

Dark Angel VS3

And Judas Brought a Knife (Part 1)

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Episode VS3.21

Prologue

A city street – February 23, 2022, 7:00 am

The dark Seattle street bore the gleam of a recent rainfall, and steam rose silently from the pavement. An unmistakable roar shattered the silence, and then the motorcycle was there, emerging from the mist and racing down the empty street. Angry sprays of water shot up from either side of the tires as the machine and its owner were gone as quickly as they had come, leaving only rippling puddles and a swirling trail of smoke in their path.

It feels like it's all been a dream. Can't believe it was just three years ago I was a cat burglar and bike messenger, and all I had to worry about was Lydecker and his Humvee. I didn't know I had it so good. Okay, so when I got away from Manticore the second time, they gave me a lovely parting gift and that made things with me and Logan pretty rough. But White wasn't so bad as villains go, and Logan and I were handling him. Then Joshua had to go get himself a girlfriend...that was when things really started to go downhill...

Max sighed into the wind, her wind-swept curls streaming behind her as she sped through the city streets, paying no attention to, but intensely aware of, the scenes around her. As she sped by an alley, a transhuman peeked out of the shadows, looked around furtively, and then quickly ducked back as a small group of National Guardsmen marched past.

*So we made it through the hostage dealio, and Terminal City, and White, and Logan's *deja vu*, and my body-art-with-vengeance, and then...but Logan was there for me, and we were dealing. Funny how it just never ends. No matter how much I*

fight, how much I try to have this normal life, something's always waiting around the corner. Now it's Renfro's whacked-out sister, of all things, and this little war she's hoping will fatten her bank account.

The motorcycle roared past a garbage can with flames flickering inside it, as several homeless men gathered around it, trying to keep warm. Before they knew what was happening, a couple of sector cops approached, guns drawn, shouting at them. They raised their hands in the air and, complying with the cops' orders, they turned and headed to a clearly-marked police van, where they were hustled inside.

Now, you couldn't blame me for saying 'screw the good ole U. S. of A.' – I mean, what have they done for me anyway? Logan and I could go off somewhere and forget everything and everybody. But no, I had to go fall in love with the great Eyes Only – blazing at the first sign of trouble isn't in the job description. Couldn't split even if, though – my family's here, and this freedom thing is new to them. So I guess we'll hang around and see what's around the next corner.

Government Office Building – February 23, 2022, 8:00 am

Agent Roy Martin sat at his desk, twirling a pencil around aimlessly, deep in thought. His reverie was broken suddenly with a knock on the door. "Mr. Martin?" An administrative assistant timidly pushed the door open and peeked around the corner. "You have visitors."

"Send them in," he said curtly, throwing the pencil down on the desk and straightening his tie. He barely had time to sit up straight in the leather chair before two men with grim faces entered and stood looking down at him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a low voice. "I

4 Virtual Season 3 — V53.21 — And Judas Brought a Knife (1)

thought we agreed that it was better to keep our relationship low profile."

"The hell with our agreement," one of them, the Army general, said tersely. "We need to get control of this situation or all hell's going to break loose. Now Kathryn's disappeared and you're not answering your phone."

"I've been busy," Martin replied. "There's a meeting scheduled this afternoon."

"We can't wait that long," the other man said. "I've been in touch with the South Africans. They are ready to move on Lydecker's camp, and I gave them the go-ahead. We have to take his army out or the whole plan's going to blow up in our faces."

Martin shifted in his seat, but no emotion revealed itself in his expression. "Fine. I don't know why she waited so long to do that in the first place."

"I do," said the general. "This little vendetta against X5-452 and Eyes Only. We know it's personal, but it's time to get them out of the way and keep moving forward. With her or without her."

* * * * *

Act One

Logan's Penthouse

Logan blinked his eyes open and squinted at the morning light that was streaming through the window into his room. He could hear the shower running in the bathroom. Then the water stopped and he could hear Max getting out of the shower. He reached for his glasses and slipped them on as he yawned, still trying to wake up.

"Hey," Max said as she walked into the room, wrapped in a towel.

"Where were you?" Logan asked as he sat up. "I woke up about an hour ago and you were gone."

Max dropped down on the bed next to him and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. "Just needed to grab some air, think a little bit. I feel like the world is on fast-forward lately."

"No need for fast-forward here," Logan answered as he reached over and caressed her shoulder. He leaned in and kissed her, this time slowly teasing her lips while his hands traveled down her back.

Max broke the kiss and stood up. "Remember that later, *Defender of the Free World*. Morning ride was a treat, but I'm late for work." She turned, dropped her towel and reached for her clothes that were lying on the chair in the corner.

Logan reached for his wheelchair and easily transferred from the bed. "You get dressed, I'll start the coffee."

"Sounds like a plan," Max responded as she pulled on her

6 Virtual Season 3 — V53.21 — And Judas Brought a Knife (1)

pants.

Logan turned and headed for the kitchen.

"Make it strong," Max called from the bedroom as he entered the kitchen.

Logan pulled a bag of coffee from the freezer and poured some grounds into the coffeemaker. After filling the pot with water, he turned it on and then headed toward the office.

Booting up his computer, he quickly connected to his e-mail and began scanning the messages that had arrived overnight. He sighed and clicked on one that appeared about halfway down the screen.

"Love to come here someday and not fear what's waiting for me," Logan muttered in the silence of the room.

Need to meet you today. - Matt

"What's up?" Max asked as she handed Logan a cup of steaming coffee.

Logan took a sip and looked up at Max. "Got an e-mail from Matt. He wants to meet me later."

Max nodded and reached down to finish zipping up her slim leather jacket, then looked over at the exoskeleton in the corner. "You get that working again?"

Logan glanced over at the machine. "Yeah, Sebastian and I were busy working on it until about two this morning, but it's running again."

"Cool," Max answered. "Well, I'm going to bounce. Need to make an appearance at work before Normal really does come to his senses and fire my butt."

"It's a cute butt. I bet he'd be unlikely to let it go so easily,"

Logan teased. "Besides, now that Lydecker has restored our financial status, you could become a kept woman."

A small frown crossed Max's face. "Hey, that's your financial status...no one keeps me...not even you."

"Sorry," Logan replied as he turned back to his computer.

"Won't be too late," Max said as she headed for the door. She waited for a moment for him to answer, then closed the door and headed for the elevator.

Jam Pony X-Press

Max slipped off her bike outside Jam Pony and pushed it into the business. She leaned the bike against the wall and walked over to the counter where Normal waited.

"You're late, missy," he snapped at her.

"Put a sock in it," she answered, not even looking up at him. "My Nalgene bottle just decided to take a leak all over the rest of my backpack and I'm not happy." She flopped the soaking wet backpack up on the counter and began pulling out the contents.

"This is not your personal hardwood drying rack," Normal retorted. "Get your life in order and get back out there... bip bip bip...time's awastin'!"

Max sighed, grabbed her wet belongings and headed for the locker room. "Cities won't burn, babies won't die," she declared as she walked away.

* * *

Max walked back to the lockers and found Original Cindy sitting on the bench in front of her locker. Cindy was leaning forward, her elbows on her knees and her eyes cast to the floor.

"Hey, boo," Max said as she reached to gently touch Original Cindy's shoulder.

"Oh, hey," Original Cindy replied, looking up at Max. Her voice was low and her eyes were clouded.

"Damn, girl, you look like crap. You missin' me that much?" Max teased.

"Ginger called last night, was up 'til about four talkin' to her," Original Cindy answered.

"So this is what tired looks like?" Max asked.

Original Cindy sighed. "Yeah, somethin' like that, sugah."

Max dropped down on the bench next to Original Cindy and wrapped her arm around her friend. "She'll get back here sooner than you know."

"Feels like it'll never happen, boo. Original Cindy just ain't lucky in love."

"That's what I used to say and now look at me...I've got a *sugar daddy* who says he'll keep me in the manner to which I'd like to become accustomed," Max answered.

Original Cindy turned to face Max. "He didn't."

"Oh, he did...he backed off it pretty quick, but I think the bike messenger lifestyle is cramping his lifestyle or somethin'. It was one thing when he needed my legs, then my ability to help with cash flow, but these days...man, what am I sayin'? We just moved in together and it's great, but this morning...well, he knows how to push my buttons, if you know what I mean."

"Original Cindy may be down on her luck, but I know that man does not want you barefoot and in the kitchen... barefoot and in his bed, maybe, but we've both eaten your

cookin', boo, and it ain't pretty most of the time."

"Yeah," Max answered. "Thing is, livin' together...it's different than I thought. It's like he's there. All of the time."

"Ain't you supposed to have a honeymoon period?" Original Cindy asked.

"Guess they forgot that part of the domestic happiness unit at Manticore," Max responded glumly.

"Relax, sistah...and let that man take care of you. I know you been on your own your whole life, but you deserve to be pampered and if that takes you out of this circus, then let it. But to be honest, I think he needs you gettin' around the city."

"He's just bein' protective. I think the thing with Renfro's crazy sister really scared him."

"Scared all of us, Max," Original Cindy answered as she took Max's hand. "You're strong, but you ain't invincible. You gotta remember that."

"Not to worry, you and everybody else in my life are makin' sure to remind me of the fact," Max replied.

"You chatter like hens!" Normal called from his desk. "Get yourselves out here and on those bikes or I will replace you both."

Original Cindy shrugged and then stood up. She held her hand out for Max, who took it and stood up.

"'Notha day, 'notha dollar," Original Cindy sighed as she headed toward her bike.

"Ain't that the truth," Max answered, stuffing her belongings back in her still wet backpack.

As Max headed out the door, Normal looked down at the

10 Virtual Season 3 — V\$3.21 — And Judas Brought a Knife (1)

counter. "Well, that's a shame...someone's left their little gadget here." He grabbed Max's pager and slid it underneath the counter in the box of lost and found that few had actually ever lost and no one ever found.

Community Services Center, Sector 5 - 10:00 am

A patrol car drove lazily along the unusually quiet streets around the Community Center. The Center was the bright spot in the dingy neighborhood, with a colorful rainbow mural on its wall and a dove flying over the sign in the doorway.

Inside, the normally loud buzz of play was replaced by the low but purposeful hum of work. The few card tables had been supplemented by many more folding tables and desks, filled with people of all ages, their heads buried in a variety of workbooks. A handwritten poster mounted near Joshua's sunburst painting outlined the schedule for the day.

10 - 11 am

Junior School - Math

Senior School - Gym

11 am - Noon

Junior School - English

Senior School - American History

Noon

Lunch

Outside, several teenagers were engrossed in a basketball class, practicing shooting and passing drills.

"What do you want, Johnny?" One of the players turned to

the young boy who stared longingly at them from the sidelines.

"Pete, can I play?" Johnny asked hopefully.

Pete rolled his eyes. "Johnny, you've already asked that ten times. This is our gym class, we're supposed to play now. Aren't you missing math?"

"But I want to play now!" Johnny pouted.

"If you don't learn math, how do you expect to keep score?" Pete insisted. "I'll play with you after school, all right?"

"Okay," Johnny sighed. Head hanging low, Johnny walked back toward the building but stopped in the doorway, not quite able to pull his attention away from the activity on the court. He watched longingly for several minutes as the boys and girls practiced lay-up after lay-up. He frowned curiously as the patrol car circled the block once again and slowed in front of the basketball court. Two beat cops stepped out and walked casually toward the kids.

The kids, trained by years of mistrust, instantly stopped playing. They quickly backed several paces away from the approaching cops.

"Seems you kids are out here everyday. Basketball, is that all you know how to do?"

"We started a school a few weeks ago," one of the boys offered, nodding toward the handmade banner that hung below the Community Services Center Sign. 'Dove Free School', the sign read.

"This is our gym class," a girl continued.

"Well, today is your lucky day. You get to put all that fresh education to good use...serving your state." The cops

12 Virtual Season 3 — V53.21 — And Judas Brought a Knife (1)

rushed the kids, grabbing a couple of boys and shoving them toward the patrol car.

With wide frightened eyes, Johnny quickly slipped into the building and raced toward Joshua, who was leaning over a child's desk.

"Joshua! They're taking Pete and Tommy away!" he said frantically, tugging on Joshua's shirt.

"Who?" Joshua asked, startled.

"The cops!" Johnny said with worry.

"Stay here," Joshua said quickly to the roomful of eyes that were instantly on him. "No one goes outside until they leave."

He raced out the door and into the courtyard. "Go inside," he commanded the kids, who still stood stunned on the basketball court. Then he raced past them to the police car where the cops were about to shove the boys in.

"Stop!" he growled, placing himself between the boys and the car door. "What are you doing?"

"What do you care, freak?" the cop snapped at him.

"They are my students. They didn't do anything wrong."

"These two fine young gentlemen have been conscripted into the National Guard of the State of Washington," the cop said, smiling.

"Where is your authorization?"

His partner smiled lazily, then reached into his vest pocket and pulled out his badge. He shoved it into Joshua's face. "This is all the authorization we need".

Joshua held his ground. "You need conscription notice.

The Governor said so."

"Don't challenge me again, freak!" the cop screamed, pulling out his baton.

A deep-seated growl escaped Joshua's throat. With a quick move, he had the baton yanked out of the cop's hand and the two officers slammed against the police car.

"Go inside," Joshua directed the boys before he turned back to the stunned cops. "I'll go," he said quietly, releasing the cops.

"You're not going anywhere except to jail," the cop snarled, shoving Joshua into the car. "Do you know what the sentence is for assault on an officer?"

Command Center, Lydecker's Camp

"The X6s are progressing in hand-to-hand combat, though they tend to fall back into preset patterns. Not much creativity there," the X5 at the head of the room reported.

"A consequence of their programming," Lydecker observed casually. Lydecker was in a meeting with the X5s, listening as they reported their progress in training the younger soldiers, the status of supplies and equipment, and a disciplinary infraction committed by an X5 and two X6s the day before. Lydecker was only paying partial attention to the obligatory reports, seemingly more interested in the soldiers themselves. His eyes went from face to face, resting longer than usual on Zack, Syl, and Jondy.

The soldier finished her report and sat down as the Colonel stood.

"Okay, people, what else do we have?"

There was a slight pause before Zack spoke.

"The shipment tomorrow," he said.

"You've chosen a team?"

Zack nodded. "I'm sending Syl, Carter, and Tal."

Lydecker watched as Syl threw a look at Jondy when Zack said this, but Jondy was pointedly not looking at either of them. However, Lydecker didn't comment on what he saw.

"Good," he said. "Anything else?" No one spoke.

"Dismissed." The soldiers began to file out of the building just as Lydecker's cell phone rang. The colonel flipped it open.

"Lydecker," he said.

"Lydecker," Roy Martin said. "Tell me you don't mind making a little trip." He spoke in a clipped, urgent tone that belied the casual words he used.

"Why?" Lydecker asked.

"Because you and I need to meet. Now."

Lydecker frowned. "Where?"

* * *

Zack and Jondy stood outside the Command Center in the middle of an intense argument.

"I don't understand why you're shutting me out of missions!" Jondy shouted at Zack.

"I'm the C.O. - I don't have to justify myself to you," Zack shot back, his voice low and cool.

They quieted when the Colonel suddenly stormed out of the Command Center. They watched his posture and the

expression on his face as he neared them. Zack stepped forward.

"Lydecker..."

"I'm going to be leaving camp to check up on something, Zack."

Zack blinked and then scowled at the Colonel's sudden surprise departure, but did not object to it.

"Where will you be?"

Zack and Jondy followed on Lydecker's heels as he headed for one of the Jeeps. Lydecker paused at Zack's question and turned to him.

"We'll discuss that when I'm back." He gave Zack a meaningful look. Zack stared back. He gave the Colonel an almost imperceptible nod.

"You know the protocol. You're in charge."

Zack stood back as Lydecker left. He turned to Jondy only to see that she was already walking away. Zack started walking after her, then stopped, seemingly debating something in his head. He sighed, then took off after her again. He caught up with Jondy near the shooting range. She looked up when she saw him approach and her eyes narrowed.

"Zack..."

"Save it." Just as Jondy was about to say something else, Zack continued. "About that shipment."

Jondy finally smiled.

A Street in Sector 5

Logan pulled the Aztek over to the side of the street. He stepped from the car and took a quick look up and down the street, then began walking toward the side of a large warehouse.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," Matt Sung deadpanned as Logan walked up to him.

"That's for sure," Logan replied.

Matt pulled a small sheaf of papers from his jacket pocket and handed them to Logan. "So Harrison in Vice showed up in a new car last week. I thought it was curious, since the mayor froze our pay a year ago and stopped authorizing overtime last month. Then I noticed that Hughes had a new watch, and suddenly Masterson is going to Hawaii for a vacation. It all seemed a little too coincidental."

Logan began scanning the sheets that Matt had handed him. "Wow," he stated when he got to the third page. "This is a new low, even for the Seattle PD."

"Yeah, I figured that Eyes Only would want to say something about it."

Logan nodded. "Definitely. This is...it's pretty much slavery."

Matt nodded in agreement. "Rich kids have always seemed to find a way out of the draft, but it used to just be getting their daddy to find them a slot in the National Guard. But to actually send someone in your place to serve? I think that has to be a new low."

Logan nodded again. "Yeah, when I was in high school the most you did was pay someone to take the SATs for you."

"Give me a little bit longer to find out who's organizing

this, but it has to be pretty far up. The cops rounding up the homeless for the conscription slots are from a whole variety of departments, and, while I work with some smart people, I don't think any of them are savvy enough to organize something of this scale," Matt said.

"Absolutely. I'll pass this along to Eyes Only and he can do some digging on his own. Thanks, Matt. Once again, I owe you one."

"Hey, civil war or not, I still live in this city and what they're doing..." Matt's voice trailed off.

"I agree," Logan said as he stuck his hand out to shake the detective's. "Call me when you've got more info."

Matt agreed and then the two men went their separate ways.

* * * * *

Act Two

Police Headquarters, Seattle

The PD's drunk tank was filled with the usual collection of drunks, hookers, and drug addicts who had been rounded up the previous night. Most days the tank was quiet, as the inmates were content to sleep off the previous night's excess in a warm, dry place. But this day, the inmates had worked themselves into a small frenzy as they taunted the man sitting alone in the neighboring cell.

"Hey, dog man!" a drunk slurred loudly. "Aren't you gonna bark for us?"

"Yeah! Show us your canines. Ain't seen teeth like that before," another shouted.

Joshua sat on his bed, his head in his knees, whining softly to himself.

"What kind of fierce beast are you? Give us a howl at least!" another prodded. "How hard can it be?" He leaned his head back and let out a loud yowl.

"Aoooooooooooo."

This encouraged his jail-mates, who quickly joined him in a symphony of howls.

Two cops quickly walked up to the cell, raking the bars with their batons. "Shut up and back off, you scum!" they shouted before turning to open the cell door. The drunks, having previously experienced the cops' skills with the batons, instantly quieted.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Today is your lucky day. Isn't that

right, Ron?" one cop asked his partner.

"Sure is, Bob," the partner nodded. "These scum will finally get the opportunity to pay back their debt to society, and serve their State no less."

"Everybody out!" Bob shouted, shoving the inmates out of the cell.

Ron walked over to Joshua's cell and opened it. He yanked Joshua off the bed and pushed him out the cell door. "Go make your call," he ordered, handing Joshua a coin.

Joshua walked over to the phone and placed the coin in the slot. He watched curiously as the police herded the drunks out the door.

"How much we getting for this batch?" Ron asked his partner.

"Thousand bucks a head. And they'll take as many as we can bring'. The National Guard seems pretty desperate for bodies. There's a rumor floating that something big is going down today," Bob said, then broke into big grin. "Good thing for us some people are happy to pay anything to avoid military service."

"Best deal I've been involved with in years," Ron smiled.

Jam Pony X-Press

"Normal, my man!" Sketchy shouted gleefully as he rode into Jam Pony. "Just picked up a new trick! Wanna see?"

"All I wanna see is your rear end high tailin' it out of here with a pack full of packages," Normal said distractedly as he pawed through the ever-rising piles of packages and handed Sketchy an envelope.

"But it's gonna make the girls drop dead," Sketchy whined. Then his eyes lit up like beacons as a petite girl with dark brown hair and big, soft brown eyes walked down the ramp.

"Hey...whoa...hey," said Sketchy in his most suave intonation as he looked at the girl. He stripped a glove off and offered his hand. "We haven't met yet. I'm Calvin, but most people around here call me Sketchy."

"Hi. I'm Lori," the girl said, reluctantly shaking his hand.

Sketchy grinned and asked, "You new? I'll show you the ropes. But first you gotta see my new trick." Lori looked at him skeptically.

"It'll kill you," Sketchy reassured her as he pushed off from the counter.

"No riding, no tricks, we're not insured..." Normal's voice drifted off as Sketchy balanced on the front wheels with the body of his bike spinning in a complete circle around his handle bars.

Engaged as he was in full dramatic splendor, he never saw Sky come barreling in the door, crashing straight into him. Sketchy sprawled in an undignified heap in front of Lori. She laughed and reached her hand out.

"Are you going to show me the ropes before you kill yourself, or should I find someone else?" she asked.

Sketchy grinned, grabbed her outstretched hand, and hauled himself off the ground. "No, I'll be glad to show you the ropes."

"Okay then, first let's get a bandage for your head," she said, looking at the small trickle of blood over Sketchy's eyebrow.

"Now that you survived the morning without killing yourself or any females," Normal snorted as he slid the first aid kit across the counter, "can you tell me where the fire truck Max is? Or did she drop dead after her first run?"

"Who?" asked a decidedly distracted Sketchy.

Neither of them heard Max's pager buzzing softly in the box under the desk.

Sector 2 – 10:30 am

"Here's what we have so far, ma'am. If we find anything else, we'll let you know. Thanks for choosing Sublime P.I. and have a nice..." Alec began, handing over a thick file folder to a middle-aged woman who already had an armful of squirming child. Without listening to him, she slammed the door.

"...day," he finished, shaking his head.

As he walked down the stairs, he could hear a high pitched squealing from inside the apartment. He shook his head. "Save me from screaming children..." he muttered, mounting his motorcycle with a shake of his head.

"And Joshua volunteers to spend his days with rug rats like that...Man's a saint if there ever was one," he mused, as his cell phone began to ring. He stopped the bike, bracing himself on one foot, and answered the phone. "What's up?"

"Alec, Alec...it's Joshua..." said the frantic voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey, big guy! I was just thinking about you...tell me, how do you deal with kids all day long? I think I'd go insane. Seriously –"

22 Virtual Season 3 — V53.21 — And Judas Brought a Knife (1)

"I need to get out - I need to get to my peeps, Alec. I need Max," Joshua stated emphatically. "I need to get to Max and Logan."

Alec shrugged, mildly irritated at being ignored. "So call Max, if you need her."

"Can't. One phone call only. I need your help, Alec. Get me out!" He pleaded, and in the background Alec could hear the clanging of metal meeting metal.

"Whoa, wait...one phone call only? Joshua, where are you?"

"The slammer," Joshua told him. "And I need to get out... please!"

"The slam...you're in jail? Joshua, what happened? Are you okay?" Alec asked, immediately concerned.

"Yes! Yes! I'm fine...please, Alec, I need to get to Max! I've got to tell her what is going down!"

"Hey, hang in there, pal. No worries, I'm all over this. I'll get you out," Alec promised soothingly. "Just be careful. Keep your head down until I get there, okay?"

"Head down, careful, got it...Alec, hurry. They're coming." Joshua's voice dropped lower. "They're coming here, and it's bad, and I have to tell Logan and Max."

"Who's coming? What's going on?" he demanded, frowning with confusion. "Joshua?"

"Just...hurry," he repeated, and then the line went dead.

"They're coming..." Alec repeated to himself as he dialed Max's pager. "Who are 'they'? What is he talking about? When did Joshua become all cryptic?" He left his phone number followed by 911 as a message.

"C'mon, Max, call me back..." he said, staring at his phone as though he could will it into ringing. "We've got a Joshua to rescue. Enough with this screwing around. Call me back, Max. You know you want to."

Alec waited for several minutes more, but the phone never rang. Frustrated, he shoved it into his pocket. "Can't wait all day," he said to himself and took off, a thin plume of exhaust curling up into the air as he drove in the direction of the city jail.

Border between Oregon and Washington

(Max) I've been waiting ever since my brief indentured servitude with the great state of California to see when the pot's gonna boil over. Those guys were just warming up and they wanted a fight. I could tell it a mile away. We slowed 'em down a little by taking out the brain bombs, but they're going to keep at it, conscripts or not. And the pieces are starting to come together. Renfro's sister, the guy who helped us escape from her rambling about profits, and Laughlin Summers working for the Department of Defense. Smells like Manticore to me...or whatever's taken its place in the grand evil scheme...

General Turner of the recently formed Army of California was consulting with his top advisers as they huddled around a table, upon which a map of the West Coast was spread out and weighted with bricks. He stared hard at the map and then rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Intense and brooding, with prematurely gray hair and a face lined with responsibility, he was not a man given to snap decisions.

"All right, men. We've set our course. Inform the troops – we're heading out." He looked around, signaling that the meeting was over, then turned his back as his cell phone buzzed from inside the front pocket of his uniform. Not

hearing movement, he shot a glare over his shoulder. "Move out."

As soon as they were gone, he answered the phone. "Turner." After listening for a moment, he said gruffly, "Of course we made it. The secession militia joined us as soon as we crossed the border, and the rest of this pathetic state barely whimpered...Yeah, we're moving out now."

He listened for another moment, then said, "You're sure they're otherwise occupied? I can work a lot of magic on the battlefield, but most of the superfreaks you sent me are all gone now, thanks to X5-452 and company, and the ragtag bunch I have left isn't any match for an army of them."

As he listened, his face grew contrite, then hardened again. "I understand," he said curtly, snapping the phone shut and slipping it back into his pocket. He walked to the front of his tent and stared out into the setting sun. "You have no idea what you're up against, X5-452," he muttered. "You or anyone else in this godforsaken country."

Logan's Penthouse – 11:00 am

Max pushed open the door to the apartment and stood in the front entrance for a moment. She could hear Logan talking on the phone, probably to an informant.

Honey, I'm home...what are we playing at here, Logan? I never thought I'd have this...a place I wanted to call 'home' and a warm body to curl up next to at night. I'd like to just pull the curtains on the picture windows and forget about the world outside, but I know I can't. Ever since I broke in here the first time, you've been trying to convince me to care about other people the way you do, and now that I do, things are more complicated. I freed them all from Manticore, but that's not enough.

Now I feel like I have to lead them to some kind of peace. I want to forget about my 'destiny' and stay up here in the ivory tower with you and eat gourmet meals forever. But you made me care, Logan, and the curtains on the picture windows are wide open...

"Max? Is that you?"

Logan's voice snapped Max out of her sad reverie. She dropped her backpack and continued the rest of the way into the computer room, propping a hip on the desk. "At your service," she said breezily, flashing him a half-smile.

"Just talked to Matt – again," he said grimly. "We got a problem – a big one. I checked in on a couple of my informants this morning and couldn't get hold of a single one. So I talked to Matt on a hunch and he sent me the names of people who have gone missing in the last couple of days." He slid some papers across to her and she scanned them, noting a few that were highlighted. "Three informants," he continued. "All disappeared without a trace."

"But..." she looked up at him, confused. "When you set this thing up again, you put up so many firewalls you'd have to have a battering ram to get into the database..."

"Now, let's see...who would have a technological battering ram capable of hacking into even the most formidable security?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

Max nodded slowly. "Whoever's been yanking our chain," she said. "Renfro's sister, maybe? Whoever *she* works for? Or who works for her...same guys who put the bug on my bike?"

"I've shut down the Informant Net. I'm not deleting it... not yet. At least not until I warn all of them. But it's not connected to the Internet anymore. The thing is, if she got

into my database...she might be able to figure out who I am, or at least where I live."

"If she did, she'd be here already," Max said, shrugging it off, but the look of concern on her face told Logan she was half-inclined to agree. "So if you're worried, why don't we just blaze? You did it once before when they breached your security."

Logan shook his head. "Gotta get on the air ASAP, warn the informants. And I can't do that till Matt calls me with more proof."

"More proof of what? That somebody's after your ass? I think the three missing guys is a pretty clear sign of that, Logan," Max pointed out.

"Not that...the other thing. The reason Matt called me this morning. The sector cops are at it again."

"Day wouldn't be complete without you risking your life for the greater good of mankind...now would it?" Max sighed, but one corner of her mouth was slightly turned up.

Windowless Room, Unknown Location

The man tied to the chair was breathing heavily. A trickle of blood ran from his lip, another from his hairline. His face was bruised and one eye was swollen shut. A muscular man with a goatee, leaning over the man in the chair, slapped him again. "You want to play some more? Fine with me."

"I'm telling you, man...Eyes Only is a secretive guy. He doesn't tell nobody nothin'. I never seen him, never talked to him – middleman on the cell phone, that's it. How can I tell you who he is if I don't know?"

"That's the million-dollar question," the man snarled.

"Nothing yet?" A second man came down some stairs into the room.

The goateed man straightened up and turned around. "Nah, man," he answered. "I don't think we're gonna find out anything this way. We've already killed two, and this one's on his way out."

The man tied to the chair began whimpering, but the two men standing paid him no attention. "I've got two people working on the encryption, but the only thing we've got for now is the database," the second man told the first. "Somebody's got to know something." His cell phone rang, and he handed the list to the goateed man. "Pick one," he said, then walked away, listening.

"I knew it!" he said after a moment. "The minute she disappears, he's off screwing us over. Somebody must have promised him more money. Doesn't matter, he's useless to us now and we can't let him give Lydecker any information. Kill them both."

He snapped the phone shut and turned back. "Got a name?"

"Yeah...Seattle PD – name's Sung. Bet he knows more than these damn drug dealers. I'll pick him up."

* * * * *

Act Three

City Hall - 11:30 am

(Max) If there has been one constant in my life since I got to Seattle, it's Original Cindy. She and the whole Jam Pony crew, even Normal – I must be losin' it – have kept me sane through the insanity of the last few years. I'm not so much for gushing and slobbering over thank-yous, but we never would've gotten out of Terminal City if it hadn't been for them. Especially Original Cindy. I used to be scared that she'd bail on me if she knew about my past...but I shoulda given her a lot more credit. She's stood up for me and mine, put herself in danger more times than I can count, and all she got out of the deal was a rash and another heartbreak. Doesn't seem fair that she helped Logan and me get over our issues, and now that we have each other, she's sleeping alone every night. Hopefully not forever, though...I mean, once you've had transgenic, you never go back...

Sketchy jumped off his bike and walked over toward where Original Cindy stood.

"What's going on?" he asked as he leaned his bicycle against his hip and surveyed the crowd.

"Damned if I know. Seems the new gig in this town is agitation. Maybe they got all nostalgic for the Millennial riots. Though Original Cindy is not sure just what they all think they're gonna accomplish by standing around and yelling."

"Hey, isn't that Melissa Michelle from Channel 3?" Sketchy asked, pointing to a woman standing near a young man with a news camera.

"If somethin's goin' down, you know she's here," Original

Cindy responded. "Probably broke her heart when Terminal City stopped being Ground Zero. Didn't have anythin' to stand around and pontificate about anymore."

Sketchy nodded and started pushing his bike over near the reporter.

"Where you goin', you fool?" Original Cindy called to him.

Sketchy turned and held up his index finger, indicating she should wait for him. He continued moving until he was standing just behind the cameraman.

"We should bag this. For all of their noise, none of these people are going to do anything to take it to the next level," the cameraman said.

Melissa nodded. "Yeah, no riots or looting here. But if things keep up in Olympia, maybe we'll have a real story."

"Let's get outta here."

Sketchy turned to find Original Cindy standing behind him.

"Sketchy, I got better things to do than standin' around an' watchin' a bunch of no-counts whine about their situation."

"This is an expression of their anger and dissent with the government," Sketchy responded.

The reporter whirled around to face Sketchy. "What's your name, sir?" Her eyes widened as she looked at Sketchy and Original Cindy. "You work at Jam Pony, don't you?"

"Sure, sugah," Original Cindy answered. "What's your damage?"

"Well, seems to me that you would have a vested interest in the insurrection the transgenics are causing here,"

Melissa responded.

"Seems to me the only insurrecting goin' on here is by normal ole folks like you and me," Original Cindy responded.

Sketchy poked Original Cindy in the side. "Hey, his camera's on. You want this on primetime?"

"Sure, why not?" Original Cindy responded. "I think it's real unfair for people to keep blamin' everything bad that happens on the transgenics. Most of those people are just tryin' to make it like you and me. Life ain't easy for any of us, not for Original Cindy, not for anyone." She paused and stepped closer to Melissa Michelle. "So put that in your newscast. It ain't the transgenics...it's crazy folks like these protestors and the assholes down in Olympia, over in California...and the folks pulling the strings behind those folks...that's where our problem is."

"This is Melissa Michelle, reporting live from City Hall in downtown Seattle."

The cameraman clicked off his camera and set it down next to him. "For what it's worth, I agree with you," he said to Original Cindy.

"Whateva'," Original Cindy responded. "Let's bounce, Sketchy. A cold one at Crash sounds damn good to a girl about now."

She slid her leg over the bar on her bike and began to make her way out of the crowd.

Sketchy paused for a moment. "You said 'live'...did we miss catching this at home?" he asked the reporter.

"Yeah, but watch for it again at noon and eleven tonight. Unless somebody down here sets something on fire, I'm

sure we'll run it again," the reporter responded.

"Awesome!" Sketchy answered as he turned to catch up to Original Cindy.

An Old Logger's Cabin outside City Limits - 11:30 am

Lydecker leaned against a porch railing, staring out at the forest before him. Another man joined him, looking out at the tall trees that reached up into the sky.

"You seem pretty fascinated with the trees for someone who's been living in the wilderness for the past few months," Roy Martin observed dryly.

Lydecker shrugged, turning to face him. "Never really get a chance to enjoy it out there. There's always something to do."

"Shame," Martin agreed. "If I remember right, you used to enjoy hiking."

Lydecker snorted, amused. "Do you remember everything about everyone who was under your command, or just those of us who were lucky enough to land in ADAP?"

Martin smiled briefly. "I hated working ADAP. Couldn't wait to get the hell out of there."

"So what do you have for me?" Lydecker asked, turning to look at him.

"What do I always have? Bad news. Because your kids... ah...liberated the transgenics in California, they've been forced to find an alternate fighting force." Martin shook his head. "It was only a matter of time before they brought in the South Africans full time, Deck."

Lydecker looked back at the tree line, apparently unconcerned. "So they've got Reds in the Army of the Republic

of California regulars now?"

"They've got Reds in the patrols that are converging on your position in Washington, anyway. First brigade landed this morning, and they're already on the move," Martin told him. "The regulars are headed somewhere else, not sure where yet."

"The Reds are headed toward my kids?" Lydecker asked, snapping to attention. At Martin's nod, he continued. "They don't feel pain, they're stronger than transgenics, they've got nothing to lose and you called me away from my people to tell me this? They're going to need me," he said, pushing away from the railing. "I've got to get back, now."

"You should be able to get back before the Reds get there," Martin said, looking at his watch. "Only barely, but...my phone line's been tapped. I couldn't tell you any other way than face-to-face. Too risky."

Deck turned to look at Martin, but light glinting off of the black barrel of a gun caught his eye. "Get down!" he yelled, throwing himself onto the gravel and rolling toward the cover provided by a line of bushes.

Surprised, Martin moved too slowly. As the shooter hidden in the shadows opened fire, he was hit repeatedly. He fell and crawled stiffly behind the bushes beside Lydecker, pulling his gun out of a holster on his lower back.

"Kind of like...old times," Martin managed to gasp, shooting toward the spray of bullets. A strangled scream made it clear that he'd hit his mark. "Get out of here, Deck," he ordered. "They'll send someone else to take care of this if I've killed that shooter, and if I haven't...then he'll get himself together and start shooting again soon. I'm dead anyway. You get back to your kids."

"You're not dead yet," Lydecker said, ripping off a sleeve to press against the wound in Martin's thigh. "They missed the femoral artery. If we get you help soon enough, you might just make it."

"Get out of here!" Martin repeated.

"Not without you," Lydecker replied, concentrating on dressing Martin's wound.

"You've been spending too much time with those kids, Deck," he said, shaking his head. "They're starting to rub off on you."

"That may be," Lydecker said after a moment. "That may be, but if we're going to make it out of this, we need to seek better cover."

He half-stood and pulled Martin along behind him into the denser foliage, but as they struggled into the shelter of the shadows, another volley of bullets hit them both, ripping through Martin and into Lydecker.

Lydecker fell into the darkness of the dense brush, Martin on top of him. He grimaced at the pain as he struggled to see to his own wounds.

"I could do with a hand here," he said before he realized that Martin was dead. He cursed quietly and lay back.

"If I didn't have to worry about conserving bullets, I'd give you a twenty-one gun salute," he whispered to the corpse.

Lydecker's Camp

Zack neared the edge of camp just as a young male soldier came jogging toward him, his rifle at his side and a pair of binoculars swinging from his neck. The soldier came to attention before his commanding officer and saluted.

34 Virtual Season 3 — V§3.21 — And Judas Brought a Knife (1)

"At ease," Zack ordered off-hand. "Anything?" he asked.

The young soldier swallowed, obviously anxious about how Zack would react to his response.

"No, sir. Nothing," he said.

Zack scowled. After a pause he nodded.

"Return to the perimeter and relieve Ian. And keep your eyes open."

The soldier saluted once more. When he was gone, Zack headed for the Command Center with a purposeful stride.

Jondy and Syl were waiting there. Jondy stood as Zack entered the room, but Syl stayed in her seat next to Lydecker's computer monitor with her feet up on the table in front of her and her ankles crossed. Zack shook his head at the question in their eyes. Jondy sighed and Syl swore.

"No call?" he asked, gesturing to the cell phone lying closed on top of a stack of maps on Lydecker's desk. Syl raised a brow.

"Doesn't the layer of dust that's collected on the casing speak for itself?" Jondy quipped. Zack gave her a look. "So what do we do?" Their eyes caught for a moment. Syl hid a smirk behind her hand.

Zack's scowl had softened but not disappeared. "Prepare a team. We'll have to..."

Whatever Zack was going to say, he didn't get to finish. The handheld clipped to his belt suddenly came to life as a voice at the other end of the frequency began to yell for help. Syl was suddenly on her feet and all three X5s were alert.

"Tobias," Zack spoke into the radio. It was the soldier he'd

just sent to the perimeter. "What's happened?"

"It's Ian, sir. He's dead! I just found him. I went to relieve him like you said, but he..."

Zack was already out of the building with Syl and Jondy at his heels.

"What's your location?" he snapped, interrupting the soldier. Tobias told him.

"Should I...should I bring him back to camp?" the younger man sounded sick. He obviously didn't relish the thought of carrying his comrade's corpse through the woods.

"No. Don't touch the body," Zack said. Syl muttered something under her breath about squeamish X6s.

Zack, Syl, and Jondy reached Tobias' location at a run, Syl on the radio calling for all soldiers to check in and alerting Krit that something had happened. When she saw Ian, Jondy moved ahead, kneeling at the fallen soldier's side and automatically reaching for the man's pulse. She stopped when she realized his throat had been slit; his eyes stared unseeingly up at her. She stood quickly, watching Zack closely.

The expression on Zack's face was fierce.

"We've been compromised."

"I'll check the perimeter," Jondy announced, moving away from Zack.

Syl had stopped issuing commands over her handheld when she saw Ian's body. "Lydecker..."

"Can take care of himself. We don't have time for that right now," Zack said. "Put out the alert."

Syl nodded, turning on the handheld again.

Logan's Penthouse

"Do not attempt to adjust your set. This is a Streaming Freedom video bulletin. The cable hack will last exactly 60 seconds. It cannot be traced, it cannot be stopped, and it is the only free voice left in this city. Even as our governor and other officials try to prevent us from being dragged into a senseless war, there are still those who are trying to profit from others' misfortune. Eyes Only has received proof of a scheme creatively thought up by sector police lieutenant, Rick Tamborino, to conscript homeless and powerless citizens in the place of those wealthy enough to pay for the service. Some members of the Seattle PD are also involved, and Eyes Only will find out who and report them to federal authorities. And a special warning to those of you who report to me – you have been compromised. Trust no one. This has been an Eyes Only Streaming Freedom video bulletin. Peace. Out."

Logan stripped off the microphone headset and turned to Max, who was looking on worriedly from a chair behind him. "Well, that's all we can do for now. Good thing Matt got me those pictures so fast or I would have had to do two hacks, and I've noticed that people tend to stop listening if you bombard them."

"I'm sorry, Logan," Max said, sitting up straighter. "You didn't sign on for any of this. Everyone who's helped you is in danger, and it's on me."

"Uh, no, I believe it's on the people who are putting 'everyone' in danger," Logan corrected. "And I signed on for all of it. All of *you*," he added more softly.

Logan walked over to where Max was sitting and sighed, catching one of her hands between his and bringing it to his lips. "Neither of us could prevent this, Max. This city is

going to need Eyes Only – and us – more than ever, so we're going to have to push through. We'll find Renfro's sister and whoever she's with and take them out. Okay?"

"Okay." But Max was still upset, still restless. She got up and stepped around Logan, grabbing the remote from his desk and switching the TV to a local channel as a distraction. The screen filled with a special news report of protestors in the street, and to Max's surprise, the reporter was shoving a microphone in the face of, of all people, Original Cindy.

"I think it's real unfair for people to keep blamin' everything bad that happens on the transgenics. Most of those people are just tryin' to make it like you and me. Life ain't easy for any of us, not for Original Cindy, not for anyone."

Logan turned from where he'd started to go into the kitchen and silently went back to where Max stood, watching. "Sketchy's with her," he noted, seeing the gangly messenger trying to jostle his friend for camera time.

"That's what worries me," Max says. Her hand went to the pocket of her vest, feeling around aimlessly, and she tilted her head in confusion, then agitation. "Great. Lost my pager, and that's the number Original Cindy would call if she needed help."

"She knows to call here, don't worry," Logan assured her.

Seattle PD

"If you want something done," Alec muttered to himself as he crawled through a window and into the building, "then you've got to do it yourself."

He landed quietly on the floor, scanning the hallway

quickly. "All right, now...if I were Joshua, where would I be?" He paused for a second and listened to the sounds of the jailhouse, his sensitive hearing picking up the sound of people talking and howling like wolves.

"Oh, very original, guys. Howl at the dog-man," he said disgustedly. "But helpful, so I can't complain too much."

Alec continued down the hall, glancing in at the lockup when he got there. There were three policemen on watch, talking among themselves as the prisoners in the drunk tank howled and pointed at Joshua, who was in a cell at the far end of the room. He paced back and forth, obviously restless.

"Hang in there, big guy," Alec whispered, looking around to make sure that no one was approaching. He opened the door quietly and slipped in, locking it behind him before striding purposefully over to the police officers.

"Sergeant Peterson, here to pick up the transgenic," he said briskly with a nod toward Joshua. "He's wanted by the Criminal Investigation Division."

"For what?" asked one of the cops, reaching into his pocket for the keys. He smiled, teeth flashing white in his round, red face. "Barking too loudly?"

"Grand theft," Alec told him, turning to face Joshua, a warning look on his face. "Wouldn't know it to look at him, but he's a hell of a cat burglar. Very quiet when he has to be."

As the red-faced police officer began to unlock Joshua's cell, one of the other men leaned in and studied Alec. "Wait a minute...you said your name was Peterson?"

"Jeremiah Peterson," Alec confirmed, trying to maintain a look of bored indifference. "And I'm running late. My

lieutenant will be all over me if I don't get back with this guy ASAP."

The man stood. "There's no Peterson in the P.D. that I know of, so let's see your badge, Detective," he drawled. "You look awfully familiar...like I've seen you on TV before."

"Hey! You're one of those transgenics, too! I remember you from the siege at Terminal City!" the third man said, pointing as he reached for his baton with the other hand.

Alec blew out a long breath and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that was me," he admitted, reaching out and wrenching the baton from the officer's hand as it was swung at his face. "So you should really know by now that I've got superior strength and speed," he continued, bringing the flat of his hand against the temple of the red-faced cop, hard enough to knock the older man out.

The two remaining officers both came at him at once, and Alec leapt up into the air to avoid them. He grabbed the steel bars of Joshua's cell and kicked out with both feet, propelling them back onto the ground. Alec followed them quickly, blurring across the room and delivering knock out punches to both within seconds.

The drunk tank cheered as Alec grabbed the keys off of one prone guard and unlocked Joshua's cell.

"Let's get out of here," Alec said. "Won't take too long for someone to notice that Larry, Curly, and Moe are passed out over there."

"Let them go, too," Joshua said, pointing toward the prisoners who had been howling at him earlier. "Let them go or they'll fight."

"Isn't fighting what got them in here in the first place?"

40 Virtual Season 3 — V53.21 — And Judas Brought a Knife (1)

Alec quipped, but Joshua merely gave him an expectant look.

"Let them go too, Alec, or they'll take them like they took the others."

Alec shrugged and opened the cell door. The prisoners cheered again, bursting from the cell and the room quickly.

"They'll be a good distraction, though, if we head out the back way and they run out the front door," Alec mused as he watched them go, leading Joshua back the way he had come, toward the open window. They both climbed through it quickly, closing the window and heading through the back alley silently until they reached Alec's motorcycle.

"We've got to get to Max," Joshua told Alec as he climbed on behind the shorter man. "Gotta tell her what's going down."

"What is going down?" Alec asked, turning so that Joshua could see the confusion on his face. "You had all that talk about bad things, and fighting...and I totally don't get why you were in there in the first place. What's going on?"

"They're taking people...making them fight in the war," Joshua said. "Making them fight when they don't want to."

"What war? You mean in California? Buddy...that's far enough away that you don't need to worry about it—" Alec began, but Joshua cut him off.

"No, war here. They took others, made them go to the army. We need to get to Max, gotta tell her what's going to happen!"

Alec's eyes widened. "You're sure about this?"

"Yes! Yes! Very sure! They said that the battle would start today!"

"You're right, we do need to get to Max," he said, pulling out his cell phone and dialing Max's pager. "And we need to get to her fast."

Logan's Penthouse

Max leaned against the window, drinking coffee and watching the newscast of the protesters with a worried expression on her face. "This is all we need in Seattle," she muttered to herself.

The phone rang and she stood, calling, "I'll get it, Logan." She picked up the phone, and sat on the desk. "Hello?"

"Max?" Lydecker's voice rasped. "Is that you?"

"Lydecker? Where are you?" Max asked, eyes widening with surprise. "Are you all right?"

"I was meeting with an informant. We were ambushed. Max..." Lydecker trailed off, hissing in pain. "Max, listen to me. You need to get to Zack. Tell him...tell him to be ready. They're in danger, all of them."

"Where are you?" she asked again as Logan walked into the room, eyes filled with questions.

"Doesn't matter," Lydecker said, voice becoming fainter. "It's not safe here. Just...get to them, Max. They need you. The Reds..."

"Who is it?" Logan asked, concerned, and Max mouthed 'Lydecker' in answer before turning her attention back to the phone.

"How badly hurt are you?" she asked him, but there was no answer other than the flat pulse of the dial tone.

"Damnit!" Max cursed, hanging up the phone.

"What's up?" Logan asked.

"Lydecker's in trouble," she said, turning toward him. "He was saying something about Zack and the others being in danger...something about the Reds, but it didn't make any sense."

"He didn't tell you where he is?" Logan asked rhetorically, turning to his computer.

"No, just a lot of cryptic babbling...I think he was on a cell phone. It sounded like there was static." She leaned over his shoulder, frowning. "We've got to find him fast, Logan. He sounded pretty bad, and as ambivalent as I am about him, I can't let anything happen to Zane and Syl and everyone."

Logan's fingers flew over the keyboard. "I know, Max. It looks like it was just on the outskirts of Seattle. The signal was pretty clear. He's gotten a little less paranoid lately - no scrambler on the cell."

"Can you get an address?"

"One more second and I should have exact coordinates," he told her, brow creasing with concern. "Should we stop off and pick up Aveta before going to Lydecker?"

Max frowned with concern. "He was hurt badly, Logan... badly enough that he was writing himself off. I need to know what he knows so that I can get to the others in time. I can't lose them again, Logan. They're my family... it'd be like losing Original Cindy, or Joshua - like losing you."

"Got the coordinates," Logan said, scribbling them down and shutting off the computer.

"Let's go," Max said, standing and striding to the front door. Logan followed, closing the door on his way out and taking her hand as they waited for the elevator. He looked at her troubled face and squeezed her fingers gently. "Hey, Max – it'll be okay. We'll get there in time."

"I hope so," she answered, sounding unconvinced, but offering him a small smile as the elevator arrived.

The steel doors to the elevator closed and neither heard the ringing of the penthouse phone or Alec's voice on the answering machine.

"Max? Logan? Where are you guys? Look, call me back when you get this message...there's something I think you need to know. Something major."

Lydecker's Camp

Three Red soldiers ran swiftly through the forest; seemingly unencumbered by the heavy packs they carried. They were dressed in dark camouflage to absorb the mid-day light, their heavy boots leaving deep prints in the soft forest floor. They pushed forcefully through the trees, obviously unconcerned about leaving a trail behind them. Breaking roughly through the underbrush, they stepped to the edge of the camp's clearing.

"This is it," the leader said, directing his companion to a spot just a foot in front of them.

The second Red stepped forward and pulled his pack off his back. He methodically assembled the rocket launcher that lay in pieces in the pack, not even blinking at the sniper's bullets that began to hit the ground just a few inches in front of him. With a final snap, he put the barrel in place and loaded two grenades. He took two steps forward and knelt onto one knee, placing the launcher on his

shoulder and aiming at the camp. He didn't even flinch as the sniper's bullets, which were previously out of range, instantly drilled into him.

* * *

"Got some tracks!" Jondy shouted from a couple hundred feet away. "They're headed right into camp."

"Put out the alert," Zack called over his shoulder to Syl as he ran to catch up with Jondy. A split-second later, he was at Jondy's side, examining the tracks.

"Six men," Jondy observed. "They split up into two teams. One's heading for Command and the other for the -"

Her report was suddenly interrupted by a forceful explosion that rocked the forest, almost knocking them off their feet.

"Ammo dump," Zack said flatly as the shock wave passed. "Command's going to need reinforcement."

* * *

"We've got a situation," Krit said, standing up and ripping the headset off his head. He turned to the four X5s who were in the Command Room with him. They each stood up and pulled out their weapons just as the building shook from the force of a powerful blast. A moment later, the door slammed open, revealing three large men dressed in camouflage. The men looked around the room as if they owned it.

"You've got the wrong address," Krit quipped as he quickly pumped two bullets into the first invader. The soldier took a small step back then surged forward, throwing himself into Krit. The others did likewise, each throwing themselves at an X5, completely ignoring the bullets

that hit them.

The soldier pinned Krit against the wall with a vise-like grip around his neck. Krit went limp, forcing the soldier holding him to shift, and as the soldier did so, Krit pushed him backward. The soldier came at Krit again, but he quickly flipped over his attacker's head, kicking the soldier's back when he landed. The soldier's retaliatory kick sent him crashing into the opposite wall, hard. He wasn't even given time to recover as the Red lifted him easily, slamming him into the wall again. Krit moaned weakly, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

As the Red moved in once more, Zack, Jondy, and Syl stepped into the Command Room, their guns drawn, each aiming at a Red. Seeing the arrival of reinforcements, the Red picked up Krit's limp body and signaled his companions. The others immediately abandoned their targets and ran toward the far wall. Picking up speed, they burst through the wall and landed on their feet on the ground one story below. Zack raced after them, shooting as he went until his gun clicked empty. The Reds disappeared quickly into the forest behind the building. Zack threw the gun aside in frustration and kept running until a volley of bullets came at him from several directions. A bullet caught him in the arm, sending him spinning backward. He dived to the ground, lying still until the volley ended, then quietly crawled out of the dense brush. As he stepped into the clearing, Syl and Jondy came running up to him.

"They got Krit?" Syl asked, her eyes wide. She started running into the trees, not waiting for Zack's response.

"Don't bother. They're long gone," Zack shouted, but Syl kept running.

"Sir," a voice broke through Zack's handheld. "Got one Red down, near station 4. He's still alive, sir."

* * *

Zack and Jondy were met by an X6 as they approached station 4. "I was on sniper duty when they arrived, sir. They had excellent intel, stayed out of my range until the last possible second. I shot him repeatedly, but he wouldn't fall. I don't even know how he survived this long; he took half a dozen bullets sir," the X6 reported.

"At ease, soldier," Zack commanded the X6, his face impassive. Then he turned to Jondy. "How many casualties?"

"Ten dead and a dozen wounded, mostly burns and shrapnel wounds," Jondy replied, staring at the blood that was trickling from Zack's arm. "You're hurt," she said softly.

Zack shrugged. "They took out the ammo dump and targeted Command. This was just a recon mission. They'll be back soon for the main thrust." He turned to the Red who lay barely breathing on the ground. "How many are coming?" he asked.

"Don't bother preparing. You can't win," the Red coughed out.

"How many are coming?" Zack asked again, his voice perfectly even.

"Enough to wipe you out." The Red forced a satisfied smile before his eyes rolled back in his head and he gasped his last breath.

Whiskey Grove Bar and Grill, Bend, Oregon - noon

"I'll take another."

The bartender looked up to find a young woman standing in front of him. "It's kinda early. You sure you need another one? You know they're taking people off the road to join the army, don't you?"

"Don't worry about it," the young woman answered.

The bartender picked up the remote control and began turning the channels on the television hanging over the bar.

"Hey, go back to that last one," the woman said as she pushed a strand of her ginger-colored hair behind her ear.

The bartender switched the television back to the cable news channel.

"It ain't the transgenics... it's crazy folks like these protestors and the assholes down in Olympia, over in California...and the folks pulling the strings behind those folks...that's where our problem is."

"That was Melissa Michelle, reporting earlier from City Hall in Seattle."

"You from Seattle?" the bartender asked as he turned back to talk to the woman, but she was already gone.

An Old Logger's Cabin - 12:30 pm

Lydecker lay in the brush where he had fallen. Martin lay half on top of him, his lifeless eyes staring straight at him. Lydecker had managed to stem the bleeding in his own thigh using Martin's belt, but the pain prevented him from moving more than a couple of inches from his original position. He held his gun loosely in his hand as he struggled against the cold and pain that threatened to suck him into a dark void. He'd lost all track of time, each moment stretching into an eternity as he awaited the return of their

attackers.

As Lydecker's eyes drifted closed once again, the brush parted and the gun was swept out of his hand. He snapped his eyes open to see Max standing over him.

"Get out of here," he whispered, trying unsuccessfully to force authority into his voice.

"Not a chance," Max said, then spoke softly into her comm. "Found him. I'm gonna need a hand."

A moment later, Logan appeared behind Max.

"You brought him, too?" Lydecker asked in shock. "Don't you get it? They're prepared to put a bullet in both your heads."

"Perimeter's clear," Max reported as Logan rolled the body off Lydecker. Logan let out a small gasp of recognition as he saw Martin's face.

"Logan Cale, meet Roy Martin," Lydecker gasped through the pain. "They're coming back. They're not in the habit of leaving things half done."

"Then we need to move you out," Max said matter-of-factly.

"He can't travel far," Logan said as he flipped open his cell phone and spoke quietly. "Hey, it's Logan. I've got someone who needs your help. Have you got transportation? Take a right at exit 176 on I-5, then head about 20 clicks northeast. The cabin will be in a small clearing on your left. See you in twenty."

"Don't bother," Lydecker gasped again. "You don't have time."

Before Max could reply, something hit the bush next to

her with a thud, sending a spray of bark and splinters into the air. "Down!" she hissed, pushing Logan to the ground.

He fell awkwardly, scraping his forehead on the tree. Max threw herself on top of him. Her eyes widened in panic for a moment at the sight of blood.

"You all right?" she asked anxiously.

"Yeah," Logan grunted, trying to catch his breath. "Is that a --"

"Sniper?" Max finished as a second shot thumped into a tree trunk above them.

"Looks that way," Logan deadpanned.

"Stay down," she instructed Logan. "You too," she added, turning her head toward Lydecker, who was trying to reach underneath Martin's body.

Lydecker opened his mouth as if he were going to object, then nodded, lying back as Max stood and ducked behind a nearby tree in one quick movement. A third shot whistled past, missing the tree this time and crashing into the brush and dried leaves behind the little group.

Max moved her head a tiny bit, just enough to see around the tree in the general direction of the shots. She scanned the area quickly until a tiny flash of movement caught her eye. Zooming her vision in, she saw an arm in a camouflage sleeve holding a weapon pointed toward her. She dropped to her belly instantly. Then, staying low to the ground, she slid over to Martin and rolled him over slightly. His weapon lay underneath him. She hesitated.

"Take it!" Lydecker hissed harshly.

Logan said softly, "Give it here, Max."

Max hesitated a moment longer, then tossed the weapon to Logan. He caught it and pushed himself over onto his stomach, then raised the gun and returned fire. After a moment, they heard the distant sound of someone running away, breaking branches and crunching through leaves, heedless of the noise. Cautiously, Max stood. The camouflage patch was gone.

Sighing with relief, she squatted beside Logan, who had pushed up to a sitting position and was carefully feeling the exoskeleton.

"I didn't bust that up, did I?" she asked sheepishly.

"Nope," Logan replied, moving a leg. "For once, it's intact."

"Cool," Max answered, offering a hand as Logan got to his feet. Together they turned to Lydecker.

"Get out of here before someone else takes a shot at you," Lydecker growled, his face white with pain. "I told you, you don't have time."

"You don't have a choice," Max replied. "I'm saving your ass. I need to know what you know." She bent and positioned herself to pull Lydecker upright onto her back. "Suck it up, 'cause this is gonna hurt."

Lydecker gritted his teeth as Max bent over him.

Then, another shot rang out.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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