

Dark Angel VS3

Head Games

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Episode VS3.13

Prologue

**Original Cindy and Max's Apartment, Sector 5, Seattle -
November 12, 10:00 pm**

Max stood at the door, her hand raised. She didn't want to startle Original Cindy, but it was her home. She was home. As she continued to mull over her options, the door swung open.

"Damn, girl, I wondered how long it was gonna take you to get your bony behind up here. Been watchin' you standin' down in the street for practically twenty minutes."

Original Cindy grabbed Max and enveloped her in a warm hug, pulling her tight. After a moment, she released Max and stood back, looking her roommate up and down.

"Looks like that dream vacation didn't leave you too much the worse for the wear."

Max snorted. "Still kickin'. So...you up for sharin' our crib again?"

"Damn straight, girlfriend. Original Cindy was not made for single livin'."

She stepped back and let Max enter the apartment. Max walked in and looked around the room.

"Home sweet home."

"You bet. Original Cindy didn't change a thing while you were gone."

Max set down her bag and sighed. "You sure? 'Bout havin' me here?" she asked. "I don't want to be in your way with

Ginger."

"Original Cindy's wondering the same thing. Why you want to come back to this crib? I figured you'd be movin' on up to the East Side with Logan."

Max stared at Original Cindy for a moment, a confused look on her face. "East side? Who lives on the east side?"

Original Cindy sighed. "Man, girl, we need to teach you some lessons about basic African-American history and the story of how our people finally broke the color barrier in situation comedy. But anyway, you're not movin' right in with Logan?"

"Not the right time," Max answered.

"My thoughts exactly," Original Cindy replied.

"Men."

"Women."

They both laughed and Original Cindy pulled Max into another long hug. When she pulled back, she took Max's hands in hers and examined Max's fingernails.

"Well, some things never change...these things are raggedy, girl."

"You thought I came back here for the view?" Max teased.

"I'll get you fixed up in no time," Original Cindy answered.

Max sat down on the couch while Original Cindy set a teakettle on the burner in the kitchen.

"So, you had enough of Chez Terminal City?" Original Cindy asked.

"Yeah...enough to last me a lifetime," Max answered, as

she leaned her head back on the top edge of the couch.

"You make Mole the new mayor?"

"Somethin' like that. He seemed to want to stay, along with some of the others. Personally, I couldn't wait to get out of there...beds sucked, food sucked...a girl needs her space."

"Hurtin' your love life?"

"Major cramp in my style," Max answered.

"So what are you doing here?" her friend asked.

"Well, I don't know about you, but...well...he didn't ask. Just told me he was going home. What about Ginger?"

"Said she still had stuff to take care of there...had to look out for the ones who would still need to break bread in the commissary."

"Responsible woman," Max replied.

"Yeah," Original Cindy answered.

"Men."

"Women."

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Act One

Jam Pony XPress - November 13, 8:00 am

Max dismounted in front of Jam Pony, paused, then pushed her bike inside the building. It appeared as if nothing had changed. Messengers were pouring in and out of the building while Normal sat in his cage shouting out instructions over the din.

"Bip, bip..." Normal's last "bip" was lost as he caught sight of Max standing in front of him. "Well, if it isn't the defender of the transgenic free world."

"Normal," Max answered.

"So...well...what..."

"You got some work for a skilled professional like myself?" she asked, interrupting his stammer.

"Uh...well...what kind of...I mean...with your..."

"Damn, Normal. You chokin' on yourself?" Original Cindy asked as she rolled her bike up to his desk. "You got a run for her or not?"

"Get a locker, missy. You'll have to start back at beginning scale on account of your extended vacation," Normal replied, seeming to have recovered himself.

"Sure thing," Max replied as she headed toward the row of lockers.

"You gonna take that from him?" Original Cindy asked as she followed Max.

"Well, I hate to give up the fifty cents per run, but I am a

pretty unemployable transgenic, so I'll take what I can get," Max answered. She reached for her locker and stopped. "Who the hell is 'Trudie'?"

"Ah...yeah, forgot to mention that. She's new."

"And Normal gave her my locker?" Max replied, incredulous.

"Well, you were hanging out in Terminal City for quite a while...and we got some new blood around here. So..."

Max sighed.

"But there's an empty one, over here...by me," Original Cindy offered.

"Where'd my stuff go?"

"Right here, sugah. I kept it for you. *I* knew you'd be back."

Max smiled and pulled on her gloves. She closed her locker to find Alec standing there, smiling.

"So, all the chickens are coming home to roost," he teased. "Must've had the same thought I did."

"The devil you know is better than the one you don't?" Max asked.

"Exactly," Alec replied. "But is he acting weird with you?"

"I killed his third bip when I walked in."

Alec nodded. "Well, I'm out of here for a bit. Catch you at Crash later?"

"Your turn to buy," Max called as Alec headed out on his bike. He paused, looked back, and waved.

"Yep, like I never even left," Max sighed.

Logan's Apartment, Fogle Towers - 10:00 am

"...the food that these charities are supposed to get is going to the black market, where it's sold at a jacked-up price. Money goes to the people who stole the trucks at the sector checkpoints and the people who own the warehouses, and the hungry keep on being hungry. If Eyes Only is still interested in helping people other than transgenics, then maybe he could check this out," said the voice of one of Logan's informants on the answering machine.

Logan had filled three pages of his legal pad with his messages, and he wasn't even halfway through them. He replayed the message, listening again for specific details that might be of use to him when he got around to researching the problem.

As he laid his notes down, pausing for a stretch, there was a knock on the door. "Coming," Logan called, standing and straightening slowly.

"No need," Alec called cheerfully as he let himself in. "Just announcing my arrival. Didn't have any bugles handy, so no fanfare. Maybe next time, though."

"What a joy that'll be," Logan muttered to himself, sitting again. "So what's up?"

"Not much. Just thought I'd stop by, see how life was going up here in the Fortress of Solitude. Needed to get away from all that bipping," Alec said, jokingly, as he wandered around the living room. "Y'know, I never really realized how much space you have in here. You could house maybe four, five soldiers in this room."

Logan looked around, and nodded, a bemused expression on his face. "I hadn't thought of that. You're right. At least four, maybe six, though."

"Starts to get a little tight at six, but you could still do it." He walked over to the desk where Logan was seated, eyes falling on the legal pad. "Whatcha got there?"

"Notes for Eyes Only stuff. I'm trying to catch up, but since the siege started I've been pretty busy and this has all been neglected."

"You know," Alec drawled, pulling up a chair and sitting on it, backwards. "That looks like a lot of work you've got piled up there. I could give you a hand if you wanted... y'know, run errands, break into places. Steal stuff. I'm good with that kind of thing. You could be the brains, and I could be the brawns. Or is it just one brawn?" He shrugged. "Whatever. What do you think?"

"It's okay, Alec. It's taken care of," Logan informed him, dismissing the suggestion.

"By who? I hate to say it, buddy, but face it, you're not going to be up for many fact-finding missions in the near future. You need a leg man, and I've always been a leg man." Alec grinned at his own pun, but his look quickly turned serious. "C'mon, if there's anything I'm good for, this is it. I take direction well, and I'm mobile. I can do this. Seriously."

"Thanks, but Max has always been my leg man...person... in the past."

"Right. When you used to be in the wheelchair all the time. But now, while you're up and about, you don't really need a leg man, do you? Or at least you wouldn't if everything was hunky-dory. You start asking her to do things you should be able to do for yourself and she's going to get mighty suspicious," Alec warned him. "Think about it, Logan. It's perfect for both of us. I get an excuse to go cause a limited amount of mayhem, and you get more

time to work your computer mojo to find stuff out and rest up for your displays of virility around Max."

The other man still looked unconvinced.

"C'mon, Logan. I want to help. I want to be a good guy and fight the good fight with you. And protect the down-trodden, and let the meek inherit, or whatever." Alec's eyes widened with a sincerity that reverberated through his tone of voice. "I want to help."

A long moment passed before Logan sighed and nodded. "Okay."

"Sweet!" Alec crowed triumphantly, rubbing his hands together with anticipation. "What do you want to do about this whole black-market food thing? Should I go bust some heads or something?"

"No," Logan replied, shaking his head emphatically. "I can't really do anything about it right now. Need to put together some info on the file before we make any moves."

"Ahh...And you can't put together info without your computers, can you?"

Logan nodded. "Not really. It's the best way for me to access public records - like charitable donations."

"I'm headed out to Terminal City for a poker game with Mole later tonight, so I can pick it up then," Alec said.

"Don't bother. I have to go tomorrow anyway." At Alec's questioning look, he added grimly, "Appointment with Aveta."

"You're still on those pain meds, aren't you? They can really mess you up. I've seen it before...you really shouldn't drive on that stuff. I'll go with you."

"Thanks," Logan said, slightly surprised.

"Hey, no problem. What are friends for, right?" Alec nodded his head toward the machine, eager. "What's next? Got any more bad guys out there for us to fight? More innocents to protect?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't heard it yet," Logan told him, amused, as he leaned forward and pressed the 'play' button.

"Well, bring it on."

"Logan? This is Buddy. I'm sorry I haven't called you sooner," said a thin, quavering voice, so unlike the robust man that Logan remembered. "I'm recovering from a stroke. Talking is hard for me now...as you can probably hear. I'm calling to tell you that Adam's gone. Disappeared about two months ago. Haven't heard from him since. I'll try you again later. Be safe."

Logan sat back in his chair, surprised, as Alec gave a low whistle. "Damn. Now that's a streaming freedom bulletin."

He didn't reply, just sat there, watching his answering machine as it beeped and the next message began.

"Buddy again. Wanted to make sure you were all right. Adam's still gone. We're on the lookout. Hope you are too." The machine clicked, whined, and beeped again.

"Logan, please, call me if you get this. Are you all right? Have you seen Adam? This is Buddy, on the ranch. If you've lost my number, it's 239-555-821-27789. Call me. I hope you're okay."

"Sounds pretty worried," Alec observed.

"Yeah, well, so am I." Logan pushed back from the desk and stood.

"What for?"

"Zack's programmed to kill me, Alec. That's why we sent him out there. Sam told us that once his memory started coming back, everything could play out like it did last time he was here. He'd think he and Max were together and I was the enemy, over and over."

Alec shrugged. "Yeah, but don't you think that if the programming had kicked in again, he'd already be here looking for you?"

"I was holed up in Terminal City for months, Alec. There was no way for him to get at me."

"It was pretty obvious where you were, and any X5 worth their salt could have gotten in there and snapped your neck in under ten minutes."

Logan turned toward him, a shocked expression on his face. "Ten minutes? Really?"

"Eh, give or take." He stopped and considered for a moment. "Yeah. Ten minutes."

"You've thought about this?"

"No, no," Alec assured him. "Just a rough estimate."

"Right."

"Logan, man, trust me. You're safe. If Zack had left the ranch to come and take you out, he'd have done it by now. He's probably nowhere near Seattle. Hell, if I were him, I would have high-tailed it for Florida by now. Zack's probably livin' the good life on a sandy beach somewhere as far away from this godforsaken rainy city as he can get."

"I hope you're right," Logan said, although he sounded

less than convinced.

"I know I am," Alec said confidently.

Checkpoint between Sector 7 and Sector 5, Seattle - 11:45 am

The thick gray clouds over Seattle dripped rain down onto the streets, where it bounced off the cars and a pair of black motorcycles as they pulled up to a sector checkpoint. The motors purred as they idled in line.

"Passes," the guard demanded peremptorily.

"Can you tell me where Fogle Towers is?" a woman's voice asked from behind a dark helmet.

"Follow this road for about 4 miles, turn left, and it's the high-rise on the right. Can't miss it," he informed her, handing the passes back.

The second rider pushed up his visor. "It'll be on our right?"

"Yes, sir, on the right," the guard confirmed.

The man smiled, steel-blue eyes still cold. "Thanks."

"Come on," the woman called, impatient with the delay. She revved her engine. "Let's go, Zack."

He closed his helmet, pushing off and gunning it. His taillights blinked in the mist as he headed down the road alongside his companion, toward Fogle Towers.

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Logan's Apartment, Fogle Towers - 1:00 pm

"Hey there, stranger," Max called, leaning against the doorway and watching Logan as he wrote on his notepad.

Logan turned, his eyes bright with welcome. "Hi." He glanced at her backpack. "Do I have a package?"

"Not today," she told him, walking over. "You know, it's been so long since I've seen you actually write anything down that I was starting to wonder if you remembered how."

"After I learned to type, I thought it might be useful to learn to write," he said, tossing his pen down onto the table. "What's up?"

"Just came by to see you." She ran a hand through his hair, making it stand on end. "What are you doing?"

"Working on my handwriting," he said, smiling up at her.

She leaned over his shoulder to see his notes. "Doesn't look like you've made too much progress."

"It's slow going," Logan replied.

She smiled at him. "You're in a good mood."

Logan stretched his arms up over his head and smiled back. "It's good to be home. I guess I forgot how good it would feel to be in my own place again.

"Plus, it's kind of nice to not be the poster child for everything that's wrong outside of Terminal City, let alone having to face the horror of eating cafeteria food for every meal," he said, laughing. "What have you been up to?"

"Work." Max made a face. "It's kind of weird to be back."

"Weird? Weird how?"

She shrugged. "Giving orders is different from taking them."

He chuckled. "You've made a living out of ignoring Nor-

mal's orders."

Max grinned. "Yeah, well, that's true."

"So, how are the people you've been giving orders to?"

"Just your normal stuff. Most of the transgenics who can make it out here are leaving, but the others are staying. Mole and the like are probably chomping on stogies as we speak."

"What's Joshua going to do?" he asked.

"He wants to go back to Sandeman's," Max told him with a sigh, sitting down in the chair next to him.

"You don't sound too thrilled by that."

"I'm not, really. It seems too risky to me. He'd be safer in Terminal City. I don't want to keep him locked in the basement with the freaks or anything, but...I hate the idea of him being in danger. Sandeman's house isn't exactly in the most transgenic-friendly part of Seattle."

Logan's brow furrowed as he thought for a moment. "Does he want to stay there? I thought he said Sandeman's reminded him too much of Annie."

"Yeah, well, he wants out of Terminal City bad enough to go there, I guess, 'cause if he's gonna be out here, he doesn't have anywhere else to go. My crib isn't big enough and...well, I don't think Alec'd be the best roommate for Joshua, y'know?"

He chuckled. "I don't really think Alec'd be a great roommate for anyone. Would it be different if someone lived there with Joshua, though?"

She made a face. "I don't know...that's the other thing. He wants Gem and Elfie to move in with him."

"Is she going to?"

"She's being kinda evasive about the whole thing, is what I'm hearing."

"Why?"

"Nobody really knows. She and Joshua are tight, and I bet it'd be easier if she had someone around to help with the baby, but she's being weird about it." Max's beeper started going off. "Damn, it's work. Normal's on my ass again."

"Giving orders?" Logan teased.

"Yeah, well, I have to take 'em. Today, anyway." She stood and turned to leave.

"Hey, Max, before you go...there's something I should tell you," Logan called.

"What?" Max said, turning back to him. "What's going on?"

He stood. "Today while I was checking my messages, I got a couple from Buddy, at the ranch. Zack's missing."

"Missing? What do you mean, missing?"

"I mean, nobody knows where he is," Logan said mildly.

"Pack a bag," Max ordered peremptorily, going over to his phone.

"Hey, hey, what are you doing?" he asked, intercepting her.

"Calling Alec. I want him to take you somewhere safe and stay with you until we get this Zack thing cleared up." Seeing his surprised expression, she raised a brow. "You thought I was just gonna let you sit here and wait for him to swoop in like the angel of death?"

"Max, he disappeared two months ago," Logan told her gently, pulling her away from the phone.

She crossed her arms, eyeing him critically. "And that means what? You're safe or something because he's had more time to plot? Logan, I know what Zack's capable of. He's gotta helluva head for strategy and he'll bust in here when you least expect it--"

"Max. He's not Zack anymore, remember?" He shook her hand lightly. "He's Adam. Besides, don't you think that if he wanted me dead, I'd be dead already?"

She shifted her weight, unconvinced. "I don't like it."

"So what are you going to do? Get Alec to baby-sit me? What if we don't ever find Zack again? Should I just live under lock and key for the rest of my life?" Logan smiled slightly. "I'm not in any real danger, Max. It'll be okay."

"I don't want to lose you," Max told him fiercely. "I don't like you being in danger."

"I don't like you being in danger either," he retorted. "But I learned a long time ago that I can't keep you in a glass box."

"I'm not trying to keep you in a glass anything, Logan. I'm trying to keep you safe."

"I'm as safe as you are," he chuckled dryly. "Probably safer, because I'm not the poster child for transgenics. I'll look for him. See if I can find out what happened." Logan smiled. "It'll be okay, Max."

She pursed her lips and nodded, finally. "Hope you're right. I'm going to head out...I'll catch you later?"

"Of course," he reassured her, kissing her lips briefly. He tipped her head up to face him with a finger below her

chin. "Don't worry about me, okay?"

"Hard not to," Max told him. "I care about you too much."

Logan laughed. "Maybe not too much? Maybe just enough?" It earned him a smile. He ran a hand through her hair, eyes warm. "Give me a call when you get off work. I might be able to scrounge up something edible and some wine to go with it. I was thinking you could help me consume it?"

"You've got it." Max kissed him again. "Gotta blaze."

Outside Fogle Towers - Several Hours Later

The tall, glass-walled building loomed over the heads of the two riders who had pulled up their motorcycles at its foot. The neighboring buildings reflected off the glass. Zack raised the visor of his helmet and craned his neck to look at the top of the building. His gaze traced down the walls, coming to rest on the sign next to the entrance.

"Here we are," said Jondy, following his gaze. She took off her helmet and tucked it under her arm. "Fogle Towers. And it looks like that doorman just left for his break. Good idea to wait until he was gone."

Zack was silent. She turned to look at him, and saw that his lips were pressed tensely together.

"Zack?"

He turned to look at her.

"Are you going to be okay up there?"

"I've had Lydecker's PSYOPs people messin' around inside my head for the last two months. Guess it's time to see if it was any use." But he continued to sit on his bike, and made no move to turn its engine off, or to remove his hel-

met.

Jondy killed her own engine, got off her bike, and fastened her helmet to the handlebars. Stepping over to Zack, she placed her hand on his shoulder.

Zack seemed to shudder. Shrugging her hand off his shoulder, he ducked his head out of his helmet, and slung it on his handlebars as she had done with hers. Shutting off his engine and pocketing the key, he stood, squaring his shoulders. Turning to Jondy, he saw her staring at him through narrowed eyes.

"So, you want to try the door or the window this time?"

Her face softened after a moment, and slowly she smiled. "Which one is more likely to convince Logan that we don't want to kill him?"

He grinned. "Let's go," he said, and started for the doors of the building.

Logan's Apartment, Fogle Towers

The space just inside Logan's front door was littered with various items of computer and broadcasting equipment. Alec bent to pick up a computer tower case, effortlessly raising it to waist level. He turned to bring it into the computer room.

"Logan! Where do you want this?"

Logan peered out from behind the sliding door to see what Alec was holding. He was also dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, but unlike Alec's, his shirt was stained with perspiration. Beads of sweat also glistened on his forehead and his arms.

"That goes on the third shelf on the left."

He absently pushed his glasses up his nose as they began to slide down, almost putting out his own eye with the screwdriver he held.

"Man, don't you ever sweat?" he said incredulously as Alec walked past him to put the equipment on the designated shelf.

"Sweat?" Alec grinned smugly as he came out of the room and went again to the hallway. "Didn't you ever study English? Horses *sweat*. Men *perspire*. X5s...have better homeostatic mechanisms than you base models." He ducked, and although his back was to Logan, he caught the screwdriver as it sailed over his head, and, grinning, held it out with a flourish.

Logan shook his head. "Just put it somewhere. I need a break," he said, stepping into the bathroom.

As Alec bent to pick up a computer monitor, there was a soft click from the front door. He looked up sharply. His eyes narrowed as the door swung slowly inward. He lowered the monitor back onto the floor and assumed a fighting stance.

A tall woman stepped through the doorway, her blue eyes widening as they fell upon his face. She started to speak, but didn't have the chance to as Alec pounced, twisting her arm behind her and trapping her quickly with a wrestle hold.

"Who are you?" he demanded, struggling to hold her as she attempted to break free of his grasp.

"I'm looking for Max," she managed to choke out, his arm still tight around her neck. "I'm Jondy."

Alec loosed his grip slightly, letting her fall forward as he swept her hair aside with his other hand.

"You don't have a barcode."

"We got them removed yesterday. Just before we came into town."

"We?"

Zack stepped around the open door, his blue eyes meeting Alec's hazel ones calmly.

"We," he said, expressionlessly. Then his eyes narrowed, and he looked as if he were trying to recall something. "Ben?"

"Oh great, not again!" Alec grumbled. "Am I going to be getting this for the rest of my life?"

"He's not Ben," Jondy said.

"Who are you, then?" Zack said.

"Like clockwork, every time." Alec muttered. "Next we'll have to go over the whole twinned vs. cloned thing...My name is Alec. We've met."

"He's 494," Jondy said to Zack. "Ben's twin. Max told me about him...when we were here before." She twisted back toward Alec. "Let go of me, please."

"Ri-ight," he said slowly, but he didn't loosen his grip on her. "Is it just me or are polite introductions a little out of place at an assassination?" he quipped, taking stock of the situation and wondering if releasing Jondy and attacking Zack instead would be a wiser move tactically, or a stupider one. Zack certainly seemed to pose the greater danger; he was as tall, but more heavily built than Alec was.

"No one's going to get killed here, Alec," Jondy placated.

"Then what is Zack doing here, of all places?" Alec demanded. "Don't you know--?"

"Yeah, she knows," Zack told him, glaring. "It's under control."

"And I'm supposed to believe that because...?"

"I've been working with PSYOPs to get rid of that programming."

"Right. Good. Hi, I'm Alec," he said, still not releasing his hold on Jondy. "Pleased to meet you," he continued. "I was born yesterday, by the way."

"Alec, give him a chance!"

"The only chance I'm giving you *both* is to walk out of here now, before I have to carry you out."

"What, so you're the bodyguard now?" Zack bristled.

"Better than being the assassin." Alec laid the sarcasm on thickly, but for a brief moment, his eyes took on a faraway look, as if he were remembering something. He blinked, his eyes hardening again, and cocked his head at Zack. "Don't you think so?"

"Look here, I'm okay, all right? I've been de-programmed."

At that moment, Logan stepped out of the bathroom, squinting at the newcomers as he wiped his glasses on a face towel...

...And all hell broke loose...

Zack launched himself at Logan, bringing the other man to the floor with a thud. He wrapped his legs around Logan in a stranglehold as he tore the towel out of Logan's hands, wrapping it around his neck and literally starting to strangle him with it. The exoskeleton whirred loudly as Logan kicked out, trying to free himself from Zack's grip.

"Logan!" Alec called out, releasing Jondy and diving for

the pair on the floor.

"Zack, no!" Jondy cried, moving toward them as well.

Alec and Jondy each grabbed one of Zack's arms, and together managed to do what neither of them would have been able to do alone, pulling him off Logan and keeping him from going after him again.

Logan crawled quickly across the floor. He retrieved his glasses from under the table, putting them on as he leaned against the wall to catch his breath.

"Zack? Jondy?" he choked out. "What are you doing here?"

Zack continued to struggle violently as Jondy and Alec held him down on the floor.

"You're a traitor," Zack said, in a voice that sounded harsh and inhuman, not like his own voice at all. "Traitors must die."

"Zack?" Jondy inquired. He didn't seem to hear her.

"You got him?" she asked Alec.

"Yeah," Alec answered, readjusting his grip and making sure it was firm. "I got him."

Jondy released her hold and stepped around to kneel in front of Zack. She took his face between her hands and gazed into his eyes.

"Zack? X5-599! Look at me," she said firmly.

His gaze broke from Logan and turned to her face. As he looked at her, something in his eyes softened.

"Zack," Jondy said, softly. "Do you know who I am?"

"I..." He looked distressed for a moment, then blinked, and the confusion cleared.

"Jondy," he said. "What happened?"

Jondy released the breath she had been holding, and got to her feet as Zack looked around, realizing what he had just done.

"I'm sorry," Jondy said. "I guess it was a mistake coming here after all."

"What brought you here, anyway?" Logan asked.

"Lydecker found Zack, at that ranch you sent him to. He had his PSYOPs people working on Zack, trying to get rid of whatever they put into his head back at Manticore. Zack didn't trust them."

"Obviously, I was right," Zack snorted.

"We figured with the concentration of transgenics in Terminal City that Max had some PSYOPs people here, but we didn't know where to find her after the siege. The only thing Zack could remember was the name of your building. I'm sorry, Logan. He was sure he'd gotten over the assassin programming."

"Alec," Logan said, watching Zack carefully. "Maybe you should find someplace for these two to stay."

"Sure thing. I'll take them back to my place, and tell Max what went down." Alec slowly released Zack, and got to his feet. Logan nodded his thanks. Alec collected his jacket and keys from the sofa and followed Jondy and Zack out of the room.

Logan waited until the door was closed behind them before he slumped against the wall, gasping in pain.

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Act Two

Sector 4, Seattle - 4:00 pm

Max pedaled hard as she raced along the familiar streets of Seattle. She pulled up in front of the appointed address, propped her bike against the building, and headed for the door.

"Jam Pony!" Max called, knocking on the thick wooden door.

"Yeah?" A heavy-set man with pasty-white skin opened the door.

"Package," Max said, handing him her clipboard to sign.

The man leaned down to write his name, and then took a closer look at Max as he stood up again.

"Hey, aren't you that chick?"

"What chick, sir?" Max asked as she reached into her bag for the man's package.

"The one off the news...the freak chick. Figures that you'd be running the streets again now that they let you out."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but have a nice day!" Max spat out, as she turned to go back to her bike. As she turned the man reached up and grabbed her hair, lifting it so he could see her barcode.

"Yep, I thought so...so what the hell do you think you're doing out here?"

Max turned back to face the man. "I'm doing my job, sir."

"Well, we don't need your kind around here."

"My kind?" Max replied.

"Yeah, your kind...your mutated, transgenic, freak kind."

Max stood silent for a moment, and then turned again. As she hit the bottom step, she stopped and turned back. "Well, I'm not real fond of your kind, either." She raised her hand, waved her middle finger in a salute and replied, "Have a great day and remember to call Jam Pony if you need something delivered."

The man stepped back into his house and slammed the door as Max got on her bike and rode away.

Undetermined Location - 8:00 pm

The cherry wood of the conference table gleamed red in the fluorescent light that spattered down on the waxed surface. Fingers shuffled paper as a voice called the meeting to order.

"Agent Martin, we'd like to hear how things are continuing on the transgenic front," said Rex Selkirk from the head of the table. His face was smooth, bland.

"Smoothly," Martin responded succinctly. "The plan to pull them off the street is in place. Our muggers have been armed with Manticore-issue weapons in order to assure the safe capture of the transgenics. We'd like to take them in with a minimum of physical harm to the specimens. In order to do that, we'll probably be using some kind of drugs to sedate them. In the tussle, our men will inject them. It should only take about thirty seconds before the transgenics succumb and are available for transport."

"I've heard that many of them look just like any other civilian. How are you identifying them?" asked Kathryn Birman.

"We have a contact among their ranks, an informant who has been helping us to locate exited transgenics using their own records."

"Is your informant a transgenic?" Birman's exquisitely arched brow rose with interest.

"Yes. She is. X-series. X5-284."

"And you're certain that your informant is totally loyal to us and not her own kind?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am entirely sure of Ginger's loyalty," Martin told her, somewhat smugly. "She's with us."

Alec's apartment - 9:00 pm

"Big TV," Zack noted, inspecting Alec's entertainment center.

Alec merely shrugged, still watching Zack warily.

"He's not going to attack you," Jondy told him quietly.

"No, just my friends," Alec replied flippantly, as there was a knock on the door. "Hey, Max," he said, inviting her in.

"Hey," she said distractedly, eyes on Zack.

"Hi, Max," he said, walking across the room toward her, face softening as his eyes drank her in.

"Hi, Zack, Jondy."

"Hey," the other woman responded with a small wave.

"How's Logan?" Max asked, turning toward Alec.

"Eh, he's fine. Just kinda shook up," he reassured her. "Seriously, Max. Logan's just as...Logany as ever. Probably cooking something and sipping wine as we speak."

She nodded, turning back to Zack. "Why did you come here?" Max asked.

"And that's my cue to do the making-myself-scarce thing," Alec said, grabbing his jacket. "I'll be back later." He left, largely unnoticed by the three tense occupants of his living room.

"Max, I...I had to."

Jondy stood, looking at Max appealingly. "We need help."

"I can't help you," Max replied, arms crossed. "Not if it means you staying in Seattle."

"You haven't even heard what we're here for," Jondy protested, incredulously.

"I need to see someone from PSYOPs," Zack told Max, holding her gaze until she looked away. "Please."

"Why?" Max pursed her lips.

"Why?" Zack asked, confused. "To get rid of this programming that Manticore put into my head, to help get back my memories...to make sure that Lydecker hasn't been giving me some new kind of programming. Pick a reason."

"You're with Lydecker now?"

Jondy nodded. "Yeah, and the Colonel's been using some of his reprogramming techniques on Zack to try and undo whatever Renfro did."

"But you don't think he's on the level?" Max asked, raising an eyebrow.

"C'mon, Maxie. It's Lydecker. Of course he's not on the level," Zack said. "This is the same guy who had me buried alive so that I'd lead him to you. He's dirty."

"If he's so dirty, then why the hell are you working for him, huh?"

"Because I needed him. Besides, the gang's all there," Zack said with a slight nod toward Jondy. "They know who I am. They're helping me figure it out, too."

"So, will you help us?" Jondy asked, golden eyebrows arching with impatience.

Max shook her head, regretfully. "I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Jondy challenged.

"How long until the next time Zack decides to take out Logan?" Max shot back. "I can't lose him. I won't. Zack's already tried to kill him twice now."

"Twice?" Zack asked, blankly. "I don't remember that."

"Yeah, well you did. Said you thought he was a traitor or something." Max waved the detail away as unimportant. "Doesn't matter. What matters is that next time Alec or Jondy or I might not be there to stop you." She sighed heavily into the silence. "I think you should leave Seattle."

"Or what? Or you'll send me away like last time?" Zack challenged, angrily. "Send me out into the middle of nowhere with a new name?"

"If it comes right down to it, then, yeah, I will," Max retorted, glaring. "Logan means too much to me to sit back and watch you kill him."

"What are you saying, Max?" Zack asked her.

"I'm saying that if it's between helping you and saving Logan, I choose Logan." Max repeated the words, saying them clearly but softly. "I choose Logan."

Zack's eyes widened briefly, before he turned on his heel,

and stalked angrily across the room. "That's just great, Maxie. You've known this guy for what, two years and you're willing to throw away family for him? He's that important to you?"

"Yeah, he is," she said, voice hard. "And I think you should leave Seattle tonight."

"Hey, now, wait just a minute. I know you love Logan and all, but what about Zack?" Jondy's eyes blazed as she advanced on Max. "How many times has he saved *your* life? I know he went back to Manticore for you and he shot himself for you...but there must have been more times than that. Don't you think you owe him a little bit? If not your life, then maybe your freedom."

"So I'm supposed to offer up the man I love on a sacrificial altar?" Max shook her head vehemently. "Not gonna happen. I can't take the risk that he'll snap and kill Logan 'cause of whatever's rattling around in his head. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Yeah, well, if your PSYOPs people do their job right, that won't be a problem, will it?" Jondy retorted.

Max bit her lower lip, considering. "What if it doesn't work?"

"Logan will still be safe," Jondy said, firmly. "If it doesn't work, we leave, for good. Until we know what's what, I'll be his shadow. I won't let him touch Logan, okay?"

"I won't go anywhere near Miracle Boy," Zack growled. "Not like I really want to, anyway."

"And if he does, I'll be there. Max. Please. You owe him this, at least."

"I owe him a lot," Max admitted. "Everything, practically."

Except for Logan's life."

"I promise that you won't have to pay that price," Jondy swore, solemnly. "All right?"

She nodded, eyes meeting Zack's. "Okay. I'll take you to PSYOPs first thing in the morning."

"Thank you," Zack replied after a pause. He attempted a small smile, walking toward her. "Good to see you, Max."

Max replied simply, "I missed you, Zack."

* * * * *

Act Three

Infirmery, Terminal City - November 14, early morning

"So," Max said, rubbing her arms, as Zack lay on the cot, ready for treatment. "Is this going to work, Trey?"

The PSYOPs specialist shrugged and ran a hand through his short black hair. "Truth is, I'm not sure. Lydecker's been mucking around in there, and God knows what else Manticore did with him before he got out. I've never dealt with a case like this before. I'll do my best."

"What are the odds?" Jondy asked from the doorway, concern creasing her features. "Give us a ballpark figure."

Trey's kind, dark eyes reflected his uncertainty. "I'd say fifty-fifty, but I really don't know."

"So the upshot is that you don't think you can help me either," Zack said grimly.

"I didn't say that," the other man corrected. "What I did say is that I can't promise anything. I think I can help, at least a little. Otherwise, I wouldn't be doing this at all. I don't like to unnecessarily sift through people's minds. Sometimes it shakes stuff loose that's better left buried."

"So encouraging," Jondy muttered.

"Hey, you asked," Trey said. "It's going to take us a few hours to get anything done, whether it works or not--and afterwards, we're both going to be pretty exhausted."

"Okay," Max nodded. "Anything we can do to help?"

He shook his head. "Cross your fingers."

"Let's just get this over with." Zack gritted his teeth and closed his eyes.

"Good luck," Jondy offered, as they left the room.

"Amen to that," Max seconded, closing the door as Trey gently laid a hand on either side of her brother's head.

Atrium, Terminal City

Max watched as Jondy paced the perimeter of the courtyard for the third time. "Worried?" she asked.

The other woman shrugged. "A little."

"Really? 'Cause you seem like you're a lot worried." When Jondy didn't respond, Max tried again. "You're giving me whiplash with all the pacing. Wanna pull up some asphalt and sit with me?"

"Gotta keep moving. If I sit down, I'll crawl out of my skin," she admitted ruefully. "Wish there was something I could do. You know, to help."

"Me too," Max said with a sigh. "Hope it works."

Jondy nodded, pulling her blonde curls back into a ponytail as she walked. "Yeah. So do I. Zack hates being out of control like this, y'know? Drives him nuts. Wouldn't ever say it, though. He's always gotta be all stoic about things. But you can tell. Every time it comes up, he gets uncomfortable and snarky. Took him a while to even tell Lydecker about it."

"How did he hook up with Lydecker?" Max asked, curious.

"Deck went out to the farm and found him about a couple of months ago. Got some intel about a man matching Zack's description from a local sheriff or something. Any-

way, once he was there, seeing him jogged Zack's memory pretty harshly--Krit says that Zack tried to run him through with a pitchfork."

"Was he happy on the farm?"

Jondy paused in her pacing, glancing over at Max. "He seemed like it. Wasn't too happy when he found out his life was a lie, though."

Max shrugged, feigning indifference. "Seems to have gotten over it."

"Yeah. He acts like he's gotten over a lot of things. Like you choosing Logan over him." Max opened her mouth to speak, but Jondy shook her head. "I understand--you love Logan. I get it. Zack, though..." Jondy sighed. "Let's just put it this way, Max. He's always been so busy choosing you that he...he never stopped to consider what your choice would be."

"What do you mean?" Max cut in sharply.

"You remember the night we broke out of Manticore?" Jondy asked, her dark blue eyes far away, lost in memory.

"Yeah," Max replied, uncomfortable. "What about it?"

Jondy offered her a one-shouldered shrug as she began pacing again. "It was your seizure that set it off, remember? Zack got us out of there to save you."

"He got us out of there to save all of us, Jondy," Max said firmly.

"Yeah," Jondy responded automatically. "Whatever. All I know is that Zack didn't get it when you chose Logan." Max watched the tense set of Jondy's shoulders as she continued softly, "I understand, though."

There was an awkward silence, and Max looked down, pulling weeds out of the concrete. "I'm surprised he didn't actually kill old leather face when he tried to run him through," she observed, trying to lighten things.

"Yeah, well, Zane and Krit were there. They ran interference, but it took both of them to pull him off." Jondy glanced at her watch. "It's been about an hour."

"Trey said it would take a couple of hours at least," Max reminded the other woman. "How have you been?"

"Okay, I guess. Working for Lydecker's been...interesting, I guess. He's the same old Colonel. In charge and all, but he knows what he's doing at least. Anyway, Zane and Syl and Krit are there. And Zack. So it's not that bad, really. The company more than makes up for the commander. You really think it's going to be another hour?"

"You *are* jittery, aren't you?"

"Kind of. I'm not good with the whole waiting thing. What do you think Trey meant by 'things get shaken loose that shouldn't be'?"

Max shrugged. "Hell if I know. Jondy, it'll be okay."

"I know. It's his fight. Just wish I could be there for him, you know? He's always been there for us, no matter what. I hate feeling like he's all alone in there." She sighed, kicking a pebble across the courtyard. "I hate that he might feel like he's all alone in this."

"Jondy, I'm sure he knows that you've got his back, no matter what." Max raised an eyebrow as she watched Jondy continue pacing. "You two seem very close."

"As close as Zack lets anyone get," the tall blonde replied sardonically. "But yeah, I guess we are."

"Are you in love with him?" Max asked point-blank.

Jondy chuckled bitterly, pausing for a moment to throw Max a glance over her shoulder. "Now, wouldn't that be stupid of me?"

"Are you?" Max pressed.

Jondy didn't say anything, looking at her watch instead. "I don't know if I can stand another hour without knowing if he's going to be okay."

"You do love him."

"Max," Jondy said, turning to face her, blue eyes dark with some indefinable emotion. "Any woman who fell in love with Zack would have to be ready for a helluva long wait."

"And you're no good at the whole waiting thing?" Max asked skeptically, quoting her earlier words.

"Something like that," Jondy muttered, eyes on the door. She sighed, a long, slow exhalation, before she turned and offered Max a tight-lipped smile. "I hate waiting."

Logan's Apartment, Fogle Towers - Late Morning

"All right, is it working...now?" Alec asked, voice muffled by the desk he was lying under as he tried to hook up Logan's computer.

Logan checked, pushing some buttons. "Yeah, looks like it. Thanks, Alec."

"No problem. It only took me the better part of two days to put together your informant net."

"Doing good deeds isn't always about saving the damsel in distress or beating up bad guys," Logan told him, grin-

ning slightly.

"Yeah, well, I got to save up my really heroic moments anyway. Otherwise I'll use 'em all up at once and not be any good to anyone. So, anyway, what are you working on?" he asked, standing and squinting at the computer screen.

"Stem cells," Logan replied shortly.

"That's not Eyes Only stuff."

"No, it's not," he said, eyes still glued on the computer screen. "I think I may have found a cure."

"In stem cells? Logan, man, haven't those failed you twice now?"

"It's the best shot I've got at the moment, Alec," Logan said shortly. "It's the only way I can think of to stay walking."

"But it's not permanent...is it?"

"That's what I'm working on...a way to make this stick."

"What if you can't?" Alec asked him softly.

"I refuse to accept that as an option."

"What if you have no choice, Logan?" he pressed.

"I'll deal with that when I come to it. Until then, I'll keep looking."

The Streets near Terminal City - early afternoon

"So, how do you feel?" Jondy asked Zack as the trio headed away from Terminal City on foot.

Zack shrugged, thinking for a moment. "Sluggish. Like my head is filled with mush."

"Sounds like a bad hangover," Max noted, studying him for a moment. "You kinda look like hell."

"Trey said it worked, so it's worth it. If it really did," Zack added darkly.

"Hey, Trey knows what he's talking about," Max protested.

"Well, so did Lydecker's men, and my hands still ended up wrapped around Miracle Boy's throat, didn't they?"

"I trust Trey more than I trust Lydecker. Besides--"

"Shhh," Jondy said, her brow furrowing. "You guys hear that?"

"Sounds like a fight," Zack noted disinterestedly after listening to the sound of feet scuffling and the muffled impact of flesh meeting flesh.

They listened for a moment longer, until a slight whimper prompted Max into action. "Sounds like someone getting beat up, that's what it sounds like," she said, heading in the direction of the noise. Jondy and Zack followed, exchanging glances.

In the nearby alley, a slender young man was fighting with three muggers twice his size. Max recognized him as an X6 who'd worked in the mess hall in Terminal City.

"Takes three of you to take out a kid?" she drawled, walking into the fight, and pulling one of the men away by the collar. "Pretty pathetic," she said, tossing him negligently aside.

He jumped up again, swinging out toward her, but she ducked easily.

"You're boring me," Max taunted, kicking him in the ribs.

The man doubled over, grunting, but still rushed her again. Again, she quickly evaded him, putting him into a headlock. "But if you keep it up, I might start to get offended." The man elbowed her in the stomach, hard, trying to get Max to loosen her grasp on him.

Max hissed in a breath from between her teeth. "Now that wasn't very nice. It hurt my feelings. Guess chivalry really is dead." She pushed him to the ground, planting a kick firmly on his butt that sent him flying into a puddle. Putting her hands on her hips, she shielded the X6 with her body. "You might want to get out of here before you really piss me off."

Zack blocked a blow that one of the other muggers leveled at Max while Jondy tossed the third out of the alley. "You like beating up kids, huh? Why don't you try this on for size?" he growled, slamming him against the alley wall before heaving him onto the ground beside his cohorts.

"Get out of here," Jondy ordered contemptuously as they scrambled to their feet and ran.

"Don't come back until you learn something about throwing a punch," Max called after them, before turning toward the younger transgenic. "You all right?"

"Yeah," he replied, shaking his head as if to clear it. "Just kinda feel...weird." He looked up, and recognized her. Immediately the boy straightened into an "at attention" pose. His hand twitched toward his head, as though he wanted to salute. Wisely, he refrained.

"Weird? How? Did you take a head blow?" she demanded.

"No, ma'am, I didn't. It should have been an easy fight but I feel somehow...tired. I don't understand it."

"You were outnumbered, soldier," Zack said, exuding

military authority.

"I know, sir, but they were ordinaries." The X6 thought for a moment. "I don't think they really got any good hits on me. I felt something poke me once, like a pinprick. Other than that...nothing."

"Go back to Terminal City and get a physical," Max ordered. "Make sure you're healthy."

"Yes, ma'am."

She had to suppress an exasperated sigh at his formality.

"You always get involved in one-sided fights for fun, Max?" Jondy teased as they walked out of the alley.

She shrugged absently, responding, "Yeah, well, gotta keep myself busy somehow." Something lying on the concrete caught her eye. Max knelt to pick it up, examining it for a moment.

"What's that?" Zack asked, watching her.

"Looks like an official ID of some kind," Max said, standing.

"That's strange," Jondy said, coming up behind her. "How many government officials go around mugging people?"

"Yeah, they do most of their stealing on paper," Max quipped, tucking the ID in her pocket.

Zack raised an eyebrow. "You're going to keep it?"

"I'm gonna to see if Logan can do some digging and find out who this guy is and who he works for."

"Why? So you can go give the guy a stern talking-to about playing well with others?" Jondy asked, clearly baffled.

Max shrugged. "I'm not sure. Something seems off about

this whole thing. Three men try to take down a kid who obviously doesn't have anything? And a transgenic who can't take care of himself because he gets unaccountably tired?"

"Seems kind of like a stretch to me," the other woman responded. "But better safe than sorry."

Max nodded. "That's what I'm sayin'."

Logan's Apartment, Fogle Towers, Seattle - early evening

Max pushed open the door to Logan's apartment.

"Mmm ...it smells great in here," she exclaimed as she made her way into the kitchen.

Logan smiled as he turned from the stove to face her. "Shrimp alfredo sauce with noodles sound okay?"

Max nodded and hopped up to sit on the counter next to the stovetop. "Sounds amazing."

As Logan moved to strain the pasta over the sink, Max frowned. "You're wearing the exoskeleton again? I thought that was just for a precaution...in Terminal City."

Logan stood facing the sink as the pasta drained. "Yeah, well, I kinda figured with Zack...well, I didn't know what to think...and better safe than sorry, I guess..." A grim smile plastered on his face, he turned back to meet her eyes. "Ready for dinner?"

"Sure," she answered, hopping off the counter and following him slowly to the table.

Logan set the pasta down and returned for the sauce. "Wine?"

"Yeah," Max answered, her tone clipped as she listened to

the servomotors on the exoskeleton whine.

Logan sat down next to her and poured her a glass of white wine. "So, you haven't said anything about the session today...did Trey think he was successful?"

Max finished chewing the mouthful of pasta and reached for her glass of wine. After taking a sip, she said, "Yeah, he felt like there was a real breakthrough and Zack felt like it was different from before..."

"But?"

"But I guess I'm not sure how much to trust any of this...to trust Lydecker...Manticore...it seems like a pretty big risk..."

"But..."

"Yeah, but," Max answered, reaching for her glass of wine again.

"You're glad to have him here...him and Jondy." Logan reached for her hand, slipping it into his. She looked up to meet his eyes and nodded.

"Then it's a risk worth taking," Logan answered.

Max nodded, slowly.

"But you're not sure?" Logan asked.

"I'm not sure how I'll ever really trust him...he tried to kill you, Logan...last fall and again yesterday. Zack is my brother and I will always care about him, but...I love you. I don't know what I would do..." Her voice trailed off as she dropped her eyes down from his toward the table.

Logan cleared his throat. "Well, I have some other news for you..."

Max looked up and smiled at him. "Yeah? You do some real work today?"

Logan pretended to look offended. "What, me? You think I'm some kind of dilettante?"

"Playboy," she teased.

"Laugh all you want, but between my computer genius and Alec's willingness to be a lackey, Eyes Only is up and ready for operation again."

"Excellent," Max replied. "Well, I've got an assignment for the last free voice in Seattle, then."

"What?" Logan asked, the teasing tone from his voice gone once again.

Max flipped the ID badge she had picked up on the street earlier onto the table. "Took this off a guy beating up an X6 outside Terminal City."

Logan picked up the badge and flipped it over. "Huh...pretty standard government issue...except..."

"What?" Max asked.

"This one has eighteen digits. The usual government issue is fifteen."

"Forgery?"

"Possibly," Logan answered. He pushed back his chair and stood up. "Let me see what I can find."

Max looked up, her eyes filled with disappointment. "Now?"

"Why, you want to do something else?" he asked.

"I don't know...it's a clear night...good for a ride and maybe a climb?"

"Climb?"

"Awfully romantic up on certain abandoned Space Needles...good for watching stars..."

Logan looked back at her, his face blank. "I'd really love to," he replied, his voice low. "But now isn't the time, Max. It just isn't the time..."

She sat silent as he turned and walked out of the room, heading for his office and the computers once again.

* * * * *

Act Four

Logan's Apartment, Fogle Towers - November 15, mid-morning

Logan looked up from the computer screen as the doorbell rang. He reached back and flipped the power switch for the exoskeleton. He stood easily and made his way to the door.

"Zack...nice...to see you again. Where's Jondy?" Logan said, warily. He stepped back and let Zack into the hallway.

"She went with Alec." He noticed Logan's cautious glance and snorted. "Relax. It's okay, if I was going to try and kill you, I would have done it by now. Max here?" Zack asked.

"Nope, just me," Logan answered. "She's probably at Jam Pony. You could page her."

"Yeah," Zack said as he walked toward the computer room. Once he was in the room, he stopped and turned to face Logan, an uncomfortable expression on his face.

"Hey, I'm sorry about...the other night and...the other time..." Zack told him lamely, shrugging. "I thought you were a traitor." He squinted for a moment. "I think... whatever. I thought I had to kill you. Sorry."

"You remember that?" Logan asked.

Zack turned, looking out the windows. "Sort of. Max told me about it when she tried to run me off." He paused for a moment, voice becoming harsher when he continued. "Said she couldn't trust me around you."

"Must be hard for you," Logan answered, crossing to the window. He stood beside the other man, looking out over the city for a couple of minutes and then turned back to face Zack. "I, uh, I really hope the PSYOPs thing works...you deserve...oh, no..."

Zack watched for a second, shocked, as Logan fell to the floor, his legs spasming wildly out of control. Zack finally recovered with a shake of his head, and knelt beside Logan. "What do I do?" he asked Logan, his tone urgent. "How do I turn it off?"

"In the back," Logan panted, trying to direct Zack to the power switch. Finally Zack found the switch and Logan's legs stilled.

"What was that?" Zack asked, looking down at Logan.

"Just help me to my chair, okay," Logan said quietly, avoiding the other man's eyes.

Zack easily lifted Logan from the floor and helped him into the computer chair.

"You aren't wearing this thing for show, are you?" Zack asked suspiciously. "You really can't walk any more, can you?"

Logan refused to look at Zack, to answer him.

"And you haven't told Max, have you?" Zack continued, stifling a slight laugh. "Nice going, Cale. She'll love that."

Logan locked his eyes on Zack's. "It's none of your damned business and I'd appreciate it if you didn't bring it up with Max."

Zack nodded. "Not to worry. I've had my fair share of secrets. So, tell Max I stopped by?"

"Yeah," Logan answered shortly, turning back to the computer screen.

Zack turned to leave and then came back. "For what it's worth, those nanocytes they used on me...Manticore used them for all sorts of things. Take me for instance... they used the nanocytes to help me heal faster - to regenerate damaged tissue...I saw them used for lots of things. I never saw them make somebody walk again, but it makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Manticore's gone," Logan responded, flatly.

"Yeah, but the scientists aren't. I have no idea what became of them, but I know that the place I woke up in was definitely Manticore. It had all the signs. It's something to think about."

"Life is hard enough as it is right now, Zack. I don't have a lot of extra time or energy to chase after your fairy tales," Logan answered, bitterly.

"Well, then you're a bigger idiot than I thought," Zack retorted, exasperated. "Will you let me see what I can find out, at least?"

Logan turned to look at him. "Yeah, let me know. And...I'll tell Max you were looking for her."

Zack moved as if to leave then hesitated. He quietly went to retrieve Logan's wheelchair from the exercise room and pushed it next to Logan. Without another word, he left the apartment.

Crash - early evening

Max plopped down on a bar stool in front of the bar at Crash. Her body relaxed and her head hit the wood of the bar with a soft 'clunk.'

"Hard day?"

Max looked up to find Jake, one of the regular bartenders, standing in front of her.

"All of my days seem hard lately," Max replied.

Jake filled a pint glass and passed it to her. She took a sip and set the glass down.

"Thanks...that hits the spot."

"Good to have you back, Max...or do you have some number I should use?" the bartender asked, smiling at her.

"Nope, just Max...same as always. Same girl, same attitude, same love for the brew you guys serve here."

"Good," Jake answered. "It's about time things got back to normal around here. Without you to shark around the pool tables, it's been pretty boring."

Max laughed.

"And Sketchy doesn't spend near as much without someone egging him on in the bet department."

Max took another long sip of her draft. "Well, it's about time we took care of that." She turned and moved to slip off her stool, then stopped.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey, Max," Asha replied, moving in to hug Max. Max stiffened slightly, then allowed Asha to pull her into her arms. "It's really good to see you here."

"I was just heading over to a table...you want to..."

"I'd love to," Asha replied. Jake poured her a pint, and then refilled Max's glass. The women grabbed their beer and headed for a small table in the corner.

"So, how is it?" Asha asked.

"Weird," Max answered. "Everything's weird...people at Jam Pony, customers...Logan. I just wanted things back the way they were, but sometimes it seems like everybody else has changed and I'm still just me."

Asha nodded and took a sip of her beer. "It's a big change for people, Max. You've always known about Manticore, the transgenics...but all of these people are just learning about it. It's going to take some time."

"Yeah, but Logan's always known about me...knew about it the first time he met me, pretty much, so what's up with him?"

"Well, it's a hard time for him now, too...just give him time, he'll adjust."

Max took a sip and then set down the glass. "But we finally got stuff straightened out. The virus is taken care of...we were taking things to another level...things should be good, but for a while now he's just been pushing me away. It's been a little better since he got home, but he's still acting strange. I don't get that."

"He's just trying to protect you, Max. You know how he hates to put his burden on anyone else. Just give him some space."

Max stared at her. "His burden?" she asked. "What burden?"

Asha took a deep breath, swore under her breath, and then reached for her beer.

"Is something going on with Logan?" Max asked quietly.

Asha set her glass down. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

Max sat for a moment, and then trained her eyes on Asha. "Is he sick? Was it Terminal City? Aveta warned me that he was tired. Dammit, I should have gotten him out of there."

"No, Max, it's nothing like that," Asha tried to reassure her, reaching for Max's hand, but Max snatched it away.

"Either you tell me what's going on, or I'm done with this conversation," Max answered.

"He's my friend..." Asha began.

"And you won't help him by keeping secrets from me," Max replied.

"Think about it, Max...has anything seemed off to you lately?" Asha asked.

Max sat for a moment. "His legs. He's having trouble, isn't he? I should have seen it! He's fine at home, in his office, but as soon as I talk about going anywhere, he shuts down on me. How could I have not seen that? Am I that stupid?"

Asha reached again for Max's hand. "Give him some time, okay? He's handling it, but I don't think he's ready--"

"Ready for what? Ready to actually talk to me about something for a change? Forget it. I'm out of here." With that, Max turned and stormed out of the bar, not even stopping as Alec and Jondy walked in the door.

"Max!" Jondy called, turning to follow her.

"Let her go," Asha said, walking up to the couple. "She needs a little time for herself."

Logan's Apartment, Fogle Towers

The sound of fingers striking keys filled the penthouse as Logan chased down the muggers online.

Logan took a deep breath and expelled it slowly through his teeth, making a hissing noise. "Goddamn it."

"What, can't hack it, Cale?" Zack's amused voice asked, startling him.

"Zack. So nice of you to break in again." He turned to face the other man.

"Forgot my hat," Zack said, picking up the knit cap lying on the corner of Logan's desk. "What's the problem?" Zack jerked a chin towards the computer monitor.

Logan's jaw tightened as he shook his head. "The ID Max got off that mugger is giving me some trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Can't get anything on it except that it's connected to Manticore in some way. The evidence trail keeps leading back there and then disappearing."

"Back to Manticore?" Zack asked, sandy blond eyebrows retreating toward his hairline. "You're sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I've been sitting here doing this for the past hour and half. " Logan took his glasses off and massaged the bridge of his nose. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about Manticore employing ordinary soldiers, would you?"

"As anything other than training staff? Nope." He thought for a moment, his face crinkling. "Maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Logan asked, perking up.

"Nothing," Zack said, shaking his head. "No. Manticore didn't have any ordinary units that I know of."

Logan's eyes narrowed. "Nothing you know of? Is there

anybody out there who might know more?"

Zack shrugged, giving every appearance of disinterest. "Always possible."

He sighed and turned back to his computer screen. "Well, if you hear anything about it, get back to me, all right?"

"Logan..." Zack paused and then continued, "About the other stuff, from today...if I find something, I'll call you."

"Well, for Max's sake, stay in touch," Logan answered before grudgingly adding, "And...thanks. For looking."

"No big deal," Zack replied. "But, before I go, one question."

"Shoot."

"Why haven't you told Max about your legs?" he challenged Logan.

"Zack, thanks for the help, but that isn't any of your business," Logan snapped.

"It's my job to protect her," Zack said, crossing his arms. "I'm just doing my part to see that Maxie doesn't get hurt."

"What a good big brother you are," Logan said with a tight, unfriendly smile, putting an emphasis on 'brother.'

Zack's features hardened. "Jondy and I are leaving tonight, and before I go, I want to know that you're not going to mess with Max's head. So start talking. Why haven't you told her yet? Were you planning on letting her find out by collapsing at her feet?"

"It's complicated."

"No, I think it's pretty simple, Logan. I don't think I've ever seen someone let his pride come before the person he

says he loves quite like I've seen with you," Zack replied.

"It's not pride," Logan said quietly.

"Then what is it, because from where I stand..."

"Because there's a potential cure..."

"And you're waiting for it to kick in so you don't have to tell her?" Zack interrupted.

"No, it's not that easy. The doctor is in New Mexico and going there would have meant leaving Max behind in Terminal City."

"Yeah, well, the standoff is over, if you hadn't noticed. So what's the newest excuse? Global warming?"

"I'm trying to tell her!" Logan burst out, frustrated.

"If you're trying so hard, why haven't you?"

"Because once you don't tell the truth...when you wait... then it gets harder and harder. That's just a fact of life, Zack, and the sooner you understand what reality is like, the sooner you'll be able to live in this brave new world," Logan sighed, deflated. "I'm going to tell her."

"Good," Zack said and then paused as he walked toward the door. "You take care of her."

"She doesn't need taking care of, Zack. You never got that about her," Logan said with a shake of his head.

"What I meant," Zack gritted out between clenched teeth, "was make her happy."

"I'm trying," Logan replied, turning back to his computer.

Zack stalked out of the apartment, taking a deep breath to calm himself. "Useless jerk can't even find out who mugged us and he's lecturing me..." He shook his head.

"Right. Muggers." He pulled out his phone and punched in a phone number, listening to it ring as he waited.

"Lydecker."

"I need to ask you a question about normal soldiers working for Manticore..."

Crash

Max stormed out of Crash. "Should have seen it..." she muttered to herself as she headed for her bike. "Maybe a good long ride across town might..."

She was still shaking her head and talking to herself when three large men crossed her path.

"That's her...that's the freak who came to my house the other day."

Max looked up to find the man she had delivered a package to a couple of days ago standing with two equally rotund friends.

"You really don't want to be the only thing standing between me and a long, hot bath..." Max said as she tried to sidestep the group of men. The spokesman followed her step and moved up into her face.

"I thought I told you this morning that we didn't need your *kind* around here."

His friends stepped on either side of her. The taller one reached for her arm, but she snatched it back. The spokesman grabbed at her. She stopped his hand and twisted it back at him, while kicking her right leg up and hitting him squarely below the belt.

"Oof!" The man doubled over as his two friends turned toward Max.

"You guys should pay more attention to what they say on TV, not just the pretty pictures. Then you'd know I could kick your ass with one hand tied behind my back, and we could've avoided all this unpleasantness," Max said as she roundhouse-kicked the taller man, knocking him to the ground.

Not stopping to catch her breath, she whirled back, punching rapidly at the face of the final member of the trio. Neither of the other men had gotten up from the ground.

"So, before you go picking on nice girls like me, I'd recommend hitting the gym," she replied, landing a final punch that knocked the man to the ground.

Inside Crash

"So, Max is on a tear?" Alec asked as he sat down across from Asha. Jondy was across the room, getting a pitcher of beer for the group.

"I...well...I might have let on about Logan..." Asha said, her voice faltering.

Alec slowly let his breath out. "Whoa...I'm so glad I'm not you right now..."

"Yeah, stupid Asha screws up again," she answered, laughing bitterly. "Sorry, better just cut all ties with me before I cause any more pain and anguish to the blessed couple."

"Why would you say that?" Alec asked, reaching for Asha's hand. He turned it up and began to trace the lines on her palm. "His secret was bound to get out."

"Yeah, but it didn't have to be me," Asha replied, pulling her hand back. "And don't sweet-talk me on this one...I

know I blew it."

"Hey, don't you think I should go after Max?" Jondy asked, setting the pitcher of beer down on the table.

"Nah, Max likes her space," Alec replied. "You've been gone for how long? I've been dealing with her on a daily basis for the past year."

"True," Jondy answered. "But you aren't a woman, Alec, and based on my short observation period, I can't imagine that you'll ever really understand us."

She turned and headed toward the door. "A woman always wants someone to come after her."

Outside Crash

"So, I'd start with abs, then work on my sparring," Max continued as she picked up the last of her harassers and sent him packing into the night.

"You looking for a job as a professional trainer?" Zack asked as he moved out of the shadows outside of Crash.

"Girl's gotta keep her options open in times like these."

"They getting on your case, Max?" Zack asked.

"Nothin' I haven't heard before and won't hear again," she replied, brushing the dust off of her pants.

"You should be careful," he replied, moving in to put his arm on her shoulder. "I want you to watch out for yourself, Max. This isn't like the old days, before everyone knew about us."

"See, that's what I've missed about having a big brother around," Max replied, stepping out of Zack's embrace. "Although I have been taking care of myself for a long

time now."

"I worry about you, Max. I...I care about you."

"I know," she answered. "I've always known, but you know how things are now. You have to accept that."

Zack nodded, then leaned in and kissed Max softly on the lips. As he pulled away, his eyes met Jondy's, and her mouth dropped open in surprise. Zack straightened up and stepped away.

"What are you doing, Zack?" Max said, moving away from him.

"Everything okay, Max?" Jondy asked, as she moved toward them.

"Yeah, just fine," Max answered. "I hate to run, but I've gotta blaze." Without waiting for an answer, she crossed to her bike and took off down the street.

Undetermined Location - late evening

"I take it, Agent Martin, that your men haven't had the success you expected," accused Selkirk. His cold eyes were trained on Martin.

"I would argue that point, sir," Martin protested politely. "I believe that we have had some progress. However, when the transgenics travel in packs, it is more difficult to capture them, in particular 452 and her companions. They're seasoned fighters. We've found that when the transgenics are alone, they're more vulnerable."

"Do they often travel in packs?" queried an elderly man dressed in navy.

"At times."

"Then it's up to you to find a solution to that problem as well," Selkirk ordered. "I hope that you do so swiftly, Agent Martin."

Martin lowered eyes that simmered with resentment at the set-down, nodding his head and replying with an appropriately deferential, "Of course, sir."

"Good. This meeting is adjourned."

Max's Apartment - 11:15 pm

A knock on the door pulled Max out of her thoughts as she sat on the couch, staring into a cup of milk.

"Coming," she called, standing up and walking over to the door. "What's up?" she asked, waving Jondy and Zack into her living room. As she studied their faces, she blanched. "Something wrong?"

"Nope, nothing like that," Jondy said. "Just came to say good-bye."

"You're leaving?" Max asked, disappointed. "Tonight?"

Zack nodded. "Lydecker wants us back to HQ on the double. He needs us."

"We're in for a hell of an ass-chewing. We said we'd be back a week ago," Jondy told Max, with a slight smile. "But we didn't want to go without saying good-bye." She hugged Max tightly. "It was good to see you," she said.

"Yeah, really good," Max replied, blinking back emotion, and hugging Jondy back fiercely before letting go.

"I always thought...after you fell through the ice..." Jondy shrugged. "I didn't have time to tell you last time I saw you, but I'm awful glad you're here."

"Me too," Zack said quietly, grazing her cheek with a finger.

"Glad you feel better, big brother," Max said, and his hand dropped away.

"Thanks for the help," he said, hugging her briefly and awkwardly.

"Jondy was right; it's the least of what I owe you." The silence became too heavy, so she cleared her throat. "Coming back to Seattle anytime soon?"

"Who knows?" Jondy said, smiling. "But if we are, then you'll know about it."

"I better," Max said mock-threateningly, and Jondy laughed.

"We should get going," Zack said, shifting his weight uncomfortably, "if we wanna be back in time for the debriefing."

Jondy nodded. "You're right." She turned back to Max. "Tell Logan and Alec we said goodbye."

"I will," Max said, pressing her lips together tightly. "Tell Krit and Syl and Zane that I said hey."

"Of course."

"Be careful, Max," Zack said, his gray eyes filled with concern. "Promise me you'll watch your back."

"I will, Zack," she reassured him. "And besides, I've got Eyes Only as backup. I'll be fine."

Zack nodded, and the two opened the door, walking into the hall. "Hey!" Max called after them.

"Yeah?" Zack responded, turning.

"Take care of each other," Max said, her eyes seeking out Jondy's.

"Always," Jondy responded, nodding, and then they were gone.

Max sat on the couch and listened to the engines of their motorcycles as they rode away into the dark.

* * * * *

Epilogue

Logan's Apartment, Fogle Towers - Midnight

Max stepped into the dim light of Logan's bedroom. His glasses had slipped down his nose and his book was resting on his chest. The light glimmered across his bed, but his eyes were closed and his breathing was even. She could see the exoskeleton leaning against the chair in the corner of his room.

As she watched, his right leg jerked slightly and she saw a grimace quickly cross his face. She sat down on the bed next to him and picked up his book. Slipping the marker in the page he was on, she placed the book on the bedside table.

She leaned over and smoothed her hand along his face. "Why won't you talk to me?" she whispered. Her hand brushed across his lips and his eyes opened to meet hers.

"Hey," he said, his voice gruff with sleep.

Max leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips. Her right arm brushed down along his left until her hand was entwined in his.

"Did they leave?" he asked.

Max sat back, her hand still wrapped within his. "Yep. I guess I should just be grateful that Zack is back to himself, and not be pissed that he left so quickly."

Logan pushed himself up against headboard. "They'll be back, Max. Zack can't stay away, and I think Jondy wants to spend more time, not less, with you."

Max leaned her head down on Logan's chest, against his shoulder. "Can you just hold me tonight?"

He paused, then smiled at her. "Sure. The world isn't going anywhere."

They sat there for several minutes until Max slipped from his embrace and sat up, looking him straight in the eyes.

"You would tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you? Like you did the other day when you didn't know where Zack was?"

Logan reached out and smoothed her hair. "Of course. We're in this together."

"No matter what?"

"Yes," Logan answered, but his eyes moved away from hers. He leaned in and kissed her again.

"You mind if I stay here tonight?" Max asked, her voice quiet.

"Uh, no, but you working tomorrow?"

"Yeah, straight up at 8:00 A.M. No rest for the wicked, according to Normal. Hey, mind if I grab a shower? Crash was grimy tonight. You could join me," Max teased.

"No, you go ahead," Logan replied.

Max stood up, stopping to look back at him. "You'd be straight with me."

"Straight as an arrow. Go," Logan replied, slapping her lightly on her butt.

Max walked into the bathroom, her brow furrowed. "He's lying," she whispered to herself. "Why start this again?"

Her thoughts continued to race as she turned the water on

in the shower, then slipped under its pulsing beat. As she reached for the soap, everything suddenly went white around her.

"What!" she called out as she slipped to the floor of the shower with a thud.

"Max!" Logan called in alarm from the bedroom. Using his arms, he slid his legs from the bed and pushed up, willing them to move forward just this once. He grabbed for the wall, then the dresser, as he painfully made his way from the bed. Reaching for the door of the bathroom, he slipped to the floor and half-crawled until he managed to get to the shower door.

Pulling it open, Logan found Max crumpled on the floor of the shower, the water coursing over her body.

"Hey, Max," Logan said, panting as he tried to catch his breath. He reached up and turned the water off.

"What happened?" Max asked, her voice filled with shock. "Was it a seizure?"

Logan shook his head. "I don't think so...I think you fainted." He reached over to the shelf of towels next to the shower, pulling a light blue one out and covering Max with it. As he pulled the towel up to cover her breasts, his fingers stopped, then traced over the markings on her skin.

"These are new, aren't they?" he asked.

Max looked down at the dark runes now running from her upper right arm to her shoulder and across her chest. She sighed and raised her eyes to meet Logan's. He held her gaze for a moment, then pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms around her.

"We're gonna figure this out, Max."