

One Sheriff At The Time

Alec sauntered into command. Up on the landing, Luke and an X4 named Brent were manning the screens, watching the numerous newscasts for anything that might involve transgenics and monitoring the Sector Police channels. Thankfully, they had the sound muted to a whisper. If he had to hear Terry Caldwell denounce him for a soulless animal one more time, or McKinley predict dire consequences if the Manticore escapees weren't dealt with swiftly and decisively, well, he would no longer be held accountable.

The weeks since they escaped from Jam Pony and the siege of Terminal City began had not been easy. Tanks waited at the gates, one excuse away from rolling in; they lacked food, water, medicine, and were hard-pressed to keep the generator that powered the command center running. That was their top priority, even more so than food; they needed to keep the cameras and comms up and running. Without them, they'd be deaf, dumb and blind. Without them, they were as good as dead.

Lack of sleep had frayed his nerves until he was hanging on by his fingernails. At times, he asked himself why he hadn't hightailed it out of Seattle at the first sign of trouble, weeks ago, when the existence of the transgenics had been exposed. X5-494, the highly trained, genetically engineered killing machine, as McKinley loved to describe them, would probably have done so without a second thought. *Alec*, on the other hand... He sighed. Times were different now. *He* was different. He could as little desert his friends as he could chew off his right thumb.

He glanced over at the transgenics gathered around the large table in the middle of the ground floor. Gentle Joshua, clever Dix. The ever belligerent Mole. Max... They were his family. And he'd stick with them to the end. He rubbed at eyes that burned with fatigue. Perhaps the end would come soon.

"How many people do we still have unaccounted for?" he heard Max ask when he approached the table.

"A few dozen," Dix said. "Mostly X4s that were out with the military. A few X5s. Several transhumans."

As soon as they had raised their flag, declared Freak Nation and claimed Terminal City as their own, Max had given orders to try and bring in as many of their siblings as they could find. Amazingly, most had stuck around in the Seattle area instead of scattering to the four winds. Unprepared for freedom in a strange and hostile world, instinct sent them to ground near the place they once called home. An Eyes Only cable hack suggesting they remobilize and a confidential e-mail address distributed over the Informant Net was all it took to get their attention, and each day more transgenics came

in, the army blockade notwithstanding. At last count, Terminal City held nearly five hundred souls. Or non-souls, if Caldwell was to be believed. The last few days, though, the stream of new arrivals had slowed to a trickle. Likely, the ones still missing either couldn't, or wouldn't, make it.

Alec cleared his throat to announce his presence.

"You're late," Max said without looking up.

He shrugged. *I'm here, ain't I.* He bit down on the remark. Max sounded as exhausted and stressed out as he felt. The last thing their fledgling community needed was its leaders go for each other's throats. *How the military would love that.* Still, he couldn't stop himself from saying, "Five minutes, is all."

She looked up at that, a scowl marring her features. "Alec—"

Whatever she'd been about to say was forestalled when Luke spoke up. "Hey, guys? Look at this. Just came in." He trotted down the stairs and handed Max a printout. She quickly read it before giving the page to Alec.

X5-264 requests extraction. Location— A long line of jumbled numbers and letters to indicate coordinates followed.

"This for real?" Alec asked. It wouldn't be the first time someone tried to lure them into a trap by impersonating a transgenic in need of assistance and he'd be damned if he were going to lose more people on a bogus rescue attempt.

"It came in on the dedicated e-mail address," Luke said with a shrug. "And look at the coordinates. Taken literally, it's a place in the middle of the Pacific. Run them through Manticore's codebook, however, and you get—"

"—someplace in Idaho," Mole grunted around the stub of an unlit cigar.

Luke grinned. "Yeah. Town called Norris, to be precise."

"Why would an X5 ask for help to get to TC? He or she figured out how to contact us; I'd think they can figure out how to get here." Max still sounded suspicious.

"She," Luke said. "Look at the last sentence."

Alec scanned the print again. The final line was more personal, quite incongruous with the terse military language of the first few paragraphs. "'Tell X5-511 he's about to

become a daddy." He looked up, catching Max's eye. "That's Biggs' designation."

Max offered him a sad smile. "Renfro's breeding program. She's pregnant." She was quiet for a moment and Alec had no idea what she was thinking. *Probably how easily she could have ended up with a kid too, like Gem, or this*—he glanced at the page—*X5-264*.

"All right," Max said at last. She started pacing, the way she did when thinking. "I can't take the bike. And no way can we get the van past the army's blockade. Logan might loan me his wheels, though. And somebody please get me an Idaho road map."

"Whoa," Alec said. "Who says you get to go?"

Max planted her hands on her hips. "I do."

"You're not going," Alec said. "You can't. We're up to our eyeballs in negotiations with Clemente and the city council about getting them to withdraw the troops. They listen to you." He placed his palms on the table and leaned forward. "We need this siege lifted, Max. We need food, medicine, fuel. If they discover you're not here, I don't know what they'll do. I get the feelin' we don't wanna find out. Why don't *you* deal with the city, and I'll deliver our expectant momma from Idaho." He grinned. "No pun intended."

"Alec, we need you here too. You—"

"I'll go!" Joshua piped up. Five sets of eyes swiveled his way and he withered beneath their look.

After a moment, Alec said, "Not that we wouldn't appreciate the help, Josh, but—"

"—I know." Joshua blew out a breath. "Too dangerous. People scared of things that are different. Running and screaming."

Max raised a hand and patted Joshua's shoulder. "It's not the running and screaming that's the problem," she said gently. "They could hurt you, Big Fella." She met Alec's gaze.

"I need to go," he said softly. *For Biggs*.

Max closed her eyes briefly, a slight tremor running through her frame, and he knew she was picturing the same thing he was seeing in his mind's eye: Biggs' broken body suspended upside down from the bridge, swaying in the night breeze. It was a sight he didn't think he'd ever be able to eliminate from his mind. Just as he would never forget the joyful glee of Biggs' killers, their satisfaction at having murdered a freak. It was

something *none* of them should ever forget.

"All right," she said at last.

"You sure you trust me not to muck up?" he drawled, wanting to get past the awkward memories and snark being the quickest way he knew how.

She pinned him with a look. "If you do, I'll kick your ass."

Alec laughed.

oOo

The trip to Norris, Idaho, took longer than expected. Logan's battered Aztec ambled along the country roads at a frustratingly slow pace, even when Alec floored the pedal. Countless times during the long journey east did he wish he could have brought the bike. But asking a highly pregnant woman to take an hours long ride on the back of a motorcycle—Alec had to agree with Max: it was impossible, even if the woman in question *was* an X5, and much harder than the average female.

At least the papers Logan provided allowed him to pass the various checkpoints along the highway without much hindrance—although there had been that incident just outside of Spokane, where a pair of overzealous cops demanded Alec bare them his neck so they could check for barcodes.

"Hey fellas, do I look like a mutant freak to you?" he'd laughed, giving them his most winning smile.

The joke was lost on the two police officers manning the post. "Not one of them ugly ones, no," they'd admitted. "But the other ones, those exes? They could look just like you or us."

Alec gave the checkpoint cops, beer guts protruding over their uniform belts, a quick once-over. "Never like you," he muttered, even as he twisted his head around. He'd been thankful that Max had insisted he laser his barcode off the night before he left, despite his protests. *Saved my butt again, she did.* Even so, he made a mental note of the checkpoint's location, determined to find a way around it on his way back, after he'd picked up X5-264.

A watery sun hung low in the gray sky by the time he turned off the main route at Pierce and began the last leg of his journey. Dusk was falling and purple shadows crawled across the narrow country road when he passed the *Welcome to Norris, Pop.*

2,763 sign. The lettering had faded, and the O in Norris was riddled with holes where someone had used the sign for target practice. The town itself was typically post-Pulse small-town American: a broad potholed thoroughfare lined with boarded up stores that used to sell household goods or hardware. A few fast-food franchises broke the monotony with glaring red and yellow signs. The centerpiece was the county courthouse, a large building of red brick. The two-storied police station sat right beside it, three patrol cars parked in front. Alec passed them slowly, knowing how easily a stranger in a rural town could draw unwanted attention.

It was on the other edge of town that he found what he sought. The *Red Stag Motor Inn* on the edge of the Clearwater National Forest turned out to be a small motel. Twenty rooms, divided over two stories in a single block building, a small office on the left corner.

Alec turned into the parking lot. It did not hinder him in the least that the lights were out, their bulbs broken and never replaced. The *Red Stag* had obviously seen better days. Paint was peeling, dust coated the windows and cobwebs hung thick on the railing of the stairs leading to the second floor. A rusty Impala stood at a crooked angle at the far end of the parking lot. Alec supposed the inn didn't see much traffic out this way since the Pulse had practically shut down tourism.

He got out and stretched, listening to his vertebrae pop back into place. Cat DNA or no, ten hours behind the wheel made for one tired, sore transgenic. Even the innocuous little flirt with the blond waitress over lunch at a roadside café along the I-90 couldn't change that. Still, it felt good to be away from TC for a bit. Away from the pressures of so many people depending upon him, away from Max's fears she could not live up to expectations, from the worry that at any moment the military might burst through the perimeter fence, guns blazing.

He glanced around the empty lot. A television flickered behind the dirty windows of the manager's office, the muted sounds of a game show drifting in the still night. The room he wanted was on the ground floor, the third door down. His boots scrunched on the gravel as he walked across the lot. He rapped his knuckles on the wood, and after a moment the door swung open, hinges squeaking softly. Alec stepped inside. "264?"

As soon as his feet cleared the doorway, his instincts began to scream that something was wrong. He tensed, senses spreading out in an attempt to determine the danger. Whoever waited for him had come prepared. Transgenic reflexes notwithstanding, he wasn't fast enough and before he could do more than twist halfway round, a taser hit the soft flesh of his left side with enough juice to disable him instantly. He clung to the door frame for support, his knees no longer strong enough to hold him up.

Idiot! He'd walked into the trap like a witless raw recruit and he could almost hear his former Manticore trainers holler about what a fuck-up he always was.

The taser hit him again, white hot agony crashing through his skull and searing his body. He had time for a last thought—*Max will have my hide for boots*—before his vision dimmed and the world turned black.

oOo

Alec woke up to hammers beating on anvils right behind his eyes. The splitting headache was familiar; getting nearly electrocuted would do that to a person. He slitted his eyes open, wincing at the glare of fluorescents hitting his retinas. He lay on a bunk bed, the thin mattress not quite concealing a few broken springs. A rough blanket was folded beneath his cheek. The faint stink of booze and vomit it gave off made him gag and he swallowed hard. Cold steel bands circled his wrists and ankles, heavy chains running between them. They jingled when he tried to sit up. An experimental tug told him the shackles were strong enough to hold a horse—a genetically empowered transgenic was no match for them. *Great.* Somebody knew what they were doing. Thus manacled and fettered hand and foot, he was at the mercy of his captors.

Once his eyes had adjusted to the light and the headache retreated to a dull pounding somewhere in the back of his brain, he glanced around. He was in a holding cell in what looked like a standard police station. Chagrined to learn that it was simple local law enforcement that had bested him—one of America's supersoldiers—he glared at the guard who sat in a chair on the other side of the room, head bent over what appeared to be paper forms. The guard didn't notice and after a few moments, Alec gave up and began to survey the rest of his surroundings. That was when his taser-befuddled senses finally noticed the highly pregnant girl who sat a few feet away on a second bunk. She rested her back against the wall, eyes closed like she were asleep.

"X5-264?" he asked softly, as if the fact that she, too, was secured with heavy manacles was not enough confirmation. She had dark blond hair, same color as his, but it hung in grimy strands past her face, a sign she hadn't had a chance to wash it in days. She wore a pair of blue coveralls, also quite dirty. Her swollen belly pressed against the heavy cotton.

She opened her eyes and blinked at him. "Yes. Call me Kat. You okay? You must've taken quite a hit, you were out for hours."

"I'm all right." He grinned. "Cat. That's cute."

She glowered at him. "No, Kat with a K. Short for Katherine. I always liked that name."

And you are?"

"Alec. 494."

Her gaze widened at that. Alec rolled his eyes. "Yeah, the bad apple."

Kat shook her head. "That's not—I'm just surprised you came yourself. I thought you were one of the leaders in Seattle, I figured you'd send someone else to pick me up."

"Like X5-511?"

She nodded. "Is he—"

"Sorry," Alec said. "He died a few weeks ago. Got beaten to a pulp by a bunch of ordinaries, who weren't keen on havin' us trannies about." He paused, taking a few deep breaths, holding a tight grip on his anger and shoving away the images that wanted to come forward. "His name was Biggs."

She shifted, and the shackles clinked. Kat grimaced.

Alec turned away. "Hey you!" he called out at the guard. "Got a pregnant girl here. You really need to keep her in chains?"

The guard dropped the file folder he'd been reading—no, make that *she*, and looked up. Alec smiled to himself; he'd always had a way with the ladies. But as she got up and walked closer, he realized his assumption had been wrong. Her nametag identified her as *Sheriff P. Moreland*. A tall, tough-looking woman in her mid-thirties, she had her light blond hair pulled back into a practical ponytail, showing off sharp features and intelligent eyes. From the expression on her face, she was not one to take much crap from her prisoners. Well, that made sense. Woman sheriff, small loggers' town like this—she'd probably heard it all, and seen it too. He wasn't going to charm them out of here.

Moreland regarded Alec a moment before she spoke. "Your lady friend put two of my deputies in the hospital," she said calmly. "And broke the wrist of a third before we could overpower her. So, yeah, the cuffs stay on."

Alec knew she wasn't going to relent, so he baby-stepped away to sit next to Kat. "How long before your baby's due?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Not sure. Soon. It's not like I've had one before."

"The breeding program?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry."

Kat smiled at that. "It wasn't so bad. X5-511... Biggs... He was nice enough. I liked him."

"So, why haven't you hooked up after Manticore went down?"

"I was deployed east," Kat said. "New York. Have been trying to make my way west since I heard about the Seattle settlement a couple weeks back. Made it all the way here, but..." Her voice trailed off.

"What happened?"

"Last guy I hitched a ride with? He got fresh. Thought he could have his way with a helpless pregnant female." She tried to sound off-handed, tough, the way Manticore had bred them, but there was a catch in her voice and Alec knew she was close to breaking point. He could only imagine what the last weeks must have been like for her. Alone, on the run, vulnerable. She glanced at him briefly before she looked away, a grim smile on her lips. "Anyway, he knows better now. After that, I ended up here. Money ran out. And I didn't dare hitchhiking any more. Next time, I might end up killing 'm."

"So you called for help."

"Yeah. And now we both end up a prisoner. I'm sorry I dragged you into this, Alec."

He offered a shrug. "No problem. We're family. 'Leastways, that's what Max always says."

"Max?"

"452. She runs TC. It's not much, but it's home. Though the jury's still out on whether or not we get to keep it."

Kat's chains rattled as she drew up her knees. Alec's eyes narrowed.

"You're shaking. How long have you been off your tryptophan?"

"A week. I asked for milk, but they said I couldn't have any."

Alec looked to see Moreland had returned to her seat at the other end of the office.

"Sheriff? Ask you a favor?"

Her keen gaze examined him from across the room. "I told you, I'm not uncuffing your friend."

Alec shook his head. "I'm not askin'. But she's sick. There was a bottle of pills in the pocket of my jacket. You still got that somewhere?"

"Yeah." Moreland put down her pen and leaned back. "I read the label. Tryptophan. It's a food supplement, not medication. I fail to see what good that'll do her. Besides, from what I hear, your kind is pretty much indestructible."

Alec sighed. "Pretty much, yeah. But not quite. We come with a defect. A brain chemistry disorder that leads to a serotonin deficiency. We need the trypto to supply what our bodies fail to produce. Kat's running low. If you don't give her those pills, she's gonna suffer from seizures until she goes into a coma, and then death." He gave her a sharp look, hazarding a guess. "Unless that's what you want?"

"It's not," the sheriff said curtly. She walked right up to the cage. Someone should tell her that was a dangerous thing to do, with two transgenic soldiers locked up on the other side of those flimsy bars, he thought. Then again, perhaps she knew what she was doing. After all, she'd been smart enough to keep the shackles on.

Moreland contemplated Kat. "Is it true what he says?"

Kat returned her stare look for look, full of Manticore hardness. "Yeah. But don't worry, I think I can hold out a while longer."

"Shut up," Alec growled. That inbred rigidity could be taken too far. "You know as well as I do that when the tremors start, the seizures aren't far behind."

"Hold out your hands," Moreland instructed. Kat obediently held them up, chains clanking. The stark light of the overheads showed that her hands were visibly shaking. The sheriff's brows drew down and she turned away. She walked to her desk and returned a moment later. Much to Alec's relief, she cast him the small bottle of tryptophan pills. He caught it deftly. Moreland also shoved a plastic bottle of water through the bars.

"Thanks," Alec said, meaning it. He'd been treated worse at ordinaries' hands.

He shook a handful of pills from the bottle and gave them to Kat. She washed them down with a few mouthfuls of water before she wiped the back of her hand across her

mouth and offered him the bottle. He accepted it gratefully and took a large swallow.

He glanced at Sheriff Moreland. She hadn't gone back to her desk but was still watching them through the bars.

"So," Alec said to her, settling himself beside Kat on the bunk again, "if you don't want us dead, why grab us up in the first place? We haven't done anything wrong that I can tell. All we want is to be left alone, live our lives."

"I may not want you dead," Moreland said slowly, "but I am sworn to uphold the law. There's a general warrant out for the arrest of your kind."

"Arresting us is as good as wishing us dead," Alec said. "They won't rest until they kill us all. Wipe out the trannies as tough we never existed."

Moreland shot him a wry look. "I doubt it would come to that," she said.

"It must be nice, living in your world." Alec gave a rueful shake of his head. Why should she believe him? The atrocities the US government was capable of were beyond most people's imaginations, stretching credulity past its bounds.

"The military only wants you contained," Moreland continued. "For your own safety as much as ours."

Alec didn't reply. He tugged at the chains. It wasn't a conscious deed; the deep-seated need to regain control of his fate drove him to never give up. When he realized what he was doing, he put his hands on his knees. Beside him, Kat moved and the bunk bed shuddered. The sheriff observed them in silence, a curious expression on her face.

"The news reports say you're all trained killers," she said at last, her voice low. "Is that true? You don't look it, but the way your friend handled my men—"

"Looks can be deceiving," Alec interrupted roughly. "We also have a fair bit of cat DNA. I bet you couldn't tell *that* from looking at us." Perhaps not the smartest thing to do, bait her like that, but he was so sick and tired of constantly having to defend who he was—hell, that he *was*—he couldn't help himself.

She gave him a startled look before her eyes fixed on Kat's belly. "That preacher did mention animal instinct... primal urges." She was speaking to herself, her lips barely moving and her voice so low that only transgenic hearing could've picked it up.

Alec's eyes widened in sudden understanding. He made a sound in the back of his throat

that might have been a laugh. "Lady, you've been watching too much TV. That crap Caldwell spouts... You really believe that's true? That we're all instinct-driven, sex-crazed animals who went on the rampage as soon as we were free?" He firmly stomped on the recollection of his own early days of freedom, spent in a rural motel with a pretty yet vacuous blonde who could never quite satisfy him. His voice low, he added, "You think that's the reason so many X5 females are found pregnant?"

Moreland met his eyes square on. "Can you offer another explanation?"

Alec turned to Kat. "Tell her," he said tiredly, not sure why he even gave the order. Humans, ordinaries, they believed what they wanted to believe, *whom* they wanted to believe. Yet, something about Moreland's demeanor suggested they might have a chance to make her listen to the truth. She reminded him of Clemente: not so much a zealot as a conscientious officer of the law.

"I was assigned a breeding partner," Kat said simply. "Last summer. Back at Manticore."

"Breeding partner?" From the tone of her voice it was clear the sheriff didn't understand. "Him?" She nodded at Alec.

"No," Alec said. "I got paired off with someone else. All of us were. Well, the fertile ones, at least."

She still didn't get it.

"Manticore's DNA database was destroyed last year," Alec continued patiently. "No more test tube super soldiers. So they decided to breed more of us the old fashioned way."

Incredulous comprehension dawned on Moreland's face. "They made you—" Her voice filled with revulsion. "You were raped?" She looked at Kat, no longer sheriff to prisoner but woman to woman.

"I guess you could call it that." Kat shrugged. "They called it copulating. Orders, you see. It was supposed to go on until we got pregnant. A lot of the females were, by the time Manticore burned down, although very few of us knew it at the time."

The sheriff's face had paled and she looked nauseous. "That's sick," she whispered. "I had no idea..."

"Welcome to *our* world," Alec muttered. He was surprised to find his hands had curled into fists. They weren't animals, cattle, to be bred like livestock. A year on the outside had taught him that. Yet, even back in the old days, the orders had felt wrong to him. It

was the main reason he never forced himself on Max, something he would forever be grateful for; he didn't think Max would have been as accepting of him worming his way into her life if he had. She certainly would have let him die when White put that popgun next to his brain.

Something tugged at his consciousness, nudging it away from his reverie and demanding his attention. Something barely audible, even though the room had grown deadly silent. He glanced at Kat and met her eyes. She gave a barely perceptible nod; she'd heard it too. Her expression was alert, a bit frightened. As well she should be.

"There's a helicopter coming in," Alec said. He tested the chains once more, knowing the futility of the gesture yet helpless to stop. Those bonds chafed, in more ways than one. "Who did you call?"

"What?" Moreland blinked. She shifted her eyes away from Kat with a visible effort, dragging her attention back to the here and now. "What helicopter? I don't hear anything."

Of course she didn't. It would be a few more minutes before that chopper came into an ordinary's hearing range. Alec shuffled across the few feet from the bunk to the bars. They felt cold beneath his palms. "You called someone, didn't you? To tell them you had two transgenics in custody. Who? State Patrol? DoD?"

"Homeland Security," she said.

"Shit," Alec swore. "That's about the worst people you could have called." The time for niceties was fast running out.

"Watch your language," Moreland murmured absently. It came out as something she had said on countless occasions to innumerable prisoners. Her mind was on something else. The sound of the approaching helicopter grew louder, clearly audible now, even to her. She glanced at the windows, which showed night still reigned, and blackness dominated. Not a safe time for flying in mountainous areas. A puzzled crease formed on her brow. "They're early," she murmured. After a moment she gave a shrug, and looked back at Alec. "Those are the standing instructions with regard to transgenic matters. Don't worry, I'm sure all they'll do is take you to a secure facility to be with your own, despite what you believe." She glanced briefly at Kat. "We're not all barbarians."

"Sheriff, your faith in the government is commendable," Alec said with a heavy sigh. "But Homeland Security will have informed the NSA the instant your message came in and the NSA wants us bad. We're at the top of their shit list." Even though Ames White had been relieved of his command after the Jam Pony fiasco, the agency still had a bone

of its own to pick. "NSA were sent in to do damage control when Manticore burned, to keep our existence under wraps. They're still mightily pissed about so many of us escaping their net."

"The United States government doesn't go around killing people without good reason," Moreland objected. "It—" The sound of gunfire that echoed outside put the lie to her words and she drew in a sharp, startled breath.

"Wanna bet?"

There was more gunfire, the staccato report of semi-automatics this time. Someone screamed in pain, the shout abruptly cut off when another shot rang out.

Somewhere in the police station a radio crackled to life. "Dispatch?" A young woman's voice, sounding frightened and confused. "What's—" The rest of her words was lost in another burst of rapid shots. Further away from the transceiver, someone shouted, "Oh Jezus! They killed Charly!"

For the first time since Alec had woken up, he found the sheriff looking at a loss for what to do. Her tranquil, *ordered* world of small town life in the mountains, where the worst crimes she'd had to deal with were drunken fistfights on Friday nights, had suddenly dissolved into chaos. People were dying. And she couldn't understand why. Alec had to concede Moreland one point: the NSA engaging in a sudden gunfight with the local cops wasn't exactly standard operating procedure. Something else was going on; someone other than the NSA must've been in that helicopter. And that could only mean—

A voice roared through the night. "494! Your days are numbered!"

Fear shot through Alec, clenching his throat. His heart thudded painfully in his chest. *White!*

"Sheriff! Wanna get these shackles off? At least give us a chance!"

Death would come for him soon, no doubt. People were trying to kill him on a daily basis, and one of these days someone would succeed. Alec didn't believe he'd live to a grand old age and die in his bed, but he didn't want to go out like this either, at the hands of that breeding cult maniac, chained and locked up like a lamb waiting for the proverbial slaughter.

Moreland paid him no attention. The radio in the other room continued to spit out scared voices, too jumbled to make out words.

"Alec? What's going on?" Kat shuffled over to stand beside him. He glanced at her. She looked ready to go down fighting, pure transgenic steel, yet all big and clumsy. Even without the chains she wouldn't be much help.

He offered what he hoped was an encouraging wink. "Ames White," he said. "The man's a psychopath nursing an insane grudge against transgenics."

"Against you," Kat said. She hadn't missed White mentioning his designation.

"Yeah." He gave a lopsided grin. "He's particularly got it in for me and Max. I don't know who he wants dead worse, her or me."

Suddenly a clear voice called over the radio. "Pat? It's Swinley." He sounded older, more experienced. "We need back up. These people aren't human. We shoot 'em, and they keep on comin'. They—" A single bang echoed over the airwaves, loud enough to make Moreland jump, a brief moment of static, then nothing.

That last shot finally startled her into action. "God, I must go—" she muttered, rushing for the door. Her fingers were fumbling with the gun in her holster.

"No!" Alec barked. "Stop!" His voice was harsh and deep, using that undeniably commanding tone that would have done any drill sergeant proud. The effect was not lost on Moreland. She froze, twisting around slowly to stare at him.

In a more moderate voice, he continued. "You can't help them. You'd only be getting yourself killed."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "Mark said they weren't human..." The gun was halfway out of its holster by now.

"He's wrong," Alec said, low and urgent. "They're human all right, just resistant to pain. They're not my people." He pressed against the bars, holding her fixed with his gaze, his eyes never leaving hers. "Think! Where would they get a helicopter? Seattle's got us under *siège*. We can barely scrounge up enough to feed ourselves. But the city is talking about a cease-fire. Why would we risk all that to start a war in the middle of nowhere?"

"To help you escape?"

The gunfire had died down to the occasional lone shot. White had managed to come up with a bullhorn somewhere, likely from one of the patrol cars. "494. I'm coming for you. No escape now." He seemed full of delighted anticipation.

Alec cocked his head. "Does that sound like someone who wants to break me out of jail?" He tried to keep his voice calm; however, he couldn't stop the quiver of fear from coming through. If he couldn't convince Moreland to release him, he'd be a sitting duck. "Sheriff, if you don't get these cuffs off me, you might as well shoot me now and spare me a far more painful death at the hands of a madman."

Downstairs, a door banged open with such force the building shook. Feet thumped on the stairs. Panic surged, overwhelming coherent thought until instinct took over. Alec clawed at the cuffs on his wrists, straining muscles to tearing point, tendons cording. *God, I don't want to die. Not like this.* He didn't care that the metal bit into his flesh until his skin broke and blood began to well up. He didn't even feel it, his system so full of adrenaline that pain was nothing but a vague memory. His survival instincts shrieked in alarm and he simply was incapable of waiting for White quietly. In retrospect, Alec believed it was this desperate, terror-fueled act more than anything he could have said that finally brought Moreland to believe him.

She took the keys from her belt. "Step back," she said, the order given out of habit more than for any other reason. She opened the door to the holding cell and rushed inside, fingers quickly sorting through the keys for the one to the cuffs. She looked up at his face one more time, searchingly, before unlocking his shackles.

He kicked off the ankle chains even as the sheriff knelt next to Kat, who held out her hands to give easy access to the cuff locks. Further down the hallway, doors slammed. They were close.

Before Alec could take more than a single step, the door burst open and two black-clad, broad-shouldered Special Ops types hurtled through, dwarfing him with their height. He didn't need more than a single glance to know they weren't ordinary human soldiers. *Phalanx.* Cold fright traveled up his spine. It made sense White would bring the cult's elite soldiers: he wasn't taking chances with 494 any longer, had been done playing a while ago. This time, it was to the finish. The barrels of their guns swiveled in his direction, their training instantly determining him the greatest threat. He stared at the muzzles, twin black eyes of death. It was too far to blur, the cell not providing enough space to roll and evade.

Kat made a soft noise, almost a whimper, and for the briefest instant the cultists' eyes shifted away from Alec. It was the opening he needed. He blurred from the cell, managed to take out the male on the left with a single high kick, the scrunch of broken bone strangely gratifying. The man slid to the floor without a sound.

His partner had spun away, using the opportunity to redirect his gun. Alec hurled himself forward, seizing the weapon and rending it from the man's grip. Bones snapped.

Despite his enhanced speed, he wasn't fast enough, though; the Phalanx soldier managed to squeeze off a single shot, the report loud in Alec's ears. Burning pain lanced through his side.

Fuck. "That hurts, bitch."

The cultist smirked even though his wrist was broken and his right hand hung uselessly. "Pain is a phantom of the mind. Animal." He snarled, came at Alec in a rush. The transgenic danced away, trying not to wince at the agony in his side.

White's voice drifted in. He was close, probably right at the foot of the stairs. "494. You better not make trouble. Or I'll make your demise as painful as possible."

Alec swallowed. He knew White wasn't boasting. The man truly hated his guts with a vengeance. Each time they had gone up against each other and Alec managed to better White had fanned the flames of that hatred until it was a furnace threatening to consume his nemesis. If he was still alive when White got his hands on him...

"You first have to come and get me, Ames!" Alec yelled back. He sounded a little winded. Hot blood was streaming down his flank, plastering his t-shirt to his skin and soaking his jeans.

Kat moaned again, and from the corner of his eye he saw how the sheriff leaned over the transgenic female, helping her to her feet, the taller woman supporting Kat's weight while they scrambled from the cell.

Now? a part of Alec's mind wondered in dismay. What was it with those X5 girls, going into labor at the most direst of times? First Gem, back at Jam Pony, now Kat.

Had to be genetic.

In Alec's moment of distraction his opponent crouched and whirled, legs scissoring, trying to sweep Alec's feet from under him. Only transgenic reflexes allowed him to leap up in time to avoid the blow. It was an awkward jump, made at the last instant, barely high enough. His landing was as ungainly, his body screaming in protest. Alec gasped. Blood loss was making him clumsy. If he didn't finish the Phalanx off soon, he need not worry about being caught alive any longer.

The man was good, Alec had to give him that. But he'd gone up against the cult's soldiers before, and they weren't infallible. As if on cue, the man opposite him made a mistake, dropping his guard for an instant. Alec took the opening offered without hesitation and the Phalanx found himself sucking for air through a crushed windpipe, clawing at his

throat even as he stumbled out of the door. There was a thud, a crash, the sound of something breaking, and White screaming vile curses. Alec tensed.

"Alec? Let's go," Kat hissed. He glanced over his shoulder. She and Moreland were huddling near a door at the other end of the office, a door he had failed to see up till now because it was at an impossible angle from the cell.

"Goes down the fire escape," the sheriff said. "Never thought we'd need it, but building codes, you know."

Alec had never felt more grateful for building inspectors and their regulations. He only took a moment to pick up the gun he'd liberated from his Phalanx opponent and followed the two women out. They clambered down the stairs as quickly as possible and a near inhuman howl of fury and disappointment followed them as they disappeared into the dark night.

Gave you the slip again, Ames, Alec thought with satisfaction.

oOo

Kat pulled the hospital gown off her shoulder and bared a breast. Her daughter's tiny mouth latched on to the nipple eagerly and started suckling. Alec couldn't tear his eyes away. There wasn't anything erotic about it, and lust was the furthest thing from his mind, bared breast or no. Yet something about the scene spoke to him, to his core, deep down where primal desires rested. *Perhaps someday I*—unbidden an image of Max flashed before his eyes. He squeezed them shut, willing the thought away. Better not go there. Besides, Max would have his balls if she ever learned what thoughts he sometimes entertained.

The door opened, and he looked toward it with gratitude. Right now, he could use any distraction. Moreland ducked her head in. She smiled at Kat, then signaled Alec she wanted to speak with him.

"You be okay for a bit?" he asked Kat.

She took her eyes away from her baby's face for a moment to give him a nod. "Yeah."

Alec walked out of the room. Moreland was waiting for him in the hallway.

"How you feel?" she asked.

He gave a shrug, regretting it instantly. "I'm all right," he said. "Or at least, will be. The

bullet went through and through, nicked a rib but they patched me up nicely." He flashed her a smirk. "Serotonin flav aside, Manticore did a bang-up job on the rest of the package. I'll heal."

She grunted something. "Here," she said, digging up a cell phone from her pocket. "Yours. There's a young lady that keeps calling for you."

"Max." Alec sighed. Undoubtedly, he'd get an earful.

"You better call her back." Moreland's lips quirked. "She seemed rather pissed."

Alec snorted a laugh. "Sounds like Max, all right."

He took the phone, walked out the front door and dialed Max's number from the parking lot.

It rang once. "Go for Max."

"Hey. It's me."

"Alec! Where are you? What the hell happened? There are reports of a firefight all over the news. What did you do?"

He winced at the shrill anger in her tone and held the phone away from his ear. Figured he'd get the blame.

"I hit a snag," he said when she finally paused for breath.

"Hit a snag," she repeated. Nobody could utter three simple words quite so scathingly as Max. "Alec, all you had to do was pick up a pregnant X5. But no, that would be too easy, wouldn't it? You had to start World War Four."

"Hey!" His temper slipped. Alec closed his eyes, took a deep breath. "That wasn't me, Max. It was White. He—"

"White?" she broke in. "Are you all right?"

And nobody could switch gears the way Max could. Sometimes, she left him dizzy, unsure which was up or down.

"You know me. Got a new hole where I didn't need one, lost a little blood, but I'll live."

"You got shot."

"Yeh." There was a long moment of silence.

"X5-264?"

"Her name's Kat. Not a scratch on her and she got a pretty little girl for her effort. Born a few hours ago. Healthy as can be, ten fingers, ten toes, the works. She's got Biggs' eyes, I think. Oh, and Max? Get this: no barcode."

"Good." He could hear the smile come over the line. "When are you coming home?"

"Soon," he said, and hoped it was true.

"Okay. And Alec?"

"Yeah." *Be careful.* "Always."

He chortled when she huffed, and pressed the disconnect button. He stayed outside for a moment longer, enjoying the solitude, the brisk mountain air. It was going to be a gorgeous day, the sun slowly rising in a clear blue sky. At last, he turned to go back inside. Moreland was waiting for him outside Kat's room.

"So," Alec said, "what happens now? You gonna rearrest us?"

Not that he would allow that to happen. If Kat hadn't been in labor, they would have skedaddled out of Norris as soon as they stepped off that fire escape, never to return, bullet hole or no. However, with the baby demanding to be born, he'd not had much choice but to follow Kat and Moreland to the hospital. At least he'd gotten a few professionally sewed stitches for his trouble.

"No." She threw him a set of keys that he snatched from the air. They were the keys to the Aztec. He cocked an eyebrow.

"Way I see it, you've done nothing wrong," Moreland said. "Except be what you are. No crimes. Well, aside from those two men you killed in my office."

"That was self-defense," he protested.

"I know." She looked away.

Alec understood. "How bad?"

"There were four of them," she said. "Five, if you count this Ames White that got away. I lost nine men. If not for the shift change, most of them would have been out on patrol, elsewhere in the county. Safe."

And we'd have been toast, Alec didn't say. Strangely, she didn't seem to hold it against him; this woman could teach Max a thing or two about blame.

"I'm sorry." He knew it wasn't enough.

"Not your fault," she said. "You can't help what you are. If they'd just walked in and flashed a badge or showed some paperwork, I'd have handed you over without a second thought. If—" She shook her head. "Just take the girl, and go. Before the real NSA gets here. I'll tell them you escaped during the fighting. That's not too far from the truth."

He gave her a grateful nod. "You know who they're going to put that on, though, don't you?" he asked sadly.

"Not if I can help it. You deserve better, the truth, at least. We have the bodies. I had someone check: no barcodes. I'll have them send up to Boise for DNA analysis."

"You do that," Alec said. "Just promise me one thing?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "What?"

"When the bodies get lost in transit, don't make too much of a noise. These are powerful people. Dangerous people. You don't want to go toe-to-toe with them."

She was silent for a moment, studying him. "You're serious, aren't you?" she asked softly. "You're convinced those bodies are going to disappear, that your kind will be blamed for what happened here."

He shrugged. "I'd like to be wrong. But I'm not. And there's nothing you can do about it except get yourself in deep shit. I'd hate to see that. You'll have done your bit for the—" he wiggled his fingers to create air quotation marks,—"transgenic cause once you let us go. Let's leave it at that."

oOo

A few minutes later Alec was helping Kat into Logan's car. Once she was comfortable, the baby snug in her arms, he climbed behind the wheel and started the engine. "Have you thought of a name?" he asked.

Kat smiled and let her daughter suckle on her little finger. "Yes. I'm calling her Faith."

Alec smiled back. "That is a very pretty name." He glanced in the rearview mirror. Moreland watched them drive off, her hat tilted backwards, hands on her hips.

Faith. Perhaps Max was right. Perhaps, if the truth, the whole truth, about Manticore came out, they could convince the American people that the transgenics weren't the enemy after all. They just might win enough hearts and minds, one sheriff at the time, to have a chance at life.

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