

Dark Angel VS3

The Thread of Life

By Parit06, willow and Zanna



Episode VS3.17

Prologue

An Undisclosed Location - Friday January 7, 2022, dawn

The view from where the young woman sat was scenic. The sun was just beginning to rise, glowing soft pink and lavender behind the trees surrounding the campsite. The morning air was crisp and cool, but she appeared to be the only inhabitant of her tent currently enjoying nature's beauty. She'd positioned her chair near the open flap of the tent, a distance away from the table behind her and the woman sitting at it, glaring down at her breakfast and at Jondy by turns.

"It's way too early in the morning to be eating things out of packets," Syl said. "It's way too early, period. There'll be plenty of time for living off rations once all hell breaks loose. Can't we eat something decent 'til then?"

Jondy raised a brow and looked at her. "Can *you* cook?" she asked. Syl grumbled, but said nothing.

"Besides," Jondy went on, "at least you got a good night's sleep. I pulled perimeter all evening, and you don't see me complaining."

"Yeah. You look real beat, J."

Jondy grinned.

Then a voice from outside divided their attentions. Syl and Jondy turned to see Krit walking into the tent. He grabbed a chair near Syl and reached eagerly for one of the self-contained meals she had just been lamenting.

"I don't care what time it is," he was saying. "I don't care if my food comes in a packet. At this point, I don't care if it

comes kicking and screaming. I need something to eat. Are you going to finish that?"

Syl and Jondy both rolled their eyes, but smiled affectionately. Syl pushed her half-eaten breakfast toward Krit with a slight grimace, and got a wide grin for her sacrifice.

"What ever happened to an army marching on its stomach?" she mused.

"Maybe Lydecker's trying to starve us into submission," Krit suggested, around a mouthful of food.

Syl wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes at him again, but then laughed when Krit saw and kicked her under the table.

"Sounds like something he'd do," she agreed.

Jondy made a little sound from the other side of the tent.

"I don't know...he's got this weird thing about nutrition and 'fueling the human machine.' Or, in our case, the '*transgenic*' machine."

Krit started to say something, but caught the look Syl was sending him out of the corner of his eye, and went back to chewing his food.

"I can't cook either," Jondy said, going back to the earlier conversation, "but I *know* some of the others can. Lydecker could put one of them in the mess tent every now and again."

"Yeah. But then they'd have to take a break from fulfilling their life's purpose – learning to kill like good little soldiers again," Syl said. She worried the edge of the tabletop in front of her with her fingernail. "God forbid one of us waste the billions of dollars' worth of R&D that went into

our creation by doing something frivolous like having an actual life."

The tent became very quiet for a long moment.

"Speaking of which..."

"Of having an actual life?"

"Of God. Where is big brother this morning?"

Jondy slowly grinned at Krit but didn't bother to answer his question. "Where else?" she asked instead.

Logan's Penthouse - 8:00am

Logan stood and buttoned his jeans, doing a couple of knee bends to make sure the exoskeleton was ready for use. Then he looked at his watch again and, sighing, went to the computer table and picked up his cell phone. Impatiently, he hit speed dial and listened to the phone ring until finally he heard a voice on the other end.

"What?"

"Max," he said, surprised to hear her answer. "What are you doing? I've been paging you...and besides, aren't you supposed to be at—"

"Took the day off," she interrupted him. "Original Cindy's covering for me. I just wasn't feeling like my usual perky self this morning," she said sarcastically, but with a light-hearted tone.

"More runes?" Logan assumed.

"Not that I know of. So, why are you calling me this early, anyway?"

"Sandeman – I got a line on where he might be holed up," Logan answered, pacing restlessly back and forth in the

computer room. "Since you already took the day off, do you want to go with me to pay him a visit? Looks like he's in the mountains, just outside the city."

"Sounds good. Thanks for tracking him down."

"I'll swing by your place in an hour. If that's enough time to get yourself perky again, that is," Logan said with a half-smile.

"No sweat. See you then." Max pressed the 'off' button and laid the phone down on the bedside table. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, revealing only a thin blue tank top and a pair of underwear. Running a hand through her hair, she stood, and a sick look flashed across her already-pale face. Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she shrugged it off and headed toward the bathroom to get ready.

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Act One

An Undisclosed Location

"Again!"

Zack walked between the rows of soldiers who'd been paired to spar at his command. At the sound of his voice, the soldiers released the holds they were practicing on the others, and faced off once more. This time, the soldiers who'd been on the receiving end of the maneuvers practiced performing them.

"Again!"

As Zack oversaw these proceedings, Lydecker watched from his tent on the other side of the clearing. The sun had just come up, but sparring practice had already been going on for hours; many of the soldiers' movements had become choppy and progressively slower.

Zack glanced at Lydecker, then away.

"Enough!" he commanded.

The X5s and X6s sparring on the mat came to attention as one, and looked to their second-in-command questioningly.

"R&R for fifteen," Zack told them, ignoring their expressions of surprise. "Then we go again."

Zack headed off toward the ammo bunker, not bothering to watch as the soldiers saluted him. Out the corner of his eye, he noticed Lydecker retreating into his tent with a shake his head. Zack's jaw clenched, but he merely nodded at his subordinates as he passed, not slowing his pace

until he was inside the bunker.

Inside his tent, Lydecker stood near the back, listening intently to his cell phone. It was obviously not good news. His lips had thinned, and his knuckles were almost white as he gripped his phone. He glared at the wall of his tent and slowly closed his eyes with a sigh.

"You're sure?" he asked. Lydecker listened to the voice on the other end, and swore softly under his breath.

"Of course," he said next. "I'll have a team on its way by noon. Fax me their last known location."

Lydecker slipped his phone into his coat pocket as the call ended and began sorting through the documents printing from his fax machine. He compared them to several more sheets of intelligence he'd collected earlier that morning. He swore again. And almost smiled.

"It *would* have to be Seattle," he muttered to himself as he slipped the documents he'd collected into the pocket of his coat and left the tent.

Lydecker found Zack in the ammo bunker with Zane, assembling supplies for the morning's target practice. As Lydecker entered the tent, both X5s came to attention, although neither saluted. They wore identical, guarded expressions, but Lydecker paid them no mind.

"At ease, soldiers," he said at once, and both men relaxed temporarily.

"Zack, Krit's going to be taking over drills for the time being. I need you to prepare a team and be ready to move out in one hour."

Zack and Zane looked at Lydecker sharply.

"Why?" Zack asked.

"We're going to be taking a little trip back to Washington State," Lydecker said simply. He reached into his coat and removed the faxed intelligence he'd just received and handed it to Zack. He looked slightly uncomfortable as Zack handed the information to Zane immediately after he read it. "Anything there sound familiar to you men?" Lydecker asked.

"Should it?" said Zane, looking up.

"These people have been trying to capture X5s."

"Who hasn't?"

"...for use in genetic experiments that will benefit their soldiers: a bunch of ex-cons and ex-militants, souped up on cranial implants that give them superhuman strength and endurance."

"Sounds like a great group of people," Zane muttered sarcastically.

"What kind of experiments?" Zack asked.

"With DNA," Lydecker told him. "The implants are very effective, but their soldiers can only tolerate them for a short period of time. The Reds--that's what they call themselves--think that if they combine Manticore genetics with their technology, they can create a super-soldier who won't burn out in six months to a year. They tried this once before. Now they're doing it again."

Somewhere in the mountains outside Seattle, early that afternoon

As he pulled up to a small log cabin in the clearing of a grove of bare trees, Logan glanced over to see Max's head resting against the passenger window, hair spilling over her closed eyes. "Hey, sleepyhead, we're here," he said

softly.

Max raised her head, instantly awake, then looked at him with a smirk and shrugged. "I thought you said this place was close by."

"I thought you didn't sleep," he said, returning her smirk. "It took longer than I thought, mostly because the roads are so bad this far out."

"So why isn't he coming out to greet us after our long trip?" Max asked warily, peering through the windshield at the front door.

The two of them slowly got out of the Aztek, and Max crept up to the front porch to peer in the two grimy windows. Her eyes widened, and she went directly to the door, which was left unlocked. She pushed it open and they entered to find a one-room living space in total disarray. The cushions on the small couch were overturned, all the food from the cabinets was strewn about, and the legs were broken off the two chairs at the rickety wooden table.

"Well, the good news is, it looks like your intelligence was right this time," Max told him grimly, surveying the damage. "Bad news is, somebody else has good intelligence, too."

"At least it looks like they took him alive," Logan remarked. "I hope he had the presence of mind to leave Ray somewhere safe before he put himself in harm's way."

Max snorted. "That's one thing he's great at, leaving behind kids who are counting on him," she replied, while scanning the room with telescopic vision.

They walked around looking for anything unusual, until Max called out, "Got something."

Logan went over to where she stood by the sofa, looking at a crumpled piece of paper. "Whoever it was, they wanted to use him. At least until he either does what they want or teaches it to someone else."

Logan looked down at the sheet. It was a crude diagram that was comprised of the word 'Sandeman,' and then arrows to 'DNA' and various complex mathematical equations that neither of them understood. Max glanced up at Logan, worried, and he put a hand on her back to reassure her, but he couldn't quite force a smile.

Max made her way around the cabin, searching carefully for any clues to what might have happened. She looked over and saw Logan looking intently through some papers.

"Find something?" she asked as she walked over to where he was standing.

"Can't tell. You know how open Sandeman is with his information. Cryptic messages, prophetic ramblings...an open book, Sandeman," Logan said, irritation coloring his words.

"Whoa, where did this come from?" Max questioned as she looked up at Logan. "We knew what he was from the beginning. Now you're getting angry?" She arched her brows and looked at him, a half-smile playing on her face.

Logan flushed slightly. "At first, we had to hold onto the idea of Sandeman because we thought he was our only hope for curing the virus. Now the virus is gone, so I can concentrate on what he did to you," he said softly. He raised his hand and tucked an unruly curl of hair behind her ear. "He had no right to use you as his personal avatar of redemption or whatever it was he was doing." He sighed as he drew her into an embrace and held her close.

Max stood for a moment, then gently pulled away from Logan. "Much as I'd love to stay here like this all day, we need to get back," she said.

"Yeah, I guess," replied Logan as he reluctantly let go of Max. He gave one last look at the papers, then pulled a plastic bag from his pocket and deposited them inside for later perusal.

Together they left the cabin and walked through the light dusting of snow as a rare winter sun glinted through the trees.

"I was never much for mountains, but...it's kinda nice out here," Max commented as she opened the door to the Aztek.

"Yeah...I was just thinking maybe we could go to the family cabin in the summer and spend some time. No Manticore, no Eyes Only...just you and me. I won't even bring my laptop," Logan teased as he got into the car.

"Wow," said Max as she climbed into the passenger seat. "No laptop...must be serious. I'd like that." She grinned at Logan as he pulled away from the cabin onto the old logging road that led to the main highway. They drove in companionable silence, enjoying the peace of the forest, until they got to the turnoff that would take them back to Seattle.

"So...what's the story with your family cabin? I thought you were more a Cape Haven kind of guy. High dive and all that," Max said, teasing.

Logan reddened slightly at the memory. He glanced over at Max, then smiled. "The cabin holds good memories for me. We went almost every summer. We usually brought Bennett. Dad never seemed to mind us, but he and I were

total terrors." Logan snorted, then continued, "You know how kids can be."

Max looked at him thoughtfully. "No, I don't. Remember? I never had a childhood," she said. "But I think I'm going to find out," she muttered as an afterthought, turning her head away from him.

Logan cast a sideways glance in her direction, but said nothing.

"I don't have a clue about kids, Logan," she remarked, sighing.

"Max," Logan said, glancing her way. "I saw the way you were with Brittany, and I watched you in Terminal City with the X8s. They loved you. You have a way with kids."

Max shook her head. "God, Logan, can you imagine me with a kid? I wouldn't know what end to put the diaper on!"

"I think you'd be a great mom," he protested tenderly.

She snorted in response. "Oh, yeah, all those babysitting classes I took at Manticore are gonna come in real handy."

Logan laughed, but Max didn't join him. Instead, she sat quietly for another minute, staring at her fingers in her lap. Then she looked up, almost fearfully. "It's not actually a joke, you know. I'm...I'm pregnant," she told him.

The Aztek lurched to the left, then back to the right, as Logan tried to regain control. Finally, he managed to pull the car onto the shoulder of the road and shut off the engine. He turned and stared at Max, unable to say a word.

Max looked at the stunned look on Logan's face and began to get even more nervous. "Logan, say something...please."

As Logan struggled with the revelation, Max watched his face go from incredulity to shock. When he found his voice again, he said, "I...I don't know what to say. How...?" He trailed off, unsure of how to proceed.

"I don't know," Max whispered, her voice breaking slightly. She looked down at her hands, then turned to stare out the window so she could regain control of her emotions.

"Max, look at me." Logan reached for her hand. "This is big. We need time to...listen, come home with me. I'll fix you dinner. Wine...wait, no wine. Tea or coffee. Maybe water."

"Logan Cale, at a loss for words. Never thought I'd see that." Max looked at Logan with a hint of a nervous smile. "Okay."

As Logan was preparing to pull back on the road, a military convoy roared past them, heading south.

Max, glad to change the subject, asked, "Wonder what that's all about?"

"No idea, but I'll check it out when we get home," Logan replied as he pulled back onto the road.

Crash - early that evening

"Another round comin' through!" Alec waded through the crowd at their favorite bar, holding a pitcher of beer over his head. Somebody jostled him as he walked by, and some of the brew sloshed out and dripped onto his face. He glared at the guy, but decided not to press the issue, and passed by without a word.

When he arrived at the table and set the pitcher down, Original Cindy laughed. "Brother couldn't even wait 'til

he got back to his glass," she said, turning to Sketchy and Ginger. "He dunked his face right into the pitcher!"

"Ha-ha. *Very* funny," Alec sneered. "We're going to have to find a new hangout. This place's been overrun by transgenics. How the hell did they know to come *here*, of all places?"

"I guess 'cause all you did in Terminal City was talk about the good old days at Crash," Ginger told him, rolling her eyes.

"Oh." Alec was at a loss for words, so he reached for his glass and started to pour. "Well, in that case, it's not *that* crowded in here, I guess," he said with a mischievous smile.

When he went to fill Ginger's glass, she waved him off. "No, really, I have to get going," she told them.

"Leavin' already?" Original Cindy asked, confused. "You just got here, boo."

"No, actually, it's been an hour already," Ginger said defensively. "And I'm exhausted. There might not be as many in Terminal City now, but I'm still in charge of food for all of them."

"And whose fault is that?" Original Cindy snapped. "Not like they couldn't find food if you didn't put it on their plates."

"No, but they might get it in ways you and this stinkin' city wouldn't like," Ginger retorted. "Look, it's been fun, but I'm outta here."

Ginger got up and, slinging her purse over her shoulder, stalked away, up the stairs to the street level, and disappeared. "She's a fine sista', but she needs to be turned

over someone's knee," Original Cindy muttered.

"Come on, OC, don't be so hard on her," Sketchy objected. "Woman can't help it if she's tired."

"If she's tired," Original Cindy muttered. "Boys, Original Cindy is calling it a night." She started to stand, and when Sketchy reached out to put a hand on her wrist to stop her, one glare from her was enough to make him retract it quickly.

"No reason to pack it in just 'cause your girl toy doesn't want to play," Alec told her. "Lots of other girls in here to pick from. Just find the few that aren't staring at me, and there you go."

Original Cindy rolled her eyes and walked away.

"So, Alec, I've been meaning to ask you if you need any help at the new detective agency," Sketchy said, propping his arms up on the back of the chair in front of him. "I've been honing my investigation skills, working for this magazine, you know. Think I'm ready for some torrid affairs, missing persons...whatever you want to give me," he continued with a smile.

"Ahh..." Again Alec was at a loss for words, so he quickly took a gulp of his beer and just smiled back without answering.

Logan's Penthouse

Max stood watching as Logan nervously walked around the kitchen. There was none of his usual efficiency as he moved from table to sink, then back to the table. Finally he gave up and turned to look at Max.

"Come over to the couch with me," he said as he walked into the living room and sat down.

Max followed him and sat down at the other end. "Okay, what now?" she asked as she protectively wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Max, this is important. I need to ask you this. Do you...want this baby?" Logan asked softly.

Max stared at Logan. "I...thought you'd be happy."

"This isn't about me right now. It's about you. How do you feel? What do you want?" Logan looked at Max with concern lining his face.

Max sat silently, rubbing her hands on her pants, then said quietly, "I think I'm crazy for wanting it...I really want it. But what kind of parent would I make?" She looked at Logan and tears sprang to her eyes. "This hormone thing is kicking my butt," she joked.

Logan leaned toward her, but Max stood up quickly, avoiding him. She walked to the window, staring out into the darkness. "I'm scared, Logan," she whispered.

Logan stood up and followed her to the window. He turned her gently toward him, brushing a tear from her cheek. "Me too, Max," he said softly, "but if you want this baby, then I want it too." Logan paused for a moment, then looked up at the ceiling. "I guess it's something I thought wasn't in the cards for me," he said ruefully. "But now...wow."

Max, trying to lighten the moment, finally managed to smile. "I take it you're okay with the news, which is a good thing, 'cause if you weren't, I'd have to kick your ass."

Logan grinned back. "Yeah, but there's still a lot to do, like getting you the best doctor around, and...when are you moving in?" he added.

"Whoa, hold on a second. I've already got a doctor, one that knows how to deal with pregnant transgenics. And...we can talk about the other stuff later." She smiled.

Logan grinned back. "How about that dinner? You're eating for two now, but then you've always eaten enough for two. Maybe I should make enough for four." He teased as he walked into the kitchen.

"Make it enough for five. Ya never know...I could have twins," Max retorted slyly.

Logan whirled around, making the exoskeleton whine. He stared at Max, eyes wide. Max looked at him and started to giggle, which quickly turned into full-blown laughter. Logan laughed as well, grinning as he turned to make dinner.

"What do you want for dessert?" he asked over his shoulder.

Max walked over to him and slipped her arms around his waist. "Now that you mention it, there is one taste I've been craving." And with that, Logan turned around and she kissed him deeply.

Logan returned the kiss, then stepped back and looked at Max. "Typically I *make* the dessert, instead of actually *becoming* one," he said with an amused smile.

"Always good to try something new," Max said, the corners of her mouth turning up.

Terminal City - that evening

In the darkness of the early evening, two X5s walked out of the barracks, past two children who were playing outside. The children were drawing on the sidewalk with

chalk, but their doodles looked more like undeveloped algebraic equations and strategy maps than careless drawings. The X5s climbed on a stack of crates and leapt soundlessly over the fence separating Terminal City from the rest of Seattle. They made their way carefully down the street, keeping up a seemingly casual conversation while surreptitiously glancing left and right, their eyes sharp and wary.

The female turned to her companion. "All's clear so far," she told him. "Looks like it's gonna be a quiet night, Nat."

Nat looked at her and sighed. "Great, Serena," he said, sarcastically. "Tell me again why we care?" His partner raised an eyebrow in his direction, but did not respond. "Why do we need to waste a perfectly nice evening, running sweeps back and forth?"

"Because you can never be too safe. That's why," she told him.

Nat rolled his eyes. "'You can never be too safe'...You sound more like a kindergarten teacher than a weapons specialist," he muttered under his breath.

"Hey! I heard that, you..."

Suddenly, both X5s froze. Then they blurred apart as two projectiles sped past them. They exchanged a look and turned toward the alley from which the shots had been fired.

"Well, if you wanted something to break the monotony," Serena was saying, "I think you just got it."

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Act Two

Alley near Terminal City

In the alley from which they'd been fired upon, the two X5s confronted their attacker. Nat was engaged in hand-to-hand with a large man dressed in black. Nat was breathing heavily, almost stumbling, as he circled his opponent in a defensive position. He was bleeding from a cut above his right eye and a busted lip, and his clothes were dirtied and torn.

The man seemed unaffected by the fight. He stood straight and tall, fists ready, and didn't even flinch when Nat landed a punch to his face and then a kick to his chest. And then another. And another.

Nat faltered and blinked. An expression of panic crossed his face, and then his attacker moved. He punched Nat, who fell, rolling with the impact of the blow. Then he dropped Nat with a kick just as he was about to get up, and grabbed him by the collar of his jacket, tossing him against the wall where Serena sat, slumped over and unconscious. When Nat hit the ground, he didn't try to get up again.

The man took a step toward his targets, then stopped suddenly, looking up as the sound of screeching tires came from the other end of the alley.

The sound of boots hitting pavement followed, just behind the man. He turned to see a young man approaching casually, hands in his pockets. "Nice night to go hunting, isn't it?" asked Zane.

The man didn't respond. He simply walked over to where

the two unconscious X5s had fallen, and bent over. When he rose, he was holding a gun.

"Not the talkative type, huh?" came a female voice from above.

Syl had dropped onto the closed dumpster that stood nearby. As the Red soldier turned to her, she disarmed him with a kick. The gun skidded to the other side of the alley, where Zane blurred and retrieved the weapon.

Syl leapt from the dumpster and took a position in front of the Red. The Red struck at her. She deflected his blows, and tried to get in a few of her own, but the Red fought her off easily.

Syl backed off a step, then came at him at full speed. He staggered when she hit him with a roundhouse kick, but then caught her ankle as she came down, and twisted, so that Syl hit the pavement with a thud.

Next the Red whirled on Zane, but Zack stepped into his path.

The Red soldier took a look at Zack and paused.

Zack grabbed the Red by his shoulders and head-butted him. The Red fell to the ground, knocked cold, and Zack narrowed his eyes. His left eye glared a bright red, for just a moment, before returning to its usual blue. Then Zack turned to Syl.

Syl gave Zack a small smile as he helped her to her feet. She was favoring the ankle the Red had twisted, but seemed otherwise unharmed.

They walked over to the two X5s they'd come to defend.

Nat still lay on the ground. Serena had just come to, and sat very close to her friend, her hand on his shoulder. She

looked, groggily, from him to the Red to the unfamiliar transgenics who stood above her.

Zane held up the gun the Red had been carrying. He also held up a small projectile he'd removed from it.

"Tranquilizer darts," he said.

"Where the hell did you guys come from?" Serena asked.

Zack had knelt at the Red's side and was looking at him intently. Then he turned to Serena. "Better late than never, right?" he said, one eyebrow raised, ignoring her question.

Serena smiled. Her friend had finally opened his eyes. "We're still breathing, so I'd have to say that's right," she agreed.

Sublime P.I. - Saturday, January 8, 2:00 pm

Original Cindy pedaled through the streets until she reached the laundromat where Alec and Gem had set up shop. She hopped off the bike and wheeled it down the alley to the back door, knocking loudly.

Gem answered the door, bouncing Elfie up and down on her hip. "Oh, hi, Original Cindy. Come on in."

"Thanks, sugah. What's shakin'? Other than little miss here," she said with a small grin.

Gem laughed. "Joshua went and found a job, believe it or not, at some community center. So I'm stuck without a babysitter." She sat down at the desk and prepared to breastfeed the infant.

Just then, Alec came in through the laundromat, carrying several boxes of Chinese takeout. He grimaced when he saw what Gem was doing. "Hey, hey, didn't I tell you that

ruins my appetite? Geez! A guy just can't catch a break."

"Only fair, if we get lunch, so does she," Gem reminded him, nodding to the baby, happily tucked under a blanket, away from public viewing. "Original Cindy, want to join us for lunch? I'm sure Alec got three times too much, as usual."

"Nah, I'm cool. I just...actually I came to, you know, hire you two. If your schedule's not already full, that is."

Gem's face brightened. "No, I think we might be able to squeeze you in," she said, flashing an impish grin up at Alec, who rolled his eyes. "What's up?"

Original Cindy pondered for another minute, staring hard at Alec, as if deciding whether or not to trust him. "This P.I. stuff, it's all confidential, right?" she asked finally.

Alec and Gem both nodded enthusiastically. "Of course," Alec said gravely. "Now spill."

Original Cindy sighed. "I don't wanna go into it, but...I'm hiring you to trail my squeeze. You know, do the follow-her-around bit, see where she goes, what she does. And keep out of sight."

"Wait, let me get this straight," Alec said. "You want us to tail Ginger, but you won't tell us why?"

"That's right. Got a problem with it?"

"Not if you got the cash," he came back immediately.

"Naturally," she replied, digging an envelope out of her backpack and starting to hand it to Alec, then changing her mind at the last second and thrusting it at Gem. Alec's open hand went empty, and he laughed a little and shook his head.

"We're in, but I gotta tell you, you might be better off just to sit down with her and ask what's..." Alec started.

Original Cindy put up her open palm to stop him. "Lot 'a things you good at, relationships ain't one of 'em," she told him. "I gotta get back to work. Catch you later."

Logan's Penthouse

Logan was sitting near a window, slumped in his wheelchair, when the call came. He was simply staring out at Seattle, and didn't seem to acknowledge the phone until its fifth ring. As soon as he picked up the receiver, he straightened up.

"Hello?" he said.

It was Lydecker. He was standing in an abandoned office building. The X5s in Zack's team, minus Zack and Syl, were in the room with him, sitting on upturned file cabinets and dilapidated office chairs.

"How's it feel to be home, son?"

"Don't call me 'son'. My name is Logan."

Lydecker ignored the comment. "Is Max there with you?"

Logan frowned, trying to keep up with the unexpected conversation. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

"Max? Wait - where are you?"

"Here in Seattle," Lydecker replied. "There's been some activity here lately that I thought Max would want to know about."

"What kind of activity?"

"The kind involving a faction that call themselves the

Reds. I believe you and Max have tangled with them before."

Logan's expression became grim when Lydecker said this. "The only humans I know, besides the Familiars, that can beat a transgenic one-on-one, hands down? Yeah, we've *tangled* with them before. Can't say I'd like to do it again."

"Max'll want in on this. The Reds have been trying to capture X5s again. And that's not all."

"I don't think that's a good idea. Max is..."

"Right here," came a voice from behind Logan. He whirled to see that Max had entered the room without his hearing her. For a moment, Logan just looked at her.

"Who's on the phone?" she asked.

At the same time, Logan heard Lydecker over the phone asking, "Logan?"

"Max, it's Lydecker," he said. Max stiffened slightly. "He's here in Seattle..."

"In Seattle? With the others?"

"I assume so. But..."

"Let me talk to him."

"Max..."

"What?"

Logan looked as though he were about to say something more, but didn't. He set the receiver down on the table and wheeled to the side, gesturing to the phone.

With an odd look at Logan, and an uncomfortable expression, Max picked up the receiver. "Max here."

"Max, the Reds are back in Seattle," came Lydecker's voice.

Max rolled her eyes. "Well, *hello* to you, too."

"And they have Sandeman."

"*What?*" Max said sharply, and she and Logan exchanged a glance. She mouthed Sandeman's name, and Logan looked more concerned. "Let me guess, they're planning to set up their own transgenic factory?"

"Something like that," Lydecker replied. "If they can't get a live transgenic specimen..."

"At least they can get the guy who made them," Max finished for Lydecker.

"Where do they have him?" she asked.

"We don't know yet. But we're going to find out."

"How..." Max began to question Lydecker further when, as if on cue, something that sounded like a scream reached her from over the phone.

The transgenics in the room with Lydecker all stiffened, but only the X5s from Terminal City looked to the closed door from where the scream had come. It was suddenly eerily quiet. Then they looked at one another with anxious expressions. Zane busied himself with working on a piece of equipment he'd found in the office. The other transgenics in his team acted as though they'd heard nothing. Lydecker, if anything, looked annoyed.

"Never mind," Max said, her face hardening. "Where are you?"

An Abandoned Office Building - Seattle

Meanwhile, in the room with the Red, Zack and Syl waited, leaning against one wall, as Trey worked with

their prisoner. He merely stood at the foot of the table onto which the Red had been placed, head cocked to one side, and stared intently into the Red's wide eyes.

The Red mumbled to himself in short, unintelligible phrases that became less and less audible, eventually unable to speak more than a simple 'no.' Throughout this process, he had given the occasional terrified screech. Now even those had stopped. The Red's face was covered in tears and sweat, and a small trickle of blood ran down his chin from where he'd bitten through his own lip.

Syl had a stunned expression on her face. She fiddled with the latch of a small case sitting on a nearby table. The case contained the syringe and the concoction Lydecker had used to immobilize the Red.

Zack was absolutely still. Arms crossed over his chest, he stared directly at the Red, jaw clenched.

After a short time, Trey straightened. "He'll talk now," he said, with the hint of a smile. Zack didn't acknowledge him, but Syl nodded, and he left the room.

With a look at one another, Syl and Zack finally approached the Red at the center of the room. He was still staring at the spot where Trey had been standing, eyes unfocused, mouth hanging open.

Logan's Penthouse

After Lydecker gave her the rendezvous coordinates, Max hung up the phone. Then she turned to Logan, who had his back to her. He was at the window again.

"You don't have to go after them, you know," he said. His voice sounded anxious. "Lydecker's got his own army

now. If they can't take care of the Reds, there isn't much you can do."

"Usually, I'd say the same thing," Max replied. She stood between where Logan sat and the door. She looked as if she might reach out to touch him, then decided against it. "But with Sandeman...I can't really take that chance. There's kind of a lot I've got to talk to him about," she continued, more softly.

When he didn't say anything, Max finally turned and left, looking almost reluctant.

Logan's hands were clenched on the wheels of his chair so tightly his knuckles were white. When Max was gone, he swore and dropped his head into his hands.

An Abandoned Office Building - Seattle

Lydecker stepped into the room where the Red was being held. Zack and Syl were still inside. Zack stood at the head of the table where the Red lay, hands gripping the table's edge. Syl stood nearby, looking at him with concern.

Lydecker gave Zack a glance and then turned to her. "Do we have what we want?" he asked.

Syl didn't respond immediately. Then she nodded.

"Good. We'll need to do a little recon before Max gets here, so we can plan from there."

Lydecker finally looked at the Red soldier. His gaze lingered a moment, then he turned to leave.

"I'll send someone in to help with cleanup," he said as he left.

The room was very quiet.

"Zack..."

"Go," he told her. "Give Zane the coordinates. I'll take care of it."

"It's just..It's been a long time since..."

Zack straightened and as he turned, Syl stopped talking. Zack's expression was completely neutral.

"I said I'll take care of it."

Syl nodded, and finally went to the door, pulling it shut behind her. Zack didn't move for a long moment. Then he did.

Syl waited until she heard the sound of a sharp crack from the room she'd just left, winced, and walked on.

* * * * *

Act Three

Abandoned Building in Seattle's Chinatown, that evening

Sandeman sat in a chair in the middle of a dingy room, his hands tied behind his back. A Red soldier paced impatiently back and forth in front of him, while his handler leaned against the wall, watching both of them.

Finally, the Red soldier turned toward his handler. "Taylor, something's gone sideways. He should have reported in by now."

"It's probably just taking him longer to track down the transgenics," Taylor said condescendingly. "I wouldn't worry. He's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

"He shouldn't have gone out alone. We work as a team. He should've had backup."

His handler sighed. "Look, I already told you I needed the rest of you here to guard our prize." He nodded toward Sandeman. Then he shrugged. "If he doesn't turn up by the end of today, we'll track down the implant."

The Red soldier stalked toward him, grabbed him by the collar and thrust him up against the wall. "Is that all we are to you? The implant?"

They were interrupted as another Red soldier came into the room, pushing Max and Lydecker in front of him. "Look who I found trying to sneak into the building."

The first Red soldier let go of Taylor and backed away. Sandeman looked up at Max and Lydecker, a neu-

tral expression on his face. Taylor straightened his collar and walked toward them.

"Well, well...what have we got here? A rescue party? Looks like our prize was the perfect bait."

"You mean this isn't the ladies' auxiliary craft and bake sale?" Max quipped. She turned to Lydecker and continued drolly, "Are you sure we got the right address, Dad?"

Lydecker rolled his eyes up at the ceiling.

Suddenly, the sound of gunfire could be heard in the building. Taylor turned toward the second Red soldier. "You idiot! You didn't check if they were alone? Go see what's happening!" He pulled out a gun and looked toward the first Red soldier. "You stay with me!"

At that moment, Lydecker and Max took advantage of the distraction and attacked Taylor and the remaining Red soldier. Lydecker swung out and knocked the gun out of the Taylor's hand, and the two of them started exchanging blows. Max leapt at the Red soldier and knocked him down with a kick to the head, landing on her feet in a crouch. Almost immediately he got back up. They circled each other for a moment, and then started trading punches and kicks.

Meanwhile, out in the hallway, Syl, Zane, and Jondy were exchanging gunfire with two other Red soldiers, as well as the one who had just come out of the room where they'd been keeping Sandeman. Syl ducked behind a corner as bullets peppered the wall in front of her. She whipped back and returned fire, hitting one of the Red soldiers in the head.

Zane fired at the next Red soldier from around a doorway. The answering gunfire grazed his shoulder, tearing

a hole in his sleeve. "Damn! My favorite jacket!" He fired back, hitting a soldier in the throat. The soldier merely clutched at his throat and continued firing.

Jondy called out to Zane from around another corner, "Remember, you gotta go for the heart or the head." She fired, hitting the soldier in the head, and watched as he fell. When he didn't get back up, she smiled grimly.

Zack came out of the doorway to the stairwell beside the remaining Red soldier, grabbed him, and slammed him into the wall, knocking the gun out of his hand. The Red soldier, in turn, grabbed Zack and shoved him into the opposite wall with enough force to crack the plaster. He pulled back and aimed a punch at Zack's head, but punched through the wall instead as Zack ducked. Zack kicked the soldier's feet out from under him, sending him sprawling on the floor. Before the soldier could get back up again, Zack stepped on his throat, pulled out a gun and shot him through the heart.

Syl, Zane and Jondy came up to him. "Why didn't you just shoot him from the start?" Syl asked.

Zack smirked. "Now what would have been the fun in that?"

They raced into the room where Sandeman was being held, and saw Max struggling with the last Red soldier. The Red soldier was seemingly unaffected by Max's blows, but Max now sported a cut lip and was becoming obviously winded.

Suddenly, the color drained from her face and she teetered and collapsed.

"Max!" Zack yelled. He rushed into the room, brought up his gun and shot the Red soldier through the chest.

Zack's shout distracted Lydecker for just a moment, but it was long enough for Taylor to knock him down with a vicious blow to the head. Taylor retrieved his gun and stood over Lydecker. Just as he was about to take aim and fire, Sandeman barreled into him, chair and all. The gun skittered across the floor as they both crashed into a corner of the room. Taylor got up with a snarl and was about to kick Sandeman in the head when he was thrown back against the wall by a gunshot through the chest. He slowly slid to the floor, leaving a stain of blood on the wall behind him.

Sandeman turned toward Lydecker, who now held the gun. They nodded at each other.

"Good to see you again, Richard."

"Likewise, Donald."

Lydecker then turned his attention to the other side of the room. Jondy stood over Max while Zack crouched down beside her, his hand at her throat. "She's got a pulse," he reported.

Syl and Zane guarded the door, their guns still at the ready. "I think we're clear," Zane said.

Max's eyes fluttered open. "What happened?" she groaned.

"That's what I'd like to know," Zack said pointedly.

Max quickly looked away, glancing over at the dead Red soldier. "He just laid a few good ones on me, that's all. I'll be okay. Help me up."

As she got to her feet, she noticed Sandeman giving her an odd look as Lydecker untied his hands.

For a moment, Max took in all of their concerned

looks. "C'mon, let's blaze." And she walked out the door without a backward glance.

* * *

"Where to?" Syl asked as they approached where they had parked their cars.

"The base," Lydecker answered.

"I'm heading back to Logan's," Max stated matter-of-factly.

Lydecker looked at her and then at Zack. He didn't say a word, but Zack nodded his head and said, "I'll go with her."

Max looked as though she were about to say something, but then she shrugged and walked off. Jondy called out to her, "Take care of yourself, little sister."

Max stopped for a moment and answered without turning around, "Yeah. You, too," and walked on, with Zack following behind her.

Terminal City

Alec stood in an alleyway, wearing a black leather jacket and black knit cap. He peered around the edge of a building and zoomed in on the door to the Terminal City mess hall. After another couple of minutes, Ginger came out and headed toward the front gates.

Sauntering silently behind, Alec followed her down the streets of Seattle. Only when they reached a greasy diner, the noise of its clientele spilling out onto the sidewalk, did Ginger hesitate, pull open the door, and disappear.

Alec stopped one building back and listened, then swore. "Great. Can't hear a thing. She couldn't pick a

library or a coffee shop for a clandestine meeting, could she?"

Instead of going in the front door, he cut down the alley and found a window that led to the men's bathroom. After pulling it open and hoisting himself in, he dropped catlike into the bathroom, then straightened up to see a man staring at him, openmouthed, from where he stood, washing his hands at the sink.

Alec shot an imaginary pistol at him and winked. "Can't have the lady know I'm taking a leak. Cheapens the allure, ya know?" He smiled and walked past the man out the door.

When he got to the end of the hallway, he peered around the corner and found Ginger, sitting in a booth across from a man in a suit and trench coat. Making sure her gaze was not in his direction, Alec slid into a seat at the counter and put a menu up in front of his face.

"I gave you the patrol schedule, for the X5s' own protection. You were supposed to take them home." Ginger was saying, and Alec's eyes grew wide. "But today I heard there was some kind of attack there last night. Somebody took a couple of X5s down before he was subdued."

"Subdued?" the man replied in surprise. "They were able to subdue him?"

"Who was it, Commander?" Ginger demanded. "I agreed to work with you because I...well, you know why. But...I can't...I don't want to be responsible for the deaths of innocent transgenics."

"And you won't be---284," Agent Martin replied. "But before you go getting any ideas, let me remind you who we both work for. If, at any time, you become a liability,

you become infinitely expendable. You have to remember, this is for the greater good. Especially now."

"What do you mean?" Ginger asked.

"Let's just say that it's become even more important that we regain control of the transgenic troops. It's a need-to-know basis right now, but trust me when I say neither you, nor they, will want to be out here alone soon."

"Well, that's all I have," Ginger said a moment later. "Same time tomorrow?"

"No, I won't be available tomorrow. I'll be in touch." Alec heard him throw some change on the table, then get up and walk out. A second later, Ginger rose and left as well.

When another few seconds had gone by, Alec got up and went out the back door to the alley. Turning on the speed, he sprinted down the alley behind the buildings and came out at the end of block, slowing to a walk. As he came out from the alley, he nearly ran right into Ginger, who was walking quickly down the sidewalk. "Whoa, hey, Ginger!" he exclaimed, pretending to be surprised.

"Oh! Alec." Ginger forced a smile onto her face. "Sorry, you startled me. Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Crash, where else?" he replied quickly.

Ginger's forehead scrunched up in confusion. "Uh...except Crash is that way," she said, pointing in the direction opposite the one in which he was heading.

Alec hesitated for a second, then laughed. "Of course it is!" he covered, spreading his hands in front of him. "Long day, what can I say? You heading there, too? Come on, I'm buying the first round."

"Yeah, I'm going to hang with Original Cindy tonight, try to make up for splitting early last night."

They started off down the sidewalk, continuing to talk, but Alec's expression as he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye was anything but friendly.

Elevator, Fogle Towers - That evening

"So, are you going to tell me, or not?" Zack asked, staring at Max. They were in the elevator, headed for Logan's apartment. He was still looking at Max as intently as he had in the van, but now looked less angry and more concerned.

"Nothing to tell," she insisted, shrugging.

"Don't give me that. You've been acting strange all day. Then during the mission..."

"Fighting Reds is a little different from kicking ordinary ass, Zack. Guess I just forgot that. Should have taken some vitamins this morning or something. I've been a little run-down, lately. You know, going back to work, fighting for the transgenic cause..."

"Max."

Zack said her name quietly, and Max stopped speaking. She looked at him, then away. The elevator had arrived at Logan's floor.

"It's nothing to worry about, Zack," she told him.

"Right."

Logan's Penthouse

Logan sat at his computer, staring at the screen but not really paying attention. He was trying to review the latest

updates on the informant net, but found his thoughts drifting to Max. Frustrated, he turned his attention to the military transmissions, noting increasing traffic. His brow furrowing, he began putting together information on troop movement. He was totally engrossed when he heard the door open and voices in the hallway. Before he even had a chance to push the wheelchair back from the desk, Max and Zack came around the corner into the room.

Logan nodded at Zack, then looked at Max with concern. "What happened? Did you find him?"

Max nodded tiredly. "Yeah. Going up against the Reds takes a lot out of a girl, though. I'm gonna go patch myself up," she said, shrugging out of her torn denim jacket to reveal a shallow cut on her shoulder.

"Was she...okay tonight?" Logan asked, looking up at Zack after Max had left the room.

Zack walked over with a suspicious look and perched on the edge of the computer desk. "What do you mean? Isn't she supposed to be okay?"

"Well, yeah," Logan said evasively. "Just curious."

"I see you're not planning on telling me any more than she would," Zack said. "Well, maybe you can talk to her, since you guys have your little secret. She collapsed during the fight."

Logan stopped typing and looked up at him with frightened eyes. "She's been overextending lately. I'm sure that's all it is. But don't worry – I'll keep an eye on her."

"So will I," said Zack, shortly. "Catch you later. Tell Max I had to get back."

As soon as Logan heard the front door click shut, he

pushed back from the computer desk and went directly to the bathroom. The sliding screen door was shut, so Logan knocked and called out, "Max?"

No answer for a few seconds, and then a long, low groan. Instantly Logan burst into the bathroom to find Max on the floor, holding her abdomen.

"Max! Max!" Logan said frantically, leaning over to her. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Max whispered. Then her eyes closed and her head rolled back in a dead faint.

* * * * *

Act Four

Crash

The Jam Pony crew was gathered around a pool table, watching Alec pool-shark his way to another hundred bucks. As he collected his payment, he caught sight of Original Cindy and Ginger whispering to each other and giggling, only inches apart.

"Looks like the lovebirds made up," Sketchy said, leaning across the corner of the pool table to get close enough to Alec's ear so he would be heard over the din of the band. "Thought maybe after all Original Cindy's complaining about her X5, she wouldn't let her worm her way back into her, uh, affections," he said with suggestively raised eyebrows and a leering grin.

"Yeah, right," Alec said. "Love is blind, my friend." His expression was dark as he watched them, and after a moment, he went over to them. "Hey, you wanna come with me to get a refill?" he asked Original Cindy, his eyes telling her what he wasn't saying with his voice. He picked up the two empty pitchers from the table and jerked his head toward the bar.

She looked at him funny, but didn't argue, for once. "Be right back, sugah," she said to Ginger, and followed Alec up the stairs.

"We need to talk," he said grimly when they reached the bar. He looked over her shoulder to where Ginger still sat, making sure she was out of earshot.

"That's what we doin', boy," Original Cindy said. "So spill."

"No use beating around the bush. Ginger's a spy," he told her. "She's working for Manticore...or whoever took their place in the hunt-and-kill-transgenics business."

Confusion, then disbelief, registered on Original Cindy's face. "You crazier than Sketchy with his camera and tabloid newspaper. Where'd you come up with that one?"

"Listen, I tailed her to a diner where she met with a guy and talked to him about capturing transgenics and taking them back to home-sweet-home. There's no mistake. We need a plan, and we have about 48 hours to come up with one. That's how long we have 'til she meets with the big bad again."

Original Cindy thought hard for a minute. "I can't believe my squeeze is a snitch. There's gotta be a reason. Those assholes musta done to her what they did to Zack."

"That may be, but right now we gotta figure out a way to shut her up without tipping her off that we're on to her. Otherwise she's liable to sic 'em on us tomorrow. For all we know, they could show up at the laundromat. You need to tell Max, and pronto."

Original Cindy sighed, but before she could respond, her pager beeped and she looked at it. "Logan," she said, surprised. "He calls me, it's usually to play spy or rescue personnel. Better check it out," she told Alec, and he flipped her his cell phone.

Harbor Lights Hospital

Assaulted by noise and smell everywhere, Aveta struggled through the city. Wearing a leather coat and gloves to protect her from unwanted touch, she hurried through the crowds. She turned a corner and saw Harbor Lights Hospital ahead. Plunging through the crowded doorway, she

looked around for someone she knew.

Original Cindy saw Aveta and came hurrying across the room. "Original Cindy has never been happier to see anyone in her life," she declared. "Come on." She turned, careful not to touch Aveta, and led the way down the crowded hall.

"What happened?" Aveta finally asked.

"I got a frantic call from Logan, telling me he was bringing Max here and to get you. You know when Mr. Cool-Under-Fire is frantic, gotta be something bad." Cindy frowned at the thought.

The hall became increasingly quiet as they walked. They reached a treatment room, and Beverly Shankar came out into the corridor. "Max is miscarrying, and she's losing a lot of blood. Aveta, she's going to need a blood transfusion."

"I'll give her as much as she needs," Aveta replied quietly.

"Original Cindy, I need you to be there for Max...and Logan. He's holding it together for Max, but I don't know for how long."

"Whatever it takes, they got it," Cindy said emphatically.

Together the women walked into the room. Max looked small and frail lying on the examination table, an IV dripping into her arm. Logan was at her side, holding her hand and talking quietly to her, oblivious to anyone else.

Original Cindy walked over to her, refusing to give in to tears. "Hey, boo. Whatcha doin' on this table? This ain't gonna get you out of cleaning the bathroom, you know."

Max looked at Cindy. "Damn, I can't ever catch a break," she said weakly, attempting to smile. Another wave of

pain engulfed her, and she shuddered.

Aveta came up to Max quietly. "Hey, Max, you ready for a transfusion?" Aveta put her hands on Max's temples and began to massage gently. Max relaxed under her touch.

Logan looked up at Aveta. "Thanks," he said simply, and returned his attention to Max.

Another woman came into the room. Beverly introduced her to Aveta and Cindy. "This is Caroline Matumba. She's the head of OB/GYN here at Harbor Lights."

Caroline nodded to Cindy, then turned her attention to Aveta. "You are a transgenic as well?"

"Yes, I am a medical unit. I'll give you all the help you need." Aveta replied.

"I would not call you a unit. You are a person willing to help your friend in need. You can transfuse her, yes?" Seeing a nod of affirmation, she turned to Max.

"We need to take you to surgery now," she said gently.

Max turned her head toward Logan, profound sadness passing between them. "Logan..."

"Max, don't talk," he interrupted gently. "Save your strength. We'll get through this."

As the doctor began explaining the procedure, Max clutched Logan's hand. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Shhh. You're going to be all right. That's all that matters now," Logan said, controlling the worry in his voice.

"You hear that, boo? We ain't letting nothing happen to you," Cindy said fiercely.

When the orderly arrived to take Max, Logan and Original

Cindy stayed at her side, each holding a hand, until they got to the doors of the operating room.

"I love you, Max," Logan said softly as Max was whisked away into surgery. He stood staring at the doors until Original Cindy touched his arm.

"Nothin' we can do here now, boo. Let's go get some coffee," she said, guiding him away.

* * *

For an hour, Cindy watched as Logan paced back and forth, wearing a hole in the already worn linoleum in the waiting room. Finally, Logan looked down the hall to see Aveta walking toward him slowly, pale and obviously tired. He went to her quickly and helped her into a chair. "Are you okay?" he asked, and in a second breath, "How's Max?"

Aveta smiled sadly. "Max is fine. Caroline said there were no major problems. Go to her, Logan. We'll wait here."

Logan stood up, his shoulders slumped. "Thanks," he said huskily, and walked quickly toward the recovery room.

Cindy looked at Logan worriedly as she watched him walk down the hall.

Abandoned Office Building

Lydecker perched on the corner of an old, wooden desk and crossed his arms as he stared at Sandeman, sitting in an equally old chair, rubbing a sore spot on his shoulder. "What did you tell them before we got there?" Lydecker asked in a low voice.

"Only that it would take a lot of money and time to do what they wanted, to breed transgenics that could with-

stand that implant," Sandeman answered. "Even if I had wanted to explain Manticore technology to them, they wouldn't have been able to comprehend it."

"You'd be surprised," Lydecker replied. "This group has a lot invested in 'that implant,' but they've never been able to turn a profit, because all their soldiers die in six months."

"Well, we don't have to worry about that any longer, do we?" Sandeman said. "Your soldiers took care of them quite efficiently."

Lydecker snorted and shook his head. "There are more where those came from. You're not out of danger, as long as they know you might be of use to them."

Just then, the door opened, and Zack walked into the small office. "Is Max okay?" Lydecker asked him immediately.

Zack shrugged. "She wouldn't tell me anything, said she was *tired*. Yeah, right," he muttered.

Sandeman sat quietly, a pensive look on his face. He raised his eyes to meet Zack's, and Zack saw something there. "Did you do something to her?" he asked the older man. "You know something, don't you?"

Sandeman sighed. "No, I don't *know* anything," he replied somberly. "But...I would like to see her again. I...I might be able to help, with whatever it is."

"You're going to get your wish," Lydecker said. Both Zack and Sandeman looked at him in surprise.

Harbor Lights Hospital - Two hours later

Aveta sat slumped in a chair in the waiting room. Original Cindy had gone in search of food and water. Aveta felt

better, but she'd given Max a lot of blood and needed to replenish her fluids. She looked around at the surroundings. Sterile, unfeeling walls, green, aseptic; it reminded her of Manticore. She became cold at the thought. She looked around as if to escape her surroundings and saw Original Cindy walking toward her, carrying a tray with food and a large bottle of water.

"You okay? You looked like you were about to run away," Cindy said, sitting in a chair near Aveta. "Look at what I scored," she said, holding up her bounty. "Managed to scrounge up a blanket, too."

They both looked up to see Beverly Shankar walking toward them.

"The transfusion helped immeasurably. Max is much better for it," she said, noting the worry in Original Cindy's eyes. "She's sleeping."

"Then I did my job," Aveta said, smiling.

"Can I get you a couple more of those?" Beverly asked, nodding to the water bottle in Aveta's hand.

"I'd appreciate that," Aveta smiled.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Beverly smiled back.

* * *

Logan stood swaying on his feet, looking at Max sleeping. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He reached toward her, but stopped, afraid he would wake her. As the door opened, he turned and saw Beverly come in with Caroline Matumba.

"Mr. Cale, I think that you should go home and get some rest. Max will be fine here," Caroline said.

"I'm not going anywhere," Logan replied emphatically.

"As you wish. I'll check on Max in the morning. If everything is all right, she can go home then." Caroline smiled gently at Logan, then turned and left the room.

"Logan, at least let me get a cot in here for you," Beverly said.

Logan sighed and looked at Max. "Okay," he said, rubbing his eyes again.

Beverly nodded and stepped out of the room.

Moments later, an orderly rolled a cot into the room and set it up next to Max's bed. Logan sat on the cot next to Max, holding her hand. He fell asleep, his hand entwined in hers.

* * *

Beverly came back into the room and saw Logan asleep. She smiled and quietly closed the door, then walked to the waiting room and found Cindy and Aveta still waiting. She handed Aveta two more water bottles.

"They're both asleep," she reported with a relieved smile. "Let's go get my car and I'll drive you home," she said, turning and walking away, followed by Aveta and Original Cindy.

Max's Apartment - Sunday morning, January 9, 2022

Original Cindy waited outside of her building. She saw Logan pull up and watched him get the wheelchair out of the car and move into it. Logan wheeled around the car to open Max's door. Max got out, looking pale and tired, slightly unsteady on her feet. Cindy saw Logan say something to Max and she sank down on his lap. Max put her

head on Logan's shoulder and he put his arms around her protectively. He looked up and saw Original Cindy waiting. He tried to smile and failed. Slowly he wheeled to the building and went inside, carrying Max on his lap, as Cindy followed.

Logan wheeled to the service elevator that carried them upstairs. Cindy walked ahead to open the door. Logan came in the door and navigated the apartment to Max's bed. Cindy watched Logan engulf Max in his arms once again, holding her. Max buried her head in his chest for a moment, then slowly stood, still a little unsteady, her normal recuperative powers undone by stress and grief. She lay down on the bed, not bothering to take off her clothes, and stared at the ceiling. She turned to Logan, looking tired and wan. "Logan...I need some time alone. Do you understand?" Max whispered.

Logan quietly said, "Okay, I'll call you." He kissed Max on the forehead and gently placed the covers over her. He turned to look at Original Cindy. "Call me if Max needs anything," he said, and left, turning back to look at Max one more time.

Original Cindy watched over Max as she slept. An hour later, she went to the window and saw Logan's car still sitting there, and she knew he was waiting. She turned away, tears falling freely.

Max's Apartment - Sunday afternoon

Original Cindy watched Max as she sat in bed, propped up against the pillows.

"You need to eat something," Original Cindy told her.

"Not hungry," Max replied. She moved slightly, then returned to staring out the window.

Cindy walked over to where Max was sitting. She sat down and took Max by the arms, and turned Max to face her. "Max, you're hurting. I know that, but you have to let me help you. Don't shut out your friends."

Max looked at Cindy. "I can't..."

The phone rang. Cindy looked at Max meaningfully as she picked up the phone and handed it to her. "Don't even need caller ID on this one, boo."

Max took the phone apprehensively. "Hey," she said.

Logan replied, "Hey, yourself. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay. Still tired."

"Yeah...Listen, mind if I come by tonight?" Logan said quietly, hopefully.

"Yeah, I mind," Max said, looking up at Original Cindy with a spark of life. "I'll swing by your place."

"You don't have to..." he began.

"Gotta get out of this place," she interrupted. "I'll be there."

Max looked up to see Original Cindy looking at her with a smile. "Girl finally comes to her senses. But he's going to want to talk about this...if you can't talk to Logan, you know you can always talk to me, 'cause you know as much as Original Cindy loves to give advice, she's a damn fine listener, too."

Max fidgeted in the bed for a moment, then said softly, "I wanted this baby, but I can't help thinking that if I had it, I would have messed up its life. Is it wrong to feel...relieved?"

"Max, if you feel it, it's not wrong. You've had so much

happen to you in your life, it's a wonder you got as far as you did. No, you're not a bad person. You have a good heart." Cindy reached out and touched Max gently. "My mama always told me that God don't give you no more than you can handle. It's just not the right time for you."

"Yeah...maybe," Max answered with a shrug.

Logan's Penthouse

Logan wheeled slowly across his apartment. He stopped and stared out the window into nothingness. After several long minutes, he turned to the exercise room and quickly strapped on the exoskeleton. He grabbed his keys and walked out of the apartment.

As he drove through the streets toward Terminal City, he noted an increase of military vehicles. It took him longer than usual to get through the checkpoints. He finally found a parking space two blocks away and began to walk.

As he reached the interior of Terminal City, near the infirmary, he saw a woman carrying an infant as she walked away. His face fell, and he quickly looked away. He quietly opened the door and slipped in. He saw Tia treating another patient and looked for Aveta. He saw her talking on the phone.

Aveta saw Logan and waved him into her office as she quickly finished her call. "Hey, Logan, let me get you the patch. Last one, right?"

"Yeah, this is it. Not that it's good news. At least having pain meant I still had some use of my legs. It's pretty much gone now," Logan replied ruefully as he unbuttoned his shirt.

Aveta looked at him closely as she placed the Fentanyl patch on his shoulder for the last time. "I'm sorry, Logan. I wish there was more I could have done," she said quietly.

"Hey, you did the best you could, and I appreciate that...I made the choice not to go chasing a cure, so I guess I'll have to live with it," Logan said sadly.

"There's a potential cure?" Aveta exclaimed. "Is it still a viable option?"

"I don't know. I'm sure it's too late now."

"Logan," Aveta said with quiet intensity, "if you have even a small chance for a cure, you should take it. Max would want you to."

At the mention of Max's name, Logan's eyes clouded in pain.

"How are you and Max holding up?" she asked gently.

There was a quick intake of breath before Logan replied, "We're doing okay."

"You're not a good liar, you know." Aveta gently took Logan's hand in her bare hand. "Let me help."

"Aveta, I appreciate your help, but once Max is okay, I'll be okay..." He slipped his hand from Aveta's. "Listen, I've got to get going." He quickly turned for the door, but turned back for one brief moment and added, "Thanks...for everything." Then he walked slowly away.

Aveta watched him, then sighed and went back to her work.

Logan walked around the corner of the building. He leaned against the wall, then slowly slid down it, burying his head in his hands. He sat there immobile for an eter-

nity, not moving. Finally, he struggled to his feet and began the trudge back to his car.

Logan's Penthouse - that evening

"Hey, you." Max's soft greeting made Logan look up from where he sitting on the therapy table, doing bicep curls.

He froze, then put down the weight immediately and picked up his glasses, sliding them onto his sweaty nose. "You're early," he observed.

Max nodded. "I heal fast," she said by way of explanation, sticking her hands in her baggy cargo pants and shifting awkwardly.

Logan nodded, then transferred into the wheelchair and wheeled to the doorway, stopping in front of her. "I'm glad you're here. I..."

A knock at the door interrupted him, and he sighed heavily before going to the door and opening it to reveal Zack, half-hiding Sandeman behind him. "Right on time," Logan muttered.

"What?" Zack asked.

"Nothing. Come in," Logan told them. "Need rescuing again?"

"In a manner of speaking," Sandeman answered, stepping out from behind Zack and giving Logan a thorough once-over.

Logan waved at the chair and said, "Long story," just as he had to Zack nearly two years before. "Well, I'm glad you're all okay. Figured Soldier Central would have moved out last night," he said, glancing again at Zack. "Unless your base of operations is in Seattle...?"

Zack crossed his arms and shrugged, narrowing his eyes at Logan. "We're here because the old man needs a new identity."

"And we thought you might be so kind as to come up with some new documentation for me," Sandeman added to soften the request.

Logan nodded. "Sure thing. Have to give me a while, though."

"I think Max and I need some time alone anyway," Sandeman interjected, and after Logan pointed to the living room, Max and Sandeman headed in that direction. Logan went after them, slid the translucent screen closed, then returned to the computer.

"So...you been keeping an *eye* on her?" Zack asked Logan facetiously.

"Yeah," Logan answered, without looking at the screen.

"So, what's up with her? And don't tell me she's overextended. Manticore didn't believe in overextended."

Logan stopped typing and looked up him. "You'll have to ask Max yourself," he said firmly.

Zack stared back at him, obviously concerned. He pushed away from the computer desk and started to follow them into the living room, but Logan unlocked the brakes on the chair and turned, making Zack stop and turn with the sound of his voice. "Not now, Zack. Do it later. Right now she needs this..." Logan waved in the direction of the living room, "...with him."

* * *

Out in the living room, Max was sitting uneasily in one of the chairs, across from Sandeman, who had taken up resi-

dence on one end of the couch. They sat in silence for a minute before Sandeman spoke up. "Are you...are you pregnant, Max?"

Pain washed over Max's face, and she struggled to maintain composure. "No," she said, in almost a whisper. "Not...not anymore."

Sandeman sighed heavily, then stood up and rubbed his forehead as he walked to the window to stare out at the night sky. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said in an equally soft voice. "I...I should have told you about the runes. More about them, I mean. I just...we had to wait, to make sure that your immunity wasn't needed anymore," he said.

"Quit with the riddles already," Max said shortly. When he didn't say anything immediately, she remembered what he had said to her in Terminal City.

"You're going to share your immunity," Sandeman answered with a smile. "This is your body's primary function. It'll stop anything that gets in the way. Any infection, any cell, anything."

"I did this, didn't I?" Max said flatly. "I knew it. Yet again Manticore managed to screw me up more than I thought they could. More than I thought *you* could," she repeated. "Do you have any idea how twisted this whole thing is?"

Sandeman turned to her, sorrow etched into his features. "I didn't expect you to...so soon," he said. "It's my fault." He came back to the sofa and sat down, reaching for Max's hand. She moved her hand away and his hand landed on her knee.

"Yes, Max. Your immunity means that you can't carry a

child to term, just by its definition. But I knew that would be the case when I...I designed you, and so I coded some of the runes to appear later, after you saved the world from the Conclave. The new ones instruct you how to disable your body's immunity to carry the child."

"Except it's too damn late," Max said bitterly. This time it was her turn to get up and pace back and forth.

"It is too late this time, but there will be another time. I'll give you what you need so that you won't have to go through this again. I know that doesn't erase your pain...I'm sorry. I...there are no words, Max. I have used you since the moment you were conceived. Used you for the greater good of mankind. But now...that's neither here nor there. And for what it's worth, it's over. You've served your purpose, and I am deeply sorry that that purpose cost you so much. That I cost you so much."

* * *

Logan and Zack were studiously avoiding each other in the computer room, Logan working on setting Sandeman up with a new identity, and Zack sitting silently in the corner chair. They both looked up when Max slid open the screen.

"You worked your magic yet?" Max asked, making a half-hearted effort to sound cheerful. Her voice was tired, and Logan continued looking over his shoulder at her, concern evident on his face.

"Not quite. The records are created, but the documents take a little while longer to produce. I made the call, though, so all you have to do is go to this address..." Logan held out a piece of paper to Zack, who walked over to get it, "...and give them that name. Not mine, please."

Zack flashed a rare half-grin at Logan, which earned him a steely glare from Max, until he held up both palms in a gesture of surrender.

"Thank you, Logan," Sandeman said from the corner of the room. "I should have asked for your help before, but I didn't know the extent of your resources, and I was in a bit of a hurry."

"Yeah, about that," Logan said. "How did you know you'd still be in danger? And what did you do with Ray?"

"If there's anything I've learned over the years, it's that there are a lot of people out there who want to use me and my knowledge for their own purposes...just as they want to use the products of that knowledge, Max and her siblings. And as for Ray, he's safe, don't worry. I might take chances with my own life, but not with his. Now that I have a new identity, we can start over somewhere."

"At least now that we know what name you'll be using, we'll be able find you. If we have any more...questions," Max said.

Sandeman nodded. "Yes. I...it will be up to you, Max, how much contact we have in the future. But I...thank you, for what you've done for me...and for the woman you've become."

"Family hour over?" Zack asked in typical fashion. "'Cause if we don't rendezvous pretty soon, they're going to come looking for us."

"Better take off then," Max said, crossing her arms across her chest and trying to look aloof.

"Don't think you're off the hook, " Zack said, giving her a quick hug. "I'll be in touch." He nodded briefly at Logan.

"Zack, until next time," Logan said dryly. To Sandeman, he said, "Take care of Ray."

"Always," the older man responded. Sandeman looked at Max, but she didn't reach out to him, so he didn't move closer. "Take care of each other," he said to both of them, and then he and Zack were gone.

Instead of perching on the computer desk as she often did, Max turned and went back into the living room, so Logan followed her, stopping just in front of the coffee table as she went over to the window. "Want to talk about it?" he asked her softly.

She shook her head and turned to him, her eyes filled with tears. "I just want to go to bed. Take me to bed."

Max sat up in the bed, watching Logan as he wheeled into the bedroom, carrying two steaming mugs on a tray. He handed her a mug, then transferred onto the bed beside her.

"No coffee?" Max asked.

"Chamomile tea. It will help relax you," he said quietly. "How are you doing?"

"Would you believe me if I said okay?" Max asked, not looking at him.

"No more than you would believe me," he replied, giving her a half-smile that didn't make it to his eyes.

Max turned to him and saw her pain reflected in his eyes. She let go, tears of grief and guilt finally making their way down her cheeks. Logan held her in his arms as she cried. "Logan, I'm so sorry," she finally whispered.

"It's okay. Shhhh," he murmured as he held her gently. He pulled the blanket around Max and himself, holding her until she fell asleep. He brushed a stray hair from her face, and cradled her in his arms, content to hold her as long as she needed.

* * * * *

Epilogue

Logan's Penthouse

Logan closed the door of his bedroom quietly and, wheeling slowly, a sorrowful look on his face, returned to the computer room. He thought for a few moments, then picked up the phone.

"Sam, it's Logan. I've been thinking about the doctor in New Mexico you told me about. Yeah, I know, but I couldn't go before...Is it too late? Pretty much...There's not much left...You think so? Great, I'd appreciate it...Let me get the name and number." He found a pencil and jotted something down on a scrap piece of paper. "...And I'll give her a call." Logan smiled and laughed a little, then concluded the call with, "Thanks again, Sam. Okay, I will."

Slowly, he put the phone down on the desk and sat silently. He caught sight of a framed picture of Max and picked it up, looking at her image tenderly. "Guess we're going to have to start stocking up on gas. Takes quite a few gallons to get to New Mexico," Logan murmured to the picture.

Washington, D.C.

A man stood, glowering, in the conference room where the members of the Committee were gathered. "He said there was nothing he could do to make our soldiers withstand the implant better," he growled, his South African accent strong. He was practically seething. "Not only that, but two hours after I get that message, I show up and the whole lot of 'em are dead and this *Sandeman* is in the

wind. And *now* you're telling me you're stiffing us?"

Kathryn Birman sat as still as a sculpture, fingers pressed together tightly. "Mr. Backeburg, we offered your group payment based on the agreement that you would capture the transgenics and their creator. You've done neither. The benefit to your program was merely a perk."

Backeburg was trembling by that point, and in a rage, he reached down and pulled a handgun from an ankle holster. But as soon as he straightened back up and prepared to shoot, a military policeman stepped out from the wall and pointed his gun at Backeburg's head, then silently took the gun away from him.

"You don't want to fight your way out of here," Kathryn said to him. She put her hands down on the table and motioned to an empty chair. "Something is coming, and if you want to be standing at the end, you'll listen to reason. I think our organizations can work out a relationship of mutual benefit. I know you have more soldiers where the others came from. And we pay generously when the job gets done."

Backeburg stared her in the eye for a long moment, then slowly went to the table to sit down with the Committee. "What's the job?"

Kathryn slid a picture out of a manila envelope and pushed it across to Backeburg. He stared down at a picture of a middle-aged, ruggedly handsome, blonde man wearing a black leather jacket and holding a cell phone to his ear.

"This man has access to Sandeman, Manticore files, and all the transgenics you could ever want. And we know where he is."

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