

## Flower Child

Summer finally arrived in Seattle in a string of long, warm days with little rain. A truce was reached with the Seattle authorities; running water was no longer an unattainable luxury for the transgenic enclave, and the fledgling Art Mall started to bring in some much-needed cash. Yes, life in Terminal City was about as good as it was going to get, Alec thought.

Joshua had been churning out paintings faster than Rita could sell them. She warned they should refrain from putting them up for sale as soon as the paint was dry, or they'd risk inundating the market. Fortunately, with the weather growing warm and gentle, the big guy had discovered another talent, one that took him away from his painting enough to slow the flood of numbered *Joshuas* to a trickle. But now Rita had suggested they enter a couple of paintings in an exhibition of new artists in San Francisco.

"Here, boy." Alec pushed the door at the top of the stairwell open and stepped outside onto the roof garden. Instantly, perspiration broke out on his brow. It was hot up here with the sun's glare reflecting off of the black tar roof. He wiped his face with the back of his hand and glanced around.

Some of the transhumans had started the garden on the roof of one of the laboratories, where the morning sun inundated the surface with its warm rays and the taller building next to it offered protection from the strong sea winds. They cultivated herbs and spices, tomatoes trained up on strings, onions, even sowed a few pumpkin seeds. Their efforts had greatly improved the communal kitchen's fare. Joshua seemed to enjoy the calm and solitude, and often spent his mornings among the seedlings, pruning, watering, repotting.

Which is why Alec hoped to find him on the rooftop so they could discuss Rita's suggestion.

He did not often go up here—greenery wasn't his thing—but Alec had to admit: the transhumans had worked wonders. Wood crates and earthen pots filled with fertile earth stood in long, neat rows. Many of the plants were in bloom and the scent of flowers hung heavy in the warm, still air.

Alec found Joshua at the end of the second row, his fingers dug deep in black soil, gently prodding the roots of a shrub into place.

"Josh." Alec blinked. The scents were starting to make him feel dizzy. He sucked in air, hoping that fresh oxygen would clear his brain.

Joshua glanced over his shoulder. "Hello, Alec." A wide grin broke on his face. "Come to see the garden? Logan brought some new herbs. Thyme, rosemary—" he pointed at the plant he had just finished settling into the dirt, "—field balm. Good for fevers."

"Uh, sure. Whatever you say, dogboy." Alec tried to remember why he had come up here in the first place—something to do with Joshua's paintings—but the sweet aromas assaulting his nostrils and the glare of the summer sun made it hard to think.

Joshua pushed himself to his feet, towering over the smaller X5. Alec looked up at his friend. He smelled of freshly churned earth and mint; it reminded Alec of wide open, green meadows. *Why does that make me wanna—*

The next thing he knew, he had his arms wrapped around Joshua's torso and was chafing his cheek against the taller man. The cotton T-shirt rasped softly under his beard stubble.

"Uh, Alec?"

"Yeah, buddy?" Alec replied absently. *God, I feel great.* Better than he could remember having felt at any time in his life before. *Ever.* His eyes drifted shut involuntarily.

Hands as powerful as steel clamps wrapped around his biceps and pried him off that warm chest, rudely interrupting Alec's ecstasy. Alec whimpered in disappointment, wriggling to be let loose. Joshua held him firmly at arm's length. Though his fingers were digging into Alec's flesh until it bruised, he was strong enough to hold the squirming transgenic.

Joshua's brows were drawn down. "Alec okay?"

Alec gave a faint laugh. "Hey big guy, I'm always all right, you know that. In fact, I never been better." *But I really want—need to...* He struggled to free himself. "You smell nice." His skin was itching and he cocked his head, stretching his neck, managing to extend it far enough to brush his jaw against the back of Joshua's hand. "C'mon Josh. Let me go."

"No. Alec not all right."

"Am too!"

"We must see Max. She can help."

Max? Suddenly Alec's mind kicked back into gear. Panic surged his veins and ripped away the veil of bliss, making him see clearly. "What? No!"

He shoved at Joshua. The dog man, who had been striving to keep his friend *away* from him, wasn't prepared for this sudden change in direction and Alec tore himself free. He stumbled back. His heart was thudding in his throat and he was feeling faint again. What the hell...?

"Josh," he gasped. Despite the heat, he felt cold to the tips of his toes. Had he *really* just been *rubbing* himself all over his tall friend? What insanity was this? He found himself trembling. He *had* taken his daily dose of tryptophan last night—hadn't he? "This... this never happened. I was never here."

Joshua looked more confused. "Alec? You *are* here."

"No!" Alec shouted, frightening even himself with his vehemence. He forced himself to lower his voice, tried to stay calm. "It. Never. Happened. You hear? *Never*. You can't tell anyone. Least of all Max. Understand?" Max would kick his ass if she ever found out.

Joshua shrugged. "All right." He was never one to ponder long on things he could not understand, like the sometimes odd behavior of his X5 friend.

The reason for his visit to the roof garden forgotten, Alec's single desire was to get as far away from Joshua as possible. He fled, tumbling down the stairwell into the street, where he stalked out of Terminal City in search of the nearest bar. There wasn't enough Scotch in the world to drown the memories of what just happened, to make him forget, but he was certainly going to do his damndest to try.

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True to his word, Joshua never mentioned the episode again. And as the days passed Alec managed to convince himself the memory was nothing but a distant nightmare suffered a long time ago, something not worthy of his time. Life in Terminal City brought enough real problems that required his attention.

"Where's Max?" he asked one morning after he entered the command room and found she was not there.

Dix glanced up from the monitors. "Her place, I assume," he said. "She has a meeting in an hour. Why?"

"We need to get the license for the Art Mall's coffee shop on the agenda," Alec said. "The city's trying to shut Gem down."

Dix chortled dryly. "I suppose they didn't like the four stars they awarded her for her

coffee and bagels in the *Spectator* last week."

"Yeah. Can't have the trannies outdo ordinaries in the caffeine business," Alec commented with a scowl. "If you see Mole, tell him I want to talk to him later. I'm going to see Max."

Though she spent most of her time outside Terminal City, at Logan's new digs, or in hours-long negotiations with Seattle's city council representatives, Max had taken up residence in an office building three blocks down from the command center. Hooked up to the electricity grid as well as the water pipes, she had turned the run-down office into a place truly her own. Alec figured she'd need such a refuge sometimes, when the pressures of running a community of Manticore refugees in a hostile world became too much. He looked around, whistling in appreciation. A comfortable-looking, though battered sofa took up the center of the room, a dark blue coverlet hiding the worst of the tattered upholstery. A small table and three mismatched chairs stood in the far corner and shaded lamps around the room would provide illumination on cold, dark winter nights. There was even a plant on the table, with small white and purple flowers.

Max caught his eye. "Joshua gave me that," she commented with a shrug. She tore off a leaf and rubbed it between her thumb and index finger. It gave up a faint minty scent. "He says the aroma should be soothing."

"Right." With an effort, Alec pulled his gaze back to Max.

"Was there anything you want?"

Was there? He attempted to recall why he had come.

"Alec?" She was growing impatient, he could tell from her tone. "I have a meeting with the city I need to prepare for," she added. "So, unless you've got something urgent to discuss..."

She was a most amazing woman when annoyed, Alec decided. And today she looked particularly gorgeous. Those dark eyes, full mouth... Unaware of what he was doing, he licked his lips. He wished he—

Without further thought, he pounced. A single leap took him across the few feet that separated him from Max, the momentum taking them to the sofa in a tangle of arms and legs. Max lay pinned beneath him, for an instant stunned into immobility. She felt wonderful, her breasts soft and yielding beneath his cheek.

"Alec, what the fuck—" She writhed beneath him but his greater weight held her down.

His hands roamed over her, touching the satiny skin of her arms, fingers running through hair that felt like silk until she managed to wriggle a knee between them. Before Alec knew what happened, he was sailing through the air and landed against the brick wall with such force that his breath was driven from his lungs. He stared at her in dismay.

Max had hopped back to her feet as soon as she could. She stood tense, ready to defend herself. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she hissed. Her eyes were large, dark, filled with shock and anger—and fear?

Revulsion chilled Alec's blood, terror turning it to ice in his veins. Had he just done what he swore to himself he never would do, that day Manticore gave the X5 soldiers orders to breed with their own? Had he tried to force himself onto a woman? Onto *Max*? What was wrong with him?

"Max, I'm sorry." It came out as a strangled croak, self-loathing squeezing his throat tight. "I'm *so* sorry." He bolted from the room, away from her, not wanting to give her the chance to voice her opinion. He barreled along the street, past an open-mouthed Mole, and kept running straight out Terminal City's front gate, ignoring the shouts of the policemen on guard.

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Max found him, hours later, at the second place she looked, the first being Crash. He was sitting on the rim of the Needle's plateau, legs dangling dangerously over the edge. He stared at his toes. Far below, advancing dusk wrapped Seattle in long shadows.

"Alec?" she asked softly, approaching him cautiously, though he must have heard her come up the stairs.

"Go away, Max." She could barely recognize his voice.

"Alec, what happened?"

"What happened?" His tone was bitter. "Max, you were there. What happened is, I attacked you."

"Why?"

Alec raised his head and twisted around to stare at her. He wasn't always easy to read, but she had learned how to detect the deeper emotions lurking beneath the happy-go-lucky facade. The hazel-green eyes that held her transfixed were dark with fright.

"I don't *know* why, all right?" he spat. "Maybe—" His voice broke. He swallowed hard and turned away to gaze out across the sprawling city.

Max nodded, though his back was to her. It was as she thought. At first, she had been too furious with him to really consider what he'd done, but once she calmed down she had remembered the perplexed look on his face after she kicked him. That's when she had gone looking for him. "Alec, whatever it is, we'll figure it out." She put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off.

"No, you don't understand. Today wasn't the first time it happened."

It was Max's turn to shrink away, fear growing in her heart. What if he—no. She would not think about it. Not yet. "You attacked other women?"

Alec barked a humorless laugh. "No. Joshua."

Max's mind reeled. "You tried to force yourself on *Joshua*?"

"Yeh." He got to his feet, stood at the edge, hands dangling at his side. She tensed as he peered over the side at the darkening streets below.

Alec turned toward her. The expression on his face was so forlorn, so lost and scared, that she could not help forgive him no matter what. The man in her apartment had not been Alec. Her big-hearted, self-centered, pain-in-the butt, smart Alec, upon whom she could always count to have her back, even when he disagreed with her, would not have assaulted her—or Joshua. Whatever was going on with him, there had to be a rational explanation.

"Max..." He hesitated. For long moments she thought he wasn't going to continue. Then, hardly audible, he whispered, "What if... Is this what happened to my twin? To Ben? Am I going insane? Because if I am..." He glanced over his shoulder, where hundreds of feet below the lights of Seattle stretched out.

"No," Max said firmly, denying his fears even though they echoed her own. "You are *not* Ben. Alec, for all its faults, Manticore was thorough. They poked and prodded you for six months after Ben died."

"Don't remind me," he said wryly.

"If there was even the slightest chance you had Ben's mental flaw, they'd have discovered it." She reached out, took his hand. His fingers were cool between hers.

"Come on. It has to be something else. We'll find out what, and then we'll fix it." She tugged gently, and he reluctantly took a step forward, away from the edge.

"Where we going?"

"To see Dr. Carr.

oOo

Alec followed her mutely up the driveway to Sam Carr's private residence, a single-story bungalow in sector eleven. He waited at her side, shoulders slumped, while she rang the bell.

"Let's go," he said lowly after a minute had passed and Carr hadn't answered the door. "Nothin' he can do, anyway."

"You don't know that," Max said. She rang the bell again, keeping her finger on the buzzer for half a minute.

A few moments later the door opened. Dr. Carr stood in the doorway, looking oddly young without his white coat. Small, round reading glasses perched on his nose. "Max? I'm sorry. I was—" He caught a good look of their faces. "Something I can help you with?"

"Yes," Max said.

"I doubt it," Alec said.

Carr's eyes shifted from one transgenic to the other. He swung the door wider and stepped aside. "Come in."

He preceded them down a hallway and into a small, warmly lit study. It was cramped with bookcases, and untidy piles of books and medical magazines covered every flat surface. "Sorry for the mess. My wife is visiting her family in Denver." He cleared a few books off the couch and gestured for them to take a seat. Max did, but Alec, seemingly too tense to remain still, hovered by the door.

"So, what's wrong?" Carr asked, studying them both over the rim of his glasses.

"It's Alec," Max said. "He's been experiencing—" She hesitated. How to phrase it? "Episodes."

Near the door, Alec made a sound, but he did not speak.

"Episodes," Carr repeated. "Of what kind?"

"Of the attacking Max and trying to force myself on her, kind," Alec snarled.

Max sighed and shrugged at Carr's wide-eyed questioning look. "He assaulted me earlier today. I kicked his ass. And he forgets to mention he went after Joshua a while ago."

"*Joshua?*" Dr. Carr echoed dumbly. He sounded as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Max couldn't blame him; she'd used pretty much that same tone of voice an hour ago.

"Yeah. Rather an insane thing to do, wouldn't you say?" Alec said sourly.

"Alec's afraid he's going crazy," Max explained. "Like Ben."

Dr. Carr's brows rose with incomprehension. "Ben?"

Max realized she had never told the doctor about her brother. There had never been any need. "Ben was Alec's genetic twin," she explained in a soft voice. "X5-493. He went psychotic. Killed a bunch of people." She didn't dare look at Alec; he must know how much it cost her to tell Carr about her brother. But Ben was in the past, and it was Alec who needed her now.

"Ah." Carr took off his glasses and started polishing them furiously. "When, exactly, do these spells happen?" he asked. "And what are the symptoms you exhibit?"

"Symptoms?" Alec exploded in anger. In a fraction of a second he stood towering over Carr. "I *assaulted* Max! Rubbed myself all over her! What more do you need? A demonstration? A blow-by-blow account?"

Carr flinched before the furious X5 but to his credit, he held his ground. "As a matter of fact, yes. *Anything* you can remember about these 'episodes', as you call them, could be important. When did they happen, under what circumstances did they occur, how long did they last."

Alec let out a breath and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He flopped down tiredly beside Max. She wanted to reach out, take his hand in support but feared he would not let her. He wasn't very good at allowing people in.

"With Joshua," Alec said, "it happened about two weeks ago. I went up to the roof garden



to talk to him about something. You know how proud he is of that," he added to Max.

"Yes." Max smiled. Joshua kept her abreast of each bud and sprout that appeared. *Proud* didn't begin to cover it. She told Carr, "Some of our people have started growing herbs and vegetables. And Joshua is amazing with those plants. Looks like Sandeman not only used a dash of Picasso, but also a touch of P. Allen Smith when he made Joshua."

Carr nodded. "I see. So, what happened?"

"Josh was pottering around with some shrub. He called it field balm. Next thing I know, I'm all over the poor guy." Alec frowned. "I do remember it was warm that day, and that I didn't like the way those flowers smelled. They made me dizzy." He shrugged.

"Anyway, I told Josh not to tell anyone, and tried very hard to forget it ever happened. Until today."

"When the same thing happened with Max," Carr said. "Where was this? Also in the garden?"

"No, in my apartment," Max answered. "In Terminal City." She was quiet for a moment, remembering. Something had been odd. "Alec looked... confused, right before it happened. A bit out of it. Like he'd had one Scotch too many, or something."

"I hadn't," Alec snapped. "Haven't had a drink in three days. Besides, I don't *get* drunk. High metabolism, remember?"

"I didn't say you did," Max countered, "I said you *looked* like it."

"What else?" Carr prodded.

She took a minute to collect her thoughts, her mind running through the events of that morning, looking for more details that she could give the doctor. Though Alec's unexpected charge had shaken her to her core, she realized she had not felt frightened for a single moment. To the contrary. "It wasn't sexual," she said.

"What? Max, I was *all over you!*" Alec protested.

"Yes, I know. But not... You didn't try to kiss me or anything. You were just..." She stammered while she searched for the right words to explain. She could feel her face heat up as she spoke but forced herself to keep meeting his eye. Alec felt bad enough already; there was no need to add her embarrassment to his burden of guilt. Still, though she spoke the truth about his intentions, her body's response had been something else. She recollected the feel of his hands on her arms, how his fingers burned her skin; his weight

holding her down... She shivered, then mentally kicked herself. From the pained look in Alec's eyes, he'd caught the shiver and misinterpreted it. "You were rubbing against me. Almost like..." She hesitated. "Like a cat in heat."

"That's the second time someone uses the word 'rub'," Carr muttered. "An odd choice of words. I wonder..." His voice trailed off a moment before he sat forward, eyes gleaming. "Max may be on to something. You got cat in your DNA, like she does?" he asked Alec.

Alec shrugged. "Yeah. Most of the X-series do. What's that got to do with any of it? I don't see Max—"

Carr cut him short. "Max," he said, almost breathless, "do you have any plants at home?"

She stared at him. "Yes, I do. Matter of fact, I remember Alec looking at it, right before —"

Carr didn't wait for her to finish. He jumped up, startling them both, and hurried to a bookcase. He returned a moment later with a thick volume. Max cocked her head to read the title. *New Encyclopedia of Herbs And Their Uses*. Her brow furrowed. What was Carr thinking about?

He browsed through the book quickly, the pages rustling. "Ah, there." He turned the book upside down and showed Max a picture of a plant. It had heart-shaped leaves and pink and white flowers.

"That's the one," she said, surprised. "How'd you figure?"

Dr. Carr chortled. Alec glared at him, clearly failing to see anything humorous in the situation, but Max felt relief. She trusted Carr. If he thought it was amusing, whatever was wrong with Alec couldn't be too serious.

"Look at the description," Carr said, laughter in his voice.

Alec's shoulder brushed hers when he scooted nearer to peer at the book in her hand.

"Field balm is a herbal medicine that is used for restlessness, nervousness, and insomnia," he read out loud. "It is also known as catwort or catnip... *Catnip?*"

If she hadn't heard it for herself, Max would never have believed Alec capable of producing a squeak. He fell against the couch, the look on his face one of such flabbergasted comprehension that she felt like laughing out loud.

"So," he said in a faint voice, "I'm not headed for the loony bin?"

Max gave in to the urge to laugh. She hadn't known how worried she'd been until Carr solved the mystery. "No, pretty boy. No more than any house cat."

He grimaced at her, for once at a loss for a witty comeback.

Max turned to Carr. "Why am I not affected?" she asked. "Like Alec said, I have cat in my cocktail too."

Carr shrugged. "It's a hereditary condition," he explained. "Not all cats react to it." He turned to Alec. "I suppose *your* DNA comes from a catnip-sensitive animal. Max's doesn't."

Alec rolled his eyes. "Great. So I'm the only one who gets to go nuts whenever I get near that damn weed," he grouched, but Max could see his immense relief in the way he held himself, the way tense muscles had uncoiled when understanding sank in. She sympathized; she felt the same way.

oOo

A few minutes later they strolled down the path to where her bike was parked. Alec was quiet until they reached the end of the driveway.

"Max?"

She looked up at him. The expression in his eyes was intense, sincere.

"I'm sorry. You know I'd never—"

"Shh." She reached up and placed a finger against his lips. "No apology necessary. You were intoxicated. I know you never think of me *that way*."

She swung a leg over the saddle of her Ninja and chuckled. "Just remind me to never give you flowers on your birthday. Hop on, pretty boy."

Alec's reply was lost in the sound of the bike's engine roaring to life. Likely, Max thought while she raced them down the street, enjoying the wind in her hair and pleased with the knowledge that disaster had been staved off yet again, that was for the best.

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