

Dark Angel VS3

Some Other Beginning's End

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Episode VS3.18

Prologue

Logan's Penthouse - Monday, January 17, 2022 - early morning

Max stood under the pulsing water coming out of the showerhead. She scrubbed at her arms, her legs, trying to wash away the memories of the past few weeks, but they continued to gnaw at her.

Everything around her went white and she could feel herself falling to the floor. When she opened her eyes, Logan was looking at her, his face filled with concern.

Max continued to scrub down her body.

The elevator door opened and, thankfully, she got to the lobby before everything she had eaten that day began to reappear.

She reached for the washcloth and rubbed more soap into it.

"How far along do you think you are?" Aveta asked.

Her hand ranged down over her abdomen, where the baby had lived, even for a few weeks.

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

She adjusted the temperature of the water one more time, making it even hotter as the steam continued to build around her.

Pain ripped across her abdomen and she felt the life begin to slip from her...The voices surrounded her. She wanted to feel their concern, but instead all she could feel was a dream slipping away.

They'd lost the baby. The baby who wasn't meant to be. Sobs began to wrack Max's body as she slid down the wall of the shower. She was sitting on the floor, her arms wrapped around her legs, when she heard the door to the bathroom open.

"You almost ready, Max? We should go."

Max pushed herself up off the floor of the shower and turned off the water. She reached up to wipe the tears from her face. "Yeah, I'll be right there," she responded to Logan.

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Act One

Logan's Penthouse - morning

When Max came out of the bathroom, Logan was kneeling in front of his bedroom closet, grabbing things out of it and throwing them into a suitcase that was lying on the bed behind him. Her hair was damp and straight from combing, and with the comb still in her hand she sat down on the bed next to his bag.

"You ready to go?" Logan asked, eyeing her with concern.

Max nodded and forced a smile. "Yeah, my bag is in the living room. You know, I always travel light. Easier to escape and evade."

Logan smiled at her attempt to make a joke and sat down next to her. "If you don't want to go...we don't have to, you know. I know you've had a lot on your mind lately."

Turning her head to look at him, she smiled a genuine smile, the first in days. "I know, Logan. I think we both have. But I'm sure you know that nothing's going to stop me from going to New Mexico with you. I know how much walking means to you, so if this is a chance for you to get back on your feet, we should at least have a look, okay?"

He smiled back and said softly, "I knew there was a reason I loved you."

"There better be more than one," she laughed and kissed him quickly. "So what do you know about this New Mexico cure?"

"Only what Sam found out. You know, he first told me

about it when I started relapsing. Since my body didn't reject Joshua's cells like it rejected yours, the treatment Vertes started won't work," Logan explained.

Max nodded. "And this doctor in New Mexico? What's she up to?"

"Gene therapy."

A little surprise showed on Max face, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she asked, "You got everything packed?"

"As much as I can fit in the suitcase," he answered. "I need to check my e-mail one last time, but then I'm ready to leave."

He stood up and headed for his office, leaving Max behind on the bed. She lay back and tried to relax.

* * *

Logan scrolled through his messages, deleting most, and flagging the ones that seemed to be of possible interest to Eyes Only. He stopped at one, from an address he didn't recognize, and was about to delete it when the subject line caught his eye: NANOCYTE TECHNOLOGY. Quickly, he opened it and began to read.

"As promised, here is what information I could find on the topic. Files are attached."

With some trepidation, Logan opened the first folder.

It contained a short list of former Manticore employees – doctors, chemists, biologists, engineers, and laboratory technicians who had been involved in nanocyte research and experimentation – and the last known location of each. There were a dozen names, along with official Manticore photo IDs of most of them. At the top of the list was

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"Doctor Elizabeth Renfro" with DECEASED stamped across the photo. The file was dated July 2020. The creator of the file was Donald Lydecker.

"Wow," Logan said aloud.

Max walked into the computer room. "Wow what?" she asked, an expression of curiosity on her face.

"Got some information I was looking for," Logan replied, leaning forward to study the list again.

"Great. Another exciting Eyes Only mission?"

"Not exactly. This one's personal. When Zack was here back in November, he said he would send me any information on Manticore's nanocyte technology research that he could find."

"Zack?" Max said eagerly. "What's he say? Where is he now?"

"He doesn't say anything except that the files are attached."

Logan looked up at Max. Her wide-eyed eagerness was replaced by an expression of disappointment.

"He just keeps popping up in our lives, then disappearing again, doesn't he?" Max commented.

"Yeah, he does. But this time, he's doing me a favor."

"Really? Zack doing you a favor? That's different. Why's he sending you information on nanocytes?"

"Just another avenue to explore in my research in repairing spinal cord injuries," Logan explained. "Let me see what else is here."

"Whatever." Max walked away, shaking her head. "Do

what ya gotta do.”

Logan opened the second folder. It contained status reports on the research, working papers, and published articles on nanocyte technology by the experts on the list. Most of the distinguished authors apparently had studied at Cornell University when it was the epicenter of nanotechnology research.

The research topics were exciting, but disturbing. There were even articles describing in detail the human experimentation performed at Manticore, including a file labeled “X5-599.” Logan opened it and began to read the report.

“This is impressive.”

Max came back into the computer room, munching a bagel. “What is?”

“This file is on Zack and how the tissue damage from his gunshot wound was repaired using nanocytes.”

“Really?” Max asked, looking over Logan’s shoulder at the computer screen. She scanned the file, thinking about Zack’s remarkable recovery.

Dr. Sam Carr was examining Zack, whose skin had regrown over the implants on his face. “It’s unbelievable,” he remarked.

Max was puzzled. Only the day before, the shiny metal implants had been visible. “What happened?”

“Nanocytes circulating in his bloodstream. Self-replicating, molecular-scale biomachines designed to repair tissue damage,” Dr. Carr explained. “I’ve read theoretical papers about the technology, but to see them in action...”

“No wonder the Steelheads wanted to filter them out of his blood. Useful little gizmos,” Logan commented.

"If he's got these nanocytes buzzing around fixing things, how come they weren't doing their job yesterday?" Max asked.

Dr. Carr was just as puzzled. "Got me."

But Zack had an explanation. "It's the machine," he said, as if Max and Sam knew what he meant.

Max had no idea what he was talking about. "What machine?" she asked.

"Eddy and the others hooked me up to it almost every day. Said it would filter my blood, keep it clean."

"My ass. They were sifting out your nanocytes," Max said, finally understanding.

Dr. Carr now understood as well. "That would explain why there was no tissue repair going on. Didn't have a chance to replicate in your bloodstream."

"I wonder where he got all these files," Max mused. Logan absently reached up and stroked her hair, never taking his eyes off the screen.

"From Lydecker, I'll bet. That guy had his hands in everything Manticore. And if he could find Zack at the ranch, I've no doubt he could compile all of this." Logan closed the file. "Well, I'm going to forward all of this to Sebastian and see if he can find updated locations for these people. Just in case."

"Yeah, just in case..." Max said, standing up. "I'll go pack the car." She left the computer room and headed into the living room to get her backpack.

A few minutes later, Logan's computer beeped, indicating that someone was waiting for a face-to-face chat with him. Logan turned on the web cam, and sure enough, there was Sebastian.

"Hey, Sebastian," Logan said.

"I got your e-mail, Logan. What's up?" Sebastian's mechanical voice asked.

"Sent you a list of Manticore employees who worked on nanocyte technology. The addresses are their last known locations. I need you to track down their current locations," Logan explained.

"When do you need this?"

"Whenever you can come up with something, but I'm not in a huge hurry."

"Okay. And the other folder?" Sebastian tapped out on his headset.

"I thought maybe you could follow up on the status reports or published articles in the files to see if these people are still working in the field of nanocyte technology. Send me anything you come up with."

"Where did you get this information? Is it from a reliable source? I didn't recognize the ISP."

"Yes, the source is reliable."

"Okay, Logan. Now, what's this all about? Why are you interested in this?" Sebastian asked.

"Do you remember last year when I had that encounter with Max's brother, Zack – the one who had been programmed to kill me?"

"Yes, you told me about that."

"Well, he'd been treated with nanocytes to repair tissue damage from a gunshot wound. The technology was very sophisticated and elegant, and worked beautifully."

"I see where you're headed with this, Logan," Sebastian said.

"It's a – backup, Sebastian. I'm heading to New Mexico to meet with a doctor who's using gene therapy to repair injuries like mine. But there's no guarantee that she'll be able to treat me, or if she does, that the treatment will work. It may even be too late, but I've got to see for myself."

"I thought you had given up on that, Logan." Sebastian's mechanical voice replied.

"Well, there's no harm in checking out the possibilities, is there? I'm out of Terminal City, I've got the time, and frankly, I've got the money again to pay for the treatment." Logan smiled.

"I guess not. I'll get right on it. When are you leaving?"

"Today. I'll keep in touch, though. I'm taking the laptop with me. Just e-mail me with whatever you find."

"I'll do that."

"Gotta go now. I'll contact you later."

"Goodbye, Logan, and good luck."

"Thanks." When Sebastian's face had disappeared from the monitor, Logan retrieved the e-mail and files, and quickly printed the files for more study when he had the time. He shoved all the papers into a file folder, then slipped the folder, along with extra batteries, into his laptop computer case.

When Max came back from the garage, he was zipping up his suitcase. He picked it up and carried it to the front door, next to the laptop.

"Everything ready to go?" Max asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"You gonna take that?" Max nodded her head in the direction of the wheelchair, sitting next to the therapy table
"Just in case..."

Jam Pony X-Press - noon

"Hey there," Ginger said as she walked up to Original Cindy. She leaned in and hugged the bike messenger. "Good runs this morning?"

"Yeah," Original Cindy answered, as she returned the hug briefly and then broke it off. "What're you up to today?"

Ginger shrugged. "Not much, just trying to wrap things up in Terminal City. And..." Her voice trailed off.

"What?" Original Cindy asked, her lips pursed slightly as she leaned forward to look into her locker.

"Well, I looked at a couple of apartments, some vacancies Alec told me about. Thought it might be time to get a place where we might...you know..."

Original Cindy turned to face her girlfriend. "Apartment? You ready to find your own crib?"

"Not just for me...for both of us. Could you sneak some time away to come look at it?"

Cindy looked around nervously. "Sure, sugah, but lemme catch Sketchy first so he can cover for me. Max is out for a couple of days and Normal is on a tear...as usual. 'Sides, we could meet up with him and Alec over at Crash later, after we're done."

"Absolutely," Ginger replied. "If Alec does show, maybe

we can play a little boys-vs-girls billiards."

"Sketchy!" Original Cindy hollered out as her fellow messenger headed toward the door. "Wait up. Original Cindy needs to talk to you."

Sketchy nodded and waved, then waited as Original Cindy ran to catch up with him. "I'm goin' with Ginger now to check out some crib. Cover for me with Normal?"

"Sure," Sketchy replied.

"We'll catch up with you later at Crash. Bring Alec. If I'm not there by six o'clock, you come find me, okay?"

Sketchy nodded. "You sure you want to go with her?"

"Gotta give her the benefit of the doubt, boo."

"Ain't love grand?" Sketchy answered. He clapped a hand on her shoulder. "Be safe."

"See you soon," Original Cindy answered, then turned back to find Ginger watching them. "Okay, sugah, let's go."

Interstate 5 South - mid-afternoon

As they traveled through Washington, Logan turned to Max. "The files are in the folder with my laptop," he said knowingly.

"What?" Max looked at him with a slight frown.

"I know you want to look at all that stuff Zack sent me."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Because you're curious about it. You've been glancing back at my laptop case the whole time we've been on the road. You want to know what I'm up to."

Max let out an exasperated sigh. "Okay. If it'll make you happy, I'll look at the files."

Logan grinned. Max pulled the folder out of the case and quickly scanned the papers.

"So, you think if this worked on Zack, it'll work on you?"

"I honestly don't know, Max. I don't know if either treatment will work. The doctor in New Mexico didn't give me many details on the therapy, only that it involves stem cells and gene therapy."

Max rolled her eyes. "Great. You haven't had much luck with stem cells, have you?"

"No, but these aren't transgenic stem cells. These are from one of the two original stem cell lines still left. The doctor said she would insert them directly into my spinal cord and somehow 'train' them to repair the damage."

"Okay, that sounds pretty straightforward to me. You've been through that before."

"Yeah, but not on a long-term basis. This treatment may take more than six months, with no guarantees. And there are risks."

"Risks? What kind of risks?" Max asked, looking up worriedly from the papers in her lap.

"If it doesn't work, my spinal cord may be further damaged," Logan stated impassively.

"And you're willing to take that chance?"

"At least I want to talk to this doctor face-to-face and assess the odds. It might not even work--those bullet fragments I had removed a couple years ago may have further damaged my spinal cord. Or there may be more fragments

still in there. Who knows? And hey, it just might work, after all."

"So, what about this nanocyte stuff?"

"It's a fallback. *If* the gene therapy doesn't work, and *if* anyone is still working on it, and *if* I can find someone to do it, then yes, maybe I'll try it. Sebastian's tracing the people on the list to see if he can find current addresses. And he's checking the reports and papers to see if they're still working in the field. He'll contact me if he finds anything."

"Do you think he will? And if he does, what makes you think it will work, anyway?"

"It worked for Zack, didn't it?"

"Yeah, well, Zack is a transgenic. Maybe it only works on us." Max shut the folder and slipped it back into the computer case.

"Max, why are you being so negative?"

"Logan," Max protested, "you *know* I don't care if you can walk or not. It's never been about that –"

"I know, Max, and I love you for that. But this is something I have to do. When Sam Carr first told me about the doctor in New Mexico, I promised myself that I would try it, but I wouldn't do it until you were safe and out of Terminal City. I'm just pursuing an opportunity. I really *am* over this issue."

"Yeah, right. A man on a mission."

"Look, Max, I'm not getting my hopes up, and I'm not going to be devastated if it doesn't work – if neither treatment works – like I was after the thing with Vertes. But I'd be a fool not to try, wouldn't I?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Max mumbled in agreement. "I guess I can go along with this scheme as long as it makes you happy, and as long as it doesn't endanger you. But if this doctor hurts you in any way, I am so going to kick her ass!"

"Okay, Max," Logan laughed. "You have my permission to kick some ass if anything happens to me." Putting on the cruise control, he reached over and took her hand. He squeezed it affectionately.

Max sidled closer to him. Logan lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Apartment in Sector 11 - 5:00 PM

"So, what do you think? Would this live up to your expectations? Or do you want to go back to that place in Sector 6?" Ginger asked.

Original Cindy walked up to the window overlooking Union Bay. "It's nice, but kind of far from the city, don't ya think? Original Cindy ain't sure she wants to spend half her day just gettin' to and from work. Why don't we find somethin' a little closer, boo?"

"What if we could just stay out here? You could quit Jam Pony, spend more time with me," Ginger replied.

Original Cindy turned back to face her. "Quit Jam Pony? Tried that once, was not pretty on the return."

"There wouldn't need to be any return," Ginger said, as she slipped next to Original Cindy and ran her hand up into Cindy's hair. "You could be my kept woman."

"And where's the money comin' from, boo?"

"No need to worry about money," Ginger answered. "I've

got it covered.”

Original Cindy turned to face Ginger. “See, that’s where Original Cindy’s got questions, ’cause she got offered a sweetheart deal like this once before and what she found out was there’s no such thing as a free ride. Somebody’s payin’ the price and I don’t want it to be you or me.”

“Why can’t you just trust me?” Ginger asked, reaching for Original Cindy’s hand.

Original Cindy pulled away from the embrace. “’Cause I got some serious trust issues...with you.”

Ginger stepped back. “What do you mean, you’ve got trust issues?”

“I know what you been up to, boo. I know about the spyin’ and stuff.”

“Spying?” Ginger spat back at her.

“You’re my woman, but Max...she’s...she’s as near to my blood as anyone. You hurt her and I have to hurt you. Simple as that, Ginger,” Original Cindy charged back.

Ginger stepped up so she was mere inches away from Original Cindy’s face. “I wanted to do right by you, *boo*, but I don’t think you’re leaving me any options here.”

Original Cindy looked up to see Ginger’s leg whipping through the air toward her head. She moved quickly to the left. Then everything went black.

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Act Two

Crash - 8:00 PM

"This doesn't feel right," Alec said, looking around Crash again. "It's been two hours since they were supposed to be here. I think it's time for us to get out there and look for them."

Sketchy turned in his seat so he could scan the room. "I agree, man. I mean, I know Original Cindy is a fierce chick, but she was supposed to be here hours ago. She told me to come lookin' for her, but where does a guy start? I got no idea where fine lesbians like that hang."

"So, we head over to her and Max's place, see if they just fell into a night of love, and then go from there?" Alec asked.

"Damn, sounds like a plan to me, and I sure don't mind if we catch the two of them going at it."

Both men smiled.

Alec stood up. "Night of love or not, we'd better find out."

Sketchy joined him and they headed for the door.

Motel, Klamath Falls, Oregon – late evening

When Logan returned from the receptionist's desk, Max had already pulled his suitcase and her bag from the trunk and was waiting for him. Logan waved the keys and said teasingly, "Only a double bed. Hope you don't mind."

She smiled back at him. "Well, now that you say that...is

there a chance of getting my own room? You know, this weird cuddling thing and all..."

Logan laughed and kissed her before he took his suitcase and walked toward the room.

The room was small but tidy. The bed was neatly made and everything smelled like roses. Logan opened his suitcase, pulled out his shaving kit and disappeared into the bathroom. When he came back, Max was sitting in an armchair and staring out the window into the dark.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, just tired," she explained. "I'm not used to sitting in the car the whole day."

Logan nodded. "Yeah, me neither. I'm going to bed, if you don't mind."

"Nah, I'll join you in a sec, if you don't mind."

He looked at her questioning face and smiled. "Of course not. There's nobody I'd rather go to bed with."

Max met his smile. "Yeah, and I'm lucky that I don't have to take the guest bedroom, considering that I never snored in my whole life."

"I know," Logan told her. "No more guest bedrooms, I promise."

While Max took her time in the bathroom, Logan sat down on the bed, switched off the exoskeleton and took it off.

When Max came back, she found him sitting on the bed, staring at his legs. The exoskeleton lay in front of him. She sat down next to him, her head resting against his shoulder. Logan wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer. For a long time, neither one spoke a word.

Logan's Quarters, Terminal City - November 11, 2021

Max entered Logan's quarters in Terminal City. The grapefruit was still lying next to the bed where he'd put it. He had wrapped the sheets around himself and curled up in the fetal position, facing the wall. For a moment she hesitated. Then she stepped closer and touched his shoulder.

"Logan, wake up," she said.

Slowly Logan turned and opened his eyes, still looking incredibly sad. "Max?" he yawned. "What's up? Why are you back?"

"I didn't want to leave things hanging between us," she said. "I don't understand why you won't talk to me. Why did I have to find you at Aveta's, asleep on her examination table? What's wrong with us, Logan?" Her voice pleaded desperately for some answers.

Logan sat up and looked at her for a moment, then lay back down. "There's nothing to talk about, Max. I'm tired. I'm exhausted. That's it."

"Then why didn't you tell me?" she asked him.

"I'm an adult, you know? I might not be transgenic, but that doesn't mean I need to be babied."

"I won't baby you, but you have to realize you're only human."

Logan's already-cold expression turned icy. "But you're not my commanding officer, right? I don't have to tell you I'm tired if I think you've got more than enough to worry about." His face softened. "You have so many other things to worry about, Max. Don't worry about me."

She looked at him, helpless. "But does that mean I have to lose my best friend? I need you, Logan."

Logan smiled at her, his eyes filled with love. "I need you too,

Max. I just can't stand the thought of being a burden."

She sat down next to him. "You'll never be a burden. I wouldn't have been able to do all this without your help."

She pulled him close for a deep kiss. Breaking the kiss, she stood up and took off her shoes and jacket. She leaned forward and kissed Logan again.

Logan reached forward and efficiently pulled off her shirt. She stood in front of him for a moment, then he lifted the blanket and she joined him in bed.

"Happy birthday, Logan," she whispered as she snuggled against him.

Logan slipped his arm around her and quieted her with a kiss.

Motel, Klamath Falls, Oregon – January 17, 2022

"That night seemed so perfect, but we should have been more careful," Max whispered sadly.

Logan looked at her questioningly.

"On your birthday, that night...that's when it happened, when we got pregnant."

Wrapping his arm tighter around her, Logan hid his face in her hair. "That was a beautiful night, Max. Please don't regret it, no matter what happened later."

"I wasn't supposed to be able to get pregnant, but I did. Typical Manticore screw-up," Max laughed bitterly.

"We'll figure something out, Max. Between what we've deciphered in the runes and what Sandeman told you, we'll get it straightened out...and then, later, maybe it will be the right time."

Max looked at Logan, her eyes on his as if she were hyp-

notized by their depths. "Logan..." She hesitated a moment before continuing. "I'm not sure that I really wanted this baby. At first it felt like such a great thing, but then... all the responsibilities...and when I lost it there were those feelings of relief. I feel so bad about having them. Of course I'm sad, but I'm also so relieved that I'm not going to give birth to a child in the middle of all this drama that is my life." Her voice was even, but tears were welling in her eyes.

Logan didn't answer at first. She stared at the ground, no longer able to meet his gaze, and said quietly, "You must think I'm some kind of a monster."

"I will never think of you as a monster, Max. It's okay to feel like that," he answered as he held her tight.

"I don't think it is," Max replied as the tears began to run more freely. "I didn't want the baby, and now it's gone, and it's my fault."

"You didn't do anything...it was...it wasn't your fault, Max."

She slipped from his embrace and turned to face him. "But what about you? Didn't you want the baby?"

Logan shrugged. "Yeah, I did. I was excited to share this with you, but I'm at a very different point in my life, Max. I worried about you and what this pregnancy might mean to you. It doesn't mean I'm not sad, and it doesn't mean my love for you is any different, but I'm not angry with you. I'm glad you told me, that you were honest about this."

"You'd have been a great dad," she told him.

"And you a great mother. One day, maybe we'll have that. I want a family of my own, a life with you." He hesitated,

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inhaling deeply. "And I have to admit that I'm scared that even if we finish decoding the runes, it will be me who won't be able to father your children."

"If the New Mexico cure doesn't work?" she guessed.

"Yeah," he answered shortly.

"If this doctor in New Mexico doesn't know what she's doing, we'll find somebody else," Max told him, a little smile playing around her mouth. "I love you. No matter what. And if that's okay with you, you can still have a life with me."

He smiled back at her. "I'd like that. I love you, too. No matter what."

Joshua's House, Sector 3 - 10:00 PM

"Lights are on," Alec said as he and Sketchy stood in the street in front of Joshua's house. "But keep your voice down. We don't want to wake the baby."

The two men walked quietly up to the house and Alec tapped on the front door. The curtain moved, and then Joshua opened up the door.

"Alec, come in," Joshua said, greeting the men. "Sketchy...good to see you."

They walked in and Alec scanned the room. "Is Gem with the baby?"

"No, Gem had dinner and a movie," Joshua replied. "I put the baby to bed."

"Must be nice to have a live-in babysitter," Sketchy replied, chuckling.

"I love Elfie, more than as a babysitter," Joshua replied.

"Sure enough, big fella," Alec answered, "but we actually need to find Gem. Do you know where she went on this dinner and a movie?"

"Don't know...that Cody guy came and picked her up. Said he needed to talk to her," Joshua answered, as he began to pace. "I don't like Cody. Don't like him being around Elfie. He is not good with children."

"Focus, Joshua," Alec pleaded. "Original Cindy is missing and we need Gem's help to find her. What movie did they go to?"

"The Majestic...revival showing of Chicago," Joshua replied, his voice devoid of emotion.

"Thanks, buddy," Alec replied as he and Sketchy rushed back out the door.

**Susanville, California,
Tuesday, January 18, 2022 - morning**

Logan pulled the Aztek over to the side of the road. He looked over at Max, asleep in the passenger's seat, and smiled. She looked so young, so innocent. He didn't want to wake her. They had gotten little sleep the night before and their conversation had sapped all her emotional strength.

Logan opened the car door and stepped out. He stretched his arms up over his head and looked down the sidewalk. It appeared to be a pretty, but quiet, little town. A nearby store looked like it would have a couple of cups of coffee they could take with them, and perhaps some pastries.

Logan looked back again at Max, then headed into the store.

He returned several minutes later, two large cups of steaming coffee safely in his hands and a bag of doughnuts tucked in his mouth between his teeth. He found Max waiting by the car, talking with two men. Logan walked over, passed her a cup of coffee and handed her the bag of doughnuts.

"Can I help you?" he asked the two men standing next to the passenger's door of the Aztek.

"You folks from Washington? You musta been on the road a while," the blonde man asked. Logan figured him to be about thirty years old.

"A day or so," Logan answered slowly. "You making new friends, Max?"

"We just like to welcome new people to our town," the other man responded. "Me and my brother Travis are pretty much our very own 'Welcome Wagon'."

Logan nodded and began to walk around to the driver's door. "Well, we're just barely started on our trip, so if you don't mind, we'll be on our way."

Travis stepped out in front of the Aztek. "Well, we'd be glad to have you here for a little longer. We'd love for our friends to meet your girl here."

Max shot a look at Logan as he opened the car door. "Y'know, we appreciate that...Travis and..."

"Steve," the other man responded.

"Steve. But, as my boyfriend here mentioned, we've got a long way to go today, so we're gonna have to get moving," Max said, as she moved to open her own car door.

Steve grabbed her arm and stopped her from opening the door. "I don't think you heard my brother, *Max*, 'cause

I'm pretty sure he said he wants you to meet his friends."

"I don't do groups, sorry," Max replied, shoving Steve's hand away from the door.

"Max?" Logan asked as he continued to stand with his door open.

"Just a minute, Logan," she replied as she turned to the two men. "I'm not sure what your mother taught you about hospitality, but this ain't it...so, we appreciate you sayin' hi, but we're going now."

"I thought you came across a little bitchy on the news," Travis drawled as Max turned to get into the car.

"What did you say?" Logan asked as he crossed over to where Travis stood in front of the Aztek.

"I said, your girlfriend is as much of a bitch in person as she was on TV. You know, we may live in California, but those transgenics made the news all over the world. My kid sister has a poster with her picture on it...some kind of 'girl power' fantasy thing..."

Logan moved up into Travis' face. "I'd appreciate an apology and then we're getting out of here."

"Logan, let's go," Max interjected.

"After he apologizes," Logan replied as he stepped up so he was face-to-face with Travis.

Travis shoved Logan back against the hood of the Aztek. Logan grabbed Travis' shirt and pushed him back into the street. Steve started to move toward them when Max grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"See, here's the thing about dating a transgenic...you can still fight your fights, but they don't have to turn dirty,"

Max explained to Steve as she held him against the passenger door. He was unable to break free of her grip.

"Apologize," Logan spat as he swung his right fist into Travis' face. Travis reeled back, then Logan followed with a left hook. Travis had a look of shock on his face as he crashed to the ground.

"Like hell," Travis replied as reached forward, hooking his right arm around Logan's left knee. Logan staggered, and then began to topple. He caught the edge of the curb and then landed flat against the street. As he hit the pavement, there was a small *pop* and then a sizzling sound as the circuits in the exoskeleton shorted out. Logan tried to get up but fell back against the ground, unable to stand.

Travis moved to loom over him as Logan used his arms to sit up and face him. "You giving up?" Travis asked.

"Nope, just calling in reinforcement," Max replied. She spun Steve away from the car door and did a front flip over to where Logan and Travis had been fighting. "Fair is fair," she said as she cold-cocked Travis. He hit the ground again, and this time he didn't get up.

"You okay?" she asked Logan as she held out her hand to help him up.

He nodded, then took her hand. "Yeah, but I think I've broken my pride."

Max laughed, and then glanced over to Steve, who was running down the street. "Well, there's bound to be more where they came from, so we'd better get out of here," she replied. She lifted Logan so he was standing, then dragged him to the passenger side door. She opened the door and helped him onto the seat.

"Sorry about the exoskeleton," she said as he lifted his legs

into the car. "But thanks for defending my honor."

Logan leaned out and kissed her gently on the lips. "Anytime, but I think we'd best say goodbye to Susanville."

Max laughed, then hurried over to the driver's seat, put the car in gear and headed out of town.

California Assembly, Sacramento, California - 10:00 AM

The assembly room was half-filled, the halls outside teeming with elected officials and staff members holding hushed conversations in small groups.

The Speaker of the House finally emerged from his office and walked quickly up to his desk in front of the room. He nodded at the clerk, who banged his gavel.

"House File 2022-345 is now called into order. We will begin the debate in five minutes."

As the clerk set the gavel down and stepped back, he turned to the Speaker. "So, this is really going to happen?"

The Speaker nodded and sat down, worry creasing his face. "I thought we would come to some other conclusion, but it appears that now secession is inevitable."

California State Highway 395 South – 11:00 AM

The Aztek was cruising down the California highway. Logan was driving, his eyes focused on the road.

"Whatcha thinkin' about?" Max asked.

"The exoskeleton," Logan admitted. He turned to her and smiled. "And how good it felt to hit that smug bastard."

Max smiled back. "Hey, even a revved-up girl like me appreciates a man defending her honor. And we'll get it fixed."

Logan nodded, then pulled the brake back to slow the car down. Just ahead of them was yet another roadblock.

"Logan, look," Max said, her voice quiet and without emotion. "These aren't policemen. They're military. Why would soldiers stop us?"

Looking at her and then through the window behind her, he saw that she was right. A couple of soldiers were surrounding the Aztek and raising their guns. With a critical expression, Logan turned back to his side window. When he suddenly found himself eye-to-eye with a rifle, his face revealed how scared he was. Looking out of the corner of his eye, he could see that the door on Max's side was open and two soldiers were pulling her out of the car. Unable to do anything, he stayed where he was without saying a word.

With Manticore ease, Max kicked the right soldier's guts and punched her elbow into the left one's ribcage. Both arched and fell to the ground. Only a second later, she found herself held by two much stronger soldiers, who didn't give her a chance to defend herself. Max tried to turn around and see what was happening with Logan, but before she could see anything, another man shouted at her, "Eyes front, soldier." He stepped from the small crowd of soldiers in front of her.

"Soldier?" Max shot back. "Sorry, man, but if you're lookin' for some of your deserters, you got the wrong one. I'm no soldier."

"You're not, X5-452?" the man asked. "What are you, then?"

"A girl on vacation?" she tried, grinning. She earned herself a punch in the stomach that made her arch.

"No, you're X5-452, also known as Max. You have been found worthy and you have been conscripted to the Army of California," he continued.

"Conscripted?" she asked. "What kind of game is this? And why do some of you look so familiar to me? Have any of you been in Terminal City lately?"

Another soldier stepped toward her, a scornful grin on his face. "What a nice little reunion, Max," he said, emphasizing "Max" as if it were something disgusting.

Max raised her eyebrow, now sure that she had seen several of these soldiers in Terminal City. "Yeah, great to see you again," she said ironically. "Hey, if you're such big fans of the Army, you're free to do whatever you want, but leave me out of this."

The soldier who'd first spoken raised his voice again. "If there's going to be a civil war, we're going to need the best soldiers we can get, and Manticore created the best soldiers. That's why you're in. We've heard reports about what you've done back in Seattle and you're exactly what we need. You're going to come with us."

"And if I don't want to come?" Max asked. Her voice was tired, as if she were too exhausted to fight and had accepted that there was no chance for her to escape right now.

"We'll *make* you come," the transgenic from Terminal City added. He raised a taser and fired, stunning Max.

Logan, still facing the rifle, had overheard the conversation. When the last words were spoken and there was no reply from Max, he turned around, worried, to see what'd

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been happening. He could only see that two soldiers with barcodes on the back of their necks were pulling Max into a military vehicle and driving away.

* * * * *

Act Three

**Situation Room, White House,
Washington, DC - 2:30 PM EST**

"We can't just let them secede. Did Lincoln just lie down when South Carolina left the Union?"

The eyes around the table were all fixed on the man at its head.

"What action would you have us take, Mr. President?" a dark-skinned woman to his right asked.

"Get our troops out there...somebody get Governor Penn on the phone. What the hell does he think he's doing? I appointed him. He has to listen to reason!" the President shouted.

"Penn has been deposed," a general at the opposite end of the table responded. "The Speaker of the House has taken over. They've formed a militia; they're conscripting soldiers as we speak."

"Dammit," the President swore. "Call Ambassador Langland in Bonn. Find out what the UN's response is. He should have met with the Security Council by now."

"I wouldn't waste my time trying to talk to anyone in Bonn. The UN has no interest in interfering in this matter," a white-haired woman on the left side of the table replied. "Canada has asked for continued military support if things disintegrate further, but the permanent members of the Security Council each said they would veto any request for peace-keeping forces in this nation. They said the US has historically cleaned up any

messes it felt responsible for, and they encouraged us to take a unilateral response to this domestic situation.”

The President dropped his head into his hands. “Heaven help us all,” he finally responded.

Sublime P.I. - noon

“So, Original Cindy said they were going to look at apartments?” Gem asked, looking up at Sketchy from her desk chair.

“Yeah, she and Ginger were going to look at a few places. Ginger said Alec had given her some leads on some cribs,” Sketchy answered.

“But you checked those places out, right?” Gem asked.

Alec sighed and stalked across the room. “Yeah, first thing. I’m not a moron.”

“Okay, just wanted to make sure we had everything covered,” Gem replied. “So, here’s what I think we need to do...check all of those places again and then work out from them. Chances are she found a place to take Original Cindy when she was looking at those first apartments you told her about, Alec.”

“Doesn’t that seem a little simple?” Alec retorted.

“When you hear hoof beats, think horses, not zebras,” she answered.

Alec took from his pocket the list of apartments he had told Ginger about, tore it into three pieces, and handed a section each to Sketchy and Gem. “Let’s split up. If you see anything suspicious, call our cell phones. When you’re done, come back here.”

Sketchy and Gem nodded in agreement, and then they all

left.

Military Headquarters, California – early afternoon

A military vehicle passed the guards at the entrance to the premises and stopped in front of the headquarters. Several soldiers jumped out, opened the back of the car and dragged a still-unconscious Max into the building.

When she woke up a little later, she found herself tied to a chair in a gray room. Eyeing her from the other side of the table in front of her was a man in his early forties, dressed in camouflage.

“Ah, milady finally decided to wake up,” he said.

Max scanned him, as if trying to find out whether he was transgenic.

“I’m General Turner. You have been told why you’re here, haven’t you, *Max*?” he asked.

“Looks like you’re recruiting transgenics for your Army,” Max shrugged. “And looks like you think I’m a good choice.”

“Yeah, that’s about it,” Turner answered. “I’m sure you’ve heard about the formation of the Republic of California. We’re going to secede from the United States, and you understand we need an army of our own for that.”

“Yeah, great,” Max snorted. “Why don’t we just pretend that I haven’t heard anything about this and you let me continue my trip?”

“No such luck,” Turner replied, a grin on his face. “It’s been decided that you’re going to become a soldier in the Army of California.”

“And if I don’t join your club voluntarily? How long do

you think you can keep me a prisoner?" Max asked.

"Oh, not long." Turner grinned a bitchy grin. "A Manticore tech is on the way here."

"Manticore?" Max asked, surprised.

"Yeah, with one of those cute little implants they used to have there. We can use a remote control to make it explode against your brain stem. Nice toy."

Alec sat in a chair in the lab tech's apartment while the tech looked at his neck. Max paced in front of them. The tech said, "Yeah, thought so. Planted a few myself back in the day. Mind my asking how you ended up with one of these pop guns attached to your brain stem?"

Max replied, "Because he's a cold-blooded, opportunistic showoff who thought he could run his game on a major bad guy who, it turns out, is an even bigger scumbag than he is! That about cover it?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much how it happened," Alec agreed.

"Yeah, so I've been told," Max nodded slowly after a little hesitation, her eyes scared.

Turner kept grinning.

A parking lot – mid-afternoon

Logan stopped the Aztek in a deserted parking lot. He struggled to get the wheelchair from the back of the car; when he didn't manage the first time, he breathed deeply, trying to calm himself, and then tried again. He transferred from the driver's seat to the chair and wheeled to the trunk, cursing his decision to put his laptop in the trunk after leaving the motel. Returning to the front of the car with the laptop bag on his lap, he transferred back into

the driver's seat, booted up the computer, and established an internet connection via his cell phone.

Only a few minutes of concentrated typing later, a smile appeared on his otherwise worried face. The screen showed the logo of the Army of California that he had seen on the soldiers' uniforms.

He continued typing furiously, and a map appeared on which a number of points blinked.

"Max, where are you?" he whispered. Minute after minute, more of the blinking points vanished, and Logan only made a little pause when one blinking point was left. He smiled a little. Sighing, he rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms as much as possible in the small space in the car, and then he went back to his laptop.

* * * * *

Act Four

The Oval Office, White House, Washington, DC - late afternoon

"Sir?"

The President looked up to find his aide standing in front of him. "Yes?"

"It's happening," she replied. "They want you in the Situation Room, but California has just officially seceded and Washington is gathering their Assembly in Olympia as we speak."

"Damn!" The President slammed his hand down on his desk. He stood up and turned so he could look out the windows of the Oval Office. "This is not what I signed up for." He turned back to face his aide. "Call the Sit. Room. I'll be right down."

The aide left. The President crossed the room to the small bar that had sat in his office since he was elected and, for the first time, poured himself a finger of scotch. He picked the glass up and quickly drained it.

"Certainly, Lincoln needed a little liquid reinforcement," he mumbled to himself.

Then he left the Oval Office to face the impending dissolution of his nation.

Apartment, Sector 11 - early evening

"Mmmphff."

Ginger crossed to Original Cindy and pulled down her

gag. "There's no one around here. Do you think I'd do this in a populated area?"

"I wasn't gonna yell," Original Cindy retorted. "This girl ain't stupid, but I would like a glass of water. Can you at least do that for me?"

Ginger crossed to the kitchen, filled a glass and held it so Original Cindy could take a sip of water.

"So, you got a plan?" Original Cindy asked. "'Cause, not to criticize or anything, but it seems to me that we're just hanging here with no sign of a resolution."

Ginger took the empty glass back from Original Cindy and walked back to the kitchen. She set the glass down on the counter and then turned to face the other woman. "Of course I have a plan, you fool. I was in special ops with Manticore for over five years. I know how to make a plan."

"No need to go insultin' Original Cindy."

"Yeah, whatever," Ginger responded.

"Thing is, boo...I was in the military...not Manticore, but this girl's lived a life...I know how people get in jams, and I thought I knew you. I don't know what it was that got you messed up with those shadowy government types, but you ain't done anything here yet that can't be undone."

Ginger stalked over and pulled Original Cindy's gag back up.

Near Military Headquarters, California – evening

Logan switched off the headlights and drove closer to the fence that surrounded the grounds. He finally parked the

car and turned to his laptop, which was lying on the passenger's seat. After typing in some numbers, he started an internet telephone call and Sebastian's face appeared on the screen.

"Sebastian? It's me, Logan."

"Logan, where are you? I'm not getting a picture from you," he said. "Sorry, but I haven't found out more about the nanocytes."

"That's fine. I'm not calling because of the e-mail. Actually, I need your help on something else," Logan explained. "I'm in California."

"California?"

"Yeah. Look, apparently California has seceded. They're enlarging their Army with transgenics to get the military power they need. And unfortunately, they conscripted Max. They stopped us on the road and took her away. I think I found where they took her, but I need a distraction to get past the guards," he continued.

"Why don't you just sneak in?" Sebastian asked.

"We had some problems in a little town this morning. Seems they didn't like transgenics too much, and when we fought our way out, the exoskeleton broke."

Sebastian paused before he answered. "I'm sure you know how crazy this is, so I'm not going to say anything about it. Where is Max and how do you want to get her out?" he asked.

"She's in their headquarters, a military base in the middle of nowhere. There shouldn't be too many guards inside the building, but the territory outside is guarded pretty well," Logan said and continued to explain his plan. "I

figured out that it'd be easiest to drive right in through the front gate."

"The front gate?" the synthesized voice asked.

"Yeah, the front gate. I'll drive up and tell them that I've got an appointment with a General Turner who is supposed to work there. They're going to call him to get a confirmation; what I need you to do is to block this phone call, redirect it to yourself and play a .wav file I've set up." Logan hesitated and grimaced. "I'm sorry to have to ask for this, Sebastian, but it is really important."

"I know. Of course, I'm going to help you to get her out. Just give me what you have."

Logan smiled, relieved. "I'm e-mailing you everything I know, including an audio file I recorded from a telephone call."

"When is this going to start?" Sebastian asked.

"Right now. I won't disconnect the line, so you should be able to hear what's happening. Just make sure that he's going to hear the right thing," Logan said as he turned the ignition key.

Slowly he drove to the front gate and stopped at the barrier. One of the guards approached and greeted him. "Good evening, sir."

"Good evening. I'm here to see General Turner," Logan said. "He's expecting me."

The guard nodded. "And your name, sir?"

"Matthew Parker," Logan answered, not a single feature revealing his lie.

"Okay, Mr. Parker. Please wait here while I verify that."

Logan watched him go back to the guard post and pick up the phone. "Sebastian, are you ready?" he whispered, but didn't get an answer. Panicking, he fully opened the laptop that had been lying half-closed on the passenger's seat. He quickly realized that the connection had been cut. Biting on his lower lip, Logan cursed silently.

The guard paced inside the post, obviously trying to reach Turner. Nobody seemed to answer - not Turner and not the audio file.

"God, what if Sebastian didn't redirect the phone call?" he murmured to himself. "Should I just drive in?"

The guard put the phone back and returned to Logan. "Mr. Parker?"

Logan nodded.

"Sorry for having to wait for so long. Problems with the telephone line," the soldier told him.

Logan involuntarily closed his eyes in frustration but was back to normal only a second later. "Problems?" he asked.

"Yeah, some problems with the phone, but I finally reached General Turner. He's expecting you. You can drive through."

Logan nodded, trying to hide his relief, when the barrier opened and he drove through.

"Thanks," he whispered to his laptop.

Logan parked his car in front of a sign saying "Headquarters" and checked the blueprint on his laptop again. Entering the building, he checked left and right until he saw the elevator. He was waiting for the doors to open when two uniformed men came around the corner and headed toward the stairs to the basement, talking to

each other.

"So she's not giving in?" one of them asked.

"Nah, says that she's not joining. Turner told her about the implant – that quieted her, but she's still rebellious."

"Stupid girl, you'd think that..."

The men disappeared just as the doors opened. Logan entered the elevator and went down to the basement. When the doors opened again, he scanned the floor and saw the two men disappear into a room in the hallway to the left. He grimaced and turned left to follow them. Slowly Logan wheeled to the door they had gone through and checked the door's label, but it only had a number on it. Stopping his chair, he stared at the door and hesitated. He'd just reached out his hand when the doorknob turned and a man left the room. He eyed Logan suspiciously and asked, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, um, I was looking for my colleague from the Department of Internal Auditing. We were supposed to meet here," Logan lied. "Is she in there?"

"No ladies inside, sorry, sir," the soldier told him, his expression still skeptical.

"Ah, okay, maybe I'm in the wrong floor," Logan said and turned around to go back to the stairway. Pressing the "up" button at the elevator, he waited for the soldier to walk upstairs before he returned to the door.

This time he opened the door before somebody else could do it and entered. The room behind the door was dark and small. One of the men he had overheard earlier was sitting on a chair, reading a newspaper in the dim light of a small lamp. Behind a huge window, he could see Max tied to a chair at a table and the other man pacing around her.

"Hello," he greeted the soldier with the newspaper. "General Turner tried to reach you. He's waiting for your report."

The man examined Logan from hair to toes, eyes resting on the wheelchair, and asked, "Says who?"

"I've just talked to him. If I were you, I'd try to find him right away," Logan said coldly and added without a blink, "Department of Internal Auditing."

"Oh." The soldier jumped up and left the room.

"One down, one to go," Logan muttered and opened the door to the actual interrogation room. What had been a window in the observation room was a mirror in this room, but once he'd opened the door, Max's eyes were already searching for his. She smiled shortly before returning to her calm façade.

Logan put on his poker face and wheeled toward Max, giving the soldier only a small nod.

"Excuse me," the soldier asked Logan. "What are you doing here?"

Logan stopped behind Max, facing the soldier on the other side of the table. "I was called to bring an implant for this X-series," he said, reaching behind as if to take the implant and the needed tools from his small backpack. He pulled out a little pocketknife, hiding it in his hand, and placed it in Max's without drawing attention to it. "Didn't your CO tell you I was coming?" Logan asked.

"Well, yeah, I heard something about a Manticore tech," the soldier stuttered, oblivious to what had just happened behind the backrest of the chair.

Making sure Max was able to free herself from the shack-

les, Logan approached the soldier, looking irritated. "Please, this is ridiculous," he said. "First you call me, make it all urgent, and now you aren't ready for me? I thought Manticore was unorganized, but this all-new California Army is so much worse," he complained. "I was called to insert this implant. If you don't need my services, I'm out of here."

"No, wait. Um, well, if you say so...but I'll need confirmation," the man told Logan and started to reach for his comm. Before he could reach it, Max was facing him eye to eye.

"No need to get confirmation," she told him, smiling. "I'm not getting any implants."

She grabbed him at his collar and pressed him against the wall. "Understood?" she asked.

"I...I..." he stuttered.

"I...I..." Max mocked him. "Shut up and remember to tell your boss that I'm out of here. And don't try to conscript me again." She emphasized her words by kicking her knee into his stomach and making him fall to the ground. Kneeling down, she took the gun from his belt and handed it to Logan.

"Are there more soldiers out there?" she asked, all business.

"Depends on how long they need to return," he explained, taking the gun as they moved to the observation room. Looking out the door, Logan gave Max an "all clear" sign, and she followed him to the stairway. As Logan stopped to wait for the elevator, he hissed at Max, "Take the stairs. The car is waiting in front of the building. Get ready, I'll meet you there."

Max hesitated and looked at Logan, but again he urged her, "Go, Max!"

After a moment, she obeyed and ran up the stairs.

Logan watched her leave and breathed deeply, waiting again for the doors to open. When he'd finally reached the ground floor, he looked out to check the hallway. He quickly saw that Max was battling with the soldier he had met in the basement hallway earlier.

Logan watched Max kicking the man in his abdomen, but the soldier was fast and grabbed her leg, twisting it around. Using her other leg, Max pushed herself up and jumped backward over his head, freeing her leg from his grip. She wrapped her arm around his neck and began choking him, only to be pinned backward against the wall.

She released the grip on the man's neck and grabbed his collar to turn him around to face her. Without pausing, she punched him right in the face, breaking his nose.

He ignored the blood streaming down and raised his hands, but this time Max was faster. She grabbed his wrists and turned them behind his back, crossing them. The soldier stepped back a few feet and Max again found herself between his body and the wall.

"This is getting boring," she said, pulling his wrists up.

"You think, huh?" he answered and bowed down, revealing an X5 barcode on the back of his neck. He moved up again, trying to crash the back of his head against Max's face. She was able to dodge a little, but was still hit.

Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply, trying to relax.

A little smile came back to her face when she heard a gun click and Logan say, "Okay, game over."

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Logan right behind the male X5, pointing the gun up at the soldier's head. She stepped from behind the X5 and pinned him against the wall, giving him a series of kicks in the stomach.

"Get out," she told Logan. "Start the car. I'll be there in a minute."

Logan headed for the car, quickly transferring to the driver's seat. He had just gotten the car started when he saw Max come running out the door. She jumped through the open window on the passenger's side and sat up in the seat while Logan was crashing through the barrier at the front gate.

"You could have told me that there was another X5," she said.

He looked at her and smiled. "You know, I would have if I had known."

Turning his attention to the road, he pulled the Aztek away from the base and toward the nearby highway. When Max saw which way he was driving, she asked, "You sure this is the right direction? New Mexico is the other way."

Logan nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure. Forget about New Mexico. Let's go home."

"You really want that?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, change in priorities. I decided that it's way more important for you to stay safe than to go to New Mexico and try something that might not even work."

She smiled. "Sounds like a plan. Thanks for coming to the

rescue, by the way.”

He smiled back. “Always a pleasure.”

A street in Sector 11 - late evening

Sketchy stood in the shadow of a tall apartment building. He stepped out of the shadows as Gem and Alec rode up on Alec’s bike.

“This the place?” Alec asked as he parked.

“Think so,” Sketchy replied. “When we were here earlier there were lots of folks home, TVs on and stuff, but when I went up to check on that apartment we looked at earlier, I heard people arguing through the walls. Original Cindy was one of ‘em. She and I have been working at Jam Pony together long enough, I’d know that voice anywhere.”

“So Ginger’s got her in a different apartment?” Gem asked.

“Yeah, sounds like the one below the one we looked at. I checked with a woman living on the first floor and she said that it belongs to the super’s mother. She goes away in the winter, so it’s empty right now.”

“Let’s get up there,” Alec replied.

The three moved quickly up to the third floor. Gem and Alec slunk down the hallway, listening to confirm how many people were in the apartment.

Gem stood next to the door, her ear pressed against it, raising first one and then two fingers. She nodded and then signaled for Alec and Sketchy to come down the hall. With one carefully placed kick, she took down the door. Alec and Sketchy quickly followed her into the apartment.

"Damn...you always have the best timin'," Original Cindy said as they came bursting into the room. The three rescuers pulled up short in front of the couch where Ginger and Original Cindy sat talking.

"Ginger. Original Cindy," Sketchy greeted the two women.

Gem looked at them, a confused look crossing her face. "Are you...? Were you...?"

"Original Cindy did have a situation goin' on here, but as usual she worked it out on her own," she replied.

"A situation?" Alec asked.

"Yeah, but now we got another one on our hands. See, y'all do have perfect timing, 'cause we were just tryin' to figure out how to get Ginger out of here, find her somewhere safe where she don't have to keep workin' for these shadowy type figures."

Alec muttered something under his breath.

"Huh? I didn't hear that, mister," Original Cindy replied.

"I was just saying that people who have a fondness for shadowy types always seem to find more shadows to hang out with," Alec answered.

Ginger stood up from the couch. "I know you have no reason to trust me, but in those months after the fire at Manticore...well, I followed up on some initial research I had done during a special ops mission in 2018. I had been down in Oregon, near Bend, on a deep undercover gig. I found someone...I found someone who looked a lot like me. Only younger."

"Oh," Gem gasped. "You didn't."

Ginger nodded. "I did. I found a sister, and then when we got out of Manticore, I went back and I found my mother. But at the same time, Martin found me. He kept me until the siege started and then he planted me in Terminal City. He has my mother and my sister."

Original Cindy stood up and took Ginger's hand. "So, I think a few of us here can appreciate what it might mean to find a family. Alec?"

Alec cocked his head and stared at Ginger. "Nice story, but I think you forgot one element - we don't have mothers. We're manufactured."

Gem, Sketchy and Original Cindy turned to look at Ginger. Her face remained calm.

"But we are made from eggs from somewhere, Alec. My mother had eggs taken from her and then was forced to serve as a surrogate. We did tests. We share DNA."

Alec shrugged. "Wouldn't put it past Manticore, but I'm also not going to believe a traitor."

"Believe me or not, but I've been trying to figure out where Martin hid them, and last week I got the information I needed. I have someone ready to extract them...but I knew that I needed to just leave, not tell you all what was going on, to make a clean break." She stopped and looked at Original Cindy. "But it wasn't that easy."

"So, you're leaving?" Gem asked.

"Yeah, I have to...my window of opportunity is closing. So, just give us a minute here and then...well...we need to...I need to..." Ginger's voice broke and she had to stop talking. Original Cindy squeezed her hand.

"You know what you need to do, boo. No worries for the

rest of us, here.”

Alec, Gem and Sketchy quickly excused themselves, leaving the two women alone for a few moments.

“It’s been amazing,” Ginger began.

Original Cindy interrupted her with a deep kiss. “The world is a crazy place right now, but Original Cindy will wait ‘til you get your business settled, and then...then we make our time together.”

Ginger pulled Original Cindy into her arms. “Take care of yourself, and I’m sorry...for all of it.”

“Ain’t nothin’ here to be sorry about,” Original Cindy replied as she tightened her embrace. “Just get back here as soon as you can.”

Logan’s Penthouse

Wednesday, January 19, mid-afternoon

Logan pulled the Aztek into the garage underneath Fogle Towers. As he slowly assembled the wheelchair and transferred into it, Max opened the hatch and unloaded their bags. They rode the elevator up to the penthouse in silence. Logan unlocked the door and opened it for Max, who swept into the apartment, arms full of luggage. She dumped the suitcases just inside the door, then headed into the living room, where she flopped on the couch and stretched out.

“I think I’m up for a short nap. What about you?” she said.

“I could join you in a nap...” Logan said with a twinkle in his eye.

“That would work,” Max agreed.

Logan wheeled over to the couch, locked his brakes, and transferred to it. Max snuggled next to him and lay her head on his shoulder.

"I'm glad to be home. That was a hell of a trip," she murmured.

"Yeah, wasn't it? Not my idea of a fun time." Logan grinned and stroked her hair.

"I'm so sorry we didn't make it to New Mexico, Logan. I know how much that meant to you."

"Yeah, well..." Logan dismissed it with a shrug. "I guess it wasn't meant to be. And I'm not about to endanger you just to pursue a crazy idea."

"It wasn't a crazy idea, Logan." Max looked up at him. "It was something you really wanted, and I wanted for you. At least there's the nanocyte stuff to fall back on, like you said."

"Oh, right. I'd forgotten about that with everything that happened. I guess I should see if Sebastian's found anything."

"Good idea."

"I'll only be a few minutes." Logan slid off the couch and back into the chair.

"Okay, but don't get so wrapped up in it that you forget I'm here waiting for you."

"Fat chance." Logan kissed her, then headed for the computer room. He fired up the computer and quickly skimmed through his messages until he found the one he was looking for.

It was from Sebastian and all it said was, "Logan, contact

me ASAP.”

Logan typed in Sebastian’s address and turned on the web cam.

“Hello, Logan. Back so soon?” said the mechanical voice.

“It’s a long story, Sebastian. We never made it to New Mexico. After that little escapade in California, we decided to come back to Seattle. By the way, thanks for your help.”

“Glad I could be of assistance. You’ll have to tell me the whole story some day,” Sebastian smiled.

“I’ll be glad to. Now, what have you got for me?”

“I found current addresses for most of the people on the list you sent me.”

“Great.”

“About half of them are still involved in nanocyte technology. And there’s a lab in Port Angeles where several of them are working now.”

“Wow. That close?”

“I’m sending you the research results. You’ll find them interesting, I’m sure,” Sebastian tapped into his headset.

“Thanks, Sebastian. I’ll get back to you after I’ve read the files.”

“Okay, Logan. Later.” Sebastian’s web cam went black just as Logan’s fax machine started to spew sheets of paper. He reached over and gathered up the pages. When the machine finally stopped, Logan had a stack nearly an inch high. He put the papers on his lap and wheeled into the living room, where Max was dozing. After setting the papers on the coffee table, he went into the kitchen. In a few minutes, he had a fresh pot of coffee brewing.

"Max?"

"Oh," she said, waking up. "What?"

"Want a cup of coffee? I've got a fresh pot."

"Sure, why not? What did Sebastian have to say?"

"He sent me some files. There's a lab in Port Angeles where several ex-Manticore types still work in the nanocyte technology field. Here," he said, handing Max one of the mugs.

She sat up. "Thanks." She took a sip of the steaming liquid. "Ah, I haven't had a decent cup of coffee since we left Seattle."

"There room for me on the couch?" Logan said, with a smile.

Max scooted over. "Sure." She patted the cushion next to her. Logan put his mug of coffee on the table and transferred onto the couch. He picked up some of the papers and began reading through them. Max also took a stack and scanned it.

"Hmmm. Encouraging results here," she murmured.

"And here," Logan said, looking at another report.

"Oh, here's a paper on repairing broken bones," Max said. She flipped through the report. "This must be the ex-Manticore guys. The authors are all from Port Angeles Biotechnology Labs. So, they're not just doing tissue repair. Glad to see they're using Manticore technology for something useful."

"Here's one from Sweden...working on repairing spinal cord injuries specifically," Logan commented. He read the research paper intently.

"Yeah? Anything significant?"

"Well, the preliminary results are very encouraging. The subjects have regained at least partial mobility." Logan looked up from the report, and smiled at Max. "The research is ongoing."

"Really?" She met his smile.

"Yeah. It looks like they're having better results than the doctor in New Mexico is. At least if the subjects didn't show improvement, they weren't any worse off than when they started the treatment. No further damage was done."

"Sounds good," Max said.

"Sounds more than good, Max. It's exciting." Logan's eyes were bright with hope.

"Yeah, it is." Max's smile brightened when she saw the expression on Logan's face.

"I hear Scandinavia is lovely in the summer."

"Oh, really? Do you think a Scandinavian cruise might be in order for our next vacation?" Max teased.

"Beats the hell out of the Republic of California or whatever, don't you think?"

They both laughed.

Logan's Penthouse, later that day

"Mmm, Logan, it smells delicious!" Max said, when she entered the kitchen. Logan sat in front of the stove, stirring something in a pot.

"Hungry, as usual?" he asked.

"Yeah, you know... fighting the bad guys, being con-

scripted, having to escape from the Army of California... I think I have a couple of good reasons to be hungry," she smiled at him.

"The table's already set," Logan told her. "Would you mind taking the pasta? I'll be there with the sauce in a sec."

Max nodded and took the bowl with the pasta. She sat down on her regular chair at the table and ate a noodle before setting the bowl down.

When she saw Logan wheeling toward her, another bowl on his lap, she was chewing more noodles.

"If you don't need the sauce, I'm going to take it back," Logan teased her.

"Nah, I want sauce. I love your sauce, you know that."

"Sorry that it's only pasta, but I hadn't planned to be back so soon," he apologized, stopping on the other side of the table, facing her.

"Don't worry. I know. I'm sorry that this trip turned out the way it did," she smiled, watching him set his brakes.

"Hey, don't worry. I think Scandinavia is much nicer than New Mexico," Logan laughed.

"You promise that we'll go there?" Max asked. "If there's a chance that this nanocyte thing's going to work, we should try it."

"We will," Logan promised. "I'll try to get more info on it and we'll go there, once things have calmed down. I don't think leaving the country right now is a good idea. Not with a civil war in front of our doors seeming inescapable."

"It's strange, isn't it?" Max asked, finally eating pasta with sauce. "The media's quit focusing on transgenics, thank God, but is it only because the country's falling apart? What happens now that states are seceding?"

"I don't know, Max. I don't know what to do about all this. That's not exactly Eyes Only's league," Logan shrugged. "It scares me that we're facing another civil war, 'cause Washington sure isn't going to let states secede without any consequences. But what scares me even more is that even if transgenics are no longer the public's focus, some of them are still out there causing trouble. You saw them-they joined the Army and used their abilities to make you join them. These Armies are powerful." He poked at his pasta with his fork.

"Do we have to do anything?" Max asked quietly. "Can't we for once just have our own little problems? As if those weren't enough."

"For now, they are enough," Logan told her. "Let's deal with Sandeman's latest bit of news and then we'll worry about how to save the world...or at least the United States.

Logan reached out his hand, over the table.

Max squeezed it and smiled. "The universe is right on schedule, hmm?"

"Always is," he smiled back.

Epilogue

That night

Max sat on the top of the Space Needle, Seattle lying at her feet, darkness surrounding everything.

“Secession. You would have thought we had finished this two centuries ago. But now it looks like we’re going to have a civil war. Again. Only this time it’s not about slavery, about north and south. Now that I think about it...thank God it’s not about transgenics either. I can’t believe there are some of us who join the Army voluntarily. As if we hadn’t had enough of that in Manticore. But if that’s what they want...I’m just glad that Logan came to get me out. The Army is no place for me. This is where I want to be. Or maybe...I just prefer to be with Logan. Guess I could call him my own personal superhero. He didn’t think for a second about going to New Mexico once we were on the run. He just gave up this chance to find a cure...for me. Wow.”

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