

Dark Angel VS3

Past Is Prologue

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Episode VS3.10

Prologue

Mess Hall, Terminal City - October 15, 2021, morning

The mess hall was filled at this early hour. Each group or cadre seemed to have its own table, where the transgenics could sit with others of like mind or appearance.

Rocky, the bouncer from the fight club Max had closed down, Zeri, and some of her transgenics congregated at a table, grumbling over their oatmeal and coffee. They glowered at Max, who was sitting with Logan at the other end of the hall.

“Gotta get out of here,” Rocky muttered. “This place is driving me crazy. She’s driving me crazy.” He nodded his head toward Max.

“Yeah,” his crony agreed. “Can’t have any fun around here. No fight club, no betting, no means of acquiring cash. I was gonna make a bundle off that fight last month. What does she expect us to do for fun – watch TV and swab latrines? I’m bored out of my skull. And to top it all off, they’re always out of beer!”

“No gambling, no drinking,” Rocky continued. “Who the hell died and appointed her God?” He drained his coffee cup, then got up to get a refill.

“Doesn’t she realize that soldiers need some sort of recreation to maintain alertness? We don’t have a gym here, so we gotta do something about the boredom,” Raz, a tall, dark-skinned transgenic with intense eyes, continued to grouse.

“Yeah, maybe we should do KP and head duty for exer-

cise! Although I'd prefer lifting a beer or two to lifting a mop." This last remark triggered a round of laughter.

"She doesn't even have as much training as we do. She was one of the ones who left in '09! She missed most of the field drills and the strategy and tactics classes. And I'm gonna take orders from her? She just assumed leadership here, never rose through the ranks like Mole over there," Zeri said through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, right. She left in '09, so she probably thinks she's better than most of us. I could take her anytime if I wanted to. And since she's been out in the world all this time, she's been corrupted by contact with the ordinaries. I'll bet she even thinks we can coexist with those lowlifes who want us dead. Look how cozy she is with that ordinary, Logan. Wonder if she's been banging him?" Rocky nodded his head in Logan's direction.

The X-series all laughed at that thought, then went back to their breakfast. A few minutes later, Rocky spoke up again.

"You know what I think? I think we should go work for Colonel Lydecker. Zeri, didn't you mention that he was looking to recruit the cream of the crop here, for some sort of elite mercenary unit?" Zeri nodded in agreement. "Sounds good to me," Rocky said.

"Yeah, me too," another said.

Raz piped up, "Anyone know how to get in touch with the Colonel?"

"No idea. But I have a feeling he'll contact us when he's ready to negotiate," Zeri answered thoughtfully.

Mole, chomping on his ever-present stogie, glanced resentfully over at the table where Max and Logan were

eating breakfast. They were smiling, and every now and then Max laughed. Mole's eyes narrowed when he heard them talk about meeting later.

"Damn!" he muttered to Dix and Gem, who were sitting next to him. "I just don't understand what she sees in him."

"Huh?" Dix grunted, confused.

"That ordinary – Logan. I just don't understand what she sees in him," Mole repeated, stabbing a spoon into his bowl of oatmeal.

Gem slid a sideways look at Mole. "Mole, you're an idiot. Logan has been with us since day one. What's your problem?"

"He's an ordinary, that's what, a chimp. He's not as smart as us, not as strong. I mean, he's even gotta wear that exoskeleton to be half as agile and fast as we are."

Dix leaned across the table and stared at Mole. "I don't know that he's not as smart as we are – he set up the whole communications system here, and he's personally managed to acquire a hell of a lot of the equipment we've needed."

"Well, I don't trust him," Mole grumbled.

"Know what, Mole?" Gem said, "I think you're jealous!"

Mole glared at her, then looked over at Max's table again. Logan was holding Max's hand, gazing into her eyes.

"Jealous! What the hell would I be jealous about?" he protested, sucking on the stogie.

"Maybe because Max is holding Logan's hand instead of yours?" Gem teased.

Mole rolled his eyes and chomped down hard on the end of his cigar. "I just don't think transgenics should...mingle with ordinaries. We should stick to our own kind. She's setting a bad example for soldiers under her command. That is, if she wants to command. If she wants to be a soldier, and our commander, she needs to act like a soldier. She can't afford to be hittin' it with someone, especially an ordinary. And she should never display affection publicly in front of her troops!"

He grunted and went back to eating his breakfast. His eyes followed Max and Logan as they got up from their table and left the mess hall.

As the mess hall doors closed behind them, Max rolled her eyes and said to Logan, "Some days, I just can't buy a break!"

Logan looked at her quizzically.

"I overheard some grumblings from Mole. He's dissing me again – as usual – and wondering what I see in you."

Logan smiled at that remark.

Max continued, "It just seems that when we're apart, they're not happy, and when we're together, they're not happy. I can't win."

"But when you and I are together, we're happy, and isn't that what counts?" Logan asked.

"Yeah, it is, but it gets so complicated," Max admitted, looking down.

"It does, but being happy is better than the alternative, don't you think?"

"I guess." Max mumbled halfheartedly.

Rooftop, Main Building, Terminal City - early morning

Max stood on the roof, staring at the Space Needle. The dawn was chilly, and she shivered a bit as the sun rose. Her shoulders were hunched, as if in defeat, and her eyes were downcast. Her expression was one of sadness. Dried tears streaked her face.

She was startled to hear the door onto the rooftop open, and even more startled to see Logan standing in the doorway, a faint smile on his face.

"Ah, you...left these in my room," he said, as he pulled something black out of his jacket pocket.

Max blushed when she realized he was holding up a pair of her cotton panties.

Logan approached her tentatively.

"I woke up and you were gone. Thought maybe I'd done something wrong..." he said apologetically.

"No, Logan, you didn't do anything wrong."

"Glad to hear that." Logan sighed with relief.

Max had to laugh in spite of herself, but the smile quickly slid off her face. Logan noticed it and came closer, almost within touching distance.

"So, what's wrong, Max?" he asked, a look of concern on his face.

"It's not you, Logan. It's me."

"You're still concerned about going into heat, aren't you?"

Max didn't answer, but looked down at the floor instead.

"Max, I told you a year and a half ago that you had nothing to be ashamed of. I meant it. Manticore is to blame if

anyone is, not you.”

“Yeah, but there’s a difference between saying it and experiencing it.”

“Well, I’ve experienced it now and I haven’t changed my mind,” Logan affirmed gently as he gathered Max to him, holding her against his chest. He looked over Max’s shoulder, staring sadly at the limp Freak Nation flag. “It was the best sex I’ve ever had. You were wonderful and exciting, not savage or untamed, like you seem to think you were.”

Max gazed up at him questioningly, then looked down at the floor again.

Logan continued, “Max, I know you hate the whole thing. But you can’t let it ruin your life. It’s only a tiny part of you.” Logan stroked her hair.

“Logan, I wanted to jump every male in Terminal City – even Alec.” There were tears in Max’s eyes.

“But you didn’t, did you?”

“I tried, but –”

“Nothing happened, Max. You know that and I know that.”

“No thanks to me. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t walked in on me and that X...Don’t tell me you weren’t ticked.”

“I wanted to help you get through it, but I didn’t know how. Now I do.” Logan smiled. “Thank you for trusting me and sharing that part of your life with me.”

They stood silently for a few minutes. Logan’s arms tightened around Max.

"I just hope we can experience it again sometime," Logan murmured wistfully.

"Don't sound so sad," Max reprimanded him, half in jest. "It'll be back in a few months, and it will get old soon enough."

"Yeah," Logan smiled sadly. He shivered. "Come on, let's get out of this cold." He gently pushed Max away from him with both hands.

"Although, I'll never ask you for another quickie again." He grinned as he led Max toward the open door.

Outside the Mess Hall – the present

Logan looked at Max, a smile on his face. "Well, you better stop feeling sorry for yourself now. There's too much to do around here."

"Yeah," Max agreed. "For starters, I've gotta get the Joshua situation resolved. At least Clemente's given us extra time to get the results of the DNA test to prove that Joshua didn't kill Annie. I really don't want that situation to escalate."

"Especially since we're pretty sure White did it," Logan replied. "I suppose we could dig up the son of a bitch and get a DNA sample if we had to."

"Pleasant thought. Imagine the CDC getting hold of his DNA sample. That would really freak them out, wouldn't it?" Max laughed at the thought. "Well, hopefully we won't have to do that. Clemente would never believe it."

"I think Clemente will believe anything at this point, especially if it's going to bring him closer to some answers. With any luck at all, everything will be straightened out soon and Joshua will be exonerated." Logan squeezed

Max's hand. "I'll catch you later. Got some work to do."

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Act One

Outside the Mess Hall, Terminal City

Alec, walking out of the mess hall with Reese, saw Max and Logan affectionately part and go their separate ways.

“Man, I gotta get out of here. I’m getting sick watching those two fall all over each other! I could use some of that myself.”

“X5-494 is not getting his dig around here? What is the world coming to?” His friend joked. “I thought you were the superstud of Terminal City. Must be lots of lovely X5 and X6 females here more than willing to take you on.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Alec agreed. “But right now I’m looking for some nice, ordinary female.”

“Anyone in particular?” Reese winked.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Alec shut down the conversation and stalked toward the barracks.

Max’s Quarters, Terminal City

Max lay on her cot staring at the ceiling. Suddenly, a sharp knock on her door brought her quickly to her feet.

She opened the door to see the dark-skinned transgenic standing in her doorway, staring at her intently.

“Didn’t think I’d see you again,” Max frowned. “Why are you here?”

“I told you I’d pass on any intelligence I run across.” He looked at her sincerely.

"Fine, come in." Max waved him toward a chair and stalked over to him. "So spill."

"Zeri and her buddies are serious about going to work for Lydecker. They were discussing it this morning at breakfast. Zeri's waiting for him to phone her with an offer. She's sure he'll be in touch."

"So Lydecker is trying to recruit people out of Terminal City."

"Looks like it."

"Okay. I'll get someone on it, uh - " Max stopped abruptly.

"Raz."

"What?"

"My name's Raz." He noticed that Max seemed disturbed. "Sorry about the other week." He looked at her apologetically. "I didn't realize you had a significant oth -"

"Just forget it!" Max snapped, then her voice softened. "Thanks for the heads up on this stuff." She escorted him to her door. Before she dismissed him, she stuck her head out and looked around, making sure that no one was in the hall, and then quickly ushered him out. As soon as he was gone, she picked up her cell phone and dialed Logan's number.

"Can you drop by here for a minute? There's something I need to discuss with you and I don't want to do it over the phone."

"Sure," the voice on the other end said. "I'll be right there."

A few minutes later, Logan knocked on the door. Almost

furtively, Max opened it and let him in, once again checking to see that the hallway was empty.

“What’s going on? Why all the secrecy?” Logan asked as he entered her quarters and seated himself on the box next to her bedroll.

“I’ve had several reports that some of the X5s and X6s are considering leaving Terminal City and going to work for Lydecker as mercenaries.” Max paced back and forth, looking worried.

“Yeah, so?” Logan didn’t sound concerned.

“Um, I was wondering if you could do some hacking, maybe into Lydecker’s files. See if you can find out what he’s up to. I still don’t trust good ol’ Donald.”

“Hey, good ol’ Donald and his merry band saved our asses here a while back, remember?”

“I know, but still, he’s always got his own agenda. And not knowing what that is makes me nervous. Most of our residents still don’t have a clue about how to function without Manticore. Lydecker’s game could prove to be dangerous.”

“Well, I’m already on it. I was about to hack into his files when you called.” Logan smiled at her.

“Okay. Well, let me know if you find anything. I want to get this potential problem cleared up before it gets out of hand.” Max paced away from Logan.

“Sure, no problem. I’ll get right on it.” Logan stood up, momentarily wincing.

Logan walked to the door and placed his hand on the knob. “Catch ya later?” He smiled at Max.

“Yeah,” Max smiled back distractedly.

Panic Room, Terminal City

Logan carefully set up for an Eyes Only broadcast, pixelating the contours of his face on the computer screen to obscure his identity.

“Do not attempt to adjust your set. This is a Streaming Freedom video bulletin. The cable hack will last exactly 60 seconds. It cannot be traced, it cannot be stopped, and it is the only free voice left in this city. Just as the transgenics were erroneously blamed for the Independence Day epidemic, so rumor of them being the cause of the latest outbreak of illness has surfaced. In fact, the illness was caused by tainted food.

“Not only are the transgenics NOT responsible for either of these outbreaks, they actually gave their blood to make the vaccine used to treat the plague. That’s right, they gave their blood to save people. They are not your enemy. This has been an Eyes Only Streaming Freedom Video Bulletin. Peace. Out.”

Logan leaned back in his chair and hit the button that would send the cable hack over the airwaves.

Jam Pony

As usual, messengers milled around while Normal yelled, in a frustrated attempt at maintaining order among the chaos.

“Bip bip bip! Lots of orphan packages here! Come on people!” He rolled his eyes and mumbled to himself. “Why do I even bother? Slackers!”

The television crackled as the Eyes Only hack interrupted

regular broadcasting. Almost instantly, the messengers went silent and zeroed in on the screen. Normal leaned out of his cage at the front desk to watch. Original Cindy, recovered from her bout of food poisoning, quietly shut her locker door instead of slamming it like she usually did.

“...rumor of them being the cause of the latest outbreak of illness has surfaced...”

“Dayum! Not again!” she muttered. Sketchy frowned at the television.

“...they gave their blood to save people. They are not your enemy...”

“That’s right! You tell ‘em, boo!” she shouted at the screen. “And we were the first to get it out to the peeps!”

“Yeah, you tell ‘em!” Sketchy reiterated. As the hack ended, he turned to Original Cindy. “I’m glad Eyes Only’s back. Someone needs to tell it like it is. I didn’t realize how much I had missed his hacks.” Original Cindy smiled and high-fived Sketchy and Sky. Even Normal looked pleased.

Last Stop Bar, Terminal City

Cain, Gem, Ginger, Rocky, Mole, and other transgenics were watching the news when suddenly the picture on the screen dissolved and the familiar red, white and blue banner appeared. As the Eyes Only hack began, they, too, listened intently.

“...rumor of them being the cause of the latest outbreak of illness has surfaced...”

“Name something and the ordinaries will say we’re responsible,” Cain said. “Rain, hail, earthquakes, plagues of locusts, zits – it’s all our fault.”

"...they gave their blood to save people. They are not your enemy..."

"Yeah, and we've got a spy right here in Terminal City – and having Max playing footsie with one of those is detrimental to our mission," Mole whispered.

"Logan? Yeah, he knows exactly what's going on here, doesn't he? He helped set up the communication system. What's to prevent him from letting the cops know everything? It would be easy for him," Rocky agreed.

"Well, what about the fact that he's wanted by the sector police himself?" Ginger asked. "Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Nah, that could be a setup by the cops to throw us off," Rocky replied. "We don't know how he really feels about us. He could be using Max to get information about us and funneling it to the cops."

"Do you really believe that?" Disgusted, Gem got up from the table and stalked off.

Crash – afternoon

Alec sat at a table, nursing his beer and checking out the scene. Original Cindy and Sky looked on as Sketchy performed another of his stunts for an appreciative audience.

"That fool needin' ta show off his skills again," Original Cindy said under her breath.

Alec looked at her, "It's not for lack of attention."

"Ya think?" Original Cindy said sarcastically, but mellowed her tone, "Good thing Max gave you time off...with this whole transgenic mess hangin' around."

Sky finished off his glass of beer, "Umm...yeah. That was

way too cool a trick you played with those cell phones.”

Alec merely nodded. “Yeah. Not much to do there lately.”

Sky glanced around nervously. “You gotta keep a low profile, though. Crash is still a public place.”

Original Cindy looked up at the staircase just in time to see Asha open the door and walk in. She paused at the top of the stairs and scanned the room for a moment, her eyes coming to rest on Alec, who was still watching Sketchy. A smile lit her face for a moment, but was quickly replaced by a confused frown. She hurried down the staircase and headed for the bar.

Original Cindy stood up and grabbed Sky’s wrist. “I’m in the mood to play some pool.”

“I’m not. Don’t got the dough to lose.” Sky resisted, oblivious to what was happening.

Original Cindy tightened her grip. “I’m gonna give you the game this time, you fool!” She tugged harder and Sky stood up, nearly knocking his empty glass off the table.

“Geez! You don’t give a guy a break, do you?”

“I don’t give anything to your lowlife male species. Ever.” She glanced at Alec. “You’ve got company.” She nodded toward the bar, then half-dragged a reluctant Sky toward the pool table.

Alec stood up and walked over to Asha. He leaned his back against the bar and continued to watch Sketchy, who was balanced on a table in the middle of the room. Then he glanced over at Asha, who was gulping down her beer.

“Don’t drown yourself or you might need to be carried outta here.” He waited for a response, but not getting one, tried a different approach. “None of your friends with

you?"

Asha's eyes narrowed. "I'm on a break. Thanks for asking." She didn't so much as glance at Alec.

"I guess they're not friends, huh?" He said it as if the fact just occurred to him.

"Guess not."

Alec's brows met. "Is there something on my face? I usually have women staring at me, not ignoring me."

"I'm not one of your floozies, Alec," Asha spat back. "But you know what? There's always something wrong with your face..." then she added so faintly that it nearly escaped Alec, "particularly after the first date." He looked curiously at her, and saw the ghost of a smile quickly cross her face.

Alec looked steadily at Asha and let the comment go. "Seriously."

"Gotta meet someone..." Asha gave Alec a hard look. "Not that it's any of your business, but it's not what you think. It's a contact."

"Amazing! He's stuck in Terminal City, but he's still got you running his errands," he said jokingly, unable to hide a hint of bitterness in his voice. Asha stood up and walked over to a table. Alec followed her movements with his eyes before he sauntered over and sat down opposite her.

"That was uncalled for. I shouldn't have said it."

Asha glanced at him and said sarcastically, "Trying to get on my good side for a change?" When Alec didn't respond, but merely continued to look at her, she shrugged.

Alec decided to be conciliatory. "You know, you've been a

big help to us these days with all the food, clothing and medical supplies. We wouldn't survive without it."

"We're just doing our part. None of you hurt anyone and these corrupt officials are all getting plenty of free publicity for themselves over you. Plus, the S1W is pretty big on equal rights – and then there's Father Destry..."

"He's proven to be a big help. I just keep hoping that the media will give us a break."

"They'll come around once they see you don't mean any harm. We're looking into it, though – who's feeding the media the stories that transgenics are dangerous. There's certainly some agenda behind it." Then she shifted gears, looking at him. "Why are you out here, anyway? You know it's dangerous," she admonished. "Sometimes you just take stupid, reckless chances, Alec."

"Just clearing my head. Sharing quarters has never been my forte. I prefer living alone. It beats sharing a shower with a few hundred transgenics, some of whom don't know how to clean up after themselves." Alec frowned at what he had just said.

"I didn't know you were a neat freak."

"I have my days."

Asha's curiosity showed. She was about to say something, but stopped herself. Her eyes flickered for a second before she got up. "Got to run. I still have an informant to meet."

"Ah, yes, the great Eyes Only. What would he say if he knew you're drinking on duty?"

Asha's face turned into a mask as she tried to control her irritation. "I help him out. He's not my keeper. I do what I do and I don't need anyone's permission for it."

Alec held up his hand. “Hey, don’t bite my head off. You’re the one working for him, not me. Though such dedication can only be...”

“I’m going.” Asha turned, and was about to leave when Alec’s hand gripped her wrist. He tried again.

“I didn’t mean...”

Asha sighed, “I know. It’s nothing. I really have to go.”

“I enjoyed today. We should do this again sometime.”

“Whatever.” Asha shrugged off Alec’s hand and looked curiously at him, “Maybe we will. But not now.”

Alec watched her leave, a thoughtful look on his face.

Logan’s Quarters, Terminal City

Max tiptoed into Logan’s quarters. Logan sat at his desk, engrossed in some files. She crept in and stood a few feet behind him. Logan could feel a prickling sensation on the back of his neck, which began to distract him.

“Max,” Logan said as he swiveled his chair around. “Glad you could join me.”

“I guess you missed me.” The corner of Max’s mouth turned up into a sly smile as she sat on Logan’s desk.

“I guess I did. Not everyone appreciates me the way you do,” Logan said with small smile of his own.

Max looked at him inquiringly. “What’s that mean?” she asked.

“Come on, Max. I may not have your genetically enhanced hearing, but I *do* know there have been more rumblings about you and me among the denizens here, and I don’t just mean Mole. They don’t like our relationship. Hell,

they don't like *me*, an 'ordinary', even being here in Terminal City."

"Logan, that's not true," Max protested.

"It is, Max."

Max frowned. "Well, they're just gonna have to get over it, aren't they? I won't have anyone questioning my authority – or my relationships."

"I understand how you feel. I feel the same way, but I don't want anyone giving you a hard time either," Logan agreed.

"It's none of their business. After all you've done here... for Terminal City...for them. I can't let them do this to you. You're here because I want you to be here." Max's tone was insistent.

"But we don't really see much of each other, do we?" Logan looked into her eyes. "Breakfast today was nice, but we don't get to do it very often."

"I know, and I wish we could be together more too, but I have to balance my time between being leader of this pack of misfits and being with you." Max broke his gaze and looked down. Then she got up and began to pace in front of his desk. "Maybe you should keep a low profile for a while."

"What's that mean?" Logan frowned at her as she continued to walk back and forth.

"Maybe you should stay away from the Command Center for a few days – unless there's an emergency. I need time to defuse these anti-ordinary attitudes."

Logan let out a deep sigh. "All right. I'll stay here. I've got a lot of research on Lydecker to do anyway. Still trying to

find out what he's up to."

Max stopped pacing, and looked startled. "You will?"

Logan grinned fleetingly. "Sure. Whatever you want, Max. After all, you're the commander."

"Okay. Well, let me get back to the Command Center. After all, I'm the commander."

Max kissed Logan briefly on the lips, then left. Logan got up from the desk, shook his leg and headed to the panic room.

Panic Room, Terminal City

As he promised Max, Logan searched Lydecker's early military files, hoping to find something relevant.

"I wonder why Lydecker is trying to recruit the transgenics here. That is, if it's not just rumor or someone trying to stir up trouble," Logan muttered.

He fast-forwarded through most of the early files and stopped at 1995, the year Lydecker's wife was murdered. Logan saw, once again, that the case was never solved. He leaned forward to gaze at the computer screen.

"Hmm, records sealed. That's odd. Maybe there's something significant in those files, if I can hack into them." His fingers flew over the keys as he tried to break into the files.

Logan's Computer Room, Penthouse, Fogle Towers – 2019

Logan hacked into Lydecker's military records, attempting to locate him, while Max and Zack looked on. He read from the files. "Here are his DOD records. Donald Michael

Lydecker. Born 1968. Enlisted in the army right out of high school. Married his hometown sweetheart."

"Oh, touching," Max said sarcastically.

Logan continued. "Accepted to OCS. Graduated top of his class. Assigned to Third Ranger Battalion. Saw action in Panama, Kuwait, Somalia...Made Captain. Assigned to Delta Force. Legion of Merit, Purple Heart..."

"Yeah, yeah, we get the point." Max's impatience began to show.

"Looks like he was on the fast track until '95. Wife was murdered. Killer was never found," Logan said.

"Probably did it himself," Zack added sardonically.

"His behavior became erratic. Half a dozen disciplinary infractions: insubordination, disorderly conduct...DUI... Bought himself a dishonorable discharge and last but not least, an ADAP admissions form from 1996," Logan concluded.

Max asked, "ADAP?"

Logan explained. "Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program – rehab for military personnel."

"Program must've turned things around for him if he was assigned to head up Manticore. He's probably still working it," Max stated.

"As in, 'My name is Don. I'm an alcoholic?'" Logan said.

Lydecker's Home – Wyoming, 1995

A grief-stricken Donald Lydecker drove back to his house after his wife's funeral. His face was streaked with tears. An open bottle of Scotch sat next to him on the car seat. At regular inter-

vals, he picked up the bottle and took a swallow.

He pulled into the driveway and got out of the car, a bit wobbly. With some difficulty, he unlocked the door and went inside. He turned on the light and staggered to the sofa, where he sat down clumsily. Fumbling, he picked up the telephone and dialed a number.

“Yeah? You got anything for me?” he barked into the receiver.

In response to the negative reply from the other end, his voice rose. “Whatta ya mean, you can’t find any information? What the hell am I paying you for? Invisible space aliens did not just land, kill my wife, and disappear! There must be some clues. Somebody must know something!”

He took another swig from the bottle. “No records? There have to be records! There was an investigation, for crying out loud! I don’t care if you were escorted off base by the MPs! Try again.” Lydecker slammed down the phone. He leaned back against the cushions of the sofa and drained the bottle.

* * * * *

Act Two

Panic Room, Terminal City

“Damn, Deck’s been a bad boy! How many disciplinary actions does the man have in his files, anyway?” Logan commented aloud to the empty room.

“I can understand the DUI, insubordination, and disorderly conduct infractions, knowing that he’s got a history of drinking, but some of these are odd, to say the least.” Logan read from the screen. “Misuse of military privileges, unauthorized use of a military database, and trespassing – all the same date. What the hell is that all about? Why was he trespassing, and where? What was he looking for?”

He went down another level into Lydecker’s personnel folder. “Why is so much missing? This doesn’t make sense.” Not only were details blacked out in Lydecker’s records, but he kept hitting firewalls that prevented him from proceeding with his search.

“Damn!” Logan exclaimed in frustration, pounding his fist on the desk. “What is going on here?”

Military Base, Wyoming, 1995 - Middle of the night

Donald Lydecker, dressed in camouflage gear, with a tiny but powerful flashlight held between his teeth, punched in the combination to the lock into the Army base’s data center. It was 01:00 hours and he figured he had a couple of hours to find what he was looking for. Silently, he opened the door, crept into the room, and closed the door behind him. Shining the flashlight ahead of him, he made his way over to the bank of powerful com-

puters. He sat down in front of one and turned it on.

Furiously typing, he searched through files, looking for the one record that would give him a clue to whoever killed his wife. He quickly skimmed through the information. A few minutes later, he stopped at one in particular and stared intently at the screen, then took a tiny computer disk out of the pocket of his tunic. He inserted it into the slot and started to copy the file.

The feel of a cold, steel barrel against the back of his head and the sound of a comm unit crackling interrupted him.

“Sir,” the soldier said into the unit on his shoulder, “I’ve got a breach in the data center. Yes, sir.” Cutting the comm, he ordered, “You! Stand up!” Lydecker complied. The MP reached over and patted him down, then carefully lifted Lydecker’s service weapon from its holster. It hadn’t completely cleared the holster when Lydecker violently elbowed him in the stomach, doubling him over. Lydecker whirled around to face the MP and delivered a vicious uppercut to his jaw.

Satisfied that the guard was out of commission for the time being, Lydecker finished copying the file and popped the diskette out of the drive. As he turned off the computer, the MP moaned, indicating that he was regaining consciousness. Lydecker kicked him in the head before he crept out of the data center. He sidled along the outside of the building, keeping in the shadows, watching intently for the summoned backup.

Backup arrived in the form of two more soldiers. Lydecker flattened himself against the building and stood still. The MPs shone their flashlights all over the area. Lydecker held his breath. They didn’t see him and walked past his hiding place, heading toward the data center building. Lydecker exhaled in relief. He proceeded carefully across the open space between buildings. When he had cleared the group of buildings that housed the data center, he walked briskly toward the gate.

He was almost at the gate when he was approached by two soldiers. One, a corporal, held a rifle on him and ordered him to halt. Lydecker complied. The other, obviously a superior, spun Lydecker around and looked him in the eye.

"Now, Captain, exactly what were you looking for?" the sergeant asked, searching Lydecker's pockets. He pulled the diskette out of Lydecker's breast pocket and put it into his own.

Lydecker said nothing as he was handcuffed and led away.

Panic Room, Terminal City

Logan cursed as he hit a dead end once again on Donald Lydecker's records. He encoded another sequence of data, trying to find what he wanted. Just then, Max hesitantly entered the room and Logan stopped what he was doing.

"Having any luck?"

Logan nearly smiled. "Not a lot. Too much security and I'm having trouble breaking through it."

Max took that as her welcome and walked over to Logan. "I hope you can break through the firewalls."

"I've come across information that someone has been recruiting soldiers between the ages of 16 and 22 for a covert operation to train South African military, and naturally, someone is paying big bucks. I can't find any more information right now, so I'm going to try to contact Lydecker himself."

"The South Africans have the Reds, so why would they need Lydecker to train their military? And why would Lydecker recruit us? There's more to this, Logan. I'll bet Deck is putting up another Manticore facility there," Max said.

“I don’t think so,” Logan disagreed. “Manticore tried to kill him, remember? I don’t think Lydecker would give them the time of day, especially after what’s happened to us and to him. He was the one who helped us, Max.”

“Yeah, and he’s recruiting soldiers. The way things are going, he could very well take over Terminal City – not that he wants to.”

“Max, give the man a break.”

Max looked incredulously at Logan, “You trust him?”

“Max, I do trust him, in this matter, at least,” Logan said.

“I didn’t come here for another argument, especially with you!” Max turned on her heel and left abruptly.

Looking bewildered at Max’s outburst, Logan just sat there and stared after her as she slammed the door behind her.

Max stood outside Logan’s door. She waited for a heart-beat or two, then sadly walked away.

On the other side of the door, Logan was struggling to stand, gritting his teeth with the effort. Sweat beaded his forehead. He couldn’t even manage that and had to sit down and brace himself against the desk to keep from falling over. A few minutes later, the spasm passed, and he was able to get up and go to the door. He opened it, to find Max gone. Logan pounded his fist on the doorframe in frustration.

Command Center, Terminal City

Max strode into the Command Center on her rounds. Luke was at the main console, checking the sewers. After a sweep, he double-clicked to reveal the mess hall on the

screen. He swept that, then continued to other public spaces in Terminal City.

“All clear, Max,” he said with confidence.

“Thanks, Luke.” Max replied “How’s it going?”

“Just another quiet day in Terminal City.”

“For a change.”

Max left the Command Center and heard Rocky talking to Dix. Neither one of them saw her as she stopped at the corner of the hallway and listened to their conversation.

“Is Logan still here?” Rocky asked the comm tech.

Dix nodded in reply. “Haven’t seen him today, except at breakfast, but he’s been fine-tuning the communications system and...”

Rocky cut him off. “He shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near the computers in the Command Center! We don’t know the guy and we don’t know what he’s capable of!” Rocky shouted at Dix.

Max stepped around the corner to confront them. “You got a problem with Logan?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Rocky replied. “I don’t trust him. I’ve never trusted him, not from day one.”

“Day one for Logan started well before you arrived. You don’t know how much he has helped us – for years.”

Rocky’s tone was nasty. “Well, why don’t you tell us all about it?”

“I...I can’t give you more details. It would compromise his mission.”

Rocky snorted. “Mission, my ass. He probably gave

Joshua up to Clemente.”

“No!” Max shouted. “Joshua is his friend. He helped us rescue Joshua from the sewers when Annie was murdered. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, right.”

“You got a problem with him, you go through me,” Max stated.

“*Through* you? Oh so you think you can beat me, huh?” Rocky sneered at Max.

“You think you can take me on? Logan has been busting his ass helping us with our system and he’s helped us far more than you ever have.”

“Hah! He’s using you to compromise our situation. What kind of leader goes to bed with the enemy?” Rocky smirked. Several transgenics had now gathered around them and were listening to the heated exchange.

“So, you think I’m not in the game?” Max demanded.

Rocky pushed her backwards, toward the wall. “Are you?”

Max twisted Rocky’s wrist when he tried to push her again. Sidestepping him, she grabbed his right arm using her left hand, forcing it behind his back, then kicked him in the ass and sent him sprawling.

Max looked at Rocky lying on the floor and spat out, “Next time you want to challenge me, make sure I’m out cold.”

She turned and left Rocky lying on the floor, with the other transgenics looking after her, bewildered.

Logan's Quarters

Logan sat at the desk in the front office of his quarters. He speed-dialed several numbers on his cell phone, but got no answer. Frustrated, he sighed deeply, but tried one more number. He was surprised to hear the receiver picked up and a brusque voice say "Hello?"

"Lydecker?" Logan said.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"It's Logan Cale. I'm surprised you answered. Figured you'd be out kicking Familiar butt or something. Heard about your little escapade at their headquarters."

"Escapade? It was business, son. You'd be surprised how quickly most of that crew caved under superior firepower. Super humans or not, most of them saw the logic of surrendering."

"Took out the Phalanx soldiers here, saved our butts, and disappeared again. Dammit, Lydecker, you've got to stop doing that. It's getting disconcerting."

"Sorry," the voice at the other end growled. "It's not that I haven't wanted to be around more. I was, ah, sidetracked for a while, shall we say."

"I'll bet."

"Krit and Syl asked me to pass on a hello to Max."

At this, Logan's face registered surprise. "You're keeping in touch with them?"

"Not all my kids think I'm evil incarnate."

Restless, Logan switched on the exoskeleton so he could pace. "Ah, I almost hate to ask, except it's been causing some trouble here. Are you trying to recruit transgenics

from Terminal City?”

“Where did you hear that?” Lydecker asked, warily.

“Let’s just say it’s the rumor du jour around here. Are you?” Logan continued to pace, the exoskeleton making whirring noises.

“I’ve been in contact with a few choice individuals. Why?”

“Do you think that’s wise, given the anti-transgenic sentiment out there? Any day there could be a riot here. We’ve got police and the National Guard periodically stirring up trouble, not to mention the media. So far, transgenics have been blamed for the Fourth of July plague and this latest illness. And you want them to be what? Your own band of mercenaries? As if they’re not in enough danger.”

“I don’t expect you to understand this, son. Currently, there are hundreds of X-series soldiers deployed worldwide as mercenaries for the Committee, so why shouldn’t I build my own corps? After all, I raised and trained most of them myself. Some of them approached me last summer and mentioned that they’d like to work for me. I’m just following up. In the past few months, I’ve been in contact with some X-series soldiers stationed worldwide, not just the ones in Terminal City. If I take some off your hands, that would be fewer mouths to feed, and maybe we could do something about lifting the quarantine there. What do you say? Will you help me?”

Logan stopped pacing. “I’ll have to get back to you on that.” He heard the hang-up on the other end.

“Guess Max does have a problem on her hands, after all,” he mused out loud.

* * *

Seattle – 2019

Lydecker and McGinnis stood by the water's edge with the sun setting in the background.

"Nice view," McGinnis commented.

Lydecker replied in a distracted voice. "Oh, yeah. Nice day. You look like hell."

McGinnis got right to business. "We have a problem we could use your help with."

"You know I'm always happy to do what I can," Lydecker said.

"Familiar with the Vatican situation?"

"Only what I read in the paper," Lydecker admitted.

"New Pope's come out against our friends in the Italian parliament. He's popular. Keeps at it, he's going to bring down the whole Mediterranean Coalition."

Lydecker said, "Consider it done."

"Can't have any accountability."

"You know my kids. Have they ever let you down?"

McGinnis breathed deeply. "You know, I appreciate everything you've done for us."

* * * * *

Act Three

Cheyenne, Wyoming - 1996

Dressed in civilian clothes, Donald Lydecker walked down the street, two official-looking papers in his hand. He looked down at the first piece of paper, an expression of sadness on his face. For the tenth time that day, he read the order of dishonorable discharge - the paper that said his Army career was over.

He reached into the pocket of his overcoat and pulled out a bottle of Scotch. Guzzling, he glanced at the second piece of paper. It was an admittance order to the Army Drug Abuse Program, known as ADAP. That was where Lydecker was heading.

“Why am I even bothering?” he said out loud to himself. “Celeste is dead, and nobody cares who killed her. I’ve been kicked out of the Army. I don’t have anything to live for. Drinking myself to death sounds better and better.”

He continued walking down the street until he saw a shabby brownstone house. He stopped in front of it and looked at the address, displayed on a brass plaque. He checked the address written on the piece of paper. With a sigh, he dropped the half-consumed bottle of Scotch into a trash bin, walked up the steps, and rang the bell.

Panic Room, Terminal City – October 16

Back at his computer, Logan continued to search Lydecker’s military records, trying to figure out why the Army would go to the trouble and expense of sending him to ADAP after he had been dishonorably discharged.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Logan commented. “How did Lydecker go from being a drunk and dishonored ex-

officer to the head of the military arm of Manticore in just a few short years? What turned him around?"

He decided to dig deeper into Lydecker's files. "What makes the Colonel tick, anyway?" he sighed.

Logan attempted to locate the ADAP files, but kept hitting firewalls he couldn't hack around. After several futile attempts, he gave up and typed in another address.

"Damn, I need some help here."

He hit a key on the keyboard and a web cam shot revealed a room filled with more computer equipment than Logan had ever possessed. An electrical crackle was followed by the synthesized voice of Sebastian.

"New digs, Logan?" The synthesized voice was monotone and deliberate as Sebastian moved his head from side to side, tapping out the words the computer spoke.

"Yeah, beats the hell out of Joshua's place, doesn't it? Sorry I've been out of touch for a while. I'm holed up in Terminal City with Max and the others, and didn't have computer access until recently."

"I figured something like that, knowing you," the synthesized voice continued. "How are you doing?"

"I've been better. It's a long story that I don't have time to tell right now, but I promise I'll catch you up soon. I need a favor."

"No problem. Nothing pressing here."

Logan explained his situation to Sebastian and sent him all the links. "I can't break through the damn firewalls no matter how hard I try. Any help is appreciated."

"Okay. When do you need this?"

"How about yesterday?" Logan replied with a laugh.

"Some things never change," the synthesized voice said, but Sebastian half-smiled.

"Thanks." Logan signed off and got up to stretch his legs. The exoskeleton was rubbing his knee and he needed to shift position for a while. He decided to track down Alec and see if he could pick up a bottle of painkillers from Sam Carr.

Abandoned Building, Terminal City

Reese peered out the dusty window, checking to see if any of them had been followed. Seeing no one around, he whispered to the others.

"Anybody heard from Colonel Lydecker?"

"Not yet," Zeri replied. "He said he'd be in touch. He just didn't say when. He's got his own agenda, I guess. He's got my cell phone number."

"Yeah? How'd you get a cell phone?" one of the X5s asked.

"Took it off one of those Phalanx guys. Had a quick talk with Lydecker before he left to clean up the rest of the mess. He promised to call with an offer."

"Do we trust him? After all, he is, or was, Manticore. And an ordinary," Raz commented.

"I don't know," Zeri said. "All I know is that our choices are to stay holed up in here until the Army or National Guard tries to storm the place, or the ordinaries try to kill us, or go work for Colonel Lydecker, earn a living – the kind of living we were trained for – and have a life. Personally, I vote for the second option."

“Me too. I’ll take my chances with the Colonel,” another one said.

Most of the others nodded in agreement.

South Market Street, Seattle

Alec entered a Chinese eatery and walked over to a scruffy young man spooning wonton soup into his mouth. He sat down next to the man and signaled to the waiter to bring him a bowl.

The guy beside him asked, “You Alec?”

“You got it,” Alec answered as the waiter brought him the soup. He slurped it up greedily. “Isn’t this tasty?”

“I’ve got Logan’s meds.”

Alec stopped in the middle of a spoonful. “Hand ‘em over.”

The young man looked around furtively, then spoke in a low voice. “I don’t got ‘em on me. The sector cops are taking all sorts of things from people at checkpoints these days. I had to make sure Logan gets his stuff. You got a bag with you?”

“That I do, my man.”

“Good. When you’re done here, head toward that alley, then go five blocks to your left. Inside the warehouse you’ll find an old metal desk to your right. Look inside the drawer and you’ll find the package there. I got Logan a whole box – just to be sure.”

“Appreciate it.”

“No. Tell him I appreciate what his boss has done for us. Glad to be of service.”

Alec nodded as he finished his soup and was about to drop some cash on the counter. The scruffy young man stopped him, placing his hand on top of Alec's.

"I'll get it. Just tell him to tell his boss."

Alec nodded and left. As he was making his way across the busy street, he spotted a blonde walking a few feet in front of him. He got on his motorcycle and roared toward her.

"Fancy meeting you here." He grinned at Asha.

"Hey, Alec." Asha looked at him, then shrugged and continued to walk.

Alec followed. "What's up?"

Asha turned and said sweetly, "Trying to get on my good side again? Or is life too boring for you today?"

"Where you headed?"

Asha sighed, stopped and faced him. "I have to be somewhere."

"Hop on, I can take you."

"You're wasting your gas." Asha said it as if it were a reprimand.

"I said hop on." Alec smiled.

Asha looked at him hesitantly. "You're not hitting on me, are ya?"

"What? Me? You've got some serious issues." Alec smirked. "Afraid my good looks will get the better of you?"

At Asha's skeptical look, Alec decided on a more practical approach. "Wheels beat hoofin' it any day."

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Asha reluctantly agreed. “Move forward so I can get on. And keep your hands to yourself.”

“Oh, I will. But I’m not too sure about you. Maybe I should be protecting myself from your hands.” Alec grinned at her.

Asha stepped away from the bike. “This is not a good idea. I did not ask for this ride.”

Alec lost the teasing tone in his voice. “Just get on. Where are we going, anyway?”

Asha climbed on behind Alec, her voice serious. “Like I said, I have a meeting,”

“Blow off your meeting and come back to my place,” Alec said brightly. Asha’s eyes narrowed with frustration as he gunned the engine and took off.

Alec’s Old Apartment, Seattle

Alec opened the door to his apartment, sniffing the air as he walked into his living room. Asha followed at his heels.

“Ah! I love the smell of my crib.” He turned toward Asha. “Don’t you?”

“Kinda smells like old gym socks and stale beer to me,” Asha replied.

Ignoring her remark, Alec went into the kitchen and motioned for her to sit. “Make yourself comfortable.”

She stalled and continued to stand. “Definitely not a good idea.”

“Asha, sit. We won’t be able to leave until we’re off the sector cops’ radar. We might as well chill out here.”

Asha finally gave in and settled herself in a chair. “If you hadn’t roared into that sector checkpoint like you owned the place, the sector cops would never have stopped us. We’d have breezed through without a glitch and I would have been at my meeting by now.”

Alec got some beer from his fridge. “Who in their right mind sets up a meeting in South Market?”

“Are you telling me this is all my fault? I didn’t offer you a ride on my bike!”

“Now, Asha, don’t get bent out of shape over this –”

Asha jumped up as if she had just sat on a hot coal. “Bent out of shape? I knew coming here was a mistake.” She got up to leave, but Alec was at the door with the bottles of beer in his hand. He laughed.

“It was nobody’s fault, okay?” Alec motioned for her to sit back down. He sat at the opposite end of the couch, then opened a beer and placed it in front of her. Asha scowled at him.

“Simmer down. God! I swear you’re too hot-tempered to be working for Eyes Only. He should think twice about sending you to one of his informants.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Okay? Nothing. It was just a comment...have some beer and chill.”

They both drank in silence as if they had agreed upon a truce.

A few minutes later, they were more relaxed as Alec animatedly told Asha about the pranks he’d played on the inhabitants of Terminal City.

“...so, Mole found out and, of course, his bunk was already covered in slime by the time he got to it! Cain was so freaked out, he volunteered to go on a run every opportunity there was one!” They both laughed at Alec’s tale. They glanced at each other as their laughter died down, and a look of longing crossed their faces. They both held their breath as Alec bent his head slowly toward Asha.

Just when his lips nearly touched hers, she changed the angle of her head to avoid the contact. She rubbed her hands along her jeans. “I hope he was able to get away.”

“Actually, no. He ran behind Max when Mole found out he was back from his twelfth supply run!” They both smiled a little, but their laughter was forced.

After a few seconds of silence, Alec said, “You really like him, don’t you?”

Asha took her time in answering. “What’s not to like? Few people have that good of a heart and would risk their lives helping others...yeah, he’s got issues, but he’s determined...loyal...he sees his goal and seizes it, to hell with the circumstances...They say that people reflect those who are around them. Working for Eyes Only...he’s very dedicated. I can’t think of anyone not liking him.”

“But you know he’s —”

“As I said, he’s loyal —”

“And he’s with Max now.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

“Would you still want him after —”

A shadow of anger crossed Asha’s face. “Contrary to what you think, Alec, I’m not looking for ways to destroy what they have. I’m happy for them.”

"I didn't mean —"

"I know. Forget it." She looked at Alec and hesitantly asked, "Do you feel threatened by him?"

Alec vehemently replied, "No!" He paused for a second, then continued. "I have nothing against Logan. I know the guy's...well, let's just say he knows where he's headed, though not always how he'll get there." He looked intently at Asha. "But I am not threatened by him."

Asha shrugged. "Just asking. What about Max? Aren't you attracted to...? Most people are taken by her."

"No! I have nothing against Max and she does kick ass, but we came from the same lab, so...in her mind that makes us brother and sister. Besides, my...er...psycho twin was in her unit."

Alec sighed. "There was this...girl..." He caught himself and shook his head as if to clear it. "She's gone now..."

Asha looked at Alec when she noticed the change in his voice. "There are plenty of girls in Terminal City."

Alec shook his head. "I don't need a girl who can kick my ass into next Tuesday..." They both smiled at that.

* * * * *

Act Four

Panic Room – October 17

Logan had Sebastian on the monitor.

“I’m sending you the codes to crack the firewalls right now,” Sebastian’s synthesized voice said in an eerie monotone.

“Thanks, man. You don’t know how grateful I am.” Logan retrieved the encoded e-mail and set to work deciphering the message.

“So, what’s this all about? Why do you need those codes so desperately?” Sebastian tapped out on the headset.

“I can’t tell you right now. But if my suspicions pan out, I promise you the mother of conspiracy theories.” Logan grinned.

“I’ll hold you to that. You know me and a good conspiracy.” A hint of a smile played around Sebastian’s mouth.

“That I do, my friend. You’ll be the first to know. Gotta go now and finish this.”

As Sebastian nodded imperceptibly, Logan ended the communication and resumed his search. Armed with the codes, he cracked the first firewall and found a file of messages, from members of Manticore’s ruling body, the Committee, discussing potential candidates for their military program. Donald Lydecker’s name came up several times as the ideal candidate.

Logan scrolled through the internal memos, most of which merely ranked the candidates. Then he came across a copy

of an official letter from the Committee to Lydecker himself, informing him that he was on the short list of candidates to head up the project. Attached to it was Lydecker's reply.

"Dear Sirs,

Thank you for your consideration of me to lead Project Manticore's military program. While I am flattered to be selected for this position, I must respectfully decline. As you probably know, my current tour of duty will end this year. I intend to retire from the military after it ends and spend more time with my wife, who has been anticipating it even more than I.

Respectfully,

Donald M. Lydecker

Captain, U.S. Army"

The internal memos that followed chilled Logan to the bone. The message traffic was heavy, and there was much discussion on how to dissuade Lydecker from leaving the Army, and more on how to convince him to accept the position. The methods mentioned became more and more radical as the Committee members realized that he would be a hard man to persuade.

Conference Room, Manticore Headquarters - 1995

In an elegant conference room, complete with the Manticore logo set in marble on the wall, the five members of the Committee sat around a large oval mahogany table discussing their dilemma.

"This Captain Lydecker is the best man for the job. Look at his record: graduated top of his class from OCS. Purple Heart, Legion of Merit. Saw combat in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. Special Ops. This guy has it all," the chairman stated.

“Yes, and he wants to throw away all that talent to leave the Army and – fish or something! What a waste,” the chairman’s second-in-command replied.

“Well, gentlemen, any ideas on how to make the Captain change his mind?” the third member, a thin man with a broken nose, asked.

The chairman held up a dossier full of official-looking papers. “This, gentlemen, is a psychological profile of Captain Lydecker. I suggest that we will find the solution here. The good captain has an addictive personality. He has been known to drink too much, although not in situations that could compromise his military standing.”

The fourth man, whose upright bearing pegged him as ex-military, picked up the file and thumbed through it. “Hmm. Impressive record – volunteered for deployment all over the world. Deliberately put himself in dangerous situations. Almost obsessive in his call to duty.”

“I think I understand what you are proposing,” Broken Nose said to the chairman. “Captain Lydecker is a borderline alcoholic. He is obsessed with his career. He will shortly end his career to spend his time with the other object of his obsession – his wife.”

“So, it looks like we need to remove the main obstacle preventing him from devoting himself to this project,” said the second Committee member.

“Yes. At the unfortunate loss of his wife, he will most probably fall into alcohol dependency. Once he falls far enough, gentlemen, we intervene. Enroll him in a 12-step program, get him sober, then offer him the position again. He can trade his obsession with alcohol for an obsession with power. To Captain Lydecker, it doesn’t matter what his addiction is, just so he can indulge it as much as he likes,” Ex-Military stated.

"How do we propose to make sure all of that happens?" the second-in-command asked.

"A simple assassination. Or an unfortunate 'accident,'" stated the chairman.

"Hmm. Why not? It would certainly solve our problem," Broken Nose said.

"Of course it will. He'll be so grateful for the second chance – and the distraction – that he will gratefully accept our offer. What do you say?" the fifth man, who had remained silent until then, said.

The chairman had a sly expression on his face. "Good idea. It could work. I say we give it a try. All in favor?"

Every hand went up.

The Lydecker House – 1995

In the middle of the night, a hooded figure dressed all in black stood at the Lydeckers' front door. Silently, he took a set of lock-picking tools out of the pouch that hung on a strap at his waist, and applied one to the door lock. It opened without creaking. He went in, closing it behind him. The intruder crept into the living room. Looking around cautiously, he headed toward the stairs that led up to the bedrooms. As if by rote, he found the master bedroom and looked in.

Celeste Lydecker slept soundly, alone in the king-size bed. Conveniently, her husband had been sent out of town on a short mission and would not be back until the next day. The intruder smiled into the darkness. Like a cat, he tiptoed into the room. From the pouch, he took out a syringe and a vial and filled the hypodermic. He leaned over the sleeping form, and with sure aim, plunged the needle into a vein.

He stepped back and waited, unmoving. After twenty minutes,

he moved back to the bed and put two fingers on her carotid artery, seeking a pulse. There was none. Satisfied, the figure crept out of the room, down the stairs, across the living room, and out the door, leaving all as he had found it, with one exception.

Panic Room, Terminal City

Stunned by what he had discovered in the sealed Manticore files, Logan speed-dialed a little-used number on his cell phone.

“Hello?” Lydecker’s voice came through on the line.

“Lydecker, Logan Cale. I’ve got some information for you.”

Mess Hall - Noon

The line for lunch was moving slowly, causing irritation among the denizens of Terminal City. Dalton, the young X6 who had defected with Gem, was helping out the best he could, but he was inexperienced in food service. When nervous, he was all thumbs.

Finally, Mole, in a fierce mood after hearing of Max’s smackdown on Rocky, approached Dalton’s station. The boy dropped an apple as he attempted to place it on Mole’s tray. As Dalton squatted down to retrieve the piece of fruit, Mole shouted at him.

“You, soldier!”

Startled, Dalton looked up to see Mole glaring down at him. “Y-yes sir?” he stammered.

“You salute a superior officer, soldier!” Mole shouted at the boy, who cringed under the verbal assault. “Did you forget everything you learned at Manticore? Did Manti-

core teach you to be so clumsy?"

"No, sir."

"Well then, remember your military training! You're a soldier! Act like one!" Mole continued on his tirade. "Stand at attention!"

Dalton looked confused, as well as fearful. Still hunkered down, he looked around to see a crowd gathering.

"I said, stand up, soldier! Show some respect!" Dalton stood up slowly, his lip trembling, eyes downcast. He tried to speak, but could not seem to get the words out.

Mole's rant was so loud that Max and Logan, at the back of the line, heard every word. Indignant, Max stepped out of the line to take Mole to task.

"Hey!" she shouted, walking up to the lizard man. "Lay off, Mole! He's doing the best he can."

"Well, his best isn't good enough, is it?" Mole sniped back. "You'd think an X6 would be good at *something*, wouldn't you?"

"I don't see *you* volunteering to help serve lunch." Max glared at him.

"Yeah, well, you won't either. It's not what I do. I'm a soldier, remember? Or have you forgotten all about that while you play footsie with your boy-toy?" Mole sneered.

"Well, then act like a soldier!" Max ordered as she chose to ignore the obvious insult.

"And you would know what that is, how?" Mole drew himself up to his full height and looked down at Max threateningly, ready for another fight.

At that point, Logan, who had remained in line while Max

dealt with Mole, left his place and walked up to stand in front of Max, confronting the transgenic. Angrily, he got in Mole's face. As they were the same height, they stood eye to eye, and were able to effectively glare at one another.

"That's no way to talk to anyone, Mole. You got problems with *me*? Settle them with *me*. Don't go bothering other people about it. Max leads this pack, so don't overstep your bounds! She doesn't take orders from you! *You* take orders from *her*!" Logan's fists were clenched at his sides so tightly that his knuckles were white.

Mole shifted his stance into attack mode. The mess hall grew quiet as transgenics stopped what they were doing and turned to watch the confrontation. The tension in the air was palpable.

"Logan, I don't need you to defend me," Max said sharply. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Yeah, chimp, you better step aside before you get hurt," Mole advised Logan in a patronizing tone of voice. "Even with that exoskeleton, you can't hope to take me on."

"Well, I can try, can't I?" Logan's nostrils flared in anger and he spoke through clenched teeth.

"Dammit, Logan, I'm handling this!" Max snapped. "Back off!"

Alec, strolling by the mess hall, caught the encounter. In a blur, he rushed in and grabbed Logan by the collar, dragging him away from Mole and Max. Once outside the mess hall, Alec let him go.

"Logan, old buddy, what the hell do you think you were doing in there?" he asked.

"Mole is all over Max – again. I just can't stand by." It

looked to Alec that Logan wasn't even close to calming down. Logan turned away from Alec and started to head back to the mess hall, his boots stomping on the concrete floor. There was fire in his eyes, his face was flushed and his fists clenched and unclenched.

Alec put his hand on Logan's shoulder. "Hey –" he began, but Logan cut him off.

"Back off, Alec," he warned as he glanced toward the mess hall, but didn't go any farther.

"Dammit, man, Mole could have eaten you for lunch – especially now. You know that."

"Yeah, well, maybe," Logan considered. "But it would have been worth it. I'm tired of the way he treats Max."

"That's for Max and Mole to settle. You really don't want to get your clock cleaned by Lizard Man. And even with the exoskeleton, how long do you think you could have stayed on your feet? Do you want to risk further injury?"

Logan looked down at his feet.

"Damn, if this is what love does to people, count me out," Alec said as Logan stalked off.

Logan's Quarters, Terminal City - later that day

Alec sat backwards on the chair at the desk, watching Logan intently as he fidgeted on the stool in front of the counter. He had taken off the exoskeleton, which leaned against the counter. Alec was a drinking beer from Logan's private stock.

"By the way, Asha says hello," Alec said.

"Oh, is that where you've been?"

“Well, I, uh, ran into her while I was getting your prescription.” Alec grinned wickedly. “Here.” Alec tossed a package of pills at Logan, who leaned over to catch them and almost fell off the stool. He missed and clumsily got up from the stool and bent over to retrieve the package. He opened it and took out a pill, which he dry swallowed.

“Thanks,” Logan said. “How is Asha?” He walked toward the bathroom to put the box of painkillers away.

“She’s fine – in more ways than one, if you know what I mean,” Alec replied, eyebrow raised. He noted that Logan’s gait was slightly stiff and that he dragged his feet a bit. He also noticed that Logan leaned against the furniture or the wall as he walked, as if to support himself. To the average person, however, Logan would have seemed almost perfectly normal, like a jock who had overexerted himself a little in a touch football game.

“So,” he continued. “How much longer do you think you can hide this from Max?”

“What?”

“Logan, can you walk across the room without hanging onto the wall or the furniture?”

“Sure,” Logan replied, but didn’t move away from the wall.

“So show me.”

Logan slowly and carefully walked toward the middle of the room. His steps were tentative, as if he couldn’t feel the floor. After a few feet, he nearly fell. Alec jumped up from his chair and caught Logan. He helped him move back to the stool at the counter. Logan sat down and looked sheepishly at Alec.

“Alec, I can’t feel my feet anymore,” he admitted.

“I rest my case,” Alec said.

Courtyard, Terminal City - evening

Logan, exoskeleton in place once again, paced back and forth across the courtyard, working off his frustration. He walked with his hands in his pockets and his head down, kicking the blades of brown grass. He was so absorbed in feeling sorry for himself that he didn’t notice Max’s approach.

“Hey, you,” she said by way of greeting.

Logan looked up, startled. “Hey.”

“Do you feel as miserable as you look?” she asked.

“Max, I’m sorry for sticking my nose into your business today. I had no right to do that, and I caused even more trouble. You were only trying to do your job.”

“Well, it was stupid, but it was kinda nice too, you being all gallant and chivalrous. Fight the power, protect the downtrodden,” Max said with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Yeah, well, you know me, always the gentleman,” Logan replied with a little laugh.

“Yeah. And I guess I’m just getting all spun about trying to keep order here, paying single-minded attention to *my* mission. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?” Max laughed too.

Logan’s Penthouse, Seattle – 2020

“You can’t let go of Manticore any more than I can let go of Eyes Only. It’s who we are,” Logan said.

Max replied angrily, “If you think you were put on this

earth to be the world's most pissed off TV news reporter and hide behind some silly red, white, and blue Halloween mask, then I feel sorry for you."

"If you think you were put on this earth to be the world's biggest cynic and hide behind some tough-ass attitude, then I feel sorry for you," he retorted.

Courtyard, Terminal City - present day

Max and Logan continued their stroll around the courtyard. "Yeah, it does. Funny thing about that..." Logan replied continuing to kick at the grass.

"Something's still on your mind," she said.

"I found out that Lydecker *is* recruiting transgenics, but I still don't know why. And I found out that Manticore lured Lydecker into the project. The Committee arranged to have his wife murdered..." They leaned against one of the buildings that surrounded the courtyard.

"I guess we're not the only ones manipulated by Manticore, after all," Max said. She glanced sideways at Logan and said, "I should have known you just wanted me to see dear ol' Donald your way."

Logan smiled sadly down at her and bent his head, their lips nearly touching. "Oh, I know how to make you agree with me."

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Epilogue

Logan's Quarters, Terminal City – October 19

Logan sat at the desk, cell phone to his ear, on the line with his bank. He had been on hold for a few minutes and was impatiently drumming his fingers on the desk. Finally, with a crackle, he heard the voice of his banker on the other end.

"Hello, Fred? This is Logan Cale. I just called to authorize you to sell the Picasso sketch for as much as it will fetch –"

His banker interrupted him. "Logan, that will no longer be necessary."

Logan looked confused. "Why?"

"Well, the will just came through probate."

"Will? What will? I don't understand."

"Of the late Elizabeth Renfro. You're the sole heir to the estate. You *did* know she had passed away?"

Logan nearly dropped the phone. He leaned forward as if to hear a private conversation.

"Yes, but..."

"I just received it today and haven't had time to contact you. As the sole heir to the late Elizabeth Renfro, you will receive quarterly stipends of at least \$200,000, depending on how the investments do. I'm sorry this took so long, but it just came to my attention, and for some reason, it took an inexplicable amount of time to get through probate. So you don't have to sell off any more of your art collection, Logan. Congratulations. I'll get the first check

cut this week.”

“Th-thanks,” Logan stammered.

“Shall I mail it or do you want to pick it up? I’ll let you know when it’s ready.”

“I’ll send a messenger for it.”

“Okay. I’ll call you. Goodbye now.” Fred hung up, leaving Logan staring at the phone.

Logan put down the phone, switched on the exoskeleton, and stood up. As he walked out the door of his quarters, he smiled to himself and mouthed one word.

“Lydecker.”

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