

Dark Angel VS3

High Stakes

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Episode VS3.07

Prologue

Outside Jam Pony

A hooded man stood across the street from Jam Pony, smoking a cigarette and glancing at the entrance periodically. He walked toward the back door of the messenger service and saw Sky hurriedly ushering an unknown person up the outside stairs of the building. Tossing his cigarette on the ground, he quickly walked away.

Command Center, Terminal City

The Command Center hummed with quiet intensity. Monitors blinked and data streamed across screens. Logan, Dix, and Luke were hunched over their monitors, fingers flying over keyboards.

“Got it!” Logan’s voice broke the silence. He grinned at Dix and Luke, leaned back in his chair, and stared contentedly at the computer screen.

Dix and Luke came over and looked over Logan’s shoulder at the screen. Dix patted Logan on the back. “Great work, Logan. I want to know how you do that.”

“It’s what I do,” Logan shrugged.

Luke looked over at Dix and raised his eyebrows. “Now we have a stable and undetectable power supply into Terminal City.”

“I’m glad it finally came together. But to remain undetected, we need to keep our usage down by rotating power to the buildings. The only places that will have power twenty-four-seven are the Command Center and

the infirmary..." Logan stopped when Max walked up to them.

Luke looked at Dix and winked. "Hey, Max," he said.

"Hey, boys. Still working?" Max asked. "I think you need a break."

"I'm game." Logan looked at Max, his eyes lighting up. He pushed himself out of the chair and stretched.

Luke watched them walk away. "What's the line on the date?" he asked Dix.

"If I were a betting transhuman," Dix said loftily, "I'd say soon...very soon." They grinned at each other and returned to work.

"How about some lunch?" Logan asked Max as they ambled down the hall.

"Sounds good. What specialty of the house is chef Cale making for me?"

"I'm not. I mean, I'm not cooking. I thought we could go to the Last Stop for some lunch.

"Last Stop Bar," Max mused. "Kinda appropriate for people with nowhere else to go."

Last Stop Bar

As Logan and Max walked into the bar, heads turned to follow their progress. A few smiled, but others frowned and muttered among themselves.

"Hey, Ginger. They have you tending bar today?" Logan asked as they approached the bar.

Ginger was rubbing down the bar with a towel. "Hey, Logan. Hey, Max," she said. "Assigned myself bar duty. I

was about to go nuts in the mess hall. I can only take so much of the same four walls, same faces, same slop day in, day out." She grimaced with distaste. "So what can I do for you?"

"I've really been craving a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich," Logan said teasingly.

"Sorry, no bacon, lettuce, or tomatoes," Ginger replied with an apologetic shrug.

Logan broke into a wry smile. "Oh right...I forgot...this is the Last Stop Bar."

"What I do have are grilled ham and cheese sandwiches." Ginger returned the smile.

"That will be just fine. Two sandwiches and...two beers" he added. "The good stuff."

"That's two grilled ham and cheese and two bottles of beer. Coming right up. Find yourselves a table. I'll bring your order over."

Max made her way to a table at the back with Logan in tow. "What's with the bacon-lettuce thingie anyway?"

"It's the perfect sandwich...toasted bread...mayonnaise... crisp bacon...fresh lettuce... and ripe tomatoes. It's a great mélange of flavors," Logan said, sitting down next to Max.

"Mmm...you'll have to make me one sometime."

"My pleasure. My dad taught me how to make a BLT and that meant it had to be perfect."

"Your dad cooked?" Max asked, her eyes wide.

"Not exactly, but he could make a BLT." Logan looked at Max a moment. "I had just started playing basketball. For some reason, Dad showed up at a game."

“And?” Max asked with a shrug.

“Let’s just say it wasn’t my best performance.” Logan’s mouth turned up in a grim smile. “That night he taught me how to make a BLT. Took me five tries to get it right. He never said anything about the game, but he did say I made a good BLT.” Logan’s eyes drifted toward Ginger as she approached their table.

“Logan, about the beer...” she said, handing them their orders.

“What about the beer?” Logan asked.

“These are the last two. Alec has been coming in every afternoon and having a couple,” Ginger said apologetically.

“What? We brought in a case a couple of days ago!”

Max looked at the stunned look on Logan’s face and started laughing.

After a second or two, Logan joined in. “Looks like Alec and I need to go on another beer run.”

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Act One

National Guard Headquarters

The hooded man waited impatiently in a decrepit building crowded with men in army fatigues. Agitated, he tapped his foot while watching a National Guard trooper who was engrossed in conversation at the far end of the room. The trooper casually returned to his desk and glanced at the man with a bored look on his face.

“What is it?” he asked, looking through some paperwork.

“I told you, that messenger company is full of transgenics, man!” Andy removed his hood, trying desperately to convince the National Guardsman.

The Guardsman’s face contorted. “Yeah, yeah. We’ve heard that one before...”

Andy grabbed the Guardsman’s wrist. “I’m tellin’ you, man, they’ve got transgenics holed up in there. I’ve seen ‘em. With my own two eyes. I’m not lying to you. Why do you think my boss fired my ass? He never fires anyone. ‘Cause I was on to them.”

The National Guardsman stopped what he was doing and stared icily at Andy’s hand on his wrist. Andy backed off shakily. The Guardsman grabbed Andy by the shirt collar and almost lifted him off the ground. “You touch me again and I’ll personally haul your ass off to jail, you hear?”

Andy nodded vigorously, gulping down his fear. Still holding onto Andy’s shirt collar, the Guardsman turned Andy toward the television. “That the place you mean?!”

Andy stared in shock at Jam Pony messengers condemn-

ing the transgenics. “That can’t be...they were helping them...”

The Guardsman threw him forward. “Enough of this! Get out of here! And don’t come back!”

As Andy hurriedly left, a man in a dark blue suit, who had been watching the exchange, approached the Guardsman.

“Hey, Mike,” he said, “Another scumbag after a reward?”

“Agent Martin,” Mike smiled. “Seems we can never get enough of them.”

Agent Martin nodded and turned his attention back to the TV.

Outside Jam Pony

A female reporter stood in front of Jam Pony, interviewing an old woman. People milled around, forming a crowd behind her.

“What do you think of the events that have unfolded in the city of Seattle during the past few months?”

“Those trans-what-do-you-call-them are responsible for the crimes happening in our city. They are also responsible for the plague a few weeks ago, if you ask me. Seattle was a clean and respectable city before they came along. They should be put in jail...just think of what they might do to our innocent children!”

The reporter nodded as she looked at the crowd. She spotted a courier returning from a run and walked over to him.

“Were you one of the messengers held hostage by the transgenics?”

"They kept us here for, like, a hundred hours, man!" The messenger pointed toward Jam Pony. *"We thought we were toast."*

Another messenger interrupted. *"They're diseased, man! It freaks me out to think that one of 'em mighta touched me. They think they can run around our streets like they're one of us. No way, man, we ain't gonna let that happen!"* He looked into the camera. *"You hear, trash? We ain't gonna let that happen!"*

The reporter turned and faced the camera.

"There you have it, direct from the staff of Jam Pony X-Press."

Command Center, Terminal City

Max and the other transgenics watched as the reporter continued.

"Speculation that the transgenics somehow caused the Independence Day plague continues to mount. The whole country awaits Seattle's response to the threat..."

Max turned her back to the TV and addressed the transgenics watching the news. "Break time's over, people. We still have supplies to think about." The transgenics began dispersing.

"Nice to know we have friends out there," Luke said sarcastically.

Joshua turned to Gem, who was holding a sleeping Elfie close to her chest. He confusedly asked, "Friends of Max?"

Gem looked soberly at Joshua. "I don't know. I don't know if any of us have friends right now." Gem walked away, still cradling her baby—a little tighter this time.

“Nice to know that now that White and his crew are gone, we only have the local freak haters to worry about.” Mole bit fiercely into his cigar. “All that flag-raising hype for nothing...”

Pub, Sector 9

Alec waited as Logan sat at the bar, transacting business. He casually admired the furniture, keeping half an ear on Logan’s conversation. The place was no Crash. The bar top was made of highly polished redwood, as were all the tables. The stainless steel chairs, currently upside-down on the tables, gleamed from their daily polishing, and the pristine hardwood floor showed no traces of the hundreds of feet and dozens of spilled drinks from the night before. The early-afternoon light shining through the windows gave the whole place a golden glow.

Their business concluded, Logan and the proprietor walked toward Alec.

“If Eyes Only needs anything...” the proprietor said, the intensity evident in his voice.

“I’ll let him know, Jim,” Logan assured him.

“And, Logan, it’s great seeing you on your feet again,” Jim smiled.

“Miracles of modern medicine,” Logan said lightly. “Thanks for these,” he added, handing a backpack to Alec.

“My pleasure. Take care of yourself.”

“You too,” Logan replied. He slid on a baseball cap and sunglasses and stepped into the street, followed closely by Alec. They walked in silence for a few blocks.

Sector 9

"I don't get it, Logan," Alec finally blurted out, confusion twisting his features. "You come out of nowhere, tell him someone he's never met is going to pick up ten kegs of beer in the middle of the night, promise to pay him at some unspecified time in the future, and he's falling all over himself to help you."

"So?" Logan asked, perplexed.

"He would have given you the whole lot for free, but you insisted on paying him. I just don't get it."

"He's a good friend," Logan explained.

"Come on! I saw his face. I heard his voice. He would have signed over the title deed for that joint if you had asked him," Alec insisted. "He must owe you big, man. What kind of hold do you have on him?"

"It's nothing like that." Logan gave an embarrassed little laugh. "Actually, I owe him."

"It's because of Eyes Only, isn't it?" Alec persisted.

"Not everyone's on the take, Alec. People appreciate it when they find someone who's not. God knows I do." Logan looked at Alec, a hint of sadness in his voice.

"Whatever," Alec shrugged, then grinned at Logan, indicating the backpacks they had slung over their shoulders.

"At least you let him lay a few bottles of premium brew on us. That stuff goes for twenty bucks a bottle at Crash."

"Yeah, there's that," Logan grinned back.

They turned a corner and worked their way across a courtyard toward the wide concrete stairs at its far end. Activity swirled at the farmers' market on the street above

the stairs. The vendors' shouts carried down the stairs, assaulting them with admonitions to buy the freshest produce this side of the Rocky Mountains.

"Probably was a nice place once," Alec commented, glancing at the brown grass and overgrown shrubbery in the courtyard.

"I remember," Logan said thoughtfully. "City used to be littered with little parks. During the summer months, they were filled with people wanting to get outside. Six months after the Pulse, nobody cared anymore. Who's got time to smell the roses when you don't know where your next meal is coming from?"

"Think it'll ever change?" Alec asked pensively.

"I hope so," Logan replied.

"So, speaking of things changing, where's your elusive friend going to set up?"

"Good question," Logan answered, frowning. "We've still got some equipment stashed at Joshua's, though there's a distance issue there. I could use one of the safe houses, but distance is still a factor. Terminal City is secure. Even if he does get traced, no one would be breaking down the doors. Just not sure how to hide from several hundred curious transgenics with highly refined observation skills."

"What does Max think?" Alec asked.

"I haven't asked her."

"So how are you two?" Alec asked casually, then tensed up, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Seattle PD, two o'clock, coming right at us."

"I see them," Logan acknowledged, his eyes darting to-

ward the right.

"They *would* pick today of all days, wouldn't they?" Alec sighed. "The one time I've actually got something worth taking."

"Must be all those years honing their policing skills," Logan smiled ironically. "Just play it cool."

"Afternoon, gentlemen. Contraband check." The first officer stopped a couple of paces in front of them. The second hung back a few feet, speaking into his radio, keeping an eye on the proceedings. He watched disinterestedly as Logan and Alec slowly complied with his partner's orders.

"Hats and shades off," the cop directed. "Drop them at your feet. Now the bags."

"Hold on a sec, Jake," the second officer said casually, walking up to his partner. He smiled at Logan and Alec apologetically. "Wish we didn't have to bother you on a day like this."

Alec watched him carefully, noticing the officer's hand as it drifted a fraction of an inch toward his holster.

"Would rather be taking the kids to the beach, but...Mr. Cale, you're under arrest."

Before the officer completed the words, Alec jumped into the air, kicking both cops in the chest. They fell over backwards, hitting the ground with a loud grunt.

"Run!" Alec yelled, heading across the courtyard toward the stairs.

Logan raced behind him, reaching the stairs as Alec cleared the top. He bounded up the steps two at a time, cleared the landing in a stride and a half, and hit the second flight. His right foot reached for the second step, but

found only air, causing his leg to collapse underneath him. Logan pitched forward, landing hard on his hands and knees, the momentum rolling him onto his right side. He grunted in shock and pain.

Out of the corner of his eye, Logan could see the officers running across the courtyard. He pushed up quickly, knowing he probably had only seconds to clear the stairs. Nothing happened. His body didn't respond. He tried again. Still nothing. He looked below him. The officers had reached the bottom of the stairs. He frantically scanned the top of the stairs, but Alec had disappeared. Still nothing. The officers arrived at the landing and stood over him, guns pointed at his chest.

Suddenly, Alec somersaulted over Logan's head, landing between him and the guns. He kicked out his right leg in a lightning-fast sweep that knocked both guns clear. Crouching low, Alec swept his left leg under one officer, taking the man's legs out and sending him tumbling down the stairs. In a second, Alec was upright again, punching the officer's partner in the solar plexus, causing him to double over in agony. Alec moved behind the officer, wrapping his arms around the man's neck, cutting off his airway. Ten seconds later, the limp body of the second officer followed his partner's down the stairs.

"Come on." Alec grabbed Logan's left arm and they quickly scrambled up the stairs, disappearing into the crowded market at the top.

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Act Two

Farmers' Market, Sector 9

"Walk, don't run," Alec directed as he and Logan wove through the crowd. "Don't draw attention. Take off your jacket and swing this over your shoulder, jacket on top." Alec handed Logan one of the backpacks.

"A small change in appearance creates significant confusion. Standard escape and evade procedure," Alec explained.

"Can't believe you bothered to retrieve the bags," Logan said breathlessly, complying with Alec's instructions.

"It's valuable merchandise, acquired by legitimate means," Alec retorted. "Why should the cops have it?"

Alec bought two apples from a vendor and tossed one to Logan.

"Smile. Laugh. I'm telling you about the hot babe I met last night."

Logan forced his features into a grin. "By all means, do," he replied, his breath still coming out in shallow gasps.

They walked a little farther, blending into the crowd, just a couple of guys looking for something to take home to the dinner table.

Near the middle of the market, they slipped between two stalls and quickly made their way behind one of the abandoned buildings lining the street, the sounds of the market fading into the background. Alec crouched down and pulled up a manhole cover, hidden under some stairs.

Logan climbed down into the sewer, Alec close behind. They jogged several hundred feet, turned right at the first junction and stopped.

“Sit, rest,” Alec directed. “We’re clear.”

Logan collapsed heavily against the nearest wall.

“Thanks for saving my butt back there,” he gasped, his face showing the strain of the previous few minutes.

Alec slid down the wall across from Logan. “Just returning the favor.” Their eyes met for a moment.

“What happened to you back there?” Alec asked.

“Not sure...tripped on a step,” Logan replied, confusion evident in his eyes. “One minute I was right behind you, the next I was on the ground. Ever had one of those nightmares? You know they’re closing in on you, but you can’t move?”

“More than I care to remember,” Alec nodded in recognition.

Logan looked at Alec in concern. “Didn’t think I’d freeze up like that.”

“Next time, try not to do it in front of guys with guns,” Alec replied.

“Yeah.” Logan shivered involuntarily, his frown deepening. “Haven’t been able to shake this fatigue. It’s been dogging me the last few weeks.”

“Endurance is an asset, but so is rest. Get as much as you can whenever you can. You never know when the next opportunity will come...standard Manticore protocol...” Alec’s voice drifted off. He paused for a moment, a faraway expression on his face, then stood up and reached a

hand out to Logan. "Let's go."

"Thanks for coming back." Logan grabbed Alec's hand and pulled himself up.

"Couldn't let all that good beer go to waste," Alec replied matter-of-factly before turning and heading down the sewer.

Jam Pony

Original Cindy was watching the afternoon news. The reports focused on the events occurring just outside Jam Pony's doors. She shook her head. "These people need to get a life."

"I don't know about a life, but you won't have a job if you don't deliver some packages, missy. Okay, you bums, I don't pay you take up space. Bip bip bip!" Normal glowered at his riders as he spoke. "Delivery, 5136 Cameron, and pickup on Transfer Avenue on the way back." Normal tossed a package to Original Cindy.

Original Cindy grabbed the package and tucked it in her pack. She waited for the door to be raised and quickly took off, weaving her way past protesters, reporters, and police. She sped through the streets, jumping piles of trash, diving down alleys, evading traffic. She was fast and efficient, one of Jam Pony's best riders. As she turned onto Seneca a police cruiser pulled out in front of her. "Damn," she said under her breath as she screeched to a halt. "Officer, can I help you?" Original Cindy smiled sweetly.

"I'm counting about ten traffic violations," the cop said. "Show me your identification. I want to know where you're going in such a hurry."

“Jam Pony messenger, officer. I’m makin’ a delivery.”

“Jam Pony, where all the trannie lovers hang out? Turn around and let me see the back of your neck.” The cop reached toward Original Cindy.

“Uh, uh.” Original Cindy held up a hand, stopping the shocked officer. “Nobody touches this body without permission.” She slowly turned exposing her neck then swivelled back, staring into the cop’s eyes. “This girl ain’t in the habit of fraternizing with people holdin’ a gun to her head.”

“Okay, you’re no transgenic. Now what are you going to do about these violations?”

“How about a donation in the name of law and order.” Original Cindy emptied her pockets and handed the cash to the cop.

The cop took the money. “It’ll do. I’d run you in if it weren’t for the paperwork. Get lost,” he said, climbing into the squad car.

“Po-pos stealin’ from the workin’ folk,” Original Cindy sighed.

After completing the delivery, Original Cindy hurried toward the pickup location, careful to avoid the sector cops since she was out of money for another payoff. In front of an old store selling odds and ends, she saw a girl of about fifteen, with long jet-black hair and soft gray-green eyes. Her clothes were dirty and she looked dog-tired.

Original Cindy approached her. “Got any gum, boo?”

The girl smiled, relief showing in her face. “How about some Orbit?”

"Just my flava. You've got Original Cindy here, lookin' out for you." Original Cindy held out her hand.

"X6-278. You can call me Blue." The girl grinned and shook Original Cindy's hand. "How does this work?"

"I'll take you to Jam Pony. We'll wait there for your transfer. Come on," she said, leading her to the alley behind the store. Under a pile of trash was a bicycle. "Follow me." Original Cindy hopped on her bike and rode away, Blue following closely behind.

Command Center, Terminal City

Max paced back and forth in the Command Center, stopping periodically to look over Luke's shoulder at the monitors. One screen flashed every few seconds, revealing different camera views of the Terminal City entrances. The other displayed a grid of the sewer system around Terminal City. Blinking red lights showed the movements of everyone traveling in the sewers.

"They're late." Max furrowed her brow and checked her watch.

"There they are!" Luke's announcement drew Max's attention back to the screen. Luke pointed at two red dots at a junction marked 'Manhole #6'. At the same moment, a disheveled Logan and Alec appeared on the adjacent monitor.

"I'm heading over there." Max walked out of the room, leaving a surprised Luke in her wake.

Manhole #6, Terminal City

Logan and Alec climbed out of Manhole 6 into the central courtyard outside the Command Center.

"I'm heading for the showers," Alec said. "Need to get this sewer scum off of me. You coming?"

"I'm gonna go over to the Command Center first," Logan replied distractedly, his eyes drifting in the direction of the Command Center.

"You don't have to check in. Camera caught us," Alec nodded, indicating the camera mounted on a wall of the building.

"I need to see Max," Logan replied, with an intensity that startled Alec.

Alec looked at Logan questioningly, then pointed toward the opening door at the far end of the courtyard. "You're in luck. Looks like she's coming to you."

Logan walked quickly toward Max, the distance between them vanishing in a few strides. He stopped a few inches in front of her, his eyes focused directly on her.

"Hey." Logan smiled down at Max.

"Hey, yourself," Max replied softly, looking up at Logan.

"You two act like you haven't seen each other in three years, not three hours." Alec rolled his eyes.

"You're late. Did something happen?" Max glared at Alec.

"Well..." Alec began before he caught the almost imperceptible shake of Logan's head.

"Stopped at the farmers' market is all," Alec continued casually.

"You should have checked in," Max snapped at him.

"Sorry." Alec raised his hands in surrender. "You don't have to bust my chops about it. I'm out of here." He

turned and walked toward the doorway. He stepped inside, but instead of closing the door, he leaned on the frame to watch Max and Logan.

Logan looked at Max's tired features. "Let's go," he said, taking Max's hand and leading her across the courtyard.

"Where?" Max asked halfheartedly, allowing Logan to lead her.

Logan turned to look at Max, concern showing in his eyes. "You're tired. Let me walk you to your quarters."

Max smiled as she shook her head. "X5s don't tire easily. I need to get back to the Command Center. We're doing a pickup today."

"Sometimes you need to just be Max." Logan gently ran his hands up and down her arm.

Max smiled tiredly. "You're dirty," she commented, leaning her forehead against his chest.

Logan closed his eyes and rested his chin on top of Max's head. They relaxed against each other for a few moments before Logan inhaled with a displeased grimace.

"I gotta clean up." Logan nudged Max gently.

"Mmm," Max replied as she rested contentedly against him.

"But I appreciate you wanting to be around me when I stink like a Seattle trash bin." He reluctantly, yet determinedly, pulled away from Max.

Max simply smiled at him.

"Take a break." With one last glance toward Max, he turned and left.

Max looked up to see Alec still watching from the doorway. He quickly disappeared into the building, pulling the door closed behind him. Max shrugged and plopped down on one of the decrepit courtyard benches for a few stolen minutes of relaxation in the afternoon sun.

Infirmary, Terminal City

Logan walked slowly toward the infirmary, his steps echoing hollowly. He stopped and placed his hand on the door. After a moment, he pulled his hand back and started to walk away.

Aveta appeared in the doorway. “Logan? Did you need something?”

Logan turned to face her. “Oh, hey, Aveta. No, I was just passing by. I decided not to disturb you. How are the supplies?”

Aveta smiled and said, “Supplies are great...it’s actually beginning to look like a field hospital. And we’ve had power all day.”

“That’s good news. Looks like things are going well here.” Logan returned Aveta’s smile.

“Are you sure I can’t help you with anything?” Aveta asked again.

“Yeah. Look, I need to get going. I’ll talk to you later. Okay?” Logan turned to leave.

“I’m here if you need me,” Aveta said softly.

Logan hesitated a moment before walking away. Aveta sighed as she watched him, then turned and closed the door.

Seattle Street – Late afternoon

Max glided down the street, moving with feline grace. She was heading in the general direction of Jam Pony, but she took a circuitous route down the byways and back streets of Seattle, avoiding suspicious eyes and sector checkpoints.

Jam Pony

Original Cindy and Blue came in the back door. They walked over to the window and looked out at the protesters shouting below.

“Transgenics don’t deserve any rights. They aren’t human. Would you give your dog civil liberties?”

“Round ‘em up and give them back to the military. Let them take care of ‘em.”

“Put them back in cages where they belong—not out among decent working people.”

Normal shook his head as he watched the protest coverage on TV. All his riders were transfixed by the screen. “Okay, people, business to run. Your fifteen minutes of fame are up and you’re on the clock. Damn transgenics, causing me nothing but problems. Let’s go! Move it!”

The riders shuffled over to get packages. As the door opened to let the riders out, Sketchy came strolling in.

Normal pounced. “Sketchy! Close the door and get over here. I don’t want any reporters in here.”

“I’m a reporter,” Sketchy replied as he lowered the door and walked toward Normal.

“I don’t mean you. Reporting connotes literacy,” Normal said, looking down at the invoices. He looked at Sketchy

again, appearing lost for a moment. “You know, I always believed in the rule of law. Never thought I would be doing this. But the stakes are higher now. People’s lives are on the line.”

Sketchy looked at Normal, at a loss for words. He changed the subject quickly. “If you haven’t noticed, which you probably haven’t, I have personally made Jam Pony a hotbed of transgenic protest. Pretty cool if you ask me.”

“No one’s asking,” Normal replied. “Get lost and take this package with you. It needs a home.”

Sketchy trotted upstairs to the second floor. When he opened the door, he felt a strong arm grab him and twist his arm behind him. “Hey! I’m one of the good guys!” he shouted in surprise.

“I thought you said this place was safe. What the hell is going on here?” Blue demanded. She pushed Sketchy into Original Cindy and slammed the door.

“Blue, it’s all good,” Original Cindy said. “He’s on our side.”

“Yeah, I even brought you something to eat.” Sketchy handed the package to Blue, giving his arm a shake. “Man, that hurt!”

Blue warily took the package and sat down on an old couch, devouring the food, “Thanks,” she said, looking up.

Outside, Max crept silently up the back stairs. She slid in the door unnoticed and slipped inside.

“Hey,” she said as she stepped out of the shadows. “Thought I’d stop by and see how the operation was going.”

"Max!" Original Cindy bounded over to Max and hugged her, as Blue looked on curiously.

"You're choking me here!" Max laughed.

"Original Cindy stepped back to admire her friend. "You look good, boo...and your tattoos are gone..."

"Max looked down at her arms. "For now...who knows when they'll come back."

"And White's dead," Original Cindy continued smiling. "Takes a load off everyone's shoulders."

"It's all good," Max grinned back then thrust out her hand for Blue to shake. "You must be the pickup...name's Blue, right?"

"You're Max?" Blue asked. "But I thought you were in Terminal City."

"Girl's gotta get out sometime," Max replied with a wry smile. "You ready to head for the Promised Land? Follow me." Blue grabbed her backpack and trailed closely behind Max as they walked to the door. Max turned to look back at Original Cindy and Sketchy. "Good work," she said before the two girls disappeared from sight.

Seattle Street

Max and Blue slipped on hats and shades and walked silently down the side streets, retracing Max's route from Terminal City. After several blocks, they became aware of footsteps close behind them. Max signaled to Blue and they turned a corner, stopping in an abandoned alley. Four men halted in surprise, bumping into one another.

Cocking her head, Max asked, "Problem, boys?"

The leader of the group spoke up. "No, baby. We just

wondered which of one us you'd find better-looking." He leered at Max.

Max replied sweetly, "Aww!" She looked at Blue as if in total fascination. "Aren't they charming?"

Blue played along. "Absolutely," she cooed.

The leader stepped forward. "Since we're all in a good mood here, how about you two accompany us back to our place?" His friends started hooting.

Ignoring his question, Max asked, "What's your name, hun?"

"My friends call me Renz. This here's Edge, Pace, and Spleen."

"Say, Renz, me and my girl still have a coupla runs. Our boss'll bust our ass if we don't deliver the goods," Max replied sweetly.

"Come on, baby. You can always tell your boss that a client held you up."

Max tried again. "Why don't cha meet us after our shift? There's a bar around the corner."

Seeing that Max and Blue were not as accommodating as he'd hoped, Renz frowned. "You turning me down?"

"Sorry, pal. Gotta jet."

"You can't leave us hanging like that. Guys gotta have some love. And you're just the babes to give it to us." Renz's tone was hard.

Edge suddenly lunged forward, grabbing Blue. Blue struggled with him, jerking away.

Renz laughed. "You wanna play rough, huh, baby?"

Max and Blue were on full battle alert. “You don’t know how rough,” Max growled.

Edge grabbed Blue’s arms from behind as Spleen stepped in front of her. Using Spleen’s body for leverage, she kicked her feet into his chest and flipped backwards over Edge. Landing gracefully, Blue swiftly kicked Edge’s back, sending him crashing forward into Spleen. Smiling, she brushed a strand of hair from her eyes as the two fell to the ground.

Renz brandished a knife, springing toward Max as Pace tried to seize her. Moving with lightning speed, Max punched Pace in the stomach, sending him to the ground. Spinning to face Renz, Max quickly moved aside as he lunged for her, grabbing him by the collar and throwing him onto a pile of boxes.

Scrambling to their feet, Spleen and Edge attempted to attack Blue again. Edge struck her from behind and she lost her balance, falling to the ground. Spleen smiled as he stepped closer, raising his foot to kick her. Catching his shoe firmly, Blue rolled over, slamming Spleen onto his back. Jumping up, she exchanged several blows with Edge before landing a kick to his face that sent him down.

Picking up a metal pipe, Pace swung it, connecting with Max’s stomach. As she doubled over, Renz landed a blow to her side. Crouching over her, Pace raised his arm to strike her again. As he brought the pipe down, Max grabbed it, wrenching it out of his hand, rolling over quickly to stand up. Throwing the pipe aside, Max leapt at Renz and Pace, landing one high kick on each, sending them sprawling.

While the men lay on the ground groaning, Max and Blue stood up, brushing dust off their hands. As they turned to

leave the alley, Max called out over her shoulder. “It’s been fun, boys!”

Barracks, Terminal City

Max walked into the barracks building. She stopped for a moment, scanning the large open room in front of her, and then quickly bounded up the flight of stairs to the second floor. The open area had originally been split up into hundreds of tiny work cubicles, separated by moveable dividers. The transgenics had gradually cleared out all the furniture and assorted debris and laid down rows of bedrolls on the floor. By keeping only a few strategically placed dividers for privacy, they had created a layout patterned after their Manticore barracks.

At first the barracks had been segregated along racial lines, the X-series on the ground floor and the transhumans on the top floor. As the weeks had passed, the lines had blurred—first for functional reasons as work teams found it easier to bunk together, later for social reasons as friendship groups developed. Even the nomlies, who had lived most of their lives in isolation, were beginning to venture out of the small offices that lined the perimeter of the open areas to join their newfound friends. The larger offices had been taken over by the X5 and X6 females who, like Gem, needed a quiet place to raise the children conceived in Renfro’s short-lived but effective breeding program.

Max spent little time in the barracks. She’d drop by once a day for a quick shower, but preferred to catch what little sleep she needed on the sofa in the Command Center. Logan, on the other hand, had carved out a place for himself in an office in the far corner of the second floor.

Max scanned the mostly deserted room, nodding at the

few transgenics who hadn't left during the evening rush for the mess hall. Most were lying on their bedrolls, taking advantage of the quiet to read or sleep. She walked past the rows of bedrolls, and stepped into the hallway at the far end. She found Logan in his room, sitting on a battered chair with his back to the door. He was dressed in a pair of boxers and a khaki tank top, his clothes thrown casually on his bedroll. His wet hair stuck out in every direction. A damp towel tossed carelessly on another chair was further evidence of a recent shower. With a screwdriver clenched in his teeth and a ratchet wrench in his hand, he methodically worked on the exoskeleton lying across his lap.

Max smiled and walked toward him.

"Hey," she said softly as she straddled the chair. Tossing the towel on the floor, she propped her elbows on the backrest.

"Hey, you." Logan flashed her a smile.

"Got Blue, our new X6, fed and settled in," Max reported, giving Logan an admiring once-over. "Missed you at the mess hall."

"Yeah." Logan returned her look. "I thought I'd take advantage of the rare quiet in this place to do some fine-tuning on this contraption."

"Haven't seen you break that out in a while."

"Figured it was time to bring it back into service," Logan replied.

Max's face instantly clouded. "Did something happen today?"

"Had a run-in with a couple of Seattle's finest," Logan admitted.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“It’s okay, Max,” Logan said quietly. “We had to make a quick break. Would have gone smoother if I had been wearing the exoskeleton.”

“Had an encounter of my own heading back today. I forgot how much fun kicking ass could be. I should get out more often.” Max grinned for a moment, then her smile faded once again. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Logan smiled in reassurance. “But it did remind me that I’m only human and that we’re still under siege. The Familiars may be gone, but we could find ourselves in another crisis at any moment. There’s no reason for me to put you, Alec, or anyone else at risk when I’ve got a tool at my disposal that allows me to carry my own weight.”

“You’re not really concerned about carrying your weight, are you?” Max asked.

“Not really, but Alec could tell you anytime what this thing is capable of,” Logan grinned.

“I just thought you were tired of it, that’s all.”

“I am. I prefer to move under my own steam.” Logan put the exo aside and stood up.

“Truth is, Max,” he said, taking a couple of steps toward her. “There’s nothing like getting something back you thought was lost forever.”

* * * * *

Act Three

Jam Pony - Morning

Normal stood behind his desk, frowning. “Which one of you lowlifes delivered a package to 1013 5th Avenue yesterday?” Normal shouted at his half-asleep staff.

Everyone stopped what he or she was doing, looked around, and went back to the usual business of ignoring Normal. Sky went to the desk. “What’s the problem, man? I got the signature.”

“I am not man, or dude. I am your boss. Ergo, I pay you to do a job. It’s not a hard job. Most idiots can accomplish the menial tasks I give them. You, however, seem not to be able to accomplish even that much.” Normal’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “You delivered a package to an M. Johnston when it should have been delivered to an M. Johnson. I just finished a call with an irate husband wondering why we were delivering expensive lingerie to his wife.”

“How was I supposed to know?” Sky asked, wounded.

“You’re not supposed to know, just look at the address. It’s a simple thing. Now get out of my sight!” Normal yelled. “Idiot,” he muttered, picking up the ringing phone.

“Hot run! 3976 Cameron Street, and on your way back, a pickup on Transfer Avenue.” Normal tossed a bulky envelope in Sketchy’s general direction. Sketchy caught it on the fly, waited for the door to open, and left, dodging reporters, police, and protesters. Sky followed quickly.

Just past the corner, they stopped for a moment and

looked at the envelope. "Sector 3, 3976...is in sector 3," Sketchy said to Sky and tossed him the package. He took off riding hard for sector 3 and the pickup. Sky watched him go, and then went to run interference.

Sector 3, Seattle

Sketchy rode by a block of dilapidated gray buildings, obviously long abandoned. Looking around, he didn't see anyone.

"Crap, I must have missed him," he said to himself. He climbed off his bike and walked to the end of the block without seeing anyone who might be his pickup. He was about to climb back on his bike when he felt a hand on his arm. Startled, Sketchy looked down and saw a nondescript little man standing in front of him. The man could only be described as brown, from his clothes to his mousy hair.

"Did you drop this?" the man asked quietly, handing Sketchy a package of gum.

"Yeah, I did," Sketchy said. "I'm sorry, man. I didn't see you standing there."

"Don't worry, most people don't see me. I expect it," he replied. "Can we get going? The longer we're out here, the greater the possibility of being detected. Right now, we have a 74.23% chance of making it back to Jam Pony undetected."

Sketchy looked him. "Gotta name?"

The man was nonplussed. "A name? No one has ever asked me for a name before. Just call me Henry. Henry Brown."

"Okay, Henry Brown. I'm Sketchy. Glad to meet you."

Sketchy thrust out his hand. Henry tentatively put his hand out, and Sketchy shook it vigorously, making Henry smile. “We better get going, or Normal is going to be all over my ass. We have to take the back way. It’ll be longer...” Sketchy kept talking as he led Henry away.

Jam Pony

Normal stalked up and down the pavement outside Jam Pony in a futile attempt to get rid of the protesters. He saw a bored beat cop watching the crowd and accosted him. “Officer, can’t you make these people disperse? Isn’t there some kind of law?”

The cop smiled insolently. “People have a right to protest.”

Sensing no help from the police, Normal shrugged and went back inside. He didn’t see the two dusty black delivery vans drive slowly past and park. The NSA operatives inside were setting up heat sensors. “You sure this guy’s on the level?” one operative asked the other, switching on the equipment.

“He worked there, said he saw transgenics. That’s all we have. We’ve made busts on less information. So until I say otherwise, we’re staking out Jam Pony. Capiisce?” Agent Martin snapped at him.

Sketchy, Henry, and Sky were working their way back to Jam Pony when Henry began to get agitated. “We need to stop. There’s a 97% chance we’re being tracked.”

“How do you know that? We haven’t had any trouble.” Sketchy stopped, confused.

“It’s my job to know!” Henry hissed.

“We’ll go in the back way up the stairs. It won’t be a prob-

lem.” Sketchy led the way.

Once upstairs, Sketchy reached for the light switch while Sky walked to the window to survey the street below. Sketchy turned to usher Henry in, but instead was met by three NSA agents storming into the room. Sketchy’s eyes widened in shock. “Ca-ca-can I help you?”

“Who’s here with you?” Agent Martin grabbed Sketchy’s shirt, menacingly getting into his face.

“Just us two, sir. Please, sir, could you let go of my shirt?” Sketchy stammered.

The NSA agent pushed Sketchy away in disgust. “Spread out,” he called. “Check everything.”

“Nothing here!” one of the agents called out.

“Move out,” Agent Martin ordered, and they left as abruptly as they had arrived.

Sketchy hesitated a few moments, then walked to the door and opened it tentatively. He scanned the alley for any signs of movement, but found none. It was completely deserted.

Barracks Courtyard, Terminal City

The morning was bright and brisk; the sun shone down on a group of transgenics in the courtyard of the barracks building. Someone had built a makeshift basketball court, putting to use the couple of basketballs that had somehow arrived with a supply run. A few were playing a pickup game of half court. Others were just standing around taking in the sun and watching Alec at the other end of the court.

Alec, as usual, was showing off, deftly sinking three point-

ers. There was occasional clapping and a loud raspberry when he missed a shot. "Hey!" he said, looking around for the offender. He spied Logan walking across the open space. Alec's eyes lighted with anticipation. "Hey, Logan, ol' buddy."

Logan stopped, arched his eyebrow, and asked suspiciously, "What, Alec?"

"Wanna shoot a few hoops, or aren't you up for it?" Alec tucked the basketball under his arm and put his hands in front of his body, palms out.

"You know how to play basketball? They teach you that at Manticore?" Logan replied with a glint in his eye.

"I know everything Abner Doubleday ever said about basketball," Alec boasted.

Logan snorted and said, "That's great, Alec, if you want to know when to lay down a bunt. James Naismith invented basketball."

"Yeah, whatever," Alec shrugged. "So you on, or are you going to stand around giving history lessons?"

"I'm ready if you are." Logan pulled off his sweatshirt, tossing it to the ground.

Alec bounced the ball slowly, then tossed it to Logan. "The game's Twenty-One. I'll let you have first possession, since you're only human."

"Fine by me if you want to stand around like an old woman, but I thought you wanted to play basketball. How about we go one-on-one, full court, first one to twenty? I've evened the playing field a bit." Logan moved and Alec heard the mechanical whine of the exoskeleton. "You think you can take me, Yapper?" Logan smiled broadly,

enjoying himself as he bounced the ball.

“What did you just call me?” Alec asked in disbelief.

“You heard me. All talk, no show.”

“I’m so going to enjoy beating your ass,” Alec said, moving into a defensive position.

“You and what army?” Logan danced backward, dribbling the ball easily. He feinted to the left; Alec followed. Logan spun back to the right, jumped and shot; the ball fell easily into the net. “Yessss, nothing but net,” Logan grinned, with a gleam in his eye.

A buzz started up among the onlookers.

Alec dribbled down the court, Logan guarding him closely. Alec moved left and stopped at the top of the key, jumped, and released the ball. It floated upward, only to be met by Logan’s hand, the exo kicking into high gear as he blocked the shot.

“Blocked shot, possession Logan,” Dix called. Alec and Logan looked at each other and then at Dix. “Hey, you need a referee, and I’ve read the rule book,” Dix shrugged.

The crowd on the sidelines grew. Transgenics drifted in from all around Terminal City. Ginger and Luke joined the crowd. The morning began to heat up, as did the game. The intensity of Alec and Logan’s expressions was mirrored by the intensity of their play. Traces of a bruise appeared on Logan’s jaw. Alec looked like he was going to have a shiner. Both had rivulets of sweat running down their faces; their t-shirts were soaked. Logan called time; the score was 18-16 in favor of Alec.

“You guys are running me ragged. I’m not exactly designed for this. And if I see any more elbows thrown, I’m

stopping the game,” Dix panted.

Max walked up to Ginger. “What’s going on?” she asked, eyeing Logan appreciatively.

Ginger rolled her eyes and replied. “Human or transgenic, battlefield or basketball court, the male species has to prove its manhood.”

“No wonder you and Original Cindy get along so well,” Max grinned. She grabbed the towel Ginger was holding and walked over to Logan.

“Hey,” she said, tossing him the towel. “How’s it going?”

Logan grabbed it and mopped his face. “Okay. He’s good,” he said, indicating Alec.

“You expected it to be a walk in the park? Think you can take him?” Max asked.

“I can take him,” Logan replied and then grinned. “If I win, dinner at my place?”

“And if you lose?” Max replied archly, one hand on her hip.

“I guess you’ll have to find a suitable punishment,” Logan grinned, sauntering back onto the court.

Alec took his time, bouncing the ball, taunting Logan. “You really thought you could take me? I’m beating you like a drum.”

“Game’s not over yet,” Logan snapped back.

Alec bounced the ball a little more emphatically than before. He drove toward the basket, jumping simultaneously with Logan. His shoulder slammed into Logan’s chest, knocking him backward. Logan fell hard, the wind knocked out of him.

“Foul! Charging!” Dix yelled.

Logan lay on the ground, gasping for air. Max watched from the sidelines, not making a move.

“Hey, are you going to get up?” Alec challenged him. “Or are you just buying time ‘cause you know you’re beat?”

With that, Logan got up. He took the ball from Dix, threw Alec a poisonous glare, and headed toward the free-throw line.

Logan slowly bounced the ball, taking his time before making the shot. Swoosh! He smiled as the ball fell through the basket. Taking the next shot, he grinned again at the second swoosh. The game was tied at eighteen.

Alec took the ball and began moving again. He looked at Logan guarding him. Logan was breathing hard and sweating profusely. Alec sprinted for the basket, but Logan was there to meet him, blocking the shot. Alec backed to the top of the key and shot. Clang! The harsh sound confirmed the two-pointer missed.

Logan quickly snatched the ball and ran up the court. Alec met him at the basket. Logan feinted right, then turned left. He stopped and shot from the bottom of the key, and groaned as the ball bounced off the rim and fell away. Alec seized his opportunity and grabbed the ball. In seconds he was down the court, watching as his shot dropped in.

Alec jumped in the air. “Yes!” he yelled. He looked at Logan in triumph as the crowd erupted in cheers.

“Max!” Mole, pushed through the crowd at the sidelines, his voice drawing everyone’s attention. “We’ve got a situation in the sewers.”

“Report,” Max directed, shooting Logan and Alec a look of concern.

“Kit and Kat were out on a scheduled supply run. They’re over an hour late checking in. Monitors showed two people arriving in the west sewer entrance a few minutes ago. They progressed about two hundred feet down the sewer, toward Terminal City, then stopped. Haven’t moved since. Just doesn’t smell right to me.”

“Did you send a TAC team to check it out?”

“Already on their way. If we step on it, we can catch up with them.” The game was instantly forgotten as Max and Mole took off at a dead run, followed closely by Alec and Logan.

They arrived at the sewer entrance a minute later and scrambled down the ladder. Working their way along in the gloom, they rapidly closed in on the TAC team several hundred feet ahead. Max quickened her pace as the TAC team disappeared around a corner.

Max turned the corner to find the TAC team stopped in their tracks, staring down in stunned silence. She pushed her way through the bodies and discovered Kat kneeling on the ground, cradling her sister in her arms. An almost inconsequential red stain marked Kit’s shirt, but her lifeless eyes revealed the truth. Tears poured down Kat’s cheeks as she clutched her sister’s inert body, rocking back and forth. At Max’s appearance, she tried to stop the tears, awkwardly brushing them away.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” she reported, reverting to her Manticore training. “Mission failed.” Then she broke down again, trying desperately to explain through her tears. “It was supposed to be routine...don’t know how it happened...they had guns and...cell got damaged, we could-

n't check in...she said it was nothing...then she collapsed...she said she could make it...she said it was nothing. Kit..." She murmured, burying her face in her sister's hair.

Tears streaming down her own cheeks, Max knelt down, wrapping her arms around both girls, supporting them in their slow, swaying dance of death and grief. She glanced up to see Logan making his way through the group. She looked at him, her eyes asking, "When will this ever end?"

* * * * *

Act Four

Terminal City - Morning

The morning was cool and cloudy. It rained the night before. The wind blew sodden trash from the slick streets into deserted buildings. Transgenics moved furtively from building to building. Lookouts on the roof that yesterday were relaxed, today were vigilant.

Max and Logan were on patrol. They walked purposefully down the street, peering into dirty windows, stopping occasionally to check with the lookouts on the roofs.

"Thanks for coming with me," Max said.

"No problem," replied Logan. "How is Kat?"

"Not great...she spent the night with Aveta. She shouldn't be alone. Logan, what is she going to do? She's lost half of herself," Max said with a tremor in her voice. "This is my fault," she whispered.

Logan grabbed Max's arm and pulled her into the doorway of a building. "Max, it was a supply run that went sideways," he said softly.

"We let our guard down, Logan! When White was killed, we thought everything was going to be okay. Nothing will ever be okay. There's a world full of people out there who want to see us dead or in a cage. We can never forget that."

"They knew the risks, everyone does."

"You and Alec could have gotten yourselves killed or captured on that beer run. You could have gotten killed

over beer!” Max looked up at Logan, her face tight with grief and concern.

Logan put his arms around Max and held her close, comforting her as best he could.

“We’d better check this building out.” Max finally pulled away.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, opening doors and peering into empty rooms. They reached the end of the hall and headed up the stairway to the second floor.

“Labs up here are in pretty good shape. Doesn’t look like anyone’s claimed them,” Max remarked.

They continued working their way down the hall, checking each room.

“I like this one,” Max said casually as they walked into a room about halfway down the hall. “Front office, decontamination shower, and back lab area complete with a sink and Bunsen burner. You could cook a five-course meal in here.” Max gave Logan a deadpan look as she walked past the shower area into the back laboratory.

While Logan walked around checking out the remnants of the equipment, Max went into the shower and idly turned the tap. The pipes gurgled for a moment, and suddenly a spurt of water shot out.

“It’s got running water,” she called out in surprise.

As she turned off the tap, her eye caught a silver gleam just under the showerhead. She reached up and pressed the small button. At her touch, the wall opened away from her, revealing a large room.

“Logan,” she called out, her voice low. “You need to see this.”

The tone of her voice brought Logan instantly to her side. They exchanged questioning glances before stepping through the opening. They paused a moment, allowing their eyes to adjust to the darkness inside. The room contained the outlines of a computer console, two sets of bunk beds, and a bank of storage cabinets filling one wall from floor to ceiling.

“Wow...what is this place?” Max asked, moving in to survey the room more closely.

“Looks like a panic room...I could use some more light,” Logan explained, groping along the wall for a light switch.

“I think you’re out of luck on that front,” Max began, just as Logan’s fingers found the switch and the room flooded with bright light.

“Fluorescents never die.” Logan shot Max a pleased smile.

“Think anyone’s ever been in here?” Max asked. The room was pristine, without a speck of dust anywhere.

“From the looks of the place, I doubt it,” Logan replied. “They probably built it and forgot about it.”

They walked over to the storage cabinets and began opening doors.

“Gallons of sterile water, packaged 2005, expires 2105, freeze-dried food, preparation instructions, first aid kits,” Logan said, rattling off the cabinet’s inventory. “There’s enough here for four people to survive three months easily.”

Max opened the doors of the next cabinet. “Hazmat suits in this one.” Max swung the door wide to allow Logan to see the four suits hanging from a rail.

“Whoever built this place intended to survive anything

that was thrown at them,” Max whistled in amazement.

Logan nodded in agreement. “A completely self-contained unit, protected against all outside hazards. Smell the air, Max.”

“Fresh.” Max turned to Logan questioningly. “The air conditioning has been running for sixteen years without breaking down?”

“Must have its own generator hidden somewhere, probably powered by fuel cell technology. Those things can last hundreds of years. Bet that’s the control unit right there.” Logan began walking toward the computer console.

“Amazing,” Logan whispered while examining the computer. “Pentium X, 100 Gig PC, circa 2005. Had one in high school. This thing’s an antique.”

“Can’t still be working after the Pulse?” Max said doubtfully.

“I can almost guarantee this room was EMP-hardened. Steel-reinforced walls, recirculating air filters, the whole works. Let’s find out.” Logan sat down and gave the keyboard a quick tap. The monitors sprang to life.

“Wow.” Max didn’t bother to hide her surprise.

“It’s all here, environmental controls, camera feeds, insulated fiber optic connection to the outside,” Logan explained, bringing up a map of Terminal City that showed the camera locations. “Cameras are down, though – probably pilfered right after the Pulse. So is the internet connection.”

Logan turned and looked at Max. “I bet you there are half a dozen rooms like this scattered throughout Terminal City.”

“Why weren’t they used when the Pulse hit?”

“You have to remember that in its day, Terminal City was the most high-tech area in Seattle. These labs had sophisticated backup systems in place. When the power went out, the secondary generators kicked in, giving them enough time to get their people out. Those backup systems were a godsend. Without them we would have been looking at a citywide disaster, not just a twenty-block contamination zone. I could spend hours here,” Logan said, burying himself in the system. He looked up a few minutes later and saw a dark shadow cross Max’s face.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just this room. Gives me the creeps.” Max shivered involuntarily. “Feels too much like a cell to me.”

“I hear you.” Logan got up and led Max out of the room, turning off the lights as they stepped out. The door automatically closed behind them.

They completed a quick walk-through of the rest of the building and stepped back into the street, only to see Dalton hurrying toward them.

“This guy just arrived, wants to talk to you. Says it’s urgent,” Dalton explained. “Says he’s an X-series, but he doesn’t look like any X-series I’ve ever seen.”

“What does he look like?” Max asked..

“Tall...no, short. Geez, I can’t remember.” Dalton looked at Max in confusion.

“I think I know who it might be.” Max sighed with relief. “Let’s go.”

Command Center, Terminal City

Henry Brown looked around Terminal City's Command Center. "There is a 95% chance that this building will hold up in the event of an attack. As for the power staying on, probabilities suggest no more than 60%."

The few transgenics in the Command Center didn't notice the strange muttering man.

Across the room, Max arrived with Dalton in tow. Dalton looked around, trying to find the elusive transgenic. Finally, he indicated Henry with a nod of his head.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Max asked, walking over to Henry.

"Uh...you...uh..." Henry stared at her, transfixed.

"What?" Max looked at him expectantly.

Henry just looked at her.

"Look, if you have something to say, spill. Otherwise, Dalton will hook you up with a bedroll and a place to bunk." Max smiled in amusement at the transgenic's nervousness.

He shifted uneasily. "I was being tracked."

That got Max's undivided attention. "What? You led—"

Henry backed up in fear and held up his hands to ward off Max. "I-I-I detected the trace at the messenger service. There's less than a 1% probability that they followed me here; I spent the last twenty-four hours ensuring that."

"At Jam Pony? What the hell is going on?"

Just then, Logan entered the Command Center. He instantly recognized the look of concern on Max's face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, giving Henry an intense look that sent him into another bout of stuttering.

“Th-th-the NSA. 98.9 % probability that they are using heat sensors to detect transgenics. Transgenic body temperatures average three degrees higher than human. They’ve got Jam Pony staked out.”

Realization hit Max. “Oh, God! There’s a pickup in fifteen minutes. We’ve got to get someone out there to warn them.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that strategy. Any team you send out has a 90% chance of capture.”

“We’ve got to alert them!” Max insisted.

“Simple solutions have the highest probability of success,” Henry stated pointedly.

Max caught his gaze for a moment, then turned and shouted at the transgenics who had followed her into the Command Center.

“Someone get me a phone. Now!”

Jam Pony

Except for the media circus outside its doors, it was a typical day at Jam Pony. Normal looked around at his motley crew. They were draped across the furniture, talking and watching TV. What they were not doing, however, was delivering packages. Normal walked out of the cage and clicked off the TV.

“I pay you to deliver packages. This is not a social club,” he yelled. “You know, people used to take pride in their work, had a sense of accomplishment at a job well done. Look at you bums, for the love of GHWB...” Normal’s

voice trailed off as the riders disregarded his rant and went back to their conversations.

Sketchy and Sky were sitting together, drinking sodas. "GHWB?" Sky asked. "That's a new one."

"George Herbert Walker Bush," Sketchy replied.

"Ahhh, I see," Sky nodded knowingly.

"Bip bip bip, people. Let's go! Packages waiting for a home. No delivery, no paycheck." Normal smiled with satisfaction, knowing he had grabbed the riders' attention.

The riders unwound themselves from the couches and chairs and filed forward for the afternoon runs. The phone rang and Normal answered.

"Jam Pony here to serve your delivery needs. How may we help you?" He tossed packages to riders as they filed toward the door. "Yes, ma'am, thank you for using Jam Pony. Hot run, 9820 Cameron Street and pickup, Transfer Avenue," Normal called.

Sky looked at Sketchy and said, "I'll take this run. Haven't made a pickup today."

"No, I'll take it," Sketchy countered. "You can run interference."

"Why me, man? You run interference!" Sketchy and Sky continued to argue as they walked toward the door.

The phone rang again. "Jam Pony," Normal's voice rang out. He quickly hung up and looked around for Sketchy and Sky.

"Stop, you slackers. You missed the run." Normal gave Sketchy a look of relief and continued his rant without missing a beat. "Customer called and canceled. I lost a

bundle of cash because of you idiots. Get out of my..."

A burst of static from the TV stopped Normal in mid-sentence.

"This is a Streaming Freedom Video Bulletin. The cable hack will last exactly sixty seconds. It cannot be traced, it cannot be stopped, and it is the only free voice left in the city. For the past six months, Eyes Only has been watching the transgenics struggle for freedom in Seattle. Some say the transgenics are a threat. Some say they are diseased. Don't believe everything the fearmongers tell you. The transgenics are like you and me. They struggle like you and me. They bleed like you and me. They seek freedom like you and me. They were designed to be soldiers, to protect our nation. They have fought and died for our freedom. But can any of us be free if those who fight for us are treated like slaves? If we allow them to be enslaved, will we be far behind? Who will be next...our friends, our neighbors, ourselves? This has been a Streaming Freedom Video Bulletin via the Eyes Only informant net. Stay strong in the struggle. Peace. Out."

Eyes Only Broadcast Center

Logan stared at his eyes on the screen, bordered by Eyes Only's red, white, and blue. He flicked off the camera and smiled slightly at the blank screen that now reflected his whole face back at him. He stood up and walked to the door, turning to survey the room for a moment, casting a quick glance at the computer console, bunk beds, and storage cabinets. The fluorescent lights cast a slight greenish hue on everything.

Logan punched the code into the keypad beside the door-frame, causing the door to swing open. He stepped out of the room and the door shut automatically behind him. He

stripped quickly and tossed his clothes out the shower door. Turning on the tap, he shivered as the cold water hit him. He picked up the bar of soap and quickly lathered up. Two minutes later, he stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist.

“What are you doing here?” A harsh voice accosted him.

Logan turned quickly to see Mole approaching him, a cigar clenched in his teeth and a rifle firmly gripped in his hands.

“Hey, Mole, you startled me,” Logan sighed with relief, picking his clothes up off the floor.

“Was on patrol and heard the water running. Came to check it out. How long have you been in there?”

“A few minutes,” Logan replied casually.

Mole gave Logan a skeptical glance and asked again, “So what are you doing here?”

“Besides taking a shower?” Logan asked. “Thought I’d move in. Barracks are getting too crowded.”

Mole looked around the room, his eyes inspecting everything. “Not a bad place. Bit off the beaten path, but does have the benefit of a private shower.” Mole paused and stared expectantly at Logan, waiting for a further explanation. Logan stared back, holding Mole’s gaze.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it.” Mole turned to leave, then stopped and looked back at Logan. He spat out the remnants of his cigar and fished another from his jacket pocket. “Maybe I should stake out one of these places for myself. Could use some more space.” He gave Logan a final appraising look, turned, and walked out of the room.

Jam Pony

A well-dressed businessman walked briskly down the sidewalk across from Jam Pony. Stopping for a moment, he dropped a couple of bucks at the feet of a beggar leaning against a lamppost.

“Agent Martin,” the beggar said, looking up. “We’ve got the place completely covered. Got a couple of sensors on each exit, including the rat holes on the far wall. If a fly runs a temperature anywhere near that place, we’ll know it.”

The beggar opened his jacket, revealing a small monitor screen. The screen crackled and then displayed a rider pulling up into Jam Pony’s entrance. She was talking on a cell phone.

“Rider 21 checking in. Delivery complete.”

The monitor displayed the rider’s heat signature, 98.6 degrees. The agents looked at her as she rode the bike directly through the entrance. She was dressed in typical street grunge style, her Jam Pony baseball cap pulled low over her forehead.

“Gotta hand it to those couriers,” Agent Martin smirked. “You can never accuse them of excessive intelligence. She waited until she was five feet from the entrance to check in.”

The rider rolled down the ramp and pulled up in front of the cage.

“Normal! TV’s on the blink!” a couple of messengers griped.

“I don’t pay you to watch TV, so get off your duffs and deliver some packages,” Normal replied caustically.

“And no riding inside!” he yelled, changing gears without missing a beat, his head still buried in paperwork. He looked up and his eyes widened in shock.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he said. “You’ve caused me enough trouble already.”

“Thanks for the heartwarming welcome,” Max replied sarcastically. “Delivery for Reagan Ronald.” She pulled a box out of her knapsack and slammed it on the counter. “Where’s Original Cindy?”

“Not on a run,” he said, returning the sarcasm. “Check the lockers.”

Normal opened the box to reveal six cell phones tucked closely together, wrapped in a sheet of paper labeled ‘Instructions for Use’.

Command Center, Terminal City

Logan and Dix sat in the Command Center, monitoring activity in the sewers and preparing for the next underground railroad delivery.

“Glad we were able to rig those miniature pulse devices in the cell phones we sent off to Jam Pony,” Dix smiled. “Might take out a TV or two in their wake, but at least the NSA’s heat sensors will be useless.”

“Our own electromagnetic pulse. How ironic,” Logan smiled enigmatically.

Jam Pony

Max sauntered over to the lockers and placed a hand on Original Cindy’s shoulder, turning her around.

“Max!” Original Cindy squealed as she threw her arms

around her friend.

“Hey, OC,” Max smiled happily.

“What gives? Pickup’s not for another hour.” Original Cindy looked at Max questioningly.

Max shrugged. “I thought I’d take the time to catch up. You know, get in touch with what it feels like to be a regular girl working in Jam Pony hell.”

“You know I love you, boo. But you risking life and limb twice in a week to visit your boo is a bit much, ain’t it?”

Max shrugged her shoulders again.

“Wassup, boo? Al’ good with Logan?”

“Better than good,” Max said with a small smile, but her eyes revealed an underlying sadness.

“So why are you here and not hittin’ it with your man?” Original Cindy prodded gently.

“We buried Kit last night,” Max replied, tears forming in her eyes.

“Come here.” Original Cindy wrapped her arms comfortingly around Max. A few moments later, she pulled back and looked questioningly at Max. “So why aren’t you leaning on Logan’s shoulder? I’m sure that boy would love to give you some comforting.”

“Logan and Alec had a run-in with the cops two days ago and Logan just blew it off. Blue and I had to kick a few asses on the way to Terminal City and we laughed about it. I could have gotten her killed. I thought maybe the killing was over, but it’s never gonna end.”

“Have you talked to him about it?”

"It's just that I can't seem to..." Max looked at Original Cindy helplessly. "We spent so much time just wishing we could hold hands. Now...it's too close, too intense."

"You're afraid you might be burying him next," Original Cindy said softly. Max stared at Original Cindy, her eyes revealing the truth of the statement.

"Original Cindy ain't gonna put a shine on you, boo. It could happen." Original Cindy held Max's gaze. "But you gotta live your life. You can't let what might happen tomorrow paralyze you today."

Command Center, Terminal City

"Where's Max?" Dix asked. "Thought you two would be on duty together."

"She decided to do this run herself. Left a few minutes ago."

"For two people who so obviously want to spend time together, you spend an inordinate amount of time apart," Dix observed.

"I just haven't been able to keep her in one place long enough to take this anywhere," Logan frowned. "Something's always getting in the way."

"How long have you been together with Max?" Dix asked.

"We've been working together for over two years," Logan replied.

Jam Pony

"How long have you known Logan?" Original Cindy asked.

"Two years, three months, eighteen days, sixteen hours

and thirty two minutes," Max rapped out, staring at Original Cindy.

"Who's counting?" Original Cindy drawled. "But I'm thinking, boo, that it might be time..."

Command Center, Terminal City

"...to take things to the next level," Dix stated, looking at Logan.

Jam Pony

Original Cindy looked at Max. "Comes a time when a girl just has to..."

Command Center, Terminal City

"...take charge," Dix said. "She may be our CO, but a girl likes a guy to..."

Jam Pony

"...make the first move," Original Cindy added.

"Yeah," Max replied, smiling enigmatically.

Command Center, Terminal City

"Yeah," Logan replied, smiling enigmatically.

Jam Pony

"Pickup on Transfer Avenue!" Normal called out, cutting Max's conversation short.

"That's for me, boo," Max smiled. "Thanks for the advice."

“Hey, Normal!” she yelled, walking toward the cage. “I’ll take that one.”

Max grabbed the address from Normal, jumped on her bike, and pedaled up the ramp. Just before she hit the doorway, she pulled out her cell phone and made a call.

“Normal! TV’s on the fritz again!” came another frustrated cry from the lounge.

“Good. Maybe you’ll remember that you’re here to work!” Normal yelled back. “Bip bip bip! Packages to deliver!”

* * * * *

Epilogue

Logan's New Quarters, Terminal City

It was twilight, an hour of changes, when daylight turns to night. Max walked toward Logan's new quarters, her steps echoing in the hallway. Her face was a picture of determination, mixed with hope and a little fear. She nervously licked her lips and fished some gloss out of her pocket, applying it tentatively. Max reached out, turned the knob, and silently stepped into Logan's room.

"Logan?" she called.

The room was empty, quiet. The last rays of the setting sun cast a soft golden glow over the space. Max slipped off her jacket, revealing a zippered red sweater that set off her olive skin perfectly. She tossed the jacket onto a chair and walked further into the room, exploring. She smiled. Logan had already made this room his space. Everything was neat and precise, the way she remembered his apartment...before. He had already completed his kitchen...a counter with a sink, a hotplate, and toaster. He had placed an office divider in the far corner of the room, separating the open and private areas. Behind the divider, several bedrolls were arranged on the floor, topped with pristine white sheets. An upturned crate served as his bedside table, holding a propane lamp, a small radio, and an ever-present book lying open, marking the place where he had last been reading.

Max jumped as the door opened and the lights flashed on. Logan walked in, humming tunelessly to himself. When he saw Max, a broad smile lit up his features.

“Oh, God,” Max whispered..

“Max! I wasn’t expecting you yet. How can I set up a grand romantic gesture if you’re here?” Logan asked with a lopsided grin.

“What grand romantic gesture?” Max asked suspiciously, her hands on her hips and her head cocked to the side.

“You know, candles...wine...pasta,” Logan replied sanguinely.

“Oh, that’s what those were. And I thought it was just brownouts.” A mischievous smirk played across Max’s face. Suddenly, the smirk faded. She looked at Logan, as if seeing him for the first time.

Their eyes met, locking for an instant, then flitting away nervously.

“Let me put on some music.” Logan walked to the radio and turned it on. The sound of soft music filled the room. “I was going to make us dinner,” he said lightly.

“Sounds good. What are we having?” Max asked.

“I thought I’d make that perfect BLT, but now that you’re here, we can make it together.” Logan smiled softly. He led Max to the counter and handed her a tomato and a small paring knife. He then moved behind her, reaching his arms around her to lay his hands over hers. Max’s hair brushed lightly against his cheek. She leaned back, absorbing the warmth of his body. “What you need is a gentle back and forth movement so as not to bruise or hurt,” Logan said softly.

Max stood still, the knife forgotten on the counter as Logan wrapped his arms around her waist. She turned and looked up at him. “Logan...”

Logan stopped her, putting a finger to her lips.

“Shhhhhh, Max, you don’t need to say it. I know...” He bent down and kissed her tenderly, gently exploring, testing. He then pulled back and smiled at her. Cupping her face in his hands, he trailed kisses down her neck, along her collarbone, stopping just above the zipper of her top. His fingers found the zipper pull and slowly slid it down as he followed it with kisses. Brushing aside her hair, he leaned around and kissed her barcode, causing her to shudder. She closed her eyes, purring softly as his kisses sent shivers down her spine.

Max turned her face up to Logan. Unbuttoning the first button of his shirt, she kissed the hollow of his throat and placed her hand over his heart. He took her hand and gently kissed her fingertips. Reaching up, she pulled his face to hers, lightly brushing her lips against his at first, then pressing against them more urgently. The kiss became deeper as they savored each other, until they finally broke apart, gasping.

Logan leaned his forehead against Max’s, his breath ragged. “Are you sure?” he whispered.

Max looked at Logan and smiled. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” she took his hand in hers and led him to the bed.

* * *

Hours later, Max lay awake in the soft moonlight. She propped up on her elbow and looked at the man lying beside her. He was sleeping, his face soft, worries gone. She pulled the sheet around herself and touched his face gently, tracing the contours of his jaw. Tears formed in her eyes.

Logan awakened at her touch. “Max?” he asked, reaching out to wipe a tear that had escaped onto her cheek. He sat up and gathered her into his arms, murmuring softly into her hair.

“They’re still out there, all the problems. They’re not going away.” Max pulled back and stared at Logan.

“I know.” Logan’s voice was a whisper. He lay back down on the bed, pulling Max to him.

“I can’t lose anyone else,” Max whispered into his shoulder.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Logan reassured her.

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