Jam Pony was telling dirty jokes, but Sketchy slumped in his chair, stared at the TV screen. The pro-transgenic rally, still happening at Terminal City, was the top story on the eleven o'clock news.

"Yo!" Griff, Normal's new hire, shouted into Sketchy's ear and pounded his arm to get his attention. "What's up, man? Have another beer!"

"No thanks," Sketchy answered, still staring at the TV. Griff followed his glance. "That's cool, ain't it?" he shouted. "Wish I was there!"

"You on the transgens' side?" Sketchy shouted back.

"Nah. Those freak ones weird me out. But I could dig a good riot, cops and bikers goin' at it. I'd like to see the Angels kick some sector cop butt for a change."

"Yeah," said Sketchy listlessly.

"Hey!" Griff shouted to the table. "Listen up! Whaddya say we blow this pop stand and head out to the rally?"

Sketchy, Sky, and Lane exchanged alarmed glances. "You heard Normal this morning. He'd flip out if he found out," Sketchy began.

"It's after hours, man! Normal's at home with his blow-up doll and a bag of Cheetos. Stay here if you want, but I'm going for a ride." Griff grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

"Maybe we'd better tag along to keep an eye on things," said Sky. "Don't want Jam Pony exposed. We just got rid of the press from the last time. And I heard he's a friend of Andy's."

"We definitely don't want to see *that* dude around here again," agreed Lane, standing.

"Why do I have such a bad feeling about this?" Sketchy asked the air as he followed them to their bikes.

Command Center, Terminal City

"Roger that, Jae," Alec said into a walkie-talkie, releasing the 'talk' button to open the channel. He ambled over toward Max, who was sitting ramrod-straight on the edge of an old, rolling desk chair with a faded, red leather seat. Her eyes darted between the computer and video monitors and an amazingly accurate map of Terminal City's layout that one of the X5s had drawn with a straight edge as her only tool.

"Okay, we've doubled up at every entrance, and no one's heard or seen anything. Except for the rats, of course. Everyone else is in their quarters, as ordered," Alec reported, looking down at Max. She didn't answer, and Alec whis-

tled. "Max. Hey, Max!"

She looked up, her intense concentration finally broken. She wiggled uncomfortably in her seat. "Logan reported in lately?" she asked, a look of pain crossing her face.

Alec put one of his black combat boots up on the file cabinet next to Max and leaned over, propping his forearms on his knee. "Twice. Everything's quiet. Luke's got our friends stashed in an unoccupied building on the South Perimeter and has some Xs standing guard. So...what's their deal?"

Max looked up, still only half-listening. "I don't know, just something. I'm going to try Normal again. I thought Original Cindy told him to keep that phone with him all the time. Probably out screwing some transgendered weirdo," she muttered.

"Huh?" Alec asked, confused.

Max shook her head, picking up the cell phone again and punching in the number. "Never mind." She listened impatiently as an impersonal voicemail message began, then slammed the phone down onto the table. "Where the fire truck is that idiot?" she hissed, completely missing the smile on Alec's face.

Mole came over to them and propped his gun on the desk. "I think this is all a waste of time," he growled. "We're supposed to go on red alert because *you* have a funny feeling?" He pulled out a cigar and began to prepare it.

Suddenly, Max arched her back and drew in her breath sharply. "Owww..." she moaned, grimacing. A second later, she stood up quickly and turned her back to Alec. "Unzip me," she ordered.

Alec was taken off guard for a second, then grinned lust-

ily. “Yes, sir,” he barked teasingly. “Anything for the cause.”

“Shut up and just do it.”

He complied, and his and Mole’s eyes widened as they watched the runes on her back seemingly come to life, bulging out against her skin. “What the hell...” Alec breathed.

“Something’s wrong. What are they trying to tell me?” Max said to herself.

Suddenly Max heard CJ’s whispering voice inside her head. *“They’re everywhere. You never know who’s part of it.”*

Then she remembered a snatch of conversation from when they’d gone to meet the new arrivals.

“Cool tattoo.”

“Yeah. Don’t know how I got it – I just got trashed one night and woke up in a tattoo parlor.”

Without explanation, Max grabbed the walkie-talkie out of Alec’s hand and depressed the ‘talk’ button. “Logan,” she said firmly. “Logan!” she repeated, her voice beginning to rise hysterically. She called his name over and over.

Finally the silent radio waves crackled to life. “This is Jae. We’re heading to Logan’s position. Out.” The disembodied voice crackled from the speaker.

Max pushed the button and spoke rapidly. “Negative. Get to Luke’s position, where he took our new arrivals. Do anything you have to do to hold them there until we can get there. They are *not* transgenics. Repeat, they are *not* Manticore. And they are dangerous.”

She threw the device down on the table and whirled

around to face Mole and Alec. “White. Again. That’s the only explanation. The tattoo...Damn it! Why didn’t I figure it out before now?”

Alec put out his hands, palms down. “Calm down, Max. White may be a freak of nature, but he’s no match for us one-on-one, and I bet his cronies aren’t, either. We’ll go down there and take them out, then come back and have a beer, okay?”

“No, there’s something else. I can feel it,” Max said uneasily. “Something big’s about to happen. We gotta get to them before it starts.” She looked from him to Mole, her face a grim mask.

Alec started to ask a question, then saw her expression and stopped. “You know, I haven’t seen that look since you told me what happened to Ben,” he said. “What’s up?”

Max bit her lip and thought for a second, her look far away, then said, “Anyone ever tell you to know your enemy really well, ‘cause that’s who you’re gonna be most like?” Alec shook his head no. Max gave a short, bitter laugh. “Well, *my* enemy was the one who told me that, and you know what? Turns out...he was right.”

After a moment, she turned and walked out of the room, Mole following closely behind. Alec stood there for a split second, pondering her words, then hurried to catch up. The walkie-talkie lay forgotten on the table.

Living Quarters, Terminal City

Logan came down the staircase from the rooftop, meeting an X5 on her way up. “Heading to bed, Logan?” the young woman asked him.

He sighed. “Yeah, I guess so. Just getting some fresh air. Been cooped up in here too long.”

“I know what you mean. I’m glad I pulled rooftop duty tonight,” she replied as they went their separate ways. Logan went to his quarters, glancing at the silent radio sitting on an upturned cardboard box as he sat down heavily on his bedroll. He had just started pulling off his boots when he heard a thump outside in the hallway. Carrying one boot, he stood and opened the door to look out. The same X5 was lying there, her hand outstretched toward his room.

“Kara...?” he said, a look of confusion crossing his face.

Her eyes fluttered, as though she were trying to stay awake. “X5...on roof...gas agent...warn others...” Her eyes closed then, and Logan knelt down to check her pulse and to try to awaken her.

When he couldn’t, he looked up and down the hallway, and, hearing footsteps coming from the staircase to the roof, he pulled back in the room and slammed the door, crossing the room to grab the walkie-talkie. “Max! Max! Answer me,” he pleaded in vain.

After another second, he tossed the radio on the bedroll and took a few steps toward the door, then stumbled. He put one hand out to the wall to steady himself, and the other hand went up to his forehead, now covered in a sheen of sweat. Above him, a cloudy gas had started to pour through a former vent that was now just a gaping hole into the building’s duct system.

Logan took another step, stumbled again, and fell to his knees. He reached out for the door and managed to wrestle it open, then fell heavily face-first onto the ground, unconscious.

Unoccupied Living Quarters

Max, Alec, and Mole stole quickly but quietly down the street, past the infirmary and into a building, where Alec led them down a dark hallway. “Real quiet in here,” Mole remarked tensely.

“Too quiet,” Max said. “Forgot the damn radio, but I have a feeling the guards wouldn’t answer, anyway.” She shivered, grimacing again and wiggling against her painful skin. “You know, if I’m supposed to be gettin’ some kind of message from these stupid things other than ‘ow’, it’s not happening,” she snapped.

“Shhhh!” Alec twisted his head around and put a finger to his lips. They walked silently the rest of the way, turned a corner, and started running when they saw three guards lying prone on the ground and the door to the holding room wide open. The room was empty.

Mole knelt by a guard, checking for wounds, and trying to shake him awake. “He’s out cold. Some kind of knockout gas?”

“Why in the hell would White send five people up against an army of Manticore soldiers? It’s suicide,” Max reasoned. “We have to find them,” she said with a touch of desperation. “Whatever took these guys out’s not going down without a fight.”

“It’s you they’re after, Max. You know that.” Alec’s face was unusually solemn.

She stared at him impassively. “Then I guess that makes me the bait.”

“You need to be under escort,” Mole said gruffly, standing up and lifting his gun to prop it menacingly on his shoulder.

“Yeah. So escort me. But we gotta alert everyone, and fast. Alec, you take the east living quarters, Mole and I’ll—”

“Max!” Alec interrupted sharply, gesturing to the unconscious guards. “They have a head start on us, and they’ve got something that can take us out. We can’t just go after them, or we’re toast.”

Max fidgeted impatiently. “We can’t just sit around with our thumbs up our asses, either.” She stopped, daring them to contradict her. “We’ll head to Command and grab the gas masks, then we split up and nail these assholes.”

Terminal City, Various Locations

The hallway outside Logan’s room was eerily silent as Alec approached the door, which was cracked open. He subconsciously reached up to make sure his mask was secure around his mouth and nose, then pushed the door, only to find it resisting him. Glancing down, he saw why. Logan was sprawled face down, and the door was bumping up against his shoulder.

Stooping, Alec shook his head. “Didn’t even get to do the deed, did ya, buddy?” he said softly to himself.

Suddenly, he froze, listening, then stood up and turned around in a blur to face one of the fake transgenics, approaching stealthily down the hallway. They faced off, then Alec attacked, taking a flying leap toward the man to kick him squarely in the chest. The Familiar went sprawling, and Alec landed gracefully, pulling out his gun and pointing it straight at the man’s skull. “Please move,” he said. “I’ve been dying to take this baby for a test spin.”

* * *

Mole had stayed behind in Command, betting that the Familiars would try to somehow sabotage their operation. He was standing in the shadows underneath the staircase to the central communications grid, patiently waiting. He didn't have to wait long. First came the faint sounds of a skylight being opened, then the catlike spring of someone jumping onto the high beams that ran the length of the ceiling.

When whoever it was had slid down a pole onto the landing just above him, Mole stepped out from the shadows and cocked his shotgun loudly. The Familiar, a young woman with light blond hair pulled back tightly, froze, her back to him, and raised her hands in the air.

Without taking his eyes from her, Mole moved around and climbed the staircase, then raised the butt of the rifle and slammed it into the side of her head. She fell to the ground without even a whimper. He knelt and felt her neck for a pulse.

"Too bad...still breathing," he grumbled, his voice muffled by the mask he wore. "But you won't be for long."

* * *

Max crouched on the roof of the supply depot, all her senses on full alert. Through the thick gas mask, she peered over the edge to scan the surrounding buildings, zeroing in on the second floor of the living quarters across the street. Quickly and quietly she stood and, with a running leap, soared across the open space and touched down on the next building. From there, she grabbed a drainpipe, shimmying down carefully to a window, and slipped in. Listening to the voices of the fake transgenics, she frowned as she crept closer to the door.

"Where is 452?" one of them hissed fiercely. "We've been

all over this damn place, and time's running out."

"I know that," the other responded. "It doesn't matter...she'll be down for the count in another few minutes, anyway."

"I wouldn't count on that," Max said, stepping into the room. Caught off guard, they whirled around, and Max took immediate advantage. She leapt forward, shoving her open hand into the first one's face, and an elbow backwards into the second one's face as he converged on her position. Both of them stunned, she spun without hesitation toward the first again and pummeled him with a series of kicks that knocked him, breathless, to the ground.

From behind, the second one lowered an iron bar over Max's head, trying to strangle her. She got her hands up under it, and they wrestled for a few seconds, Max gasping for breath. Finally, she lifted her foot and slammed it down onto the guy's foot, hearing his bones crack under the steel toe. Although he barely flinched, it startled him enough for him to loosen his grip, and Max spun out from him and turned, a look of frustration crossing her face. He took a step toward her but stumbled on the fractured foot, and she pounced, knocking him unconscious with a series of quick jabs to his jaw.

"Don't you people ever learn?" she asked in disgust, tossing back her long hair to stare at the two inert bodies lying before her.

Command Center, Terminal City

"So what do we do now?" Alec asked, throwing his leg over a chair and sitting down heavily. He threw his handgun onto the table and stared at Max.

Max looked over the railing at the four unconscious Famil-

ears, shackled together, eyes and mouths bound tightly. "We're still down one," she said unnecessarily.

"No kidding," Alec replied sarcastically. "Can't get anything past you."

"Cut it out," Max warned him with a glare. "There's something going on, something we don't know."

"And then there were none," Mole commented cryptically. "Our guys are breathing, but for all we know, they're brain dead."

Max's mouth tightened. "There's nothing we can do about it until these freaks of nature come around and we can get the 411 on how to reverse the effects of that gas they cooked up."

"Good thing you found that atmospheric analyzer Luke was working on," Mole told her. "That mask was starting to irritate my sensitive skin."

Alec snorted and picked up the small device on the table. "Still looks normal here. Guess they wanted to take out everyone in the living quarters before they hit Command."

Up above them, in the rafters, a small canister lay dormant, where the Familiar had tucked it before Mole had confronted her. Suddenly, silently, it activated itself and began spraying a cloudy mist straight down toward them. One minute, they were discussing strategy; the next, they were all face down, dead to the world. The furious beeping of the analyzer in Alec's hand echoed around the cavernous space, unheard.

Outside the Command building, a sewer grate scraped, and the last Familiar pulled himself up onto the pavement. He headed inside the building, pulling the comm link out of his ear. Casually tossing it up in the air, he caught it and

smiled. After making sure that the three transgenics were out cold, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

“Targets subdued. We’re ready for the next phase.”

* * * * *

Act Four

West Perimeter, Terminal City

A man dressed in camouflage and toting a large baton carefully paced up and down next to the high fence topped with barbed wire that served as the barrier between Terminal City and the rest of Seattle. Another National Guardsman passed by, and the two greeted each other, but as soon as the second was gone, the first resumed his pacing, staring thoughtfully through the fence to the large building that loomed just a short distance away.

Suddenly he seemed to go on full alert. His pupils dilated almost until his bright blue irises disappeared, and his telescopic vision focused in on the group of people who had just appeared around the side of the building. He watched silently as the five of them made their way across the alley. They were slowed because three of them were limping, bloody and battered, supported by the others, who appeared uninjured.

The Guardsman's gaze shifted to zoom in on a sewer grate hidden beneath large wooden crates. When the group reached the grate and disappeared inside, he took out a cell phone and dialed. "X5-732," he said shortly. "Something's going down inside. The West Perimeter guard hasn't made a round in the last hour and I just saw a group heading to the sewers – they looked like they mighta gone up against some X5s and survived. I think you might want to get over here and see what's going on."

On the other end of the phone, Lydecker's face was grim as he sat inside the dusty old house. He caught Syl's gaze

and cocked his head imperceptibly so that she'd approach. "Head to the rally and watch for us at the rendezvous point. We're going to need a distraction," he said. "Give us fifteen minutes." He clicked the phone shut and looked up at Syl, who had Krit in tow.

"The Familiars are making their move," he said. "It's time for us to make ours."

Front Gates, Terminal City

The crowd was, if anything, louder and more energetic than it had been during daylight hours. Floodlit by TV camera crews and police searchlights, the ACLU contingent stood around a trashcan fire singing protest songs from the 20th century Civil Rights Movement, which the Angels regularly drowned out with rowdy chanting. The police and National Guard encircling the protest group wore expressions of stoic patience as midnight approached.

Sketchy and the Jam Pony crew chained their bikes to a fence a block away, among a growing crowd of people obviously bored with the club scene and hoping for some excitement at the protest. A sector cop glared sternly at them as they went by.

"Ooohhh, I'm scared," sneered Griff melodramatically.

Sketchy glanced nervously over his shoulder. "You know, I've, ah, had some experience with these law enforcement dudes, and they lack a sense of humor about this freak thing. Maybe we ought to—"

But he never finished, because at that moment one of the Angels jumped up on an overturned trash can, pumping his fist in the air. "Live free, die free!" he shouted, and the crowd cheered.

Enthusiastically, Griff raised his fist in the air too. "Freaks rock!" he shouted. There were more cheers and whistles from the crowd. Three or four people next to the Jam Pony group picked up the cry and suddenly the whole crowd was chanting, "Freaks rock! Freaks rock!" The Angels joined in, and, after a moment of hesitation, so did the ACLU people. The police and soldiers came to attention, reaching for shields and batons.

"Let's get out of here," Sky said into Sketchy's ear, but it was too late. They were completely surrounded, only able to move forward as the crowd surged toward the gates. Sketchy squinted and tried to cover his eyes with his arm as they stepped into the light.

"We're on TV!" shouted Lane over the din.

* * *

Inside the police trailer, Clemente and Sung leapt to their feet, staring at the main monitor as the crowd surged toward the gates.

"Damn it," Clemente groaned.

On a smaller monitor, a second camera showed close-ups of faces in the crowd. One was Sketchy, wearing his Jam Pony cap. Clemente and Sung didn't see him. They were staring in horrified fascination at the main gate.

* * *

"Get rid of this, you ass!" Sky growled, snatching Sketchy's Jam Pony cap.

"Hey—" Sketchy began. And then with a final mighty roar of "FREAKS ROCK!" the crowd pushed past the surprised National Guard and straight through the gates, breaking the weakened chain.

The Jam Pony cap fell from Sketchy's hand and was immediately flattened underfoot.

"Aw, Max and Alec are gonna kill me," he groaned as the Angels' bikes roared into Terminal City.

Lydecker's Safe House

Lydecker and the team mobilized instantly, leaving the safe house one by one, Lydecker last. They edged cautiously through the dark streets until they reached the edge of the rally, spreading out by twos. They were indistinguishable from the crowd, except for Lydecker, who in spite of his leather jacket, was clearly much older than the average demonstrator. Without missing a step, he grabbed a helmet from a bicycle chained to a lamppost and jammed it over his head, concealing both his age and his identity.

At that moment, the gate went down.

"Move!" Lydecker barked into the microphone clipped to his shoulder. The team surged into Terminal City with the crowd, Lydecker issuing a stream of commands. "Steady...steady...now! Group in the right alley!"

The X teams efficiently cut through the melee and gathered around Lydecker, who was holding what looked like a radar gun. "Heat-seeking device," he explained briefly, handing it to Syl. "Circle these buildings. Any Familiar will register lower than normal. Locate them." Syl nodded and vanished into the dark with Krit.

A roar rose from the rally crowd and scuffling broke out. Several bodies came flying into the alley. As they began to roll, scramble, and crawl back out, Lydecker reached down and hauled one person back. It was Sketchy.

"Aw, crap," Sketchy began woefully, looking up at his faceless captor.

"Quiet," Lydecker commanded as Jondy held up a hand, listening intently. "Over there," she announced, pointing to her right. The team, Sketchy in tow, headed down the dark alley and around the corner. Syl and Krit stood in the shadows.

"In here. Almost all of them," Krit said, indicating the living quarters.

Lydecker shoved Sketchy through a doorway and down a dim hallway. "This is what you're going to do," he told Sketchy as they walked, followed by the rest of the team. "You're just some moron protestor who stumbled in here by accident, looking for a place to take a whiz. Make noise. A lot of it. Got that?"

"Yes sir," gulped Sketchy.

Krit pointed to a doorway. As they approached, Lydecker released Sketchy. "Do it," he commanded.

Sketchy began to sing in a quavering voice. The team flattened themselves against the walls, waiting.

"Mean it," Lydecker growled at Sketchy. Obediently, Sketchy sang louder.

Abruptly, two members of the Phalanx charged into the hallway, guns raised. The team shot them instantly. Though the guns were silenced, the sound brought Thula to the door. At first, all she saw was Sketchy, wobbling alone in the middle of the hallway.

"Party's over, jackass," she snarled, stepping toward him.

"It certainly is," Lydecker said as two of his soldiers took aim at Thula.

Sketchy ran.

Command Center, Terminal City

“Max? Max.” Syl’s voice was gentle but insistent as she knelt by her sister, shaking her shoulder as she sat at the table, slumped over.

Eventually Max started to stir, moaning unintelligibly as she fought for consciousness. Syl kept patting her on the shoulder, murmuring soothing words as she shot a concerned glance toward Lydecker, who stood surveying the scene from the top of the stairs.

At the same time, Krit was kneeling beside Alec, checking his vitals. As he carefully turned the X5 over, he gasped slightly. “Ben...” he breathed.

“Ben’s dead,” Lydecker reminded them shortly, and Krit and Syl both turned to him. “Must be a twin.”

“His name is Alec.” All three turned to Max, who was tiredly pulling her head up from the table, rubbing her forehead. “What the hell happened?” She focused in on Lydecker. “I thought I heard your voice, hoped I was having a nightmare. Aren’t you supposed to be dead?”

Deck allowed himself a rare, but grim, smile. “Can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“A girl can dream,” she shot back, her voice still weary. Then she seemed to remember. “White...he got the jump on us...” She stood up from the table too quickly, and Syl caught her as she swayed. “Logan...”

“Everyone’s okay, Max,” Syl said. “Well, everyone except the Amazons with the guns, that is.”

Alec and Mole began to stir on the ground, and activity

began to hum again in the Command Center. Max heard Gem asking about Elfie, who had been with Joshua in the living quarters. “Who else is with you?” she asked. “Is someone checking on the others?”

Syl smiled. “We picked up Zane and Jondy along the way. Jondy’s off cleaning up our mess, and—”

At that moment, Lydecker’s radio crackled, and Zane’s voice came over the airwaves. “People are starting to come around here. Don’t seem to be any lasting effects of whatever it was. There’s a guy here, says he wants to talk to Max.”

Lydecker took a step and handed the radio to Max, who took it warily. “It’s me.”

“Max?” Logan’s voice came through, sounding almost as weak as her own. “You okay?”

Everyone in the small space smiled at his concerned tone of voice. “Yeah. I’ll be better in a few. You?”

“I’m alive – that’s good enough for now. I’m on my way to Command.”

A crackle as the radio changed hands, then Zane’s voice again. “Hey, there’s another guy here, says he was on patrol when he went down. Said he saw a light on in an old genetics lab a couple of blocks away – maybe someone moving around. I’m going to check it out.”

A look came over Max’s face as she remembered standing with CJ in the abandoned Advanced Recombinant Genetics lab in Terminal City.

“He didn’t come here until later, after the government took over.”

“Took over what?”

"Hello! Manticore."

Lydecker reached over and took the radio from Max, who focused her faraway gaze to shoot daggers at him. "I'll meet you outside the building. Don't advance until I get there," he ordered. "Over."

"Let's get one thing straight right now," Max said as he strapped the radio to his belt. "In here, I'm in charge. You got that?"

Lydecker stared at her for a moment. "If we hadn't gotten here when we did, you'd all be dead. You're a good soldier, Max, but let's not forget who taught you everything you know. And you've still got a few things to learn, it appears."

"Not from you," she retorted. "You can follow me," she told him coldly, then turned her back on him and spoke to Syl and Krit. "Syl, you're with us. Krit, can you keep things under control here till we get back?"

"You got it, Max," Krit answered, and the three of them shared a smile.

Laboratory, Advanced Recombinant Genetics, Terminal City

Zane and Joshua were waiting outside the building when Max approached with Lydecker and Syl. "Maxie," Zane said warmly, and they hugged.

"You're okay, little fella," Joshua said happily when they broke apart. "Zane asked me to show him where Father's lab was."

"Thanks, big fella," Max told him, clapping him on the back. "Let's go see what's up."

The group entered the dusty building, and Joshua led the way to the second floor and down the hallway to the main laboratory. Silently, Max and Joshua took up positions on either side of the doorway. On Max's signal, Joshua flung the door open. Max entered first. An old man stood in the center of the room, hands at his side. At the sound of footsteps, he turned. Abruptly, Joshua pushed past Max.

"Father?" he asked, brushing off Max's restraining hand as if she were a child.

The old man's face was astonished. Then he smiled. "Joshua," he said tenderly.

Eyes shining, Joshua turned to Max. "Max, it's—"

The old man let go of Joshua. "Max?" he asked in wonder, taking a step toward her. There was a blur and then Max was behind him, pinning his arms to his sides.

"Max, it's Father," Joshua protested.

"Your father, not mine," Max said angrily.

"No, Max, yours too, he made us all—"

There was a sound in the hallway and Lydecker entered the lab, gun already drawn and pointing directly at Joshua. "It's all right, Donald," Sandeman assured him. Joshua growled.

"And you too, Joshua." Sandeman pulled away from Max, who released him despite the mistrust in her face. "We're all on the same side now," Sandeman continued, touching Joshua's arm. Lydecker lowered the gun.

"Are you so sure of that?" Max demanded. "CJ told me all about you. You're one of them, the snake wackos. Did you come in here with them? Can't keep us locked up so you're gonna kill us?"

"I brought him here, Max," said Lydecker.

Sandeman held up a hand. "Max, I am not part of the cult. You must believe me. I don't want people to die. I want them to live. That's why I made you. To give life."

Max was scornful. "You've got a funny way of showing it. You start Manticore and then ditch us there, property of the U.S. government? People died. My brothers and sisters died. They're still dying."

"I know, Max," Sandeman sighed. "I'm very sorry. But I could not come back to help you. To have done so would have risked everything. Especially you."

Max folded her arms, fixing him with a hard stare. "Okay, since you're here, why don't you finally explain what's so freakin' special about me?"

As Sandeman began to speak, Lydecker held up a hand. "First, Richard, we secure Terminal City. Clear out that crowd that broke the fence down an hour ago. Let's go." He left the laboratory, but Joshua and Syl did not follow him until Max nodded her agreement.

She then looked over at Zane. "Could you pull guard duty, big brother?" she asked. "You know, make sure he doesn't cook up any more of us tonight or anything."

When Zane smiled and nodded, she also turned to leave, but Sandeman stopped her.

"Max...you have seen CJ? And my other son?"

"Yeah." Max sighed, her face softening. "Last I saw CJ, he'd been shot. Don't know if he made it. He was trying to help me, to do what you wanted."

Sandeman nodded. "And the other one?"

"He's out there," said Max grimly. "Keeps trying to kill me."

"As he has tried to kill me, many times over the years."

"He'll be back, you know," Max said, looking at the night-darkened windows.

"Yes," Sandeman answered. "I do know."

Front Gates, Terminal City

Inside the trailer, Clemente addressed police and National Guard officers. "Continue to hold your fire. We've seen no sign of transgenics, only the rioters. I won't have another Kent State on my hands. Is that understood?"

Nods.

"We do not provoke a confrontation. We're here to wait it out, not shoot it out. That's all." The officers filed out of the trailer.

When the door closed, Clemente speed-dialed a number on a cell phone, then tossed it to Matt Sung. "Phone company says this is Logan Cale's number. Maybe he can put us in touch with Max."

Sung struggled to keep his face expressionless as the phone rang, over and over. Finally, he handed it back to Clemente. "No answer."

Clemente shrugged. "Worth a try. Well, I guess we'll do this the old-fashioned way." Picking up a bullhorn, he left the trailer, Sung right behind him. They approached the damaged gates.

"This is Commander Ramon Clemente of the Seattle Police Department. I need to speak to Max."

There was some laughter. A Hells Angel in the back of the crowd shouted back, "Here's Max! Say 'hi' to the cops, Max," and pushed forward an extremely drunk and unsteady biker, who toppled over, causing another wave of laughter. Clemente lowered the bullhorn in exasperation.

* * *

Half a block away, Lydecker stepped back from a shattered window into the protective shadows as Max stepped silently to his side. Lydecker indicated the crowd.

"They want to speak to you out there," he told her, watching intently.

"Clemente," Max said, moving cautiously toward the door.

"Don't tell them I'm in here," Lydecker instructed.

Max looked at him scornfully. "What do you think I'm gonna do? Say I'm all set, thanks, my ex-CO just knocked off ten of the bad guys while you were on a doughnut break?"

She stepped out into the courtyard and jumped onto the nearest bike, revving the engine to get the crowd's attention. On impulse she hit the gas. The crowd parted as she roared toward the gates. A huge, angry biker shouted something at her.

Max pointed at the bike. "This yours?" she shouted back.

"Get off my bike, bitch!" the biker protested. In an instant, Mole had him by the collar.

"I think you mean, 'My bike is your bike, ma'am,'" Mole said genially, as Max popped a wheelie and roared to a stop in front of him. The biker, wide-eyed, nodded as Max put down the kickstand and stood on the seat.

"Hey, you all. Thanks for your support!"

Mole winked at the redheaded woman from the ACLU. "We really do appreciate it, darlin'," he told her, casually dropping the biker on the ground. She smiled back weakly, cringing a bit.

"But...much as we'd like to party all night with you," Max continued to more cheers, "you can't stay. It's contaminated inside and they're armed outside. Not to mention the fact that you all became felons when you busted that gate. So tell you what. You get on your bikes and I'm gonna get that cop up front to let you ride away nice and peaceful. Okay?"

There was some grumbling, but the crowd began to scatter as Max made her way to the gate, where Clemente waited.

"Commander, huh? Congratulations," Max told him.

"Thanks."

"Let me cut to the chase," Max said. "I don't want those guys in here and you do want them out there. So I'll send them out and you'll look like a hero, saving all these nice, idealistic protestors from the monsters."

"And?"

"And you stay out of here and don't make me fight you. I've got something else I need to do. Don't distract me. Trust me, it'll be the biggest mistake you ever made." Max stared levelly at Clemente.

After a long pause, he said, "All right." Then he shouted to the troops, "Fall back!" By the time he turned back to Max, she was gone, vanished into the shadows. Already, bikers were beginning to ride out.

Half a block away, Terminal City

Striding down the street, Max pointed. "You!" she shouted.

In the crowd, Sketchy, still shaking, jumped. "Not again!" he protested. But Max hadn't meant him. She stopped a nearby rider, then motioned. Original Cindy and Ginger stepped out of the crowd.

To the biker, Max said, "Take my friend here wherever she wants to go. And no funny stuff, got it?"

He nodded.

Max turned to Original Cindy. "Take care," she said softly, her face filled with regret.

Original Cindy reached out, taking Max's hand and Ginger's too. The three women stood for a moment amid the noise and chaos. Then Original Cindy spoke. Looking into Max's eyes, she said, "I told you once already. You, Max Guevara, are my family."

She turned to Ginger. "And you..." Words failed her for a moment. "I'm leavin' only because I know I won't be doin' either one of you much good in here, dead. I promise you. I'm gonna find a way to do you all the good I can out there."

"We'll find a way to be together again," Max whispered.

"Damn straight we will," Original Cindy replied. Max released her hand and stepped back as Original Cindy climbed on the bike behind the rider, then leaned over to kiss Ginger. "See you soon, boo!" she called over her shoulder as the rider pulled out. Max and Ginger stood silent, side by side.

"Guess I'd better go see what needs to be done," Ginger

finally said in a voice choked with tears, walking away.

Max stood watching. In the glare of the television lights, even she couldn't see Sketchy, Sky, and Lane furtively moving behind a group of protestors on foot, half-carrying Griff. Nor did she notice Sketchy bend over several times, as if searching for something.

"Hey," said a voice from behind her.

Logan. Gates forgotten, she threw herself into his arms. He held her close, then stepped back and indicated the departing crowd. "You didn't get me a ride," he said, a question in his voice.

"You were right," Max told him, intensely. "We may not have a tomorrow. I can't lose you now. Not when I just got you back. So as long as Aveta says this place isn't gonna kill you..." She stopped.

"She did. Manticore blood does wonders for the immune system. I'm fine," Logan reassured her. "And you?"

Max pulled up her sleeve, revealing the runes. Logan sighed.

"Looks like our friends are still on your radar," he said.

"Yeah. But let's not let that stop us. Meet me in my quarters in an hour?"

"I'll meet you in your quarters any time," Logan smiled. "But, Max?"

"Yeah?"

"There's no...rush."

"I thought—"

"Yeah, well. Since you're not planning to throw me out

and I'm not planning to leave, I was thinking you might want to get things cleared up first." He traced the runes with a finger, thoughtfully. Max smiled.

"Thanks, Logan," she said, leaning her head against his shoulder. Logan kissed the top of her head, watching as the last of the riders departed.

"You're welcome. Just remember—"

"What?"

"This is your last chance to get rid of me. If you don't throw me out now, I'm never leaving."

In the white glare, they saw the police pull the damaged gates shut and padlock them anew. Max shrugged.

"Too late," she said lightly as the last lock snapped into place.

* * * * *

Epilogue

A street near the Terminal City gates

Ames White stood in the shadow cast by a store awning under a nearby streetlight, shielded from view from the rally a block away. He shifted impatiently from foot to foot. Finally, he whipped out his cell phone and glared at it before punching in a number and listening to the unanswered rings. When a message came on, he shut it off.

A few seconds later, the phone rang, and he answered. “Yeah?”

“Checking in, sir. We are back at base. Took us longer than we expected. Had a run-in with 452 and her soldiers – injuries slowed a couple of us down.”

“Have you heard from the strike team?” White asked impatiently.

Silence. “Uh, no, sir. We took the designated exit route and didn’t encounter them. They shouldn’t have had any problems, though, sir. Everyone was out when we left.”

“Well, they’re taking their sweet time. Let me know if you hear anything,” White said, and ended the call. He held the phone to his lips for a second, his face darkening in anger. After a moment, he shoved the phone into the pocket of his trench coat and stalked away into the darkness.

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