

Author's note: This is a Work-In-Progress in the sense that new episodes getting added is a possibility. The various installments, though they are presented here in the correct order, are not written or published chronologically.

Early Days - Mission

November 2017

A dozen X5s and X6s stood at ease around the mat in the middle of the training ground, watching two of their fellow soldiers circle each other warily. The day was mild for November in Wyoming, and a watery sun reflected on the barracks roof. Snowcapped mountains rose in the distance while birds twittered in the forest, their carefree song mingling with the hard breathing of the two transgenics inside the circle.

494 charged his opponent, lashing out with a kick that would have broken bones if it had connected. With an effort, the other X5 avoided the blow. A match in size, skill and strength, he caught 494's ankle and flipped him back. A normal human would have landed hard on their back, but 494 used his own momentum to somersault head over heels and land, catlike, on his own two feet, grunting with the impact. He winked at his opponent. "Nearly had you there."

The other nodded. "True. But *nearly's* never good enough, 494."

Balancing on their toes, the two started dancing around each other again, looking for an opening, a moment of distracted attention, that they could use to their advantage and finish the match. Their martial arts instructor, a black-belt Special Ops officer on loan from Quantico, was kneeling at the edge of the mat, his eyes never leaving the two X5s. Technique-wise, he was the better fighter, which is why he'd been hired to teach. However, if the supersoldiers ever turned on him, he would be no match for the transgenics' superior speed and strength.

Suddenly, the PA-system crackled to life. A disembodied voice blared across the training grounds, shattering the concentrated silence. Some of the younger X6s jumped in surprise, then glared at their older brethren who chortled with amusement.

"X5-494. You are to report to the colonel's office. On the double!"

The two X5s in the circle straightened. "Looks like we gotta go with undecided," 494 grinned.

"Lucky for you," his opponent said. "I was about to kick your ass."

494 snorted. He turned to the training officer. "Permission to leave, sir?"

"Granted."

494 threw him a quick salute and jogged away. Behind him, the officer ordered two X6s to the mat to demonstrate their skills.

Colonel's Lydecker's office was on the second floor of the administration building. It was not a place X5-494 visited often, and the few times he had been ordered to report to Manticore's commanding officer, it had not been an enjoyable experience. Thus it was with some trepidation that he climbed the steps, boots echoing on the vinyl-covered concrete steps, wondering why he had been called away from practice.

God, I hope they haven't found out about Saturday night's trip to Gillette!

If they had, it would most definitely mean a stint in isolation to 'think on the consequences of subordination', at the least. Still, he had been so careful not to get caught... Maybe that fellow Bill at the gate had ratted on him after all. Maybe his girlfriend hadn't liked the cologne 494 got him as much as he'd hoped and this was his petty revenge. He could've just asked for his money back, damn him.

At the top of the staircase 494 stopped and dusted off his fatigues. He ran a hand across his short-cropped hair to ensure he was presentable before he knocked on the door to the colonel's office.

"Enter," Lydecker replied. His voice sounded muted through the thick wood.

"X5-494 reporting as ordered, sir!"

The colonel wasn't alone. Another man—middle-aged, short, glasses—leaned against the windowsill, his mouth drawn down in skepticism. 494 had never seen him before. He looked like a man who was used to having his orders followed though, despite the sallow skin and pudgy frame that spoke of too many hours spent in artificial lights.

Lydecker got up from his desk. "At ease, soldier."

494 dropped into the more comfortable stance, feet slightly apart and hands clasped behind his back. His eyes focused on a spot on the wall just over his commanding officer's left shoulder.

"494, this is Major Chandler from Homeland Security. He has requested the assistance of a first class operative that can eliminate an enemy of the state and retrieve a disk with vital information without anyone knowing the military was involved. Think we can

provide the major with someone like that?"

494, unsure what sort of response, if any, was expected, risked a quick glance at the colonel. A faint smile of amusement played around Lydecker's lips and at the sight, a thrill ran through 494. Was the colonel saying what he thought he was? In any case, he sure as shooting hadn't been called in about his clandestine excursion last weekend. Perhaps Bill had gotten lucky with his lady friend after all.

"Sir, yes sir!"

Lydecker nodded, satisfied. Major Chandler, on the other hand, scowled. "Colonel Lydecker, I understand you think well of your soldiers. But *this* is supposed to be the best you can offer? He's but a boy!"

A muscle in 494's jaw twitched at the insult. "I was cleared for solo missions last month, sir," he said, fighting to keep the anger out of his voice. He was ready, dammit! And this bonehead from HS was trying to screw with his first chance to prove it.

Lydecker gestured him to silence. "Yes, he's young," he said mildly. "X5-494 was also trained for this from birth. He's qualified in the use of numerous small arms. An expert in various martial arts. Speaks several languages fluently. Possesses a photographic memory, and an IQ that puts you and me to shame. You've seen the file."

494 stood a little straighter even as he blinked. Praise from the colonel? Manticore was generally far quicker to tell him where he fucked up than when he did well. However, though he enjoyed hearing his commanding officer commend him, he knew very well it wasn't for his benefit.

"I did. But I expected someone older." A note of doubt crept into Chandler's voice. "Colonel Lydecker, I don't have to tell you how vital this mission is. To national security, *and* to your Manticore program. This will be the boy's first solo mission. Are you sure you want him to handle it, and not someone who's more experienced?"

"I have full confidence in X5-494," Lydecker said.

"I hear there were... disciplinary problems?"

"All corrected with a few months of extra training," the colonel said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

494 ignored the shiver that raced down his spine. He'd already missed out on the Quantico redeployment. If the colonel found out about his after-hours trips to Gillette—

that would ruin his chance at getting this mission far more surely than the major's doubts.

"He performed excellently this summer in Uzbekistan. And he was with Captain Richardson's command last month."

Chandler quirked a brow in confusion.

"The rescue mission to deliver the US ambassador out of rebel hands, down in Colombia," Lydecker clarified.

The major's eyes widened slightly at that. "That was nothing short of a miracle."

Lydecker nodded. "So, you see, 494 is one of my best."

"All right." Chandler pushed himself up from the sill. The top of the major's head barely reached 494's chin. "We'll give your man—" there was a slight hesitation there, "a chance. If he performs well, we may have further use for your people in the future."

"Thank you, sir!" 494 said. "I won't let you down."

Early Days - Keepsake

October 2018

Maybe she would make chicken tonight. Fried, with garlic and lime juice. With tiny, boiled potatoes at the side. The girls would like that. And perhaps she could get some fresh greens for a salad. Maybe—

"This is the last." An orderly emptied a white plastic sack of dirty clothes onto her sorting table, interrupting her mental dinner preparations and. Manticore's laundry generally didn't require much sorting. It was all either military issue, clothing, or bed linens. Though occasionally, like today, civilian apparel appeared among the wash. That required more care; after all, one couldn't have undercover operatives stand out in the crowd because the colors of their shirt had run.

Besides, left to themselves, those operatives put the strangest things in their pockets.

She pulled a pair of tan slacks from the pile and began going through its pockets. Parking stubs, keys, coins; one time, she had even discovered a computer memory stick in a shirt pocket—turning *that* in had gained her a substantial bonus.

Yes, caution was the better part of valor. Even when one's job was something as dull as running a military base's laundry room.

Satisfied the pants were empty, she turned them inside out and reached for the next garment, a pair of black jeans. A faint stink of acrid smoke wafted from them and she wrinkled her nose. She briefly wondered what adventures its wearer had endured.

Outside, muted gunfire rang in the distance, the noise familiar and comforting. She was but a simple laundress; those men and women out there were the real champions. Designed and trained to be perfect soldiers, they were formidable, invincible, the last line between her, and a country that would be thrown into anarchy and chaos. She did her part, small it might be, but without those soldiers, it would be all for naught.

Her hand stilled inside a front pocket of the jeans, brushing across a small object, cool to the touch. She drew it out, surprised to see it was a heart-shaped locket on a thin silver chain. What an odd thing for a soldier to bring home from a mission.

She should turn the object in to her superiors, she knew. But they would only destroy it. And it seemed to be real silver. She might be able to pawn it off and have real beef for dinner tonight, instead of chicken.

Her mouth watered at the idea even as her hands trembled at her disloyal thoughts. She dropped the trousers back on the table and opened the locket. Inside was a tiny picture of a dark-haired woman, more handsome than beautiful, holding the prettiest little girl with dimpled cheeks in her arms.

She examined the picture for a moment before snapping the locket shut. She would not turn it in for destruction, nor could she bring herself to pawn it off. Somewhere, a mother might look for the locket, or a sister, or a daughter.

She slipped it to her apron and picked up the jeans again. Who would have brought such a trinket home, and why? The bar code stenciled on the tag inside told her all she needed to know: X5-494. Her brow creased. There had been rumors, gossiping among the civilian staff. It was whispered he had bungled his assignment over a woman, that he had done the unthinkable, had fallen in love and refused to follow orders.

If that were true, 494 would be in for a world of hurt. She usually tried to ignore it, shut off the thoughts of how those whose performance had been inadequate were disciplined. They were soldiers; they couldn't be allowed to fail. *Still*, she smiled, *it is kind of romantic, isn't it?* Perhaps she should return the keepsake to him. After all, he and his fellow soldiers gave up so much that she remain safe. Such a little kindness could never hurt. Could it?

Early Days - Memory

November 2018

"That should be enough," the doctor announced. He flicked a switch and the thin beam of red laser light disappeared, leaving a brief afterglow. The X5 strapped to the table gave no indication he noticed his hours of torment had come to an end. His eyes remained wide open, staring at nothing. Only the irregular rise and fall of his chest and the occasional twitch of a limb when a synapse misfired in his abused brain indicated he was still alive. Mercifully, he had stopped screaming a while ago, his throat raw and vocal cords shredded. It had been a relief for all involved in the procedure. They knew, once the screaming stopped, it was as good as over and merely a matter of time.

"So, his memory is wiped clean?" Major Sandoval asked. "He will not remember Berrisford, or his assignment?"

The doctor smiled at the ignorance the question revealed. "Nothing so simple," he said. "It's impossible to truly erase someone's memories, at least if you wish to keep the subject's personality and skills intact and not turn them into a blubbering plant."

"Then, what good is this?" The major turned angrily to the doctor. "You've had him for days, under orders to prepare me a blank slate suited for reindoctrination. Now you tell me that cannot be done?" He ground his teeth. "I might as well have put him down right away."

"Like I said," the doctor continued, not in the least disturbed by the officer's temper, "we cannot *wipe* his memory. A brain isn't a computer hard drive. What we did—it's hard to explain in layman's terms—we severed the neural pathways needed to access the memories. Plus, we planted a suggestion that associates areas where the undesirable recollections are stored with severe physical pain. Not unlike the stimulæ the laser provides. Chances are good that he will never recall those memories you want buried."

"But it is possible that he will remember one day." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. There are no guarantees in psychological matters. There is too much we don't know yet about the brain and the way it functions. I would advise that you don't send this soldier on missions to Seattle. Familiar surroundings might jog his memories loose in spite of our work."

The major snorted in disgust. "Get him out of here," he ordered the two soldiers who stood watching passively near the door. "Put him in solitary until he's recovered enough to go through reindoctrination. Let's try to salvage what we can."

Early Days - Mia

July 2020

He shifted on the hard chair, slouching a bit further in an attempt to relieve the pressure on his tailbone and the growing ache in stiffening joints. He had long since mastered the art of patience—one didn't survive Manticore for long without it—but the way they made him wait this time was rapidly moving from the realm of Tiresome to Absurd.

The glare of the fluorescents overhead, the single illumination in the windowless room, gave no indication how much time had passed since they sat him down on this chair right before breakfast. There was no clock on the wall, of course, and they had taken away his watch the second they'd dragged his ass into Psy Ops—for reasons they'd yet to reveal. But the hole in the pit of his stomach told him that lunchtime had to be a distant memory while dinner was just around the corner.

They had to know that he'd finished their inane test, the questions so insultingly simple he had considered ignoring the questionnaire altogether. It had taken him less than three minutes after picking up the felt-tipped pen to answer the two hundred or so questions; questions that would drive anyone insane, let alone someone with his IQ.

But perhaps that was the entire point of the test: see how far they could push him before he snapped. Well, he'd be damned if he gave them the satisfaction. He wished he knew where the camera was hidden. Undoubtedly he was being monitored by an array of psychiatrists right about now and he'd enjoy staring them down. Then again, perhaps it was better he didn't. He doubted getting cocky would get him out of Psy Ops any sooner. Still, it was hard to suppress that natural inclination while they left him to cool his heels with nothing to divert his attention and his overactive imagination coming up with worst case scenarios as to their reasons.

Count yourself lucky, he mentally told himself. He slunk down even further until he could lift his legs up and rest them on the table, ankles crossed. At least he wasn't restrained, drugged, or cuffed spread-eagled to one of the examining tables downstairs, subjected to one of their more... physical... trials. He closed his eyes in an attempt to catch a nap but the room was cold and he shivered involuntarily. Was this all part of their games? Or had they truly forgotten about him?

It was almost—but not quite—as if they were subjecting him to another sensory deprivation experiment. He still had his eyesight; except there wasn't much to look at, just four naked off-white walls, a light-blue vinyl floor, the chair he sat on, and the table.

They hadn't taken away his hearing, but the room was soundproofed. He concentrated

for a while on the thud of his heartbeat, the rush of blood in his ears, refusing to give them the satisfaction of talking out loud just to hear the sound of his own voice. After all, wasn't talking to oneself a sure sign of insanity?

The next sense: taste. His mouth was dry and even water would have tasted sweet. Yet there was nothing.

Touch—again, smooth walls, slick vinyl, the slippery steel of the table. Or himself. He chortled. Not an option.

The last sense left was smell. He grimaced. If they kept him here long enough he might wish they had deprived him of *that*...

He shoved away the urge to hop up and start pacing. Instead, he dropped his head, closed his eyes, and pretended to have fallen asleep.

oOo

Many, many hours later—definitely past dinnertime, and he suspected the moment for midnight snacks had come and gone too—the door finally clicked open. He lifted his head, instantly wary but refusing to show it—and blinked rapidly.

For the longest time he wondered if perhaps his tormented brain had cracked after all, after the long hours of mindless boredom. She had to be a hallucination. Or else he had died and gone to heaven.

"Hey," she said. Her peppy voice broke the spell. He regarded her cautiously. Large, bright eyes. A dazzling smile, showing a row of even, white teeth. Curvaceous body clad in a dress covered with brilliant red and blue and yellow flowers almost painful to his eyes, used as they were to drab walls. She wasn't a doctor.

"Who are you?" he asked. "*What* are you?"

"I'm Mia." She closed the door behind her. "My specialty is telecoercion."

"Tele—what?"

Mia wandered around the table and he twisted on the chair to follow her with his eyes.

"Telecoercion." She smiled brightly. "Means I make people do—"

"I know what coercion means," he interrupted. "Why are you here?" Even as he asked

the question, he had a sinking feeling in the pit of his empty stomach that he wasn't going to like the answer.

"What do you think?"

He rolled his eyes. "More tests. You're not going to make me do embarrassing things, are you?"

"What sort of things?" Her cheeks dimpled and she cocked her head at an odd angle.

"Quack like a duck? Hop like a bunny? Dance a jig on the table. Naked."

Her eyes widened slightly. *Shit*. Had he just put an idea in her mind? Seemed like his big mouth was running away with him again. He clamped his jaws shut, determined not to say more.

"Would you like that?" Her voice was a bit lower, more husky.

"No!" he squeaked. *Squeaked!* Time to take the initiative back.

Mia cocked her head a little further, blinking those large, bright eyes at him. They sparkled with merriment.

"Liar."

"Well, okay, I would. The naked part, at least. With you." His hands flew up to his mouth. Where the hell had that come from? Way to go, 494. Try and *flirt* your way out of Psy Ops. Yeah, right.

But Mia merely giggled. "Don't worry, soldier. I can only work with feelings already there. I can't make you do anything you really, *really* have no desire to do, or say anything that deep down you do not believe. And I see no ducks in your secret fantasies."

She paused, her expression growing serious for the first time since she had entered the room. She crossed over to him, and despite himself he drew back in the chair when she leaned forward, catching his chin between her small hands. Her palms were cool and dry. She pitched her voice low, barely audible even in such close proximity. "Hang in there, 494. Don't let them vanquish that spark of free spirit. Some day, it might turn into a blaze."

He blinked, not sure what she was talking about. She let go, offered him a quick wink and went to the door. She knocked, then turned around and cocked her head again in

that strange way she had. "You'll forget I said anything," she said.

The door opened, and she slipped out.

By the time they came to take 494 out and back to his cell, all he could remember was how long the dreadful day had lasted, and how hungry he was.

Early Days - Release

August 2020

Without warning, the door to his cell was flung open. Two guards, X4s this time, their tufted ears and slitted pupils regarded as too outlandish to allow them on covert missions, filled the doorway, tasers loosely held in their hands.

494 froze, watching them warily. They were early today; he hadn't even had the chance to finish dressing after reveille sounded, and facing them barefoot dressed only in army issue boxers did nothing for his confidence. Yet he kept his face passive, careful not to show any outward emotion. It was probably another trick from the seemingly bottomless well of methods to keep him on his toes and upset his mental state.

How long since they dragged his ass into Psy Ops? He couldn't be sure—some of the time had been spent in a drug-induced haze—but it had to be close to six months. How much longer were they planning on keeping him? And what the hell had he done wrong to end up in this hellhole in the first place?

Another person stepped into his cell, his appearance surprising 494 out of his reverie. Instead of the bulky orderlies he had expected, their job to drag him off to whatever the day's tests would involve, the man who entered was slight, wearing a white lab coat that instantly identified him as one of the shrinks. The X5 couldn't put a name to the face; they never bothered to introduce themselves before the torment began, but he did have a vague recollection of this man watching stoically, clipboard in hand, while non-existent demons that his hallucinogen-drugged mind had conjured up at the X5 alive. It wasn't an experience he cared to repeat. Some day, 494 vowed, he would like to see their roles reversed. See how impassive the doctor could remain then.

Of course, none of his thoughts showed on his face. He knew the drill too well to fall into that particular trap. *Keep your thoughts to yourself, and give them what they want.* The maxim had kept him alive for twenty years and he wasn't about to abandon it in a moment of futile desire for payback.

He snapped to attention, knowing it was the expected response even though the doctor held no military rank.

"As you were, soldier," his visitor said.

494 relaxed his stance a bit but did not lower his guard. Anything that broke the uncomfortable routine of the last months was likely to be unpleasant. He carefully kept his gaze on the wall, a few inches over the psychiatrist's left shoulder.

"I have good news, and bad," the doctor said. "Which do you want first?"

494's brow twitched, wanting to frown in confusion. He risked a quick glance at the man's face to see if he were being goaded into some kind of response. A faint smirk played around the shrink's lips. More games, then.

"Sir?"

The psychiatrist chuckled. "All right. Congratulations, 494, you have been cleared for reassignment, meaning your stay as our guest has sadly come to an end. We've given you a clean bill of health, no mental disorders lurking in that precious DNA of yours."

This time, 494 failed to keep the surprise from showing in his expression and his eyes snapped to the doctor's face. They were letting him out of Psy Ops? About damn time.

And assuming that was the good news, what would be the bad?

His visitor did not keep him wondering for long. "You understand that your return to active duty is still to be confirmed by the director. And to tell you the truth, we have recommended you're to be terminated. You may not have a mental disorder, we *have* failed to rid you of your intractable nature. No, don't give me that look." The doctor smiled, mildly amused. "You don't fool me with that act. And I doubt you'll fool Director Renfro."

Well, wasn't that just great. They'd release him from Psy Ops only to put him down like a rabid dog. Despite the pain they put him through, the drugs, the harsh treatment, 494 did not want to die.

"Well, get yourself dressed," the doctor said with a nod to the camouflage pants dangling from 494's hands. "These soldiers will escort you to the main compound, where your fate will be decided." He turned to leave the cell.

"Sir?" 494 tried.

"Yes, soldier?" The doctor turned back.

"Sir, why was I here in the first place?" He had to know whether it was something he had done, if only to avoid making the same mistake again.

"They never told you?" The man's surprise was genuine and his features softened, giving him an almost sympathetic appearance. "It was your twin, X5-493."

"The one who escaped in '09."

"Yes. He went insane. Turned psychopath. He killed a bunch of people in cold blood."

And how's that different from what he was designed for, what I am designed for?

Of course 494 did not voice the question. Instead, he straightened in a semi-salute.

"Thank you, sir."

Early Days - Partnered

September 2020

"X5-392 has passed her long range targeting test with flying colors. We recommend she be cleared for more specialized instruction at Fort Benning." The training officer rattled off the reports on the various X5s in a monotone voice. "X5-494 has settled in with his unit, and has resumed training. However—" Here some emotion slipped into his tone while his mouth curled downward in disgust, "we have proof he has also resumed his activities as a procurer of illegal goods."

"As we had predicted," the head of Psy Ops muttered beneath his breath. He exchanged a look with his colleague, and after a brief nod from the training officer, Psy Ops turned to the blond woman at the head of the table. "Director Renfro, we strongly urge you to reconsider your decision with regard to 494. And I repeat my department's recommendation that he be euthanized as soon as can be arranged."

Renfro shook her head. "Your opinion is noted, doctor. But my decision stands."

"But, Madam Director..."

She muted the arguments her staff members brought forth in favor of their views to a buzz in the background and gazed out of the window. Far away, on the parade ground, men and women dressed in army fatigues went through a series of hand-to-hand combat motions, their every gesture in sync. They were designed to be the perfect battle machines, and the exercise turned out as graceful as a ballet. Too far away for her to recognize any faces, she knew that the subject of discussion was among them—and so was 452, the bane of her existence.

By regulation, both 494 and 452 should have been terminated, their characters too headstrong to allow them to survive. Yet, she kept them alive. There were precious few of the remarkable X-series left, and with the DNA lab destroyed, new ones were impossible to come by. These two were so different from the others, yet mirroring each other in unexpected ways. Both independent in nature, strong-willed, refusing to give in. There had to be a way to subdue them, to break them to her will. She had never backed down from a challenge.

She realized the discussion had progressed from 494's fate to more mundane matters like fuel supplies and food storage. "What's the status of the breeding program?" she interrupted to ask the question that was currently high on her list of priorities.

"Um..." the department head of Genetic Research stuttered, caught aback by the sudden

change in subject. He shuffled the pile of papers before him nervously, pushing the glasses that constantly slipped down his nose back up.

"Well? Spit it out, man?" Renfro snapped.

"W-we have finished the bloodwork," he stammered. "Paired off the ideal breeding partners based on their genetic profiles. Success levels should be high."

"Give me the list," Renfro ordered.

He pulled out a sheet from the pile and began rattling them off. "X5-392 is a match with X5-546. X5-387 is a match with X5-698. X5-736..."

Renfro gave a curt nod at each pair of numbers he read out. Not that she had much clue as to which face belonged to which designation but her approval was expected.

When he finished and fell silent, she cocked a brow. "Those are not all the X5s we have on base. What about the others?"

He shifted in his seat, reluctant to meet her eyes. "The others are... sterile, madam. Fertility wasn't a high priority when the series were originally designed."

"Dammit," she muttered beneath her breath. "What about 452? I did not hear you mention her. Is she sterile too?"

"No, ma'am. But..." His voice faltered.

"So, she can breed?" Renfro's voice was cold. Although the answer did not matter much; she was going to put X5-452 into the breeding program regardless. It might be just the thing to bring the runaway to her knees, after she had lived for ten years in relative freedom. At the least, it would teach her that she belonged to Manticore, heart, mind, and body.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And her ideal partner would be?"

The head of Genetic Research glanced around the room as if looking for a way out. Everyone else seemed to have found something terribly interesting in the table's wood grain surface.

Renfro chuckled. She already suspected the answer. "Let me guess: 494."

"Yes, Madam Director."

But the outburst they expected never came. Instead, she threw her head back and began to laugh. X5-452 and X5-494. If that wasn't a match made in a heaven of irony, she didn't know what was. "Perfect!"

"Um, ma'am?"

She looked around the table. Her staff's expressions ranged from blank for the ones who could school their features to utterly confused for those less skilled in hiding their thoughts. She sighed. Dimwits, all of them.

"Don't you see?" she said. "It's the perfect solution."

"Perfect?" the head of Psy Ops ventured. "Mixing those genetics, we're likely to end up with progeny that possesses, let's say, less than desirable character traits."

"Perhaps," Renfro admitted. "If they produce, we'll have to keep a close eye on their brood. In the meantime, 494 will give me 452."

"He might resist," Psy Ops warned. "Refuse to use force on her. And I don't see her welcoming him with open arms either."

"Doesn't matter," Renfro said. "If he's a good little soldier and does as he's ordered, she'll just hate me more, plus there's the added bonus of possible offspring. If he fails to obey, he might gain her trust. Such rapport I can exploit." She looked back out the window at the training ground.

"Either way, the bitch will be mine."

Early Days - Assignment

September 2020

It was close to lights-out when they came for him: two X5s looming in the doorway once the cell door was unlocked.

"X5-494," the dark-haired one on the left said. 494 thought it was 698; he hadn't had much time to familiarize himself with his new unit mates. "You're to come with us."

494 hopped up from his bunk. Any diversion that kept him from studying spidery cracks in the ceiling for entertainment was welcome. "Where we going?"

The other X5, a blond specimen with cheekbones that bespoke a Slavic genome in his cocktail, answered. "We've been ordered to report to the briefing room in D-block."

494 masked his surprise with a shrug. "In the middle of the night? Curious."

The other two stared at him.

They would not be giving him an assignment so soon, would they? Might it be a trap? Though they had released him from Psy Ops, put him back on a regular training schedule with the rest of the Xs, they still considered him untrustworthy. He was kept a prisoner, locked in a cell after hours, no recreation allowed, and he was growing bored of his own company.

Tread with care, 494, he reminded himself.

He followed the other soldiers down the hallway and across the quad, marching in step, their boots echoing in the still night. A dozen or so X5s stood already at rigid attention before chairs lined-up in the briefing room. All male, 494 noted. His natural curiosity picked up a notch.

Director Renfro paced before the troops, dressed in a dark blue suit that made her blond hair appear to glow in sharp relief. 494 suppressed a shiver. She was a dangerous woman. Far more dangerous than ol' Lydecker, who had at least been predictable in a cruel let's-see-how-much-you-can-take way.

He followed the others' example and saluted. "X5-494 reporting."

A guard—an ordinary soldier—closed the door while Renfro looked over the assembled X5s. She gave a curt nod of approval that did nothing to relieve 494's apprehension.

"As you may know," she began without preamble, "our main base of operations was attacked earlier this year. Invaluable data accumulated over many years of genetic research was destroyed. Data that was used to create you."

Despite his misgivings, 494 found himself listening with fascination. He had heard rumors—Psy Ops wasn't as cut off from the rest of the compound as they liked to think—and here he found confirmation. It wasn't clear, however, what it had to do with them. *Stolen* data could be recovered using an X5's special skills, but once it was destroyed? Not so much.

"That means," Renfro continued, "that we can no longer grow X-series in test tubes. At least not for long years to come. And only at the tremendous cost of having to start all over again."

Why was she giving them all these details? Nobody ever explained the reason. They gave orders, X5s were expected to follow them, period. Never had the old soldiers' adage held more true than at Manticore: theirs was not to reason why, but to do or die.

Though nobody moved, X5-494 sensed the other soldiers echo his thoughts. They vibrated with tension if you knew what to look for: someone breathing just a bit harder than necessary, the twitch of a jaw muscle caught from the corner of his eye. They were as much in the dark as he was, and as wary. Strangely, that made him feel better.

"So," Renfro finished, a slow smile that held no humor curving her lips, "we have to enlarge your numbers the old-fashioned way." She paused, as if she had explained it all.

Confusion rolled off from the gathered soldiers in almost visible waves. "Ma'am?" one brave soul asked. 494 mentally commended the soldier for daring to speak and voice the question on all their minds.

Renfro's grin merely widened. "Breeding, soldier," she said. "You were taken off your birth control shots a few weeks ago and we conducted some tests. You've all been ascertained fertile and each of you has been assigned a breeding partner."

494 barely managed to suppress a snort. She was going to breed them like livestock—well, to Renfro they probably *were* nothing but cattle. How else could she stand there and order them to rape their fellow soldiers, the female X5s? What the hell was the woman thinking? He wondered if the girls had received similar instructions, or if they would come as an unpleasant surprise; he wouldn't put it past the director to believe that once she gave the males their orders, everyone else would fall in line, no objections raised.

"Ma'am?" someone ventured, a tall, broad-shouldered X5 on 494's right. "How—" He faltered. "It's not—"

A few snickers rose; 494 bit his lip to keep in a chuckle of his own. *Someone* had not paid attention in class. Then again, he couldn't really blame the soldier. He looked like an infantry class X5, and they didn't get out much in the real world. And with Manticore's rules against fraternization so ruthlessly enforced...not much action to be had on base. On the other hand, he himself had been designed for solo missions. He had successfully finished several, and felt no compunction to enjoy the perks that came with being free of Manticore's strict control to the fullest, if only for a few days.

Unbidden, images flickered before his mind's eye: a pair of trusting brown eyes, a pearly white smile, dimpled cheeks. Far off, he thought he heard piano music. He blinked, and shook his head. Where the hell had that come from?

Before he could further examine the flash of unconnected memory, recall who the girl was, Renfro drew his attention. She did not appear amused.

"That's why we have put together an instructional video," she said coldly. "To refresh your memories, for those who need it. Sit down, soldiers."

494 did as ordered and settled on the hard-backed briefing room chair. This ought to be good.

oOo

It wasn't.

An hour later, close to midnight, the overhead lights blinked back on and the video screen grew dark. The X5s, their night vision suddenly assaulted with bright fluorescents, blinked owlily for an instant. 494 stretched to soothe stiffened muscles, bored out of his skull with the technical explanations of how tab A fitted into slot B. At least the hardcore porn—probably an attempt to get them 'in the mood'—that followed had been mildly entertaining, if somewhat unrealistic.

Renfro took her place before the gathered soldiers again. "Doctor Schwartz here will inform you of your designated breeding partner. I expect to hear your reports tomorrow morning at roll call. Do not disappoint me."

"No, ma'am," the X5s barked as one.

The doctor Renfro had indicated made his way slowly along the lines of soldiers, checking each designation against his clipboard before identifying their assigned partner.

"X5-494, sir."

"Ah, yes." Schwartz looked him up and down before glancing at his clipboard. "You have been assigned to X5-452."

"What?" He could not help the startled question. Dammit. He'd known there would be a catch. "Sir, X5-452's been living outside for years. God knows what bugs she picked up. And she's a—"

"—a rogue and a traitor," Renfro finished. "We are well aware of that, soldier. She's also of excellent breeding stock that we determined is fully compatible with your DNA. And you know as well as I do that both of you are immune to any regular sexually transmitted diseases so don't give me that nonsense. Any other objections you wanted to voice, soldier?"

"No, ma'am. But—"

"She'll likely resist," Renfro continued as if he hadn't spoken. "I would think that'll suit your own contrary nature. I expect results from you shortly, 494." She turned to the waiting guard. "Take him to her."

Swallowing a sigh, 494 followed.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Despite what Renfro thought, he *really* did not want to force 452 to have sex with him. Or any woman, for that matter, but that was beside the point right now. And he doubted he'd be able to convince her they'd best follow orders. He'd seen her around the quad a few times, at roll call, during training; *she'd* never toe the mark, no matter what torment Renfro subjected her to.

He still had no idea how to avoid the situation when they reached her cell—like him, they did not allow her to wander around unescorted. He had no choice but to play it by ear. Fortunately, that's what he did best.

He waited until the door was unlocked, then stepped over the threshold.

She looked up, wearing an expression of annoyance. He would have expected Manticore to have cured her of displaying her thoughts so clearly. It lasted only a moment, though, then her eyes—brown, large—widened further in shock and she paled visibly. Still, the first word out of her mouth was not what he expected.

"Ben."

Early Days - Twice

September 2020

He drew stiffly to attention. "Ma'am. X5-494 reporting as ordered."

Renfro gave no indication she had heard, or even realized his presence; her eyes never left the thick report she held in her hands. She turned to a new page every few minutes, the soft rustle of paper the only sound to break the monotony of the air-conditioning's low hum.

Without moving, merely shifting his eyes, 494 chanced a quick look around her office. The windowless room was rather bare, sparsely decorated with a few pieces of practical furniture in smooth, gray steel, its starkness befitting the rest of the Manticore compound. Neat stacks of file folders lay on one side of her desk while a computer occupied the other half. There was nothing on the walls except a large video screen opposite her desk.

Renfro kept reading, and 494 held his rigid stance. Though his muscles started to cramp, he did not dare relax. He wasn't sure why he had been ordered to the director's office, but could take a few wild guesses. Top of the list was that his days were numbered, that she had decided to take Psy Ops up on their recommendation after all. So if she prolonged his life with a few short hours while finishing the report, he wasn't going to complain about a sore musculature. And if he was wrong, if she were just playing mind games, well, he had seen better, and lived through worse.

At last she dropped the file on her desk and looked up; her dark eyes glittered, strangely at odds with the platinum of her bleached hair. A chill ran down his spine at the cold amusement in her gaze. She cocked a neatly groomed eyebrow.

"Twice, 494?" Her tone was mild.

He blinked. "Yes, ma'am." He offered a small smirk to hide his uncertainty and stress the truth behind his words.

"So you say." Renfro toyed with a pencil, tapping the butt end against her palm, studying him with a calculating look that would have made him squirm if not for years of Manticore training. Even so, it took an effort to keep his posture. She wasn't fooled, he could tell.

She threw the pencil down and it clattered onto the desk, the noise loud in the silence of the room. Renfro reached for a small remote control and pointed it at the television screen.

"Have a look at this, 494."

The screen sprang to life, showing the familiar bare cement walls of a Manticore cell, the camera angled so that it pointed at the door. The cell door swung open and he saw himself saunter in.

"Ben." *Her* voice, soft and startled. His breeding partner's dark head appeared in the lower right corner of the screen. Her face was invisible because her back was turned to the camera, but he recalled clearly how she had paled.

Crap.

"What?" 494 heard his screen-self say.

This was bad. Really bad. Why the fuck had he covered for her, and with such a blatant lie at that? He should have guessed they were watching. Especially with their reputations: she, one of the '09 runaways, and he still on probation. He could have told the truth, blamed 452. It was not like he owed her anything. When had he turned into such a sucker for large brown eyes and dark, silky hair? Last he remembered, he liked his women blond.

He watched, mind busy devising excuses while the entire scene played out. The sight of her foot connecting with his stomach made him wince; she'd had quite a kick. He forced himself to stand stiff and straight-backed, though every instinct told him to bolt and take his chances with the X7s on the perimeter.

Finally the screen went blank and Director Renfro returned her cold gaze to him. "It seems to me you have a problem counting, wouldn't you say so, 494? Or perhaps you failed to understand the concept of copulation?" Oddly, her voice still held more amusement than anger.

"Ma'am, I—" He stopped. With the damning evidence of his lie right there on tape, what possible justification could he come up with that she would accept? Though why he was here, and not down in solitary awaiting the firing squad, he had no clue.

She chuckled. "You got yourself in quite a pickle there, soldier. Not the kind of situation you, with your reputation for insubordination, can afford." She pushed the black leather chair away from the desk and went to stand right before him, shoving a piece of paper under his nose. "This," she said, "is an order for your termination. And that," she gestured at the television screen, "does nothing to convince me not to sign it."

He did not reply. He was frantically scouring his brain for something he could offer her, something that would postpone what seemed inevitable. Yet he was careful that none of his thoughts showed on his face, keeping his eyes firmly on a point somewhere over her shoulder. Renfro chuckled.

"Oh, you're good, 494. I'll hand you that."

She turned away from him before she continued speaking. "Lucky for you, I have a problem too. One that you might help me with."

Hope flared. He shifted his eyes to her. "Ma'am?"

"452," Renfro said. "She has been on the outside too long, tasted too much of sweet freedom. I'll never be able to bring her back into the fold. Oh, she might talk the talk and walk the walk but she's not fooling me one bit. She's unreliable, and will remain so. By rights, *her* designation ought to be on this termination order right alongside yours. Still, I believe I can utilize her one last time. Have you ever heard of Eyes Only?"

For an instant the apparent change of subject threw 494. He quickly recovered, masking his confusion with a calm tone. "Yes, ma'am. Subversive element who hacks into cable television to spout false propaganda." He could repeat the party line as well as anybody if the situation required it. "Nobody knows his identity, or how to find the man."

"Well put, 494. And I have reason to believe 452 might know more. She could lead us to him. That's where you come in."

"Ma'am?"

"Your job, 494, is to make her trust you. You should have gained some rapport already, with that display of consideration last night, then lying about it this morning. Built on it." She had begun pacing. "I've seen your file, 494. Persuasion is your forte. Help her escape when the chance comes. Then follow her and take down Eyes Only for me. If you succeed, I might—just might—rescind your termination order." She held up the page for emphasis. "Clear, 494?"

"Crystal, ma'am. I won't fail."

She laughed softly. "I had a feeling you'd say that. See that you don't. Remember, this is your last chance. Dismissed, soldier."

He snapped her a salute, turned sharply on his heels and strode out of her office. Once he was alone in the hallway, the door firmly shut behind him, he sagged with relief. He had

managed to dodge the bullet one more time.

Early Days - Escape

September 2020

"She's gone." He failed to stop a smug grin from curling up the corners of his mouth. "She bought it hook, line, and sinker, ma'am."

"Well done, 494." Renfro didn't smile. To the contrary; her mouth tightened at the look on his face, and he quickly wiped the smirk off, replacing it with the customary emotionless mask that Manticore found so desirable in its soldiers.

"Go get changed. You cannot afford to let 452 get too far ahead." She gave a nod and the X7s who had escorted him back to the barracks melted away into the forest without a word. "Remember, I want Eyes Only alive, and that can only be achieved if you bring him here in time to give him the antigen," she continued. "There will be transportation waiting for you in the motor pool."

"Yes, ma'am." He offered her a crisp salute, hand to head, before he trotted off to his quarters. Someone had anticipated 452 would escape tonight and civilian clothes had been laid out on his bunk during his absence. Black leather jacket, black shirt, dark-gray, nondescript cargo pants. His eyes lit up; it seemed ages since he had worn something that wasn't designed to homogenize, since he had been sent on a mission that took him out of Manticore.

He checked the label in the jacket and was not surprised to find it marked as his—well, issued to him, at the least. Manticore was nothing if not thorough and the Quartermaster always made sure undercover agents would blend in.

He dropped the jacket back on the bunk, scooted out of the mottled camouflage pants and grabbed the cargoes. Something small and hard was lodged in one of its side pockets; curious, he dug it out and a silver, heart-shaped locket rested in his palm.

What the—

Without warning, a series of images and sounds flashed across his brain: dark eyes glittering with amusement, a loud, fiery explosion, and, strangest of all, the *Peanuts* theme song... The memories were gone before he could grasp them and he searched his mind, trying to find them again. Instantly, sharp agony pierced his skull, reminiscent of his days in reindoctrination. 494 whimpered, knees giving way while he struggled to empty his mind of all thought.

Once the pain faded to a dull throb in the back of his head, he found he had collapsed on

his bunk. His face pressed against the leather jacket and he sucked in air in large gasps. Trembling, he pushed himself to his feet and shakily finished dressing. He carefully avoided thought of the memories.

Manticore had messed with his mind. Tried to make him forget something they did not want him to remember. They must have failed, because the recollection was still in his head somewhere. It was something that had to do with the small object he stuffed back into the pocket where he had found it. The mere idea of the locket caused his facial muscles to twitch in fearful anticipation and he quickly forced away the image. Still, if they wanted him to forget, why leave such a solid reminder in his trousers? What cruel kind of mind games were they playing with him this time?

"494? What's taking you so long?"

"Coming," he called over his shoulder. He shook the concerns away; he had no time to worry about Manticore's schemes right now—he had a mission to fulfill. *452, I'm on your tail.* He grabbed the jacket and shrugged into it, walking out of the door without looking back.

Little did he know he would never return.

Disclaimer: this story is based on the Cameron/Eglee Productions/20th Century Fox Television series *Dark Angel*. All characters belong to their original creators. The story was written for entertainment only and no copyright infringement was intended.