

Dark Angel VS3

Deliver the Helpless

By catherder and Rachel Wilder



Episode VS3.06

Prologue

Familiar's Laboratory, Sector 12 - July 1, 2021, early morning

A scowl on his face, Ames White kicked the metal trash-can across the floor of the laboratory. The cell phone had been silent for too long; he had heard nothing from Thula or any other members of the Phalanx for several hours, so he could only assume that their mission to release the disabling gas within Terminal City had failed.

"Damn!" he shouted, startling the lab technician, who nearly dropped the vial he was holding.

"What's the status?" he asked testily.

"First dose ready for dispersal, sir," the lab tech replied, his voice trembling a bit in response to the other man's display of temper.

"Good," White said, walking over to a large map of Seattle. He pointed to a vector near Terminal City. "It goes right here. This better work as well as the trial run in the Himalayas did."

The lab tech nodded meekly.

"Right now," White snarled. "I want their allies dead as soon as possible. And those National Guard and Sector Police idiots. When the good guys start dropping dead and spreading this, *that* should stop the pro-transgenic movement in its tracks and cause widespread panic. Now, how soon can you have the rest of the biotoxin ready?"

"I can have a batch ready every two hours, sir."

"Good. I want a batch released every two hours, then, in this pattern." He shoved pins into the map in a widening spiral pattern. Then he turned on his heel and walked away, muttering.

The Sewers, Terminal City

Lydecker, standing amid the rubble and dead Phalanx members, looked down at their bodies with regret. He shook his head.

"Too bad they were fighting for the bad guys. They were formidable opponents. I could have done a lot with them if I could have taken some of them alive." He turned to Krit and Syl. "Make sure they're buried with soldiers' honors."

He walked away to find Sandeman and report the casualties.

Advanced Recombinant Genetics Laboratory, Terminal City

The old laboratory was as dusty and disordered as Max remembered it from months ago, when she had confronted CJ, Sandeman's younger son, there. Most of the equipment was still where it had been left when the previous occupants had hastily decamped, although Logan and Dix had recently commandeered most of the computer setups for the Command Center. Joshua, happy to be with his 'father' again after so long a time, accompanied them.

"We didn't get the chance to talk yesterday," Sandeman said.

"I know. I had to – take care of some business," Max replied.

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Sandeman nodded in understanding. "May I?" he asked, indicating an old chair. Max nodded and Sandeman sat, wearily. "My people are ancient," he began.

Max rolled her eyes. "You're not gonna tell me how your alien spaceship crashed here, back in the days when we all lived in caves, are you?"

"No. We are human also, a variant of the human race that evolved in an isolated part of the world. A natural disaster forced us from our homeland and we encountered other humans for the first time. Only then did we realize that they were not like us. Some of us were immune to pain, some to disease, some to poisons like snake venom. That was when they began breeding."

"They who?" asked Joshua.

"Most of us were content, and still are, to live quietly among other humans. But some saw that selective breeding could create a superior race. And then they began to believe that only they deserved to live, that the weak and inferior should die. These are the ones you know as Familiars. They believed this so strongly, they turned it into a cult, a religion, instead of the science it actually was. They even believed that the heavens themselves would signal the Coming."

"The stars. They watch the stars," guessed Joshua.

"Yes, Joshua. Meteors, comets. Signs." Sandeman shook his head. "Periodically, plagues and epidemics decimate the human race. We who are immune to the snakebite are also immune to these diseases. For thousands of years, the Familiars have waited for the epidemic that would kill the unworthy. Each time, however, humanity has survived, and the Familiars have grown tired of waiting."

"So White thought he'd give Mother Nature a hand," Max said.

"Yes. Once they had the science, the technology, they could take matters into their own hands, unleash destruction on their own timetable. That was when I began Mantecore, racing against time."

Max snorted. "I still don't get why you dragged me into this."

"I need your blood, Max, to give humans immunity. *Our* blood is incompatible with human blood. The rejection would kill them."

A look of alarm came over Max's face. "My blood - my stem cells - they've been rejected -"

"But no one died?" asked Sandeman anxiously.

"No."

Relief spread across Sandeman's face. Smiling, he began, "That's good news, wonderful news!" He turned to find Lydecker standing in the doorway. "Donald, perhaps we do have a solution...I can use this place," he said, looking around his old laboratory.

Lydecker nodded. "I've got some things to take care of, Richard. I'll find you later." With that, he turned around and walked away, leaving Max with a puzzled look on her face.

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Act One

Joshua's House, Seattle – July 1, 2021, mid-morning

"We should have done this earlier," Logan said, walking up to Joshua's house. "I just hope the equipment is still here. We could use some of it in the Command Center."

"So, is Eyes Only planning on broadcasting live from Terminal City?" Alec asked as they reached the front porch.

"I'm not sure Eyes Only is the best vehicle for getting the truth out any more," Logan answered.

Alec glanced back over his shoulder. The street was empty, the neighborhood quiet. "Asha will be here at ten, with the truck. Let's get the stuff ready to go, so we can get the hell out of here when she arrives. It's just a little too quiet for my taste."

Logan unlocked the door and popped it open. Walking into the living room, he glanced around. Everything looked in order.

"Any visitors while we were gone?" Alec asked.

"Nope, looks good." Logan walked over and ran his fingers over the computer keyboard. He turned and surveyed the entire set-up. "I'm going to get some boxes out of the basement so we can get this packed up."

Alec nodded and turned his attention to the cables attaching the video monitors to the hard drives.

Logan headed toward the basement door, pulling it a bit harder as the humidity had caused it to stick slightly. Door open, he reached for the light switch. The light in the

basement came on, but the bulb over the steps had burnt out. Logan sighed and headed down the dim stairwell. He felt his way down in the gloom with his hand on the rail. As he reached the third step from the bottom, he tripped, his right foot not quite hitting the next step. His arms flailed as he tried to catch himself.

"Oof!" he grunted as he hit the floor, hard.

"You okay down there, buddy?" Alec called from the kitchen.

Logan sat up, brushing the dirt from the floor off his left arm. "Yeah, just missed a step there. I'm fine."

"Got those boxes?" Alec called. "Asha just pulled up, and I think we shouldn't press our luck by hanging out here any longer than we have to."

Logan picked up the boxes, grabbed the railing and headed up the stairs. Halfway up, he stopped and flexed his foot, trying to shake out the numbness from the fall.

"Here we go," he said, handing the empty boxes to Alec. The X5 made quick work of boxing the components he had disassembled.

"Hey," Asha greeted them as she walked through the front door. "Looks like you've got things under control here."

"Thanks for helping us out with this, Asha," Logan answered, fixing a small smile on her.

Asha returned the smile. "I'm happy to help, Logan, you know that. Anything I can do...to make up..."

"Yeah," Logan answered, then smiled at her. "Sorry, I know you were just trying to help and we still can really use it. Things are...well, it's rough in there."

"And as far as the other thing goes, I'm sorry, too," she replied as she reached for a box to carry out to the truck.

With three people loading the truck, the task went quickly. Alec pulled the back door down and locked the latch.

"So, we going in the front gate with this?" he asked with a grin.

"Nah, Max said that we could try an opening on the perimeter along the railroad yards. Dr. Shankar's been able to get in and out there without attracting too much attention," Logan responded.

"Hey, before you go back, we need to make one more stop," Asha interjected. "Some priest called me, a Father Destry. I have no idea how he found me, but he said he was a friend of Max's. Said he saw her on the news reports and he owed her one."

Logan nodded. "Yeah, he does know Max. What did he want?"

"He said he had food, clothing, supplies. You trust him, Logan?" she asked.

"Yeah, he's a good guy. But...maybe we should do this another day."

"What other day? I mean, we're here, we've got a truck...why would we risk coming out here again?" Alec asked.

"Because Father Destry is going to think he knows you," Logan answered, glancing at Alec.

"Huh?"

"Max met him when she was looking for Ben.

Ben...well...Father Destry was almost one of his victims."

Alec stood quiet, unsure of how to respond.

"It's food, it's clothing, in and out," Asha finally answered.
"Let's go."

Logan waited as Alec climbed in next to Asha. She started the engine and pulled away, heading back into the city toward the church.

Various Sector Points outside of Terminal City

A National Guardsman patrolling Terminal City suddenly crumpled to the ground, bathed in sweat.

"Gibbons!" His patrol partner stopped, mid-stride, and squatted down to see what was wrong. He checked for a pulse, and found it weak, and then felt the fallen Guardsman's forehead. Gibbons was burning with fever.

"Can't breathe..." Gibbons gasped.

"HQ, we need an ambulance down here, Sector 7, Terminal City! I'm on 4th Street, about midway down the street. I've got a man down, fever, difficulty breathing. Hurry!"
The radio crackled with static.

The dispatcher on the other end repeated the street vectors.

"Yes, hurry!" the soldier shouted.

At a location near the border of Sectors 5 and 7, a bored sector cop paced back and forth. No one had tried to get in or out, and it had been that way for days. Suddenly, his face became shiny with sweat, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed. The only person who saw him go down was a homeless man, who crept out from behind a dumpster and over to him. The bum rolled him for his

watch and wallet, and then scurried back the way he had come.

The cop groaned and lay there gasping. Painfully, he switched on his radio and in a weak voice, called for help.

A young bike messenger, waiting to pass from Sector 5 into Sector 6, started to sweat. As he waited, he stripped off his jacket and stuffed it into his saddlebag. A few more people were ushered through the barricade. The messenger moved up in line, unbuttoning the collar of his shirt. By now, the sweat was dripping off him. His breathing became shallow. He moved up in line again. As he got to the barricade, he showed his messenger ID to the sector cop, who took the tag and scrutinized it closely. As he waved the messenger through, the young man fell over sideways, his bike on top of him, his Jam Pony hat falling off his head and into the gutter. The cop switched on his radio to call for help.

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church, Seattle

Asha parked the van in front of the church. "He said the supplies were in the church hall. I'll go see if he's there."

She headed into the church. Alec shifted uncomfortably on the seat. "I'm guessing I'll just wait here."

"Yeah, might not be a bad idea," Logan responded. "I should go see if I can help her, though."

Logan opened the door and got out of the truck. He paused and turned back.

"You know, it isn't your fault...what he did, what Ben did."

"I know, but somehow it doesn't feel that way," Alec replied.

Logan nodded, and then turned to go find Asha. He walked up the stone steps to the large doors, stopping to shake his foot slightly as he pulled open the doors and then disappeared into the church building.

Alec was fiddling with the radio when he heard a tap at the truck door. He turned to find a priest standing there. The color drained from the priest's face, his hand slipping away from the window and down to his side, as he saw Alec.

Alec hopped out of the truck, unsure of what to say.

"Ben?" the man questioned.

"There you are!" Asha called as she and Logan emerged from the church building, carrying bags of clothing and boxes of canned goods.

The priest and Alec stood face to face, neither one speaking.

Logan walked over to Father Destry, taking the pale man's hand. "This is Ben's twin brother, Alec. I'm sorry for the shock, Father. Asha didn't tell us we were coming here until it was too late."

The priest held out his hand to shake Alec's. "Alec, it's good to meet you. I'm Father Destry."

Alec took his hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you, Father."

The priest reached out and touched Alec's arm. "I was sorry I couldn't help him...your brother."

"Yeah, well, he wasn't all that much of a brother to me, was he?" Alec said, looking at the ground.

Father Destry stood silent, Alec's discomfort making it

difficult to respond.

"We'd better get this stuff loaded up if we're going to meet our arrival time," Alec said, breaking the silence as he took one of the boxes Asha had carried out and placed it in the back of the truck.

"I'm willing to talk...if that would help, Alec," the priest tried again.

"The only thing that's going to help is getting the rest of this stuff out here and in the back of this truck," Alec responded.

"He's only trying to help, Alec..." Asha began.

"Well, maybe it's not the help I need right now, Asha. When you find out that your mirror image is a homicidal maniac, then maybe you can come to me and share your opinion on that, but until then, grab the rest of those clothes and let's get out of here!"

With that, Alec ended the conversation and they loaded the supplies into the truck and were soon on their way back to Terminal City.

Outside of White's HQ

Ames White leaned against a wall, looking up at the heavens. What looked like fireworks, sparkling in the morning sunlight, exploded over a distant city sector. White's usual sour expression had been replaced by one of contentment. His flunky, Otto, approached him warily. He had seen White transfixed by light displays in the sky before.

"Sir?"

White turned to face him and sighed. "Yes, what is it?" he asked irritably.

"Ah, call for you – on your car radio," Otto replied apologetically.

Reluctantly, White returned to his car, leaned in the window, and grabbed the radio.

"White."

A faint voice on the other end summoned him to a meeting.

"Otto, I've got to take a meeting. Too bad. I was enjoying the light show."

"I know, sir. You seem to be really fascinated by lights in the sky. I've seen you stargazing before. Nice hobby, astronomy."

"Yeah," White said, looking at Otto with a patronizing expression. "Nice hobby. Good omen." He got in the car and drove off, leaving Otto standing there, looking perplexed.

Command Center, Terminal City – Afternoon

Dix, manning the Command Center, was watching the news reports attentively. Suddenly, on Channel 3, a breaking story burst onto the screens with a News Flash header. A news reporter, standing next to several ambulances, spoke into a mike.

"This is Melissa Michelle, live at the barricade between Sectors 5 and 6, where a mysterious illness seems to be striking people down. First, a bike messenger collapsed at the gate. The sector policeman who attempted to assist him also collapsed. Both men seemed to have high fevers, chest pain, and difficulty breathing. They are being taken to Harbor Lights Medical. The same mysterious illness seems to have struck in several other locations around the

city. Over to you, Patrick."

"This is Patrick Long in front of the entrance to Terminal City, where ambulances have just arrived to take two National Guardsmen to the hospital. The Guardsmen collapsed a short time ago. They also are suffering from a high fever, chest pains, and difficulty breathing. We have reports of other people in various parts of Seattle with identical symptoms. Is there some sort of epidemic here? If so, what is it and where does it come from? We will keep you updated."

Other transgenics began to gather in the Command Center, watching the news reports. Max, Logan, and Alec came in together to watch the broadcast. Max and Logan exchanged knowing glances. Max took off, heading for the old genetics lab to meet with Sandeman. Alec looked puzzled.

"What's got her all spun?" He turned to Logan, who frowned.

"Do those news reports sound to you like an epidemic of some sort is beginning?" Logan asked in reply.

"Dunno. Maybe. So what?"

"So, maybe White and his cronies have somehow infected a bunch of people to begin this 'Coming,' you know, to kill off us 'ordinaries' so they can take over the world. Max is the antidote for that. Sandeman said he could make a vaccine against it from her blood. I guess she's off to donate some for the cause."

"Oh, Okay. Good idea." Alec nodded as if he understood the import of the event.

Two parked cars, a pier near Seattle Harbor

The Priestess smiled at White. "Well, Ames," she said, "I see your plan is proceeding. The news reports are – interesting."

"Yes, it's starting. I suspect that in a few hours, the news reports will say that the transgenics are to blame."

"I wouldn't be surprised, Ames."

"I'll make sure of it. In an hour or so, I will call my contact at Channel 3 and drop a few hints in his ear. By tomorrow, there will be a full-scale panic among the humans. They'll start blaming the transgenics for this 'plague.' The rest will take care of itself. First, people will attack those idiot pro-transgenic protesters, then they'll go after the transgenics. Finally, they will fall ill themselves, and die. All tied up neatly, don't you think?" White smirked.

"Don't pat yourself on the back yet, Ames," the Priestess warned. "This has just begun. We need to see it played out, before we can declare it a success. You've been thwarted before."

"I won't be thwarted this time. No one will know how this outbreak started. They won't be able to track it, and they won't be able to stop it." White oozed confidence.

"Still, the Conclave would feel better about this if we knew the girl was out of the picture. Still no luck in finding her?"

"I know she's holed up in Terminal City. We just haven't been able to get to her yet..." White began by way of explanation.

"Any word from the Phalanx?" the Priestess asked, looking at him with a stony expression.

"– Not yet. I'm expecting to hear from Thula any time."

"You said that hours ago. We have to assume that the gas canisters did not get planted and that something has happened to our brothers and sisters inside Terminal City."

White remained silent. She was correct, of course, and he had nothing to say to counter her criticism.

"This biotoxin better work, Ames..." the Priestess threatened. She got back in her car and drove away, leaving Ames White to fume.

Infirmary, Terminal City

Max lay on an examination table, a needle in her arm. Blood flowed from her vein, through a tube and into a collection bag hung on the side of the table. Aveta monitored the procedure intently.

"Almost done, Max," Aveta commented, her eye on the rapidly filling bag.

"How much does Sandeman need? I can spare another unit if necessary."

"This is enough for now, since our facilities for storage are limited. I'd rather keep it stored in *you* than in a refrigerator. If Dr. Sandeman needs more, I'll let you know. What we need now is a sample of the biotoxin."

"I'll have Logan get right on it as soon as I get out of here," Max said. "He's got the medical contacts, you know."

"I sure do," Aveta agreed. "Well, after you're done, I still want you to sit for a few minutes and drink fluids. Don't want you passing out in the Command Center. Mole would jump all over that."

Both women laughed.

Logan's Quarters, Terminal City

Logan paced back and forth as he speed-dialed a number on his cell phone. The phone rang several times, but finally was answered by Sam Carr.

"Hey, Sam."

"Logan, what's up? You okay?"

"I'm fine, Sam. Just tired. I need a favor— a big one."

"So, what else is new?" Sam laughed. "What do you need this time?"

"Sam, you've been following these news reports? The ones about this mysterious illness?"

"Following them?" Sam Carr's tone was incredulous. "People are being hauled in here by the dozens. They're dropping like flies."

"Well, it's hard to explain, but is there any way you can get a sample of the bug?" Logan continued to pace.

"I suppose so. Why?"

"Because I think it's a biological weapon that's been deliberately set off. Remember that little rash of targeted biotoxins we stumbled on last year? The one targeted to the Chinese community?"

"Yeah, nasty stuff," Sam stated. "I remember the mini-panic it caused in Chinatown."

"I'm almost certain this is related. Targeted biotoxin, dispersed in the air initially, but then spread through direct contact."

"Well, I don't like the sound of that."

"Me neither. If it's what I think it is, you'll have to contact

your buddy, Dr. George, at the CDC."

At the mention of Dr. George, Sam rolled his eyes. "We weren't exactly buddies, Logan. I'm pretty sure he knows I was hiding something from him."

Logan continued, "Whatever. We've got someone here working on a vaccine, but he'll need a sample of the toxin. Once he gets it made, we'll need the CDC to get it distributed." He stopped pacing and looked at his watch. "The sooner, the better."

"I'll get right on it. There's at least one lab guy who owes me a favor. I'll call you as soon as I've got the sample."

"Great. Thanks, Sam. I owe you big time."

"Logan, you *always* owe me big time. One of these days, I'll collect." Sam hung up.

As Logan looked at the now-silent cell phone, there was a knock at the door. He answered it to find Max standing there, a questioning expression on her face. He directed her inside with a movement of his head. Max nervously straddled the rickety chair next to his bedroll.

"Did you get hold of Sam Carr?" she asked anxiously

"Yeah. He's on it. He'll call me when he's got the sample. We can arrange for someone to pick it up."

"Someone? You mean *you'll* meet him to pick it up, don't you?"

"Well..." Logan hesitated. "He *does* know me and trust me. If you want to send someone else, I'll understand."

"You know I would rather do that. But you're right, he knows and trusts you," Max agreed reluctantly. "If he can get it to you tonight, I guess it will be safe enough after

dark. And there are enough distractions right now, with people dropping in the streets, that maybe the National Guard and Sector Police will ignore you. Take someone with you for protection. Just in case."

Logan laughed. "Yeah, I know the drill. " He leaned over and kissed her. "Don't worry about me."

"But I *do* worry about you," Max replied, "so *I'm* going with you."

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Act Two

An alley just outside the Sector 7 border— July 2, 2021, before dawn

Logan and Max emerged from a manhole, looking furtively around for National Guardsmen and police. The alley was empty. Max glanced around, taking in the scene. At the sound of an approaching car, she went into a protective crouch, peering into the darkness, her eyes trained on the car. Logan put his hand in his pocket, ready to draw his weapon if necessary.

"Nice first date on the outside, Cale," Max teased. He turned to smile at her.

The headlights flashed three times. That was the signal Logan and Sam had agreed on. Sam pulled up near the pair and doused his lights.

"Hey," Sam whispered. He nodded at Max and she smiled back.

"Hey," Logan replied, approaching the car. Max stood a few feet away, protecting the perimeter.

"Do you know how weird this is, Logan? I feel like a drug dealer," Sam complained facetiously.

"Well, I appreciate your efforts, Sam. When all this is over, I promise I'll repay the favor."

Sam reached over to the passenger seat and picked up a sealed and locked biohazard container. "Here. I got samples from half a dozen cases, just in case." He handed the container to Logan, along with the key.

"Great. I can always count on you to be thorough. And Dr. George?"

"Still trying to track him down. I've put calls into his office, his home, his vacation house, and his answering service. Unless he's out of the country, I should reach him soon."

"Good. As soon as the vaccine's ready, the CDC needs to jump in. Let me know as soon as you hear from him."

"Will do. And Logan? Be careful. We don't know how dangerous this stuff is yet."

"Oh, I've got a good idea. Thanks, Sam. You better get out of here now."

Logan signaled to Max as Sam slowly drove away, turning on his headlights a block away.

"Shall we take in dinner, dancing?" he smiled, their mission accomplished.

"Love to, but can I take a rain check?" Max asked.

Logan nodded, slipping his arm around her as they quickly walked back to the manhole and their home in Terminal City.

Command Center, Terminal City - later that morning

"It's on again," Dix commented as Max walked into the Command Center.

All of the televisions in the Command Center were on, tuned to news reports. Every station had pre-empted regular programming to report on the ongoing medical emergency.

Max walked over to stand behind Dix, whose eyes were

transfixed by the screen showing Channel 3. She glanced over, noticing that Mole and Alec were also in the room. Mole was slouching in a chair in the corner, while Alec stood near him, also watching the coverage.

"This is Melissa Michelle, Channel 3 News, reporting from Harbor Lights Medical, where victims of the mysterious illness continue to arrive. All hospitals in the area have been overwhelmed with victims. Reports of fatalities are beginning to filter into our newsroom.

"Symptoms of this illness include weakness and fever initially. Shortness of breath, chest pain, and bloody cough develop shortly thereafter. Finally, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain occur. We have unconfirmed reports that the illness has spread outside of Seattle.

"Scientists attempting to track the origin of the epidemic can only say that it seems to have started Terminal City's vicinity. The first reported victims were National Guardsmen patrolling the Terminal City perimeter..."

"Great," Mole declared, chomping on his stogie. "Now they're going to blame that on us, too!"

"You think?" Alec asked, laughing.

"Don't even go there, Mole!" Max commanded. "We need to stay calm and lay low. We've got a scientist working on a vaccine against this bug. Here. In Terminal City. We didn't cause this, but we sure as hell are going to stop it. And soon. When it's ready, we, the so-called freaks, are gonna make sure it gets to the people who need it."

"And why are we gonna do the ordinaries any favors?" Mole asked.

"Because we don't want to take the rap for something we didn't do. And we want the 'ordinaries' to know that we

are not their enemy. If we want to get out of Terminal City, we need those 'ordinaries' as our allies. This is one way to do that. So, chill, people. We'll get through this crisis, too."

Head held high, backbone straight, Max strode out of the room.

Sam Carr's office that afternoon

"It's very important I speak to him," Sam Carr said to yet another flunky at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Have you heard about the problem we're having here in Seattle?"

"Dr. George is very busy."

"Busy or not, put him on the damned phone!" Sam yelled into the receiver.

"Just a minute."

The doctor sighed as he returned, yet again, to the sounds of Muzak.

"This is Dr. George."

"Do I need a return of smallpox to get your attention?" Sam spat into the phone. "I've been trying to reach you for hours."

"I saw your patient on the news recently," the older doctor commented.

"Who?"

"Don't play stupid with me. Linda Eastman. What do you say about my hunch now, Dr. Carr?"

"We have a potential disaster here and you want to talk about Linda Eastman?" Sam shot back.

"We've already got a team on the way."

"Good, because we have reason to believe that it was deliberately dispersed in an act of bioterrorism."

"Bioterrorism?" Dr. George sounded surprised. "That's a serious charge. Do you have any proof? Any idea of who's behind it? Have you contacted the FBI?"

"No, not yet. We're trying to keep this as quiet as possible so people won't panic. I personally don't have any proof or idea of who's doing this, but I have contacts who do, and they're investigating. We think it's a Category A disease, so time is of the essence. In the meantime, there are scientists working on a vaccine to prevent further spread."

"It sounds like you have things under control, so how does this affect the CDC?" Dr. George asked, curious.

"We're going to need your help getting the vaccine to the people who need it." Sam's tone was conciliatory.

"That shouldn't be a problem. The CDC has procedures for that. We established the Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Program pre-Pulse to coordinate a national effort to protect the public's health in the event of a biological terrorist attack. I'll tell the team to get together with the local health department as soon as they arrive."

"Thank you. I appreciate your help and your discretion."

"Why the secrecy? I understand why you don't want to cause panic there, but surely the FBI could be of assistance? I have some friends there if you want to talk to someone."

"Ah, no. It's a delicate situation. We've got more than just an epidemic problem here —"

"Yes, I've seen the news reports — the transgenics and your

friend, Linda, or is it Max?"

"I think someone is trying to lay the blame on them. Cause even more trouble. That's another reason we're trying to keep it as quiet as possible."

"I understand. You have my complete cooperation – and my silence for now. I'll get the team in place. Where can I contact you?"

Sam smiled as he relayed his contact number, the relief evident on his face.

"I find it very interesting that one Dr. Sam Carr, who didn't know anything about his patient, Linda Eastman, now has his finger on the pulse of a bioterrorism attack in Seattle," Dr. George added, with a wry tone in his voice.

Sandeman's Laboratory, Terminal City

Sandeman was bent over a microscope when Max and Logan came in. He looked up briefly and smiled at them, then went back to work.

"How's it going, Doc?" Logan asked.

"Pretty good, Logan. I should have it ready in several hours. Have the arrangements been made for dispensing the vaccine?"

"According to my contacts, the plans are underway. There's a CDC team on its way here. They'll meet with my contact and the local health department to set things up as soon as they arrive.

"Great. Sounds like everything is under control," Sandeman said. He set aside the microscope.

Max spoke up. "It is, as far as getting a handle on this biotoxin attack. But we still need to defuse the growing anti-

transgenic sentiment. Those idiots from Channel 3 are doing a good job of fanning the flames – like we needed any more bad press. I swear White has a mole in the networks."

"Wouldn't be surprised," Logan commented.

Sandeman shot him a knowing look. "You think my son is behind this?"

"Yes, I do," Max said. "He's been trying to kill me ever since he met me. He even sent his Special Forces after me. Are you sure he's related to you?"

"Unfortunately. I tried to raise him and CJ right, but... well, I just don't know what happened. CJ wasn't strong. I knew he could never pass the initiation, so I tried to protect him. Otherwise, he would have died during the ritual. Eventually, he became so unstable that he had to be institutionalized. On the other hand, Ames – was very talented, passed all the tests, the rituals. He was slated to be a member of the ruling council. But he fell in with these Conclave types and became more and more narrow-minded and bigoted. I had to disown him."

"But you have a grandson," Logan said. "And as far as I can tell, he's pretty – normal." Logan smiled.

"A grandson? How old?" Sandeman's eyes widened in surprise.

"Old enough to have passed the ritual." Max looked agitated. "Has that cute little snake symbol on his arm and everything."

"He passed? Can I see him?" The old man's voice sounded eager. "My son doesn't have him, does he?"

"No, Logan and I got him away from his father. He's safe."

"Can I see him? Is he in Seattle?" Sandeman's eyes were pleading.

"I think we can arrange it," Logan said. "Once we get this outbreak under control, I'll get in touch with his guardian and have him brought here."

"Thank you. I thought I would never have any contact with my family again." Sandeman sounded relieved. There were tears in his eyes. "I'll call you as soon as this is ready. Won't be long now."

Max and Logan looked at each other. Logan took Max's hand and together they left the lab.

Outside the lab, Logan stopped. "I'll call Wendy's sister. See how soon she can get Ray here. As soon as Sandeman gets the vaccine made and we get it out to hospitals and clinics, I'll have Ray brought to Sandeman."

"Logan, you don't want to bring Ray to Terminal City. It's not a safe place," Max protested.

"Don't worry. He won't be here for long. Sandeman's okay. I'm okay. Ray will be fine." He squeezed her hand. "At least someone will have a happy ending."

* * * * *

Act Three

Sam Carr's Office – July 3, 2021, morning

"Dr. Carr, nice to see you again," Dr. George said, walking into Sam Carr's office.

The neurologist rose from his desk and shook his visitor's hand warily.

"It's good to have you back here in Seattle, although I wish it were under better circumstances."

The men sat down. Dr. George reached for his briefcase, pulling out a sheaf of papers.

"We've got to get your vaccine out on the streets and into our clinics as soon as possible. I've had people out there since early this morning, setting up sites in each of the sectors, but I have to admit, we're getting close to a panic situation here in the city."

Sam Carr leaned back in his desk chair, listening to Dr. George.

"I can appreciate your concern, Doctor, and I promise you that we're working on this. I've got very good people here working on the vaccine."

"Can you give me any indication of when we might expect to have it? I've got clinics lined up, filled with staff and nothing to give them. You've asked me to keep quiet, to trust you, but I'm going to have a national crisis on my hands pretty shortly. The whole country is watching Seattle, wondering when these transgenics are going to show up in their neighborhoods, what kind of diseases they might spread."

Sam cringed at the words. "Give me another hour. I'm waiting for a phone call and as soon as I know about the vaccine, you'll be hearing from me."

"We need to get this disseminated. I've got clinics all over the place. Do you have a plan for that?" the doctor from Atlanta questioned.

"My contacts have a network here, bike messengers. They'll get the vaccine to you as soon as I have it. Things are as under control as possible. You're just going to have to trust me a little bit longer."

Dr. George stood up. "Well, let me know about the vaccine. I'll be at the clinic in Sector 12."

Sam Carr watched the CDC doctor leave, then began to pace impatiently.

Logan's Quarters, Terminal City

Logan phoned Wendy White's sister. Although in hiding, she had kept in touch with him, periodically letting him know how Ray was doing. As usual when talking on the phone, Logan paced back and forth, scratching his head.

"Well, how soon can you get here? This afternoon? That's great. Call me when you get in and I'll make arrangements for you to meet Ray's grandfather. He's a good guy, helping us out with a, um, tricky situation here. He really wants to see Ray. I promise that Ames White won't know anything about this – he's out of the picture. And thanks for keeping Ray safe."

He hung up and speed-dialed another number, continuing to pace while the phone rang. In mid-stride, he briefly grimaced, then reached down to rub his calf. The person on the other end picked up.

"Hey, Sam, the vaccine's ready. Sandeman will meet you where we met the other night. In an hour, okay?... He's got several batches made, but resources are limited here, you know. Dr. George knows that the CDC guys have to be able to produce more of it, right? Great. Thanks, Sam."

Outside the Sector 7 border – an hour later

Sandeman, guarded by a pair of X6s with attitude and automatic weapons, stood near a dumpster, nervously drumming his fingers on the metal container he carried. A gray car drove up and stopped near the dumpster. Its occupant rolled down the window.

"Dr. Sandeman?"

Sandeman nodded, almost imperceptibly at the mention of his name.

Sam continued, "Logan Cale sent me. I'm Dr. Carr. I'm here to pick up a package."

Sandeman stepped forward, toward the car. The bodyguards approached with him, on the alert, sniffing the air, looking around. Silently, he handed the container to Sam, who placed it carefully on the floor of his car and covered it up with newspapers. Sandeman stepped back.

"Take good care of it," he said. "Use it well."

"I will. I'm on my way to the research lab to meet with some CDC doctors. They're prepared to duplicate this quickly. Thank you. We owe you a great deal."

"No, you don't. It was my fault in the first place," Sandeman responded cryptically. Then he turned around and walked away, his bodyguards flanking him. Once again, Sam drove away from a furtive meeting in an alley.

Command Center, Terminal City

Logan sat behind the console, monitoring the bank of computers and television screens, with Max and Alec looking over his shoulder. The television sets had been on constantly since the news of the outbreak began. The media had continued to fan anti-transgenic sentiment with its increasingly inflammatory reports, always showing stricken people collapsing or being carried to ambulances in the background.

"You know, now's one of those times it'd be good to have an alternative news source," Alec commented.

Logan sighed and turned to the two behind him. "Yeah, might be a good job for someone I used to know," he said softly.

Max watched, confused, as a look passed between the two men.

Just then, all the television screens flashed a trailer that said, "Late-Breaking News." The room became very quiet as all eyes checked out the latest report.

"This late-breaking news. We take you to City Hall for an announcement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."

Logan recognized the speaker as the craggy doctor he had seen at Harbor Lights Medical, pulling rank on Ames White. He sat up straight in his chair.

"In the past few days, we have had reports of outbreaks of a fatal, plague-like illness throughout the country, and scattered reports of the same illness in other parts of the world. The CDC has identified this illness and has taken steps to produce a vaccine, which has already been sent to the locations where the illness has struck. We are happy

to say that we have nipped this epidemic in the bud. To people in the areas affected by this outbreak, we advise you to contact your local health departments and hospitals. You will be told where to report for inoculation. Thank you very much."

Logan smiled. Max bent over and hugged him. Alec high-fived him.

"We did it, Max. You did it."

Max rubbed her arm, still sore from donating blood. "We all did it. Now, if we can only get the media to believe that the freaks of Terminal City, stopped this plague, I'll feel a lot better."

"Definitely a job for Eyes Only," Alec responded, poking Logan.

"Don't worry, Max, that will happen. Eyes Only will make sure of it. I promise," Logan assured her.

"Whatever." Max looked skeptical.

"Hey, c'mon. Whatever happened to 'fight the power, protect the downtrodden'?" Logan responded, getting up from his chair to face her.

"Blah blah, woof woof," she answered. "Just in case that plan doesn't work out, I think I might go find Mole and see if we can't run some drills. You know, just in case we're still overrun by a cult of snake-covered weirdos."

As Max turned and left, Logan and Alec watched her.

"Sunshiny personality. They teach you that at Manticore?" Logan asked.

Alec smiled. "No, but we did daily drills working on our optimism. Say, if you're serious about Eyes Only, I think I

might have found a place where it could work, down past the living quarters. I'd be happy..."

"Okay, sounds good. But let's get through this ordeal first and then we can worry about Eyes Only."

Jam Pony

Original Cindy sauntered into Jam Pony, pushing her bike. Normal stood at the counter, his head resting in his hands, slumped forward.

"Hey, Normal, what's up? Original Cindy's been on a mission, but she's ready to 'bip bip bip' if you got work to do."

Normal looked up, his face a bit gray.

"No deliveries today," he said, his voice quiet.

She glanced around the room. Sketchy and Sky were standing in the corner, not speaking. Sketchy's eyes were red.

"What's goin' on here?" Original Cindy demanded.

"Toby's dead," Sketchy replied.

Original Cindy looked at Normal. He nodded an affirmation of the terrible news.

"No way!" she exclaimed.

"Damned plague," Normal responded. "Dropped him, at the checkpoint for Sector 6. Cops called when they found his Jam Pony ID."

"You know Max had nothin' to do with this...none of 'em did," she replied, her voice even.

"Yeah, we know," Sketchy answered. "But it doesn't bring our man, Toby, back, now, does it?"

His question was answered with a ringing phone.

"Jam Pony," Normal answered, his voice flat and devoid of emotion. "Yeah, we've got riders here. You need what?"

The messengers watched as Normal began asking more questions, taking notes on the pad in front of him. Finally he hung up the phone.

"Bip bip bip! I need everyone on their bikes now!"

Original Cindy stared at their boss, while Sketchy and Sky didn't move.

"Did any of you kids hear me? Doesn't anyone want to avenge Toby?"

Sketchy stood straight up. "Avenge Toby?"

"What's the dealio, Normal?" Original Cindy asked, taking a step toward the counter.

"That was some doctor. They got a vaccine. We need to get it out there, to the clinics the CDC's set up. You morons think you can handle this?"

"Hell, yes!" Sketchy shouted. "Where do we go?"

The messengers mounted their bikes as Normal shouted out addresses, the bikes flying out the door of Jam Pony as fast as their riders could pedal them.

Outside White's office

Two members of the Conclave, dressed in somber suits, frog-marched Ames White toward a car. In the distance behind them, Otto lay on the ground, unconscious. The female Familiar in the front seat, obviously a high-ranking member, looked at him with disgust on her face.

"Honestly, Ames, what are we going to do about you?" she

said.

"What are you talking about?" White struggled against his captors, but was unable to break their hold on him. The two Familiars roughly manhandled him into the back seat, then got in next to him, one on either side so that he was trapped between them.

"You haven't been watching the news reports, have you, Ames?"

"Not since this morning. I've been busy. Why?"

"Once again, your little plan backfired."

"What are you talking about? People were dropping like flies."

"The operative word is 'were,' Ames." Her eyes flashed with anger. "The CDC has developed a vaccine. At this very moment, they are inoculating people."

"How? – That's impossible! There's no way the CDC could know what it is, much less come up with a vaccine. It's impossible," he reiterated.

"Well, impossible or not, they *did!* And quickly. You've screwed up— again."

White could only gape like a fish, his mouth opening and closing rapidly.

"The Conclave cannot afford any more of your screw-ups. You've been called in front of the Council to answer for your mistakes."

White shut his eyes tightly as the car sped off, carrying in it an already condemned man.

Conclave HQ - an hour later

In a room resembling a courtroom, the High Council of the Conclave, clad in ritual robes, sat in judgment of Ames White. Other members, spectators, also in their robes, were seated in hard, upright chairs in front of the table at which the High Council members sat. Everyone looked grim. The lighting in the room was harsh. White was seated in an uncomfortable chair across from the council table, his hands bound in front of him, a symbolic gesture, since any Familiar could easily break the bonds. The High Priestess, sitting at the center of the table, questioned him about the failure of yet another of his schemes and the loss of the Phalanx.

"Ames White, you have been summoned here to account for your actions regarding the transgenics and the Coming. What do you have to say in defense of yourself?" she asked sternly.

"I have no idea how anyone could come up with a vaccine for the biotoxin we released. It was developed under the strictest security. I myself made sure of that." White stated firmly.

"And what about the Phalanx? What happened to them?"

"I don't know. Thula never reported back to me once they had penetrated the perimeter of Terminal City. We must assume they encountered resistance and were – eliminated." White looked down at his feet and began to shuffle in discomfort.

"And what of 452?" another member of the Council queried. "Has *she* been eliminated?"

"Her status is unknown," White replied.

"Were you able to identify and eliminate Eyes Only?"

"I was able to identify, but not locate him."

"So, Ames, you don't know how the biotoxin was neutralized. You don't know what happened to the Phalanx. You don't know what happened to 452, and you can't locate Eyes Only. What *do* you know?" The High Priestess' tone was accusatory.

"I know that I'm loyal to the Conclave and to its mission."

"Are you?" she questioned. "You've constantly endangered the Familiars. You've repeatedly overstepped your bounds in following orders. You've managed to get the Phalanx soldiers – the best fighting force we have, by the way – killed or captured. You've taken it upon yourself to usher in the Coming, then managed to delay or abort it by failing to eliminate 452. Not a very good track record, don't you agree? You're either disloyal to the Conclave or hopelessly incompetent."

"How can you question my loyalty?" White demanded, jumping up from the chair. "I even *killed my wife* for the Conclave. I loved her. I LOVED HER!" he shouted. "I strangled her with my tie and buried her on the grounds of Brookridge Academy because *you* said she was a threat to the Conclave." White pointed to the High Council. "Does that show disloyalty to the cause?"

"But you didn't kill her when you were supposed to – after she delivered your son – did you?" she stated.

White could only hang his head.

"You have failed in all your missions against the transgenics. The High Council will adjourn to discuss your fate." The High Priestess nodded her head to the burly Familiars who had abducted White earlier. "Make sure he doesn't go anywhere."

The Familiars throttled White unceremoniously and pushed him down onto a chair.

Furrow Airfield

Max and Logan, lightly disguised with caps and sunglasses, waited nervously at the little-used airfield for private planes. Logan smiled at Max who had volunteered to come with him. They watched as Wendy White's sister, Elaine Olsen, with her nephew Ray in tow, came down the steps from the plane and approached them. She looked furtively around her, and then breathed a sigh of relief when she realized that Ames White was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey," Logan said. "Thanks for coming." Max strode up to him and took Ray off to the side so he and Elaine could talk.

"I'm glad to help, Logan. I didn't even know Ray's grandfather was still alive," Elaine Olsen said softly.

"We didn't either, until just recently. When he found out he had a grandson, he was eager to see Ray," Logan replied.

"He's not here?" Elaine looked around.

"Ah, no, he still had some work to do. We'll take Ray to him."

"He knows about Ray's – special abilities?"

"Yes." Logan laughed. "He has them himself. But he's one of the good guys."

"You're sure?" Elaine was skeptical. "After all, Ames..." She left the sentence unfinished.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure. You heard about this epidemic we had

in Seattle?" Elaine nodded.

"We think Ames and his group were responsible for it. But his father, Ray's grandfather, developed the vaccine that's being used to fight it. Like I said, he's one of the good guys. He couldn't be here to meet Ray because he's still working on it."

"Okay. If you say so. I just want what's best for Ray."

"I'll personally make sure of that. Thanks for keeping him safe."

"My pleasure. Can I say goodbye to him?"

"Sure."

Elaine Olsen went over to where Max and Ray were standing, comparing the snake brands. Max's was almost gone, only faintly visible on her palm, and she was explaining to Ray why.

"Ray, I want you to go with Logan and Max. They'll take you to meet your grandfather." Elaine put her hand on Ray's shoulder.

"My grandfather?" Ray looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"Yes, Ray. He can explain to you all about your special abilities and train you to use them. I can't do that, you know."

"What about my dad?"

"We don't know where your father is," Logan said, "but your grandfather is here in Seattle and wants to see you."

"Well, Okay. I guess that's all right." Ray didn't seem sure.

Elaine Olsen knelt down and hugged Ray. "Goodbye, Ray.

I'll keep in touch. Take care. I love you."

She walked away with tears in her eyes. Logan went to her.

"I'll have him contact you as soon as he gets settled. You won't lose touch with him, I promise."

"Thank you. I appreciate everything you, and Eyes Only, have done for Ray – and what you tried to do for Wendy."

"I'm just sorry we couldn't save her. But at least Ray will have a good life, away from his father."

Logan escorted Elaine Olsen back to the plane and made sure she was settled in for the trip back. Max took Ray's suitcase and put it into the trunk of the old sedan Alec had commandeered for them. Ray clambered into the back seat. Finally, Logan came back to the car and got in. The first half of their mission accomplished, they headed back to Terminal City.

Conclave HQ

Ames White sat, head in hands, waiting for the High Council of the Conclave to return with the verdict. The two guards still flanked him, looking bored. White raised his head and looked around, eyeing possible escape routes.

There was a commotion and the doors of the council chamber opened. The High Council returned, their robes rustling. Solemnly, they once again took their seats at the council table and the rest of the Conclave followed. The guards grabbed White under the armpits and hauled him upright. He surveyed the expressionless faces.

"Ames White," the High Priestess addressed him. "The High Council of the Conclave has found you guilty of

treason against the Familiars, and sentences you to death." She motioned with her hand to the guards alongside him. "Take him away. We will carry out the sentence shortly."

White was roughly escorted out the door of the council chamber, hands still bound in front of him. A few yards down the hall, he suddenly doubled over, as if in pain. His escorts, caught off guard, lost their hold of him momentarily. White quickly grabbed the firearm he kept strapped to his ankle, fired a round into each guard, burst his bonds, and took off running. He easily overpowered the guard at the door of the Headquarters building, stole his cell phone, and was gone.

He had traveled about a mile and had lost himself in the crowds in South Market when he felt safe enough to stop. He stepped around a corner and pressed himself against a wall. Hastily, he dialed a number.

"Otto?" he whispered breathlessly. A familiar voice on the phone answered in the affirmative.

"Sir?"

"I need your help. Can you get me a car?"

"Sir, you've been declared *persona non grata* at the Agency. They say you're a rogue agent. I'm afraid you're on your own. I will risk my job if I help you, sir." Otto was apologetic, but firm.

"Damn!" White rang off so violently that he almost broke the phone. He leaned against the wall, trying to decide what to do next. He looked around and saw a line of cars queued up to get through the sector checkpoint. On impulse, he yanked open the door of one of the cars and pulled its startled driver out.

"NSA!" he barked, shoving his badge under the driver's

nose. For some reason, the Conclave guards hadn't taken his wallet. He still had his collection of various agency IDs. At last, he headed out of Sector 12, toward Sector 7, toward Terminal City, driving quickly, but not recklessly. He didn't want to attract attention to himself.

"I'm going to get that bitch, 452... for ruining my life, if it's the last thing I do. And I'm going to kill her this time," White whispered to himself.

Sector 7 border

Logan drove the battered sedan carrying Ray White toward Terminal City. He and Max spent the trip telling Ray about Sandeman, his grandfather, preparing him for the meeting. The boy bounced up and down in the back seat, looking all around as the miles and landmarks whizzed by. He seemed to be eager for the meeting.

"Ray, we're gonna park the car soon and head into the sewers," Max explained.

"The sewers?" Ray's ears perked up. "Cool!" He grinned at Max.

"Easiest way to get where we need to be," Max continued.

A few minutes later, they arrived at their destination, a deserted block of shops near the Sector 7 border. Logan pulled the car up into an alley and parked behind a loading dock, where it would be hidden from the casual observer. He and Max got out of the car. Max got Ray from the back seat. Logan grabbed the suitcase from the trunk. They crossed the alley to a manhole. Max easily picked up the manhole cover and set it aside. Logan climbed down first and took the suitcase Max handed him. Next, Ray climbed down. Max followed them down, closing the manhole behind her. At the bottom of the ladder, Logan

dialed his cell phone and reported to Sandeman that they had arrived at the entrance to the sewers and were proceeding with haste to his lab. Then Logan pulled a heavy-duty flashlight from his pocket and turned it on. In the eerie glow of the flashlight, they made their way toward Terminal City.

The Sewers outside Terminal City

Ames White passed through the Sector 7 checkpoint using his NSA ID, then ditched the stolen car near the outskirts of Terminal City. He found a sewer opening and jumped down into it.

Not needing extra light to see in the passageways, he made his way surely toward Terminal City. On the alert, weapon drawn, he went into a semi-crouch, looking around to make sure there were no guards or lookouts in the tunnel. He would do the ambushing, not be ambushed.

As he neared an intersection of tunnels, he caught a glimpse of a flashlight beam across the passageway. He turned sideways, pressing himself against the wall. He raised his gun, just in case. The sound of footsteps, of more than one person, grew louder.

He saw three figures, a man, a woman, and a child, cross the intersection. It took only a second for him to recognize his son. Surprised, he stared at the other figures. One was 452. The other one, the one holding the flashlight, was Logan Cale. White smiled, ready for the hat trick. Silently, he edged forward, preparing for the ambush. The smile turned into a snarl as he entered the intersection and aimed the gun at Logan.

The sound of the shot reverberated in the tunnels until it

sounded like cannon fire.

There was a blur of motion as Max threw herself against Logan and Ray and knocked them to the ground.

"Take cover!" she shouted as she rolled away from them.

Logan quickly covered Ray with his own body and crawled away from the intersection. He found a forest of pipes for shelter. Pushing Ray farther into the pipe cluster, he crouched down and took the 9 mm from his pocket. He had dropped the flashlight when Max pushed him to the ground and it was difficult to see what was happening. He could hear the sounds of struggle, however, so he was on full alert.

Max had continued to roll away from Logan and Ray until a standpipe halted her. She flipped back onto her feet in a defensive crouch, seeking out the source of the shot. She scanned the intersection for the intruder.

"Well, 452, it looks like I've finally found you. Now it's just you and me, one on one."

"Yeah? Well then, bring it on, White. I'm tired of all this pussyfooting around."

"I want my son, 452. You have him."

Max stood up, holding her hands out in a palms-up gesture. "Guess again. I'm not holding anyone here."

"Your henchman, Cale, has him then. Hand Ray over now and I'll kill him quickly. He won't suffer." White raised his voice to make sure that Logan could hear him. Logan held onto Ray, his hand over the boy's mouth to prevent him from crying out to his father.

"I think not," Max, replied, crouching down again, ready for the attack.

White jumped at her, moving across the intersection of the sewer like he was flying. She stepped back just in time to avoid full contact. He aimed a vicious chop at her head, but she blocked him, kicking at him. He jumped back, and flipped into a roll, coming up along side of Max, punching her in the face. Her nose began to bleed, and she wiped it with the back of her hand.

"Now you're making me mad!"

Logan stepped away from the pipes, looking for a clear shot but it was impossible to separate the bodies. Shielding Ray from the view of the fight, he kept his gun aimed at the two rolling and crashing on the concrete floor.

White jumped into the air and spun around. With a cry, he kicked at Max's head. She ducked the blow just as Logan fired off a round at White. The bullet missed him, but only by inches. There was a muffled "Damn!" from Logan. Max flipped and kicked, aiming at White's chin, but she only got a piece of him. He grabbed her foot and turned her upside down. With her other foot, she kicked him in the stomach, knocking the breath out of him momentarily, forcing him to release his hold.

White snarled again, the whites of his eyes glowing in the darkness. He somersaulted toward Max. As he approached her, he shot out an arm; fist clenched, and caught her on the jaw. Max's head jerked back painfully. Taking advantage of her sudden backward movement, he jumped at her with both feet forward, knocking her to the ground. While Max lay on the ground, he kicked her in the head a few times for good measure, just to make sure she would stay down.

"That ought to hold you while I go get your boyfriend," he said to her unconscious form. He stalked away from Max,

gun now drawn. "I'm not gonna kill you yet. I'm gonna kill him first, so when you come to, you can see his dead body. Then, I'm gonna kill you!" His lip curled in derision.

He headed in Logan's direction; so intent on his prey that he didn't hear the footsteps behind him. Logan had stepped back behind the pipes again. He flattened himself against them, trying to hold his hand over Ray's mouth. If Ray gave away their position, Logan would be a sitting duck.

"Ray? Come out here. I want to see you," White said, a pleading tone in his voice. He could hear Ray struggling to get away from Logan.

"Ray, you passed the initiation. You have the powers. You can get away from him."

White was nearly at the pipe cluster. Cautiously, he approached it, peering into the gloom. His supersensitive hearing picked up the sounds of two people breathing. He chambered a round and stepped up to the pipes, drawing a bead on Logan.

Logan's heart began to pound as he heard Ames White advance toward them. The pipes provided protection, but little possibility for escape. He heard the soft snick of White's gun and then the shot. He raced his hands over Ray's body, searching for the injury, but Ray seemed unharmed. After a moment he looked up to find his adversary lying on the floor, his eyes open in a death stare. Richard Sandeman stood over his son's body, a large caliber pistol in his hand.

"Two sons, both quite mad," he said regretfully. "I hope my grandson isn't."

Logan, still speechless, tilted his head and frowned, ques-

tioning silently what had just happened. He still held Ray protectively against him.

In reply to his unspoken query, Sandeman answered him. "I knew how long it would take to get from that entrance to the lab. When you didn't show up on time, I got worried. So I decided to come look for you, and just in case something had happened to you, I came armed. Good thing, too."

"Thanks, Doc," was all Logan could say.

"Is this my grandson?" Sandeman gestured toward Ray. He put the gun back in his pocket.

"Yes. This is Ray. Ray, this is your grandfather." Logan let go of Ray and the boy slowly walked toward Sandeman. He looked down at his father's body, and then knelt next to it.

"Goodbye, Daddy. I love you."

He got up and went over to his grandfather. "Did you kill Daddy?" He looked up at Sandeman.

"I had to, Ray. He was going to kill Max and Logan. And maybe hurt you, too," Sandeman said apologetically. "I couldn't let him hurt you."

He knelt down painfully to lower himself to Ray's level. "Do you understand? I could never let anyone hurt you."

Ray nodded solemnly. "Will you teach me what to do? Daddy said he would..." He trailed off.

Sandeman reached out and clasped Ray to him. Logan, seeing that he was no longer needed, walked away to find Max. She was still unconscious, bruised, and bleeding. Logan knelt down and gently held her. "Come on, Max, wake up. It's Okay now. The son of a bitch is dead." He

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smoothed her hair and looked down at her, relief written all over his face.

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Act Four

The Sewers outside Terminal City

"We'll take good care of him," Aveta said as she took Ray's small hand in her gloved one. "I'll...I'll give him something for the shock, check him out."

"Thanks, Aveta," Max said, as she sat against the wall, catching her breath.

"Are you sure you won't come with me? Let me take a closer look at your head? I really should observe you for a while."

Max waved her away. "I'm fine, really."

"You want us to get...that thing...out of here?" Alec asked, pointing at White's now still form.

Max turned to look at her former adversary. Sandeman stood next to his dead son's body. He had not spoken for several minutes.

"Nah, we'll get it taken care of in a little bit. Would you go with Aveta, make sure Ray is okay?"

Alec nodded and followed Aveta back into Terminal City.

Max reached her hand out and Logan helped her up. She stumbled slightly and he grabbed her arm.

"You should have gone back with them. You're not all right, Max."

She didn't answer him, taking a few steps toward Sandeman. He didn't seem to notice he had company.

"I'm sorry it came to this," she said, reaching out to touch

Sandeman's arm.

He turned to look at her, surprised. "You are?"

"I mean, I appreciate what you did...for Logan and for me, but I wouldn't wish this on anyone, to kill your own son."

"He stopped being my son some time ago," Sandeman answered quietly. He knelt down and pushed the hair back from White's face. "He was a good boy. He had great potential." He stood up and turned back to face Max and Logan. "Do you...do you have facilities for disposal?"

"We can take care of it," Logan answered. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

"No, I think I've done what's necessary here. I think it's time for me to move on. I can finally put everything behind me, return to my new life. Besides, I have a grandson to raise now."

"Thank you," Max stated again, unsure of what else to say to him.

"No, I should thank you, Max. You're everything I had hoped you would be, everything Donald had told me you were."

Max turned to look back down the sewer toward the entrance to Terminal City. "Where the hell is Lydecker, anyway?"

"You could spend the rest of your life trying to answer that question, Max. Don't. You have much bigger issues to worry about, to take care of. I wish you much luck."

Sandeman turned to leave. "Be careful, Max. To whom much is given, much is expected."

Max and Logan stood silently as the old man slowly left,

to retrieve his precious grandson.

Terminal City - early evening – July 4, 2021

"Come on, Max, you need a break," Logan said, holding out his hand to her. Max took it and twined her fingers in his. They were standing in the courtyard, enjoying a few peaceful minutes. White's body had been taken away and Aveta had checked out Ray. Sandeman had put away the lab equipment, his mission accomplished.

"I can't, Logan," she protested. "I've gotta stay here and take care of things."

"Max, it's only for a few hours. Terminal City can take care of itself for a little while. White's dead and the Familiars are neutralized. That's a big burden off your shoulders. You deserve a break."

"Well –" she said hesitantly.

"If it will make you feel better, check everything out. If it's all running smoothly, then come with me," Logan suggested. "You'll enjoy yourself."

"Okay." They walked through the compound, not holding hands, but close enough to touch. Each crew – kitchen, medical, tactical, sanitation – checked in with Max. All reported that conditions were A-OK. Logan smiled knowingly.

"See, I told you. Now, you've got no excuse not to come with me."

"Okay, you were right. What else is new? Now, where are we going?"

"It's a secret," Logan replied enigmatically. "Come on. I know a shortcut."

He led Max to a little-used entrance to the subterranean maze of sewers. They descended a metal ladder to a wide cavern, only slightly damp. It looked like it hadn't been used in years.

"Not the most scenic route," Logan admitted apologetically, "but the fastest. I found this when I was tracking the group who came here back in April."

Tentatively, he held out his bare hand to her again and she took it. They strolled together through the underground tunnels, both smiling with contentment. After about 15 minutes, Logan pointed to another metal ladder leading to street level.

"Up there. Want me to go first? Just in case?"

"Sure. Give you the opportunity to be a gentleman and look out for the lady," Max teased.

"Okay." Logan let go of her hand and began to climb up the ladder. He pushed the manhole cover aside, and then stuck his head out to look around. The coast was clear and a beat-up sedan was parked nearby.

"All clear," he said as he scrambled up and out onto the street. He leaned over and held out a hand to Max, even though he knew she didn't need the assistance.

Max emerged from the sewer and took a deep breath. It wasn't exactly fresh air, but it wasn't Terminal City either. She glanced around and saw the car. She smiled.

They got in the car and Logan drove back toward Sector 3. Max realized that they were heading to Joshua's.

"Logan, aren't you worried about us being spotted?" she asked in a worried tone of voice.

"Not really. We've got sector passes, thanks to Alec. It's

dusk and most of Joshua's neighbors keep to themselves." Logan assured her.

Terminal City

"Father is leaving," Joshua stated.

Sandeman looked up from the suitcase he had been packing. "Yes, it's time for me to leave, Joshua. I hope you understand that."

"But I've been looking for you, wishing you would come back. I...I missed you." Joshua crossed the room to stand in front of Sandeman. "You created me. I was first."

Sandeman nodded. "And now it's time for you to live on your own, to not be afraid."

"But people outside, they are afraid, afraid of Joshua and the others."

Sandeman reached over to touch Joshua's arm. "I am so proud of you, Joshua. You are a good man."

Joshua's head bowed, the tears flowing from his eyes. "But I don't want you to go. You just came here, I just found you."

"And this isn't goodbye, not forever," Sandeman replied. "But this isn't the place for me. I need to go back to my life."

He closed the suitcase and set it on the ground. He slipped his hands up, under Joshua's long hair, raising Joshua's face so he could look in his eyes.

"You are free now, my son. Don't be afraid any longer. Be proud of being the first. It's a great thing."

Joshua reached forward, pulling Sandeman into a full

embrace. He held his father for several moments, finally releasing him and stepping back.

"Be safe, Father. And I will miss you."

Sandeman reached once more to touch Joshua's face, and then turned and left.

Joshua's House, Sector 3

Logan pulled up in front of Joshua's and parked.

"Is this safe?" Max asked as they sat in the car.

"Nobody bothered us the other day when we picked up the Eyes Only equipment," Logan answered, opening the door of the sedan.

Max followed him out of the car and onto the sidewalk.

"So, we're at Joshua's. What's this about?"

She bounded up the steps, not waiting for an answer. She seemed glad to see the old place, especially after the confines of Terminal City. Logan followed her, but more slowly, holding onto the rickety railing.

"You okay?" Max asked.

He looked over at her. "Yeah, fine. I've just been tired at night – since that virus. It's nothing, really, Max. And it didn't help that I took a dive down Joshua's basement stairs the other day. Must have pulled something."

She looked back at him, not completely convinced, then broke into a grin. "Where does it hurt? Can I kiss it better?"

"I can think of a few places." Logan stared at Max, a deadpan expression on his face. After a moment, he grinned and turned to open the door. "Well, I thought we could, ah, kick back, grab a couple of beers from the fridge, and

watch the fireworks. It's not the Space Needle, but it's a good location, nice and high. The view should be terrific."

"Fireworks?" Max looked at him quizzically.

"Fourth of July, Max. Independence Day, you know. You probably didn't celebrate it back at Manticore, but it's kind of significant. Especially since you're free of White and his crew of whacko soldiers. I thought you might enjoy the fireworks."

Logan headed into the dilapidated kitchen and returned with a couple of bottles of beer and a bag of chips. "It's not much, I'm afraid. All I could arrange on the spur of the moment," he apologized.

"It's fine, Logan. Thanks," Max said as he handed her a beer.

Outside of Conclave HQ

Hidden by darkness, Krit, Syl, Zane, and Jondy crouched in front of the door of the Conclave Headquarters, automatic weapons drawn and at the ready, waiting for Lydecker's orders. Cautiously, they surveyed the area, making sure that no civilians were in the line of fire. Other X-series soldiers surrounded the building. Lydecker, comm unit in his ear, checked his watch. In a whispered voice, he counted down.

"Three...two...one...NOW!"

The wood of the heavy door splintered as they broke in.

Joshua's House – later that night

Max and Logan sat on the porch, sipping beer, eating chips, and watching Seattle's fireworks display. Max leaned against Logan and tilted her head to rest on his

shoulder. He reached down and tipped her chin up, his lips brushing across hers at first, and then pressing more firmly as he pulled her close to him.

As the rockets began exploding over their heads, he slipped back, breaking the embrace.

"Happy Independence Day, Max."

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