

ukefied The Most Dangerous Game

N.B. Please note that this post is fairly graphic-heavy! The chapter headers are quite large (and by "quite" I mean "seriously") but they are so incredibly detailed I couldn't bear not to show them off. Author's notes follow the story~

Artist:  [dollarformyname](#)


Fandom: Dark Angel

Disclaimer: No loitering, no line dancing. Also, this series and its characters do not belong to me.

Word Count: 20,274

Rating/Warnings: NC-17 (for the sex, not the violence)

Character/Pairings: Ben/Alec, Max/Logan, Joshua, Original Cindy, various background characters

Notes: Takes place after "Borrowed Time," but veers into marginally-AU after that: some things have happened already, and some have not. Any biology/technobabble is cheerfully glossed over. Based on  [dollarformyname](#)'s [prompt](#).

Alpha:  [measuringlife](#)

Beta:  [dollarformyname](#)

Summary: After "Pollo Loco," Manticore tries to put Ben back together. When it doesn't work as well as they'd hoped, they use him as training bait for the new Gossamers instead. They chase him down and rip him apart time and time again, until Max torches the facility and lets everything out — then it's open season. Eventually the Gossamers chase him all the way back to Seattle, to Max's guilt and Alec's misery. Gossamers are relentless hunters, though; it doesn't take them long to catch up — and now they're after Alec, too.



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Two hours and fifty-one minutes. This is how much sleep he could have gotten by now if he could afford to rest. The Washington forests are silent and cold; Ben can feel the frost nip his toes and creep up his arms. The tree is rigid and unyielding against his back, and his ass is numb but he doesn't dare shift his weight. The wind rustles the leaves and he shivers, wrapping his arms tighter around his knees.

He learned a few weeks ago that Gossamers can't climb very well, and he's put that knowledge to good use. He's closer to the perimeter than he's ever gotten, having strewn his issued fatigues about the forest in an attempt to throw them off. This has entailed its own sacrifices, leaving him clad only in thin grey sweats and a matching t-shirt, both still damp from his dive in the river. He rubs his bloodied feet together in a vain effort to warm them.

Two hours and fifty-three minutes and not a sound. Ben lets his eyes drift shut, inhales deeply through his nose and tries to quell the shudders rippling up his spine.

In the distance, something moves through the undergrowth. Ben's eyes snap open, body going rigid as he strains his ears. Dead wood is creaking in protest, twigs are cracking, and they're coming. They're coming.

Steady on, he thinks, desperately. Gossamers can't climb. So long as he stays up here, hidden in the leaves, they won't be able to find him. Down below, the rustling sounds grow closer. At least two Gossamers, he figures. Maybe more circling around. It doesn't make sense, though — has it really been that long since he washed off his scent? *Don't move. Remain in position.* They've probably been circling the whole compound like this, he reasons. This time, they just happen to have found his tree — but *they don't know that*, he reiterates, steadying his breathing.

"Please protect me," he whispers into his knees. Every time, he prays for Her help — and every time, the Blue Lady doesn't answer him. "Please."

When he hears something heavy land on the branch behind him, he screams.



Ben comes to in his room, strapped to a gurney. The restraints slow his

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shivering, but they cannot stop it. The room is nearly empty, sterile, and white, white, white. He aches all over, but his left leg hurts worst of all. He can feel the Gossamer's claw-marks like a line of fire around his thigh.

"Help," he croaks, not really expecting an answer. She hadn't thought him worthy then; why would She favor him now?

His cell door opens, but he doesn't bother turning his head. He knows who it is: Jones, the current overseer of the Gossamer project; Dr. Kensington, his current attending physician, for lack of a better term; and Aldrin, field commander for the Gossamer handlers. Like clockwork.

"How long this time?" Jones asks, taking hold of Ben's chin and moving his head side to side.

"Just a little over three hours, sir," Aldrin answers. "He was up a tree again, but they still got him. They've been practicing," he adds with a note of pride.

"Excellent," Jones says, giving Ben a rough pat on the cheek. "Did you have to tranq them?"

Aldrin hesitates. "Some of the Retrievers are becoming quite aggressive — almost as aggressive as the Eliminators. We did have to tranq 'em and pull them off him."

Jones makes some noncommittal sound. Ben blinks once, slowly, but doesn't speak. He doesn't speak to any of them unless spoken to these days; it makes things easier on him.

"Can he handle some solid food yet?" Jones asks over his shoulder. "How long before he's ready for another round?"

"Two days and he should be fine," Kensington replies. She appears on Ben's other side then, checking the monitors hooked up to him. "Maybe another day before he can stomach real food. We'll see how he feels."

"Good," Jones intones. "Good. Madame X has me stepping up productivity around here. I don't want to disappoint her. I'll want the latest batch of Gossamers ready for the field by the end of next week."

"Next week, sir?" Aldrin sounds hesitant. "That's..."

"That's...?"

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A pregnant pause. "Nothing, sir. They'll be ready."

Ben closes his eyes. He sees a ghost of the Blue Lady behind his eyelids.

When he opens them again, there is only Jones.



The wound on his leg has nearly healed, but he can still feel where the Gossamer tried to rip the life out of him. It's another freezing night, but at least they issued him a new pair of grey sweats fresh out of the dryer. He wonders idly if anyone had bothered searching the compound for his old clothes, or if maybe the Retrievers had fetched them.

"Are you ready, 493?" Aldrin asks. He almost sounds compassionate, like he cares. Maybe he does; maybe he wants his pet Gossamers to have a healthy hunt.

Ben glances over his shoulder. The Gossamers are held in cages about twenty feet away. Aldrin usually gives him a two-minute head-start, and then sics them after him. This batch isn't quite trained yet; instead of waiting patiently for the signal they are growling and snapping at the steel bars. They can smell Ben, and they want him.

"493!"

Ben had tried not resisting, once. When Jones's orders had become clear, Ben had tried submission, letting the Retrievers disable him. They'd been chasing him down for nearly a month, and he'd figured surrender would be easier. As it turned out, Aldrin didn't want *easy*. Escaped transgenics weren't going to go down without a fight, he'd said. And then he'd let the Gossamers eat Ben alive as a lesson.

"493." This time it comes with a smack to the back of his head. Ben staggers, turning back around to face Aldrin. The man looks annoyed, but not angry. "I swear," he sneers to one of the other handlers, "when they put this kid back together, they wired him wrong." Then to Ben, "Are you *ready*, soldier?"

Soldier. It's almost funny. Ben bites the inside of his cheek to forestall the

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whimper and blinks away tears before they can form. He was a good soldier, once.

"Yes, sir," he manages.

"Then two minutes. Go!"

Ben doesn't waste any time. He takes off as fast as he's able, blurring over the hills and into the woods. He heads for the river first, diving in and swimming across, washing away his scent. Hopefully it buys him enough time to get situated.

They can climb, he thinks, terror quietly clawing its way into his chest. His one advantage, gone. He crawls onto the opposite riverbank and coughs up water. He sits back on his knees and looks up at the trees. So they learned how to climb. So what? That doesn't mean they learned how to *jump*.

Ben gets a running start, leaping up to the tree nearest to him. The branches seem solid enough. He rotates his shoulders, suppressing a shiver, and jumps again, from one tree to another.

He lands easily enough, though a bunch of leaves smack him in the face. It's better than the alternative. Some ways behind him, he can hear growling and snapping. This batch hasn't perfected the art of silence, either. Ben takes a deep breath, and leaps again.

Six or seven trees later and he's really gotten the hang of it. He picks up speed, moving through the forest in his own private express lane. Ben's blood is pounding heavily in his ears and his breathing is ragged, but he's still moving closer to the perimeter faster than before.

Then his branch breaks, snapping clean off its tree, taking Ben with it. He gasps, but like any true cat, he lands on his feet in a crouch, his heart in his throat. It's only when he straightens that it hits him.

"No!" he cries when the solid weight lands on his back. It's heavy and its claws are digging into his skin, but he manages to roll over before it can paralyze him with its silk. A Retriever, at least, not a — it bites him, fangs sinking deep into his shoulder. Ben struggles to sit up, beating its face with his fist until it lets go, furious. Ben twists around, punches it square in its ugly, lizard-like mug, and scrambles to his feet.

He gets maybe three feet before an Eliminator nearly takes his leg off,

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slamming him into a tree and popping his knee out of its socket. Ben howls, but it sounds distant even to his own ears. He goes down, kicking with his good leg until he can't anymore, vision swimming with the Gossamer's teeth. He brings up his forearm to keep its fangs at bay, wincing when they bite into his flesh.

Help me, he pleads to Her, as a wet warmth spreads across his belly.

Shots are fired, and the Gossamer pinning him goes down, falling over on its side in a heap. Ben remains on his back, staring up at the forest's canopy, still save for the involuntary twitching.

"Incredible response time," he can hear someone comment somewhere above him.

"Thought it was gonna kill him," another one pipes up. She sounds further away.

Ben tries to sit up, but can't make his limbs work. His stomach hurts, it — he brings a hand over, touching soft, squishy ... he can feel the weight of it. His hand comes back dark with blood.

"Oh my god!" someone freaks out. "Where the hell is the medic?"

"Son of a bitch!" someone else exclaims. "It gutted him. Fucking thing gutted him!"

When this happens, Ben always hopes this will be the time they just let him die.

He's always wrong.



"Are you ready, 493?"

Ben looks over his shoulder. The Gossamers are growling, low and menacing. Two of them are gnawing on the bars of their cages. A week without exercise has taken its toll on them, and Ben's scent has their blood boiling. One Eliminator snaps its jaw shut with finality, and Ben feels it right in his gut. He sports an ugly, jagged scar across his belly now, from when one of those

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bastards disemboweled him. His other injuries are healing nicely, just in time for another round.

It's pretty mild out, considering. Ben shifts his weight from foot to foot, and zips up the hoodie they gave him. "Yes, sir," he demurs. It's not Aldrin. Actually, Ben hasn't seen Aldrin lately. Maybe he got promoted. The thought almost makes him laugh.

"Then two minutes," the handler says. "Go."

Ben takes off in a blur, but he doesn't even know why anymore. What difference does it make? The Gossamers eat him if he doesn't run and eat him if they catch him.

They always catch him.

Nothing he does is ever good enough — for Manticore or for Her.

His foot catches in an upraised root and he stumbles, nearly losing his balance. Ben almost wants to use it as an excuse to trip, fall, hit the ground and wait for the Gossamers to come. At least it would be over quickly. He slows to a stop, breathing heavily, fighting down familiar panic.

He hears a blast. Startled, Ben spins around, but he's too far out in the compound to really see anything. He can hear it, though, albeit faintly. An explosion — fire — at Manticore. And right on its heels, underneath a blur of shouts and the wail of alarms, he can make out smaller, staccato blasts that can only mean gunfire. It's pandemonium; Ben can only imagine what happened.

He's taken two steps in its direction before he realizes what he's doing. The Gossamers are in that direction. The Gossamers and—

The *Gossamers*. Ben hears them now, too, moving fast and furiously through the woods.

Ben turns back around and runs.

He runs faster than he thought himself capable. He stays away from the trees — won't help, anyway — instead weaving around them with practiced grace. He runs for what seems like forever, runs like he's *possessed*. Somehow, he has a feeling that the handlers will have their hands full with whatever caused the explosion.

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Somehow, he knows it's just him and the Gossamers out here.

He keeps running, faster and faster, ignoring the pain in his gut. He concentrates on his breathing, and the world narrows to just him and the road ahead.

When the perimeter comes into view, Ben almost trips over his own feet. *Impossible*. The Gossamers must be right on his tail. He glances over his shoulder, gradually slowing to a stop. No, nothing behind him. *The guards must be waiting to tranq me*, he rationalizes, craning his neck to catch sight of any hidden lookout. Again, nothing.

Ben swallows over a lump in his throat, and realizes he's shaking. "How did I get here?" he whispers, breathless. This isn't how the game is played; this isn't how the evening ends.

"Tell me about the Good Place," comes Max's voice, unbidden.

Max. He twists his hands into his hoodie. Max would ... Ben shakes his head, violently. In the distance, he can hear the familiar growling.

Manticore's exterior perimeter isn't some high fortress wall. Instead, sensors are strategically placed in trees, logging the comings and goings of anyone who steps past. There are no fences to climb or alarms to disarm. Provided one reaches it, they can walk right on through without any fuss; it's even easier when the trespasser is familiar with how to dodge the sensors altogether.

"Maybe She wants to help me, after all." Ben says it out-loud, because he still can't believe it.

"Run!" he can hear Max order him.

The Gossamers are behind him.

Ben runs.



Even though he's passed at least two towns tonight, Ben sleeps under the

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stars. His clothes are still damp from a jump in someone's pool. He has no money for a room and there were no good robbery prospects. The night is going to be cold and uncomfortable — but he's cold and uncomfortable *outside*. It makes him giddy; a shrill laugh squeezes past his throat before he can help it.

The ground is chilled and lumpy, but Ben is bone-tired and drops off to sleep easily, curled up in the bushes at the edge of a highway.

His training accounts for some of it, but being Gossamer prey for weeks is what wakes Ben that night. His eyes snap wide open and he goes very still, listening. He can hear many things — owls hooting, rodents scurrying — and among them, the telltale Gossamer hiss.

Ben scrambles to his feet and stumbles up the ditch to the highway. He sticks out a shaky thumb, looking over his shoulder, expecting a Gossamer to leap out of the trees at any moment.

One car drives right on by. Then two, then three. Ben bites his lip, still on alert. If he doesn't get a ride in a few seconds, he has to run.

The next car is a dark red pick-up. A huge African-American man leans out the window, takes in Ben's frazzled appearance, and gestures vaguely. "You can hop in the back if you want."

"Thank you," Ben gasps, not entirely acting. He climbs in and lies down, curling in on himself and pulling his sweater's hood over his head.

He should have known better. He should have run farther, secured better shelter for the night. Ben escaped Manticore; of course the Gossamers did, too. What happened to the guards?

The pick-up takes off down the highway, doing at least 80. Ben doesn't know where they're going, and doesn't care. After ten minutes pass without incident, he falls back to sleep.



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Two hours and twenty-seven minutes. This is how much sleep Alec could have gotten already if Max hadn't dragged him out to steal some supposedly priceless paintings. Now, instead of being curled up at home, he's breaking-and-entering.

"Stealing is wrong, Max," he needles, body pressed flush against the wall. He's holding a plastic poster-tube to his chest. To his left, a black canvas bag is leaning against the wall.

"Shut up," she dismisses him, edging closer to the corner. Slowly, she peeks around, and then snaps back with a sharp intake of breath. "Two goons hanging out by the door. This would have been easier if we could have gotten to Ingles's little museum from outside."

"Too risky," Alec reminds her. Old man Ingles takes his perimeter security pretty seriously; there are cameras all over the place outside. By contrast, maybe he is skimping a little in the indoors department. Max and Alec have been slowly inching their way toward the Ingles Collection and haven't come across any difficulties. The cameras have been a joke and these two jokers are the first security personnel they've seen.

"We could just take 'em out," she whispers. "There are only two of them. If we get them before they have a chance to sound any kind of alarm, we're home-free."

Alec nods. "I doubt they're going anywhere any time soon." He slips the strap from his shoulder and sets the bag gently upon the floor, propping it up against the wall. "I don't think Degas is worth all this trouble. His stuff isn't even that good."

Max rolls her eyes. "How would you know?"

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"I know what it's *worth*," Alec retorts. "I just don't think it's warranted."

She gives him a little grin. "That's fine. As long as it gets us the full price, who are we to question someone's taste?"

Alec smirks back. "On three, then? One, two ... three."

Max moves first, darting around the corner toward the guard closest to them. Alec is right behind her, taking advantage of Goon Number Two's momentary shock to drop him as swiftly as Max knocks out Goon Number One.

"Nice work," Max compliments them, tapping Number One with her toe. "Take the rest of the night off." She bends down and starts frisking them for keycards.

Alec takes that time to fetch the tube and canvas bag from where he left them. By the time he returns, Max is already inside, has one of the paintings down and is expertly working it free of its frame. Alec scans the room, immediately noting the camera.

"Took care of it," she explains before he can ask. "We've got, like, five minutes before they realize the camera's on the fritz. Maybe more, if they're occupied with something else."

"Cool." Alec lets out a low whistle as his eyes roam over the collection. There is so much junk here — statuettes, historical flatware, paintings by better artists than Degas — and their buyer wants pictures of dance classes and women bathing. Strange world. "Must've taken him forever to amass this collection."

"Or not." Max rolls the painting and stuffs it in the tube. "Ingles is loaded, remember? He can probably snap his fingers and get whatever painting from whatever museum he wants."

Alec snorts, carefully lifting down a very expensive oil-on-canvas. He puts it in the other bag, frame and all. "I think wealth inverses taste."

"Well, whatever you think, this is our ticket to more tryptophan and other supplies Eyes Only will need to keep the underground program running."

"Hey," Alec replies, disarmingly, "no arguments here." Any initiative to help transgenics survive in Seattle is something he can get behind. "We good?"

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"We're good," Max affirms, screwing the tube's top back on and shouldering it. "Let's blaze."

Their exit from the Ingles Estate is as smooth and easy as their entrance was. Alec almost wishes he could be around when the old tycoon realizes he's been robbed. Chances are good he will be stepping up his security measures.

With their booty in tow, Max and Alec clear the estate and take to the rooftops. Their buyer — a man who goes by the name "Mr. Black," because he's a unimaginative dork with bad taste in art — said he would meet with them a few sectors over, on top of an old Starbucks building. Taking special care of their loot, Alec and Max make their way to the rendezvous point, cautiously avoiding the hoverdrones.



Alec lets Max do the talking, since this is her gig. He pays only vague attention to the details, because haggling for a fence is generally boring. Mr. Black sends a representative, and before long the paintings are relinquished and Max and Alec are counting packets of bills.

"I trust everything is in order," Mr. Black's spokesperson says.

Max zips the duffel bag closed and puts her arms through the handles like a backpack. "It's been a pleasure doing business with your boss. Tell him we might be interested if he has any other jobs for us in the future."

Mr. Black's rep gives them a two-fingered salute. Alec returns it, just for kicks, and then he and Max are on their way home.

"That wasn't painful, was it?" Max muses, adjusting the bag on her back. "This should be more than enough for a take for each of us, plus money for any transgenics supplies that are needed throughout the underground."

"Time well spent," Alec agrees. "Plenty of cash for you and Eyes Only to funnel through the system." He glances up at the night sky. "Hey, wanna take the rooftops home? This job was pretty low-key; I feel like a run."

"Sure," Max replies with a shrug. "It gives us a reason to avoid the sector

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police."

They exchange glances — an impromptu countdown — and then they're off. It's not quite a race, but to anyone who asks, Alec will be glad to point out that he jumps farther than Max does. He's ahead of her before long, running one roof ahead, and only a minute or two after that he decides it might be a good idea to let her catch up. So he slows down, stopping on top of an apartment building, and waits.

He hears it first: something in the air that doesn't mesh with the usual sounds of the city. It almost sounds like some sort of growl. Alec turns in a slow circle, searching, and his eyes widen when he sees the creature leap at his face, all tongue and teeth.

"What the hell?!" he cries, stumbling backwards. He sidesteps, moving out of its way, turning to keep the beast in sight. "Max, watch out!" he shouts. The creature leaps again, claws outstretched, and Alec reacts more swiftly this time, delivering a well-placed spinning crescent kick, sending whatever it is flying onto its side. Then Alec gets a good look at it.

It's a Gossamer, he's sure. Part-lizard, part-attack dog, with a pinch of insect to top off the cocktail. This one's huge, though — easily four-and-a-half-feet — and when it rears up on its hind legs and hisses, Alec takes a step back. *Is this an Eliminator?* he wonders, wishing he had brought a knife or gun. It hisses again, intimidating, and Alec watches with trepidation as saliva drips off its fangs. "Just what we need," he mutters to himself. "Another Gossamer loose in Seattle." He remains very still, calculating his next move, wondering how he's going to beat a Gossamer of this size.

Max chooses that moment to drop in — quite literally. Alec sees her appear atop the building's rooftop entrance, and then she's leaping, landing square on the Gossamer's head and taking it down.

"Let's go!" she barks, turning to run. "We can't fight it here; we're too close to civilians."

Alec doesn't need to be told twice. He sprints, blurring until he catches up with her. "We can't fight it anywhere," he says. "Did you see the size of that thing?"

"It was a Gossamer?" She glances over her shoulder and gasps. "It's coming after us."

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Alec doesn't know why he looks, but he does. The Eliminator is catching up fast, running on four sinewy legs, snarling and snapping its jaws. "I've never seen a Gossamer that big before, Max."

"Seriously, what the hell." Max looks over her shoulder again, and then gives him a measuring look. "We should split up, then maybe one of us can get the drop on it."

"Sounds fun," Alec quips. "Don't let it spooge all over you."

"Don't get spunk on your face," Max cheerfully retorts.

Max goes left, Alec goes right. It takes only a moment to realize that the Gossamer is after *him*. "Fantastic," he sighs, leaping from rooftop to rooftop. As he runs, he scans the city for a good hiding place. Somewhere he can corner the damn thing and let Max sneak up behind it.

In the distance, the dilapidated Space Needle practically shines like a beacon. Of course. He'd like to see this bastard climb the Needle with those lizard claws.

Alec changes course, running toward the Space Needle with renewed fervor, trying to put as much distance between the Gossamer and himself as he can. He can hear the creature growling and snarling behind him. He makes sure to weave left and right so as to avoid any secretion sent his way. Being wrapped up in a spooge-cocoon wasn't fun the *first* time, and he doubts it's the kind of thing that's better the second.

As soon as the Needle's in range, he leaps, grabbing hold of the scaffolding and beginning to climb. He's done this a hundred times — even raced Max up once or twice — and it doesn't take him long to get even halfway up. He has time to wonder how far behind Max is before the Needle shakes from sudden impact. Alec holds on tighter as the steel beneath him quivers and sings. *Oh, you have got to be kidding me...* Against his better judgment, he looks down.

The Eliminator is climbing up, using its powerful claws to dig right into the wall. It's slower than Alec, but it's coming.

"Son of a bitch," Alec spits, and moves faster. At least he's sure to accomplish his goal of cornering the damn thing. Not much is cozier than a room in the Space Needle.

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There aren't many open windows into the Needle, but Alec knows where they are. He finds one and jumps in, taking a moment to quickly scan his surroundings. The former monument is mostly used as defunct storage space or makeshift apartments for squatters who can manage to break in. This would be a terrible time for an Ordinary to be hanging around.

Which, of course, is precisely why there's a kid huddled in the corner amongst some boxes. His face is buried in his knees and even in the faint moonlight, Alec can see that he's shaking. He doesn't even lift his head.

Alec makes a helpless gesture with his hands. "Well, this is just great. You could not have picked a worse time to squat."

Then the young man does look up. Alec is struck dumb when he finds his own face staring back at him. "Whoa," he manages.

"Who are you?" other-Alec rasps. He looks awful — bruised, covered in filth, greasy hair — but his eyes are what get to Alec. They're vacant, dark. Dead.

"That should be my question," Alec says, even though he knows, he *knows*, he's looking at X5-493. At Ben.

And Ben's dead eyes are widening in terror as he tries to push himself further back into the wall. Alec spins around in time to see the Gossamer's claws curl onto the windowsill. He clenches his fists, plants himself firmly between Ben and the window. He bends his knees slightly, ready. As soon as the Eliminator pulls itself over the ledge, Alec charges, putting his weight into it and landing one strong uppercut right on its ugly chin. The Gossamer rocks backward, claws still gripping the ledge. Then it's coming forward again, and *holy shit*.

Alec jumps backward to avoid the snapping jaws. Another hop to dodge the swipe of claws, and then a sidestep to clear the shot of webbing. It splatters against the old filing cabinets instead.

Somewhere behind him, Ben begins to panic. "Why did you *bring it here?*"

Alec knows hysteria when he hears it. "Stay down," he orders. "I'm going to take care of this mother." The last thing he needs is Ben getting in the way.

"You won't," Ben cries. "You can't."

Alec wants to ask just what the hell that means, but the Eliminator has other

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plans. It's bigger than the last Gossamer they dealt with — nastier, too. He ducks another shot of its weird webbing and goes in for the kill. Getting close to it probably isn't the best idea, but neither is dancing around the Space Needle until it gets tired.

It rears up on its hind legs, swipes at him. Alec dodges left. Then right. He goes for its soft underbelly, fist connecting as hard as he can. The Gossamer doubles over, jaws snapping. Alec leans back to avoid the headshot. The Eliminator is fast; its claws move before Alec can recover, catching him across the shoulder and knocking him over. He uses the momentum to roll, retreating as it comes at him. It leaps as he recovers his footing. Alec blocks the massive jaws with his forearm. The pain barely registers, but its grip is like steel. It shoves, and Alec resists with all his strength. If the Gossamer pins him, the game's over.

He punches its face with his free hand. One pair of claws rips down his side — tearing through his clothes, digging into his flesh. He goes for its eye. It doesn't let him, throwing all its weight into the next shove. He hits the floor with a shout. Gossamer's got him now, all up in his face and he wishes he had a *fucking* weapon.

Something hits the Gossamer's back with a sickening thud. It happens again, a metallic twang, and Alec realizes it's a steel bar. It gets hit again and again, enough to distract the Eliminator from its purpose. It loosens its grip on Alec and he moves fast. He shoves with his hands and feet, ignoring the pain. The Gossamer rolls off him, baring its vulnerable belly for his rescuer.

It's Max, of course. She's pissed-off, in full-on protective mode, and sinks the rusted point of her improvised weapon right into the Gossamer's chest. Alec winces at the squishy wet sound. Max stabs it again, and again. She ignores its flailing limbs and enraged growls. When her steel rod is red with blood and guts, she thrusts it into the Gossamer's neck, silencing it forever.

There is a keen moment of relief. No one speaks.

Then Alec says, "I'm glad you worked out your anger issues."

And Max says, "Shut up."

Alec cradles his wounded arm. It hurts like a bitch; Gossamers pack a serious punch. He pushes himself to his feet, wanting to ask about their loot — because you know, priorities. He doesn't get the chance.

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"Max." Ben puts so much into just her name: desperation, sadness — and a sick, twisted mixture of fear and relief.

She turns at the voice, going stock-still. The steel bar falls from her grip and clatters against the floor. She remains frozen even as Ben stumbles toward her. His Manticore standard-issue sweats are tattered and worn, making him look even smaller and worse for wear than he already did. He throws himself at Max, burying his face in her neck, wrapping his arms around her like she's a lifeline.

Alec takes a step forward, but Max shakes her head. She brings her hands up to settle on Ben's back, gloved fingers curling into his hoodie. "Ben," she whispers shakily, disbelieving.

When she says his name, it breaks a spell. Ben slides to his knees, hands grabbing fistfuls of Max's pants. "Max," he chokes out. "Max, please — I can't..."

She shakes herself out of her stupor. "You can't what?" she asks him, crouching. She touches his face gingerly, mindful of the bruising. Alec fidgets, feeling awkward and out of place.

"I can't anymore," Ben tells her, confessing something only he understands. "I can't."

"Can't what?" Alec asks, abruptly. Max glares at him over Ben's crouched form. Alec returns it with one of his own. "Well, do you want to be here all night? There could be more of those things out there."

Ben stiffens. "Yes," he agrees. "There's more. There's always more."

Max nods, her plan of action decided. "Okay. Come on, Ben. We're getting out of here."

"Seriously?" Alec sighs. His psychotic serial killer twin shows up back from the dead, and they're just going to take him with them?

But when Max tries to help Ben up, he resists. "Max," he pleads, fingers gripping her jacket. "Kill me. Please."

Alec blinks. Max goes very still for a moment, but recovers quickly. "Don't be stupid." She tries pulling him up again. "Come on, work with me."

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"No!" Ben cries, pulling away. "Max, don't you get it?" He curls in on himself, arms folded protectively across his belly. "They found me in the *High Place*." The next comes out brokenly, "They can find me anywhere."

Alec has had just about enough. "They're going to find *all* of us if we don't get moving." He stalks forward, grabbing Ben roughly under the arms and hauling him to his feet.

"Alec!" Max snaps.

He gives her an exasperated look. "What, you want to sit here until he's no longer suicidal? We don't have time for that." He nods at Ben. "He's a mess. My arm feels like it's going to fall off. And did you forget the money for our supplies that needs to be given out?"

"I am a mess," Ben says, limp in Alec's grip. Holding him up is making Alec's wounded arm ache, and he has half a mind to drop his clone and leave him here. He doesn't, though, because he knows Max won't. "I'll only cause problems for you," Ben adds, not looking up. "The Gossamers are after me. They've always been after me."

"It was after *me*," Alec points out, but even as he says it he figures that it's not precisely true. The realization makes him angry, makes him tighten his grip on Ben. Only when his clone whimpers does Alec snap out of it. "Sorry," he mutters. He really isn't, but Max is glaring at him again.

"You're coming with us to Logan's," Max tells Ben. Her tone brooks no argument. "Are you strong enough to climb down yourself?"

Ben lifts his head. "I think so," he says, finally. With some effort, he stands up straight, pulling out of Alec's grip.

"Good." Max heads for the window, gesturing for them to follow her. "We're going to get you cleaned up, fed, and then you're going to tell me what the hell happened to you, got it?"

"I'd like to hear that story," Alec adds, giving his limping twin a sidelong glance.

"The Gossamers will follow me," Ben warns them, not looking at Alec.

"No, they won't," Max reassures him. "I won't let them." She swings one leg

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over the windowsill and starts climbing down.

"You don't understand," Ben says. "They—"

"Don't even bother," Alec interrupts, shoving at his shoulder to get him moving. "You know what she's like."

Ben glances back at Alec, looking like he wants to say something. Instead, he glances down at Max. With a quiet sigh, he follows her down the Needle. Alec goes next and, keeping Ben between them, all three eventually land on a rooftop below. Max vanishes for a moment, fetching their stashed duffel.

"Okay," she says, shouldering it securely. "Let's cover our tracks and head to Logan's."

"Cover our tracks?" Alec muses. Ben looks even less convinced.

Max gives him a look. "What sort of half-rate training did *you* get?" She lifts a hand to hold off his retort. "With any luck, the city's filth will do most of the work for us. Let's go."



Max doesn't push Ben for an explanation. She doesn't let Alec pester him, either. She'd probably let Logan ask, but Logan doesn't. They have to wait — until Ben is checked over, until Alec's injuries are tended to, until Logan gets the funds they secured squared away. Once Logan is satisfied, he retreats to the kitchen to make something simple for breakfast. Alec settles back against the couch, stomach and arm wrapped in crisp white bandages. He hopes it won't take him long to heal. The Gossamer seemed much stronger than the last one they tangled with.

Ben is sitting on the other end of the couch, looking nervous and out of place. He's still filthy and looks like he's gone four losing rounds with an Eliminator. Logan and Max insisted he eat before going to wash up and sleep. He picks at his sweater, looking over his shoulder every few minutes.

Max can't seem to sit still. She paces the length of the living room, like she can't decide if she wants to stay with Ben and Alec or seek refuge with Logan. She's obviously dying for an explanation — Alec is, too — but hey, they're supposed to be doing that don't-rush-him thing, right?

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Logan returns with breakfast. He hands each of them a bowl of scrambled eggs mixed with spinach and red peppers. Ben tears into his like he hasn't eaten in days. Considering an X5's endurance, this may very well be the case.

"Why didn't you steal food?" Alec asks, breaking Max's precious don't-rush-him rule. Sure enough, she glares at him even as she exchanges Ben's empty bowl for her own.

Ben glances at Alec, still chewing. When he swallows he answers, "I did when I could. It wasn't always a good idea to move once I found a good hiding spot. The more I moved around, the easier it was for them to follow my scent."

Now that she's seen asking a question doesn't break him, Max ventures, "Ben, what happened to you?"

He barks a laugh. To Alec, it sounds a mite hysterical. His hands tighten around his second empty bowl. "I-I don't." He frowns, lowering his head.

"Take your time," Logan soothes. Always the gentleman, Alec thinks, setting his own untouched bowl onto the carpet.

"Manticore put me back together," Ben begins. "I asked Max to — I *remember* Max breaking my neck. She did it so they wouldn't..." he shudders, sets his bowl aside and wraps his arms around himself. "They fixed me."

"I never saw you around the barracks," Alec points out.

"No," Ben says quietly. "They couldn't..." he frowns again, touching his temple. "There's something ... wrong. With my head. They said I wasn't a good soldier anymore. So I," he hesitates, mouth working, "I helped train Gossamers."

Alec feels his eyes widen of their own accord. Max sucks in a breath. Logan asks, "How?" but Alec doesn't see why; it's *obvious*. It's so obvious, Ben doesn't even answer — just holds himself tighter, like he's scared or ashamed.

"Oh, damn it," Max exhales. "Oh, damn it to Hell."

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Logan rocks forward, like he's going to go put his arm around her, but catches himself. "How did you escape?"

Ben gives a slow shake of his head. "I didn't. I didn't have to. There was an explosion, I think. A fire, maybe." Alec's gaze whips back to Max. "I don't know," Ben goes on. "I was in the middle of a, ah, training session when it happened. The Gossamer handlers were supposed to keep close tabs on them, follow them, and tranq them after they caught me. I made it all the way to the outer perimeter for the first time. There wasn't a guard in sight, so I just ... kept running."

"And so did the Gossamers?" Logan wonders.

Ben sighs, sounding so tired. "They were bred and trained to hunt me down. Their training wasn't complete before Manticore burned, so they'll hunt me forever. These are new and improved Retrievers and Eliminators. They're bigger, stronger, and they can climb better than before. And I—" he swallows, tries again, "for months, I was either running from a pack of Gossamers or recovering in a sterile room at Manticore. I didn't ... I just *ran*. I didn't think about where I was going. I ended up back in Wyoming." He looks up at Max. "Did you know the site in Gillette had been cauterized? I don't know why I went back there, but there was nothing left. And I had to keep moving." Alec watches Ben's fingers alternatively tighten and loosen their grip on his sweater. "I could avoid the Gossamers for a time, but whenever I would settle down for a day or so ... it didn't take them long to find me."

"They hunt in packs?" Max asks.

Ben shakes his head. "No. And that makes it so much worse, because one of them can find me at any time." He leans against the sofa cushions, finally relaxing a little, like the confession has lifted some of the weight from his back. "I think I killed one. Or at least hurt it really badly. They caught up to me a few times, and I managed to get away, but..." he trails off. They've all seen his scars by now.

"You came back to Seattle," Max prompts him.

He nods. "I remembered the High Place. The Lady doesn't — She doesn't speak to me anymore, so I don't know why I came back." He closes his eyes. "More than once, I wanted to just sit down and give up. But, Max, it *hurt*. The Eliminators, they know how to...."

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"That they do," Alec pipes up, indicating his arm.

His comment lifts everyone out of their collective despair. "You should rest," Max tells Ben. "Really rest. In a real bed."

Again, Ben tries to tell them they've made a mistake harboring him, but neither Max nor Logan will hear of it. Both of them insist that Ben spend the rest of the night in the guest bedroom and take advantage of the hot shower.

"Down the hall," Logan instructs, even though everyone knows that.

"Alec," Max says pointedly.

"Seriously?" Alec replies, not quite hiding his distaste. But she saved his ass tonight, so he gets up with a sigh. "Fine. Come on, Ben."

His twin regards him with suspicion, like *Alec* is the crazy one, but gets up and follows him out of the room.



Max leans on the kitchen counter, watching Logan do the dishes. Thankfully, he waits until they can hear the shower running before saying, "Max."

It's the only opening she needs. "Ben was at Manticore," she starts, and once the words are out of her mouth she realizes how *angry* she is — at Renfro, at Manticore, at herself. "Ben was there the whole time. They were using him as live bait and *I was there.*"

"Max," Logan immediately consoles, "how could you have known that?"

She doesn't answer, choosing instead to glower at her forearms. She didn't expect Logan to understand; Logan's not the one who had crippled Ben. Logan's not the one who had snapped his neck and left him for Manticore to recover. *Logan* isn't the one who set everyone in Manticore free except for Ben. Ben, she had condemned to a life running from bloodthirsty hunters.

She failed to save him the first time. Looks like she failed him the second time around, too.

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Alec sits on the bed in Logan's spare bedroom, waiting for Ben to finish his shower. He's been in there for nearly fifteen minutes already. It's probably been weeks since he's had a chance to bathe beyond dips in rivers to wash off his scent. It makes Alec feel a pang of sympathy for his twin, and that just makes him angrier altogether. After Ben's psychosis resulted in PsyOps time for Alec, after Ben started signing his murders with *X5-493, DDS*, after their identical genetic makeup sicced *Gossamers* on Alec, he has the nerve to show up in the flesh. The worst part is Alec can't even lay into him with feeling like a jackass, because of what Ben's clearly been through.

The shower shuts off, startling Alec out of his reverie. When he first met Max, she called him "Ben." Personally, Alec doesn't see how anyone could mistake the two of them. Alec obviously got all the charisma from the cloning process.

Ben wanders back into the guest room, lavender towel wrapped around his waist. The room's low lighting hides the scars criss-crossing along Ben's belly. He closes the door behind him, but stops short when he spies Alec seated on the bed.

Alec nods toward the pile of purloined clothing he had thrown on the mattress. "Found some clothes that would fit you. Figured you'd want to toss the Manticore gear."

Ben stares at him for a long moment — long enough that Alec starts to wonder if maybe the kid shut down or something. Finally he steps forward, towel falling low on his hips. This close, Alec can see where Ben was sewn together after being disemboweled. It's a jagged pink mark across his abdomen, and the sight makes Alec swallow. Ben picks up the white t-shirt and pulls it over his head. Alec doesn't bother averting his eyes while Ben chucks the towel in favor of the black bottoms; yup, they're identical, through and through.

"You're welcome," Alec says, when it becomes obvious that Ben isn't going to speak.

This gets the other X5's attention. Ben looks right into Alec's eyes, almost like he's searching for something behind them. For a second, Alec thinks this is going to be the extent of their communication, but then Ben says, "I didn't

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know I was twinned."

And *goddamn it*, that one sentence digs deep under Alec's skin. "I figured you didn't," he snaps. "Otherwise you wouldn't have made my life a living hell."

"Your life?" Ben echoes, taken aback. He looks so honestly confused by the idea, it just makes Alec angrier.

"What did you think would happen, genius?" He makes comparative gestures between them. "You run wild, murdering people for your whacked-out religion, and then disappear? Who did you think would take the fall for it?"

Ben tilts his head, regarding Alec with those pensive eyes. "I'm sorry, Alec. I didn't know I had a clone."

"I'm not your *clone*," Alec sneers — which is just stupid, because that's exactly what he is, but screw Ben, anyway. "We're obviously very different people, all right? I never worked through my issues by hunting innocent civilians through the woods and performing oral surgery."

Ben averts his eyes. "I suppose they would figure I deserve what I got, then."

Alec almost agrees with that sentiment, but holds himself back just in time. He's pissed, and more than a little aggravated at this newfound factor in his life, but he isn't cruel. "Listen," he says, calming down. "After you and Max broke out, I had to spend weeks in PsyOps. They poked and prodded into my head until they were satisfied that I wouldn't end up like you." He picks at the bedspread. "Everything was just peachy until I get arrested for a murder I didn't commit. And now you bring Gossamers into it."

"They're after *me*," Ben stresses on reflex, still looking away.

"I smell just like you," Alec reminds him. "Underneath the better cologne and deodorant, anyway."

His twin rounds back on him, eyes ablaze. "I didn't even want to come here. Max made me come back with her. I didn't even want to come back to *Seattle*. I just wanted—" he chokes, tries again. "I just wanted something like *home*."

"Your High Place?" Alec hazards, thinking back to his clone's ramblings.

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Ben sinks down onto the mattress. It dips with his weight, and Alec scoots further away to put some distance between them. "I'm not even safe there," Ben whispers. "I'm not safe anywhere. I wish Manticore hadn't burned."

Alec's eyebrows shoot up. "You wish it *hadn't*?"

"How do you do it?" Ben asks, leaning on his knees. "How do you manage on the outside?"

"Just doing my own thing," Alec replies carefully. He isn't sure if Ben is having a breakdown or getting existential. "Making the best of things and enjoying freedom." Ben gives a slow nod. When he doesn't answer right away, Alec hedges, "You don't do well outside the walls, do you?"

"Manticore made sense," Ben states with conviction. "Manticore had rules to follow. This place ... it's chaos. There are no rules, no drills. At Manticore, the Gossamers would stop." His voice drops back down to a whisper. "They made the Gossamers stop."

Any anger Alec had left is gone when he notices Ben is shaking. "Hey," he ventures, hesitantly reaching out. His fingers ghost over Ben's shoulder, not quite touching. "Look, you've been through hell. I get it. But don't worry," he continues awkwardly, "now you're back with the winning team. Transgenics," he clarifies at Ben's quizzical expression. "Max and Logan like to do this little save-the-world thing. They're getting pretty good at it. They've helped transgenics in trouble before." He rubs the back of his head. "They've helped me. What I'm saying is, the next time any Gossamers show up looking for you, Max has got it covered."

Ben fidgets. "It would be easier on everyone to just let her kill me again."

"Uh, not really," Alec points out with a little grin. "'Coz then the Gossamers would just be after *me*. And that is not cool." When Ben barely reacts to the joke, Alec sighs and stands up. "You should probably sleep. Looks like you haven't been getting much for the last ... how long were the Gossamers chasing you around?"

"Long enough," Ben says, sounding drained.

Alec leaves him, closing the door softly behind him. When he heads back to the living room, he finds Max and Logan sitting at opposite ends of the couch. The latter looks pensive; Max looks miserable. She glances up at Alec

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when he walks in, and her face is uncharacteristically open and raw.

"Whoa," he murmurs.

"How is he?" she asks.

Alec shrugs. "Fucked up. Don't blame him, really. He's still convinced the Gossamers are going to find him here."

Logan taps one long finger against his knee. "The last Gossamer we dealt with was a pretty good hunter, and if this batch has only improved..."

"I won't let them take him," Max says firmly. "I don't care how far I have to carry him this time."

Logan gets that look again — like he wants to put a reassuring hand on Max's shoulder — and Alec thinks they should just put their damned heads together and really work at a cure for that stupid virus. It's really just sad at this point. "You want me to dig up whatever I can on the Gossamers?"

Max's turns her head to him, eyes softening. "Thanks."

"Anyway," Alec cuts in, before this gets lame, "we should take him out tomorrow."

"Out where?" Logan wonders, eyebrow quirking behind his glasses.

"I thought nothing about him impressed you?" Max goads.

Alec makes a face at her. "It's hard to stay pissed at someone that pathetic. Can you believe he used to be a soldier?"

"I can't believe *you* used to be a soldier," she retorts.

He beams at her, reveling in her irritated scowl. "I was thinking we take him to Crash."

"Crash?" Logan parrots dubiously. "You want to give the psychotic trauma victim *alcohol*?"

Max nods, raising her eyebrow expectantly. Alec raises his hands in surrender. "I never said he had to drink. I only meant — well, it's where we all go. I take it you're not gonna kick him to the curb?" Her glare is answer

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enough. "Then if he's going to start living a 'normal' life here, let's assimilate him."

"Normal life didn't agree with Ben last time," Logan points out, not unkindly.

"No," Max says. "I get it. We can keep an eye on him, of course, but he's never going to fully recover if he spends the rest of his life looking over his shoulder." She lowers her head and adds wistfully, "Haven't we all done enough of that?"

Alec nods. "So, Crash tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Max agrees.



The ground is wet with morning dew. Ben wakes up, squinting against the dawn. Sunlight peeks through the canopy above him.

The Gossamer cries are in sharp contrast to the peacefulness.

Ben freezes. *No*, he prays, desperate. *Not again*. He tries to get up — can't. His wrists and ankles are strapped down with roots. He can't pull them out. He *can't pull them out*.

"Help," he manages past gritted teeth.

The Gossamers announce their hunt again. Ben keeps struggling, limbs quivering from the strain. He tosses his head back and forth in frustration.

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When he opens his eyes again, She's there.

And with the dogs bearing down on him, all Ben can ask is, "Why did you help me escape to let me die here?"

She comes to him then, and his blood runs cold. Her blue-and-white skirts flicker in and out of existence, gathering flecks of red as they do. Flecks, spatters, drops of blood. Ben closes his eyes, not believing it. When he opens them again, he sucks in a gasp, trying to press further back into the earth.

She's staring down at him with a mutilated face. Strips of her skin are missing, peeled off and hanging from her jaw by a thread of flesh. He can't stop staring at them. They move when She talks.

"I didn't help you escape," She tells him, kneeling down. Her bloodied skirts brush his arm; they're warm and wet — so unlike the morning dew.

The Gossamers howl again. Ben chokes down a whimper.

"Hush," She soothes, lifting a hand to cup his cheek. There are maggots eating through her palm, crawling up her arm.

Ben screams, turning his face away and squeezing his eyes shut.

"Look, you've been through Hell. I get it."

Alec's voice. His clone. His twin, in a sense.

Ben opens his eyes, turns toward Alec's voice.

The Gossamers leap.



His throat is sore when he's shaken awake. He doesn't know how loud he screamed, but his voice is hoarse when he pleads, "No!"

"Ben!" Max is yelling at him. "Ben, it's me."

He freezes at the sound of her voice, the world swimming slowly into focus.

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He's in Seattle, in Logan Cale's apartment. He's with Max.

Gradually, he relaxes on the bed. Max lets go of him, but gropes for his hand in the tangle of bedding and grips it tight. He looks over her shoulder and spies Logan in the doorway. He's keeping his distance, watching Ben with wary eyes.

"Max," he whispers. He feels her tighten her grip. He glances around the room, searching, and asks, "Where's Alec?"

He can feel her go still. She's still holding his hand but the grip has changed. "He's gone home," she tells him clinically. She ducks her head, asking the next question from behind a curtain of hair. "Do you want me to call him?"

Ben shakes his head. "No. No, it's fine." He starts to carefully untangle himself from the blankets. Max moves away to accommodate, and soon Ben is tucked in again. He instantly feels drained.

Max is staring at him. He can see the questions behind her eyes, but she doesn't ask any of them. "Do you need anything?" she offers instead. "Water?"

He shakes his head, eyelids fluttering shut.

It's the only nightmare he remembers, at least.



Max decides to call in sick, but Alec spends his morning at Jam Pony — mostly to close a couple of deals he has going a few sectors over. Following Max's nagging advice, he showers before leaving his place, and again before leaving Jam Pony. Then he swings by his place to grab some jeans, underwear, and an olive t-shirt, figuring if his twin is going to be hanging around, he is going to look good. When he returns to Logan's, he learns that with the exception of one incident, Ben ended up sleeping the remainder of the night and halfway into the afternoon. He also succeeded in making Logan his personal cook. The scent of garlic and onions hits Alec's nose as soon as he walks through the door.

"What's for dinner?" he asks, flopping onto the couch next to Max.

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"Make yourself at home," she needles. Alec shrugs it off; she's been extra touchy ever since they found Ben.

"Roast," Logan calls from the kitchen, and despite his terminal condition of wanting to save the world, he is seriously awesome.

Ben wanders into the living room, still dressed in Logan's loungewear. "Alec," he greets him.

"Hey." Alec tosses him the plastic bag; Ben snatches it out of the air without batting an eye. "Thought you might want to wear real clothes tonight."

Ben peeks into the bag, then blinks at him. "Thanks." Without preamble, Ben turns back around and goes to change.

"He shouldn't thank me," Alec confides to Max. "I gave him my old underwear."

"Gross," she chides, shoving him.

Alec shrugs one shoulder. "It can be payback for getting me arrested. They're *clean*," he stresses when she keeps staring at him.

She shoves him again.



Crash is crowded as usual, but Alec and his friends are able to find a table. They slide into their seats amidst heavy hip-hop beats and it's not long before they all have tall glasses of beer to nurse. The waitress winks at both Ben and Alec, and Alec makes a mental note to try pinging someone's twin fantasy sometime soon. He's glad Normal isn't hanging around; he isn't in a rush to have to explain why his long-lost twin brother is suddenly in town. Original Cindy and Sketchy find them, though, and that's almost as bad. Max swears by Cin, but Sketchy is another story.

"How come you never mention you had a twin brother?" he wants to know.

"You never asked!" Alec jokes, all smiles and sunshine. He buys Sketch a beer and the matter is soon forgotten in favor of watching Logan shoot pool like the stuff of legends.

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Ben nurses his beer and acts the part, plays a perfect tourist out of his element. Sketchy regales him with the better corners of the slums and keeps trying to goad Ben into playing a round of pool.

"I gotta know if you're as good as Alec," he says. "I've owed entire paychecks to this guy."

"You're good for it," Alec replies with a grin.

"I never could shoot straight," Ben says, gesturing vaguely to the pool tables. "I won't let you take my money."

"Too bad," Sketch sighs, and wanders back over to get a better look at Logan's game.

To Alec's right, Max and Cin are having their own hushed conversation. He doesn't want to eavesdrop, but Max sounds a little distraught. He's about to give her a pat, to sort of check in, but then Ben is standing. Alec looks up, inquiring.

"Need some air," Ben tells him, and starts weaving his way through the crowd.

Alec almost stays put; Ben didn't say anything about wanting company. He doesn't move for a minute or two, but then he finds himself standing up of his own accord.

"Man can't go to the can by himself?" Original Cindy ribs.

Alec gives her a broad smile. "Figured I'd see if he needs help. You'd be surprised how easily he gets lost."

Max catches his eye as he turns to leave, and she still looks troubled to Alec. He makes it a point to ask what her deal is later. One would think she'd have been all over Ben, trying to reconnect with her brother. The thought makes something in his chest hurt. Alec can't help it; sometimes he wonders what it would have been like to be raised as part of a unit — a team you could count on no matter what. After the 2009 escape, Manticore scrapped those kind of team-building exercises.

Crash has shitty climate-control when it's crowded, so leaving propels Alec into a literal breath of fresh air. He moves to the side so he's not blocking

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the doors, and scans the area for Ben. He finds his clone around the corner, hanging out by a dumpster. Figures. The second he's left to his own devices, Ben runs and ducks into the nearest dark corner and huddles there until it's safe.

Ben doesn't say anything when Alec approaches, so Alec decides to break the ice. "Crowds creep you out?" he hazards.

"... No," Ben replies. "Just not used to so many people in one place anymore." He sneaks a look at Alec's face before staring at his shoes. "You'd be surprised how easy it is to fall into unhealthy routine. It was only a few months, but being back at Manticore, living in that room ... it becomes normal."

"I hear you," Alec says, leaning on the wall beside him. "I used to think I had it pretty good at Manticore, considering. It was a while before I realized I was wrong." *Thanks to Max.*

Almost as though he's reading Alec's mind, Ben wonders, "How did Max make it out here all these years?"

"Easy: she's nuts." When Ben looks at him, Alec winks. "You kinda have to be. This whole city's nuts. But you get used to it." He pauses, uncertain. How do you explain the appeal of living on the Outside to one whose head was never properly equipped to handle it? "You just have to put yourself out there. If you don't, you're never really living."

Ben blinks at him, and Alec thinks this is going to turn into some sort of philosophical discussion. Suddenly, Ben's face closes off and he goes very still. As Alec watches in surprise, his twin's skin goes white.

"What's wrong?"

Ben swallows thickly. "Gossamer."

"What?" Reflexively, Alec glances around. "I don't see anything."

"Did you hear it?" Ben whispers, one hand whipping out to seize Alec's coat sleeve. "The keening. I heard it. How did they get my scent so fast?"

"How do you know it's them?" Alec wants to know, scanning the sky in case anything is going to get the drop of them.

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Ben tightens his grip. "I didn't stay ahead of them for weeks by letting them get the jump on me." And then he's all instinct, getting a better grip on Alec's sleeve and proceeding to drag him along. "Come on, we have to get as far away from here as we can. We have to outrun them. Outrun them, and stay leagues ahead."

"Whoa," Alec is saying, resisting the pulling. "Hey, whoa — calm down. Listen to me. *Ben*." He yanks sharply, grabbing hold of his clone's shoulders and turning him back around. "First we tell Max." Ben's eyes are wild, lost in his old ways, but he mouths his sister's name. "Yes. Max is going to help you, remember? Come on." He doesn't wait for an affirmative, reversing their positions and tugging Ben back into Crash. Maybe the sweltering bodies grinding on the dance floor will throw off the creature's scent. But knowing their luck, probably not.

Alec and Ben walk back to their table as fast as they can without calling attention to themselves. "Problem," he announces to Max.

She looks up from her conversation with Cin. "Problem?" she echoes worriedly.

"*Problem*," Alec stresses. Behind him, Ben is increasingly antsy, and it's amazing his clone hasn't lost his shit all over the bar by now. "We need a distraction."

Ben looks like hell. Even in Crash's low lighting, she can see his harried expression, his pale face, his haunted eyes. He looks like he's barely keeping it together. Max's heart aches for him, but there's no fucking time for that now. "Right," she tells Alec. "I got it. You and Ben gotta blaze. I'll figure something out. Get ready to run."

Alec nods, and in a blink he and Ben are gone, moving quickly through the mass of people. "Boo," O.C. ventures. "Are you okay?"

"It won't be like last time," she finds herself swearing. "This time, I'm going to save him."

"Boo—"

"Cin," Max cuts her off. "Can you make sure Logan and Sketchy get out of here okay?"

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Her best friend nods. "You know it, Boo." And that's one of the greatest things about Original Cindy: she knows when to talk and when to move. She slides out of her seat and heads for the pool tables.

Max makes her way to the nearest fire exit and sets off the alarm. The ring is loud but the confusion is louder; everyone around is suddenly moving, shoving, and generally ignoring most of what they were taught in school. The sprinklers come on, soaking everyone. In the chaos, Max spots Logan and her friends, shuffling slowly but steadily toward the doors. She's not sure how the Gossamer found them here so quickly, but at least it will have to work its way around a slew of pissed-off club-goers and the authorities.

Max, for her part, does a quick sweep of the place and then makes her exit through the restroom window. Once her boots hit the pavement, she's running, brainstorming places Alec and Ben might go.



As soon as the fire alarm goes off, Alec and Ben are on the move. They turn down the nearest alley and run as fast as they can, putting as much distance between them and Crash as possible. Now that he knows what to listen for, Alec can hear it: the high-pitched, curt, intermittent keening. It sounds almost like a large bird; if you didn't know what the new Gossamers sounded like, you would never be able to tell a pack of them was after you. Alec almost admires the DNA cocktail genies at Manticore — except that making super attack dogs has turned out to be really inconvenient for him. He can't tell which direction the keening is coming from, but Ben told him they only call like that when they are organizing a pack hunt. So these mothers can hunt solo or in groups, depending on the situation, which is just *great*. Alec concentrates on moving through the sector, scanning the seedy buildings for a good place to throw down. At first they are running side by side, but soon Ben starts inching ahead, a manic look on his face.

"Stay focused!" Alec orders him. He reaches out, catching Ben's arm to bring him back. "It's not Manticore." They turn down another alley that reeks of piss and garbage.

"Get to higher ground," Ben says, pulling his arm out of Alec's grip. "They don't do well in the trees."

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"I told you, it's *not Manti*—" Alec pulls up short, skidding to a stop. At the mouth of the alleyway stands a Gossamer. Alec can't tell if it's a Retriever or an Eliminator from here, but it's crouched low and growling — waiting. "Uh-oh."

Ben is a frozen next to Alec, a breathy "no" falling from his lips. Alec wants to move in front of him, reassure him, but he doesn't dare do anything to provoke the Gossamer right away. His fingers clench into fists. *How did this thing circle around us so fast? Unless—*

"Watch out!" Ben shouts, but before Alec can even turn around he's been hit. The second Gossamer's webbing knocks him off his feet and pins him to the ground. The back of his head whacks painfully against the pavement, and he sees stars. *They caught us in a pincer move*, he realizes, straining against his bonds. The toxin in the webbing works fast, potent even through the fabric of his clothes. Alec's limbs are going numb. It's getting hard to struggle. The Gossamer that nailed him is standing over him now, all scary-faced and drippy-fanged. It's not eating him, though, so it must be a Retriever. He cranes his neck, trying to look for Ben. He doesn't see him anywhere. Figures. His twin's probably freaked out beyond reason; probably scrambled up the wall and ran away while he still could.

Even as he thinks this, Ben is proving him wrong. His twin blurs into view, swinging a garbage lid with enough force to smack the Gossamer off of him. Then it's a stand-off. Ben wisely makes sure to keep both Gossamers in front of him. Alec can tell Ben wants to run — can see the way his legs are quivering — but he holds his ground. Armed with a garbage can lid, like a transgenic Captain America. It would be funny if Alec wasn't trussed up for a butcher.

Both Ben and the Gossamers are still, sizing each other up. Alec can't move at all now, except for his head. "Ben," he tries, but his voice comes out no stronger than a hoarse whisper. It's not going so great.

A bullet ricochets off one of the Gossamers's hides, embedding itself into the brick wall somewhere. The Retrievers turn their backs to Ben. Even before she walks into his line of sight, Alec knows the new attacker is Max. One of the Gossamers rears on its hind legs to intimidate her with its size. She responds by emptying a clip into its vulnerable underbelly. Alec blinks, watching the Retriever hit the ground, twitching as blood oozes from its fatal wounds.

The remaining Retriever moves like lightning. Max has no time to reload, so

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she uses the charging Gossamer as a springboard instead. She flips off its back with an almost choreographed grace. When it turns back around, Ben whips his garbage can lid at it. Alec can't see it, but hears the giant discus strike true, giving Max enough time to slide a new clip into her gun. When it's pissed off — when it jumps — Ben flinches away but Max stands firm, shooting it down. She gets four in it before it collapses, and Alec knows it's over. He drops his head back onto the ground, not bothering to look up while Max walks over and finishes the Gossamer off.

He feels someone standing over him a moment later. Alec opens his eyes as Ben kneels next to him, armed with a shard of broken glass. Without a word, Ben starts cutting him loose. Inch by inch, the webbing is torn away and Alec is freed. He feels better in mere moments, and Ben helps him sit up.

"Thanks," he manages. Ben only shakes his head.

Max joins them, planting one gloved hand on her hip and fixing him with a feigned scowl. "I can't leave you alone for five minutes, can I?"

"Nice bull-leaping," Alec compliments her. "I had the best seat in the house." He pointedly doesn't mention the gun she's still holding, but that doesn't stop him from staring at it.

She follows his gaze, and a muscle in her cheek twitches. She takes the pistol apart in record time, dropping the parts to the ground and stomping them to useless pieces. "Are you okay?" She crouches down to get a better look at him.

His limbs are starting to tingle with renewed feeling. "Getting there," he replies. He tries to stand; it's like moving through molasses. Ben and Max end up hooking his arms around their necks and lifting him. Once he's upright, he finds himself leaning heavily on Ben. His twin wraps his other arm around Alec's waist, hand worming under his jacket to settle against his hip.

Max takes a step back. She looks them up and down but doesn't comment. "These were Retrievers, I take it?"

"Yeah," Ben replies. To Alec, "You're lucky. They were trained to use only as much force as was necessary. You could have been much worse off."

"Fantastic," Alec mumbles. "Just how many of these things are on the prowl, anyway?"

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Ben looks apologetic. "I don't know."

"Logan's working on it," Max says. "He has connections. Someone, somewhere will have some kind of information on the Gossamers." She glances over her shoulder. "These ones are huge. And dangerous. If I hadn't gotten the drop on them...."

"We should get out of here," Ben advises. "If any other Gossamers were in range while these ones were keening, they might be on their way." He shifts Alec's weight. "I knew it would only be a matter of time before they caught up to me."

"Take me home, then," Alec says. "We can hole up while Logan works on getting some intel. How long before I feel normal again?"

Ben gives him a sidelong glance. "The toxin wears off in a couple of hours. You'll get steadily better in the meantime, though."

"Back to Alec's, then," Max says, "before someone comes asking after all this commotion."



It's a slow journey back to Alec's apartment, since he can't move very fast. Max wants to support him on his other side, but there's something about the way Ben is holding Alec that makes her feel unwelcome. The rejection goes nicely with the cold hard ache of guilt in her gut. Ben was — *is* — *her* brother. His mercy-killing was one of the hardest things she's ever done. If finding out she'd botched *that* wasn't bad enough, now he's imprinted on Alec, his clone who went on record deriding Ben and everything he stood for. Since Ben first saw her, they've barely spoken, and certainly not alone.

Max had already resolved not to pressure him into any conversation he didn't want to have. But she supposes she thought he would come to her. When he didn't — when he opened up to *Alec*, of all people, it hurt. So she'll have to settle for trying to fix her mistakes without hurting anyone further. In the interest of covering their tracks again, they do a little breaking-and-entering at a closed gym. She sits in the locker room, hunched over with her elbows on her knees, and waits while Ben and Alec shower. She wonders if her brother is helping his twin. Then she feels a spark of irrational jealousy.

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When Alec and Ben wander back in, freshly clean, she forces herself to stand up and shuffle them back onto the streets.

Alec's apartment is nicer than hers, but still no contender for Logan's. All the same, it's somehow warm and inviting — despite belonging to a cavalier shady dealer with a smart mouth. She smiles to herself as she holds the door open for Ben and Alec.

"What?" Alec asks, catching her grin.

"Nothing, gimpy," she replies.

Alec's already moving easier, and needs only a little help settling onto his couch. He sinks onto the cushions with a sigh. "That's it for me. I'm not moving another inch tonight."

Max shakes her head at him. "Are you sure it's a good idea for you to stay here alone?" She looks around the place. It's a solid foundation, but the Gossamers seem to be able to get into anything.

"I was here alone last night," Alec points out.

"I'm going to stay," Ben says, startling them both. "So he won't be alone."

"Are you sure," Max starts on top of Alec's "You don't have—"

"I want to," Ben insists, and he sounds so much like his old self that Max wants to cry with relief. She catches Alec's gaze and hopes he can see it in her eyes.

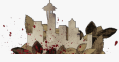
"If you don't mind," Alec says. "I could use someone to bring me rum," he adds flippantly. "One of my contacts hooked me up with some sweet Santiago from Cuba and it is *kick-ass*."

Max rolls her eyes. "All right. We'll meet up at Logan's tomorrow and see if he managed to find anything out." She almost asks if they want her to stay, too, but doesn't. O.C. is probably climbing the walls waiting for Max to come home as it is. She's sure they'll be fine, but, "I'm going to call to check up on you later, so keep your phone on."

"Yes, ma'am." Alec says it with a cocky grin, and Max tries not to roll her eyes again. They might roll right out of her head one day.

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"See you tomorrow," she tells them with a wave, and shuts the door behind her on the way out.



When she gets home, Original Cindy is sitting on their couch with her arms folded, face schooled into a no-nonsense expression. She doesn't waste any time. "You wanna explain to me what the hell that was tonight?"

Max spreads her hands, jokes, "You won't accept the 'it was all a dream' explanation?"

O.C.'s purses her lips. "You show up at Crash with Alec's 'twin' brother, and when the boy shows up lookin' spooked, you orchestrate a distraction so they can blaze outta there? And you expect me not to ask questions?"

"I don't expect you not to ask questions." Her voice sounds hollow to her own ears.

"Boo," Original Cindy fixes her with a look so deep that Max feels it see right through her. "Tell me."

And Max tells her. Max tells her everything — about Ben, about the Blue Lady and the High Place, about the Gossamers and what Manticore had done. She tells O.C. about her guilt and her history of always failing her siblings, about her hurt and jealousy after her brother and Alec latched onto each other out of nowhere. She doesn't know how she gets from the doorway to the couch to Cindy's arms, but in the end that's where she is, and Original Cindy is holding her and petting her and telling her it's okay.

"It's not okay," Max chokes into O.C.'s shoulder. "How is this my life? Never mind all the other shit that's going on, which sucks hard enough. I spent *months* back at Manticore before torching the place, and not once did I ever notice my brother — the brother I *killed* just to spare him from them — was being used as a sick experiment?" She tightens her grip around Cindy's camisole. "Renfro paraded his picture in front of me. She was probably having the time of her disgusting life."

"Boo," O.C. says softly, fingers carding through Max's hair. "I've never heard of a psychic X5, have you? Unless that's a skill you've been holding out on

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us, then I don't see any reason for you to blame yourself. For not knowing something there was no way for you to know."

"I set them free," Max whispers. "I let them loose across the countryside."

"And what was better for him? To be stuck in Manticore forever? To play 'hunt the most dangerous game' forever? Boo, listen to me." She takes hold of Max's head and lifts her so they're eye to eye. "You've already done so much. You saved him twice in two days. You're helping him get back to living a normal life. You're hunting down the Gossamers once and for all." She strokes Max's cheek. "Instead of killing yourself over something you can't change, focus on how to help him from here."

Max smiles through the lump in her throat. "Thanks, O.C. I'm glad you've got my back."

"Course I do, Boo." Cindy looks like she's going to say more, but the phone rings. She quirks an eyebrow at Max. "At this hour, it's probably for you."

Max picks up, her heart in her throat. Something couldn't have happened to Ben or Alec already, could it? "Hello?"

"Max," Logan says. "I know it's late, but I wanted to make sure you would come straight over tomorrow. I may have found the answer to our friend's little problem."

"Already?" Max wonders, even though she's grinning and feeling much better about everything.

"My contacts do good work. Get some rest and I'll see you back here tomorrow."

"You mean later today," Max chuckles, and hangs up. "Logan's got something figured out."

O.C. nods. "Good, good. Your man could research circles 'round anything that crawls out of Manticore's basement. You'll solve this problem and help Ben, Boo — I don't doubt it."

"Thanks," Max reiterates. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Crash and burn, probably," Original Cindy snickers.

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Six shots of Santiago later, Alec is feeling considerably more like himself. The numbness and dizziness is all gone, making way for hunger. He feels even better after getting off the phone with Max.

"Good news," he says to Ben, who's been listening with rapt attention at the other end of the sofa. "Logan may have some info on the Gossamers."

Ben blinks, his mouth falling open in disbelief. "I," he starts, and stops. Lowers his head.

"What's wrong?" Alec asks. "I told you, didn't I? They're good at this sort of thing."

Ben shakes his head but doesn't look up. "It's just, I didn't think ... I didn't ever think...."

And Alec gets it. "Hey," he says, not wanting to pull Ben under when he was doing so well, "I didn't get to properly thank you." When Ben glances at him through his eyelashes, Alec clarifies, "For saving my ass tonight."

"Oh, I didn't really—"

"You did," Alec insists. "You could have frozen — freaked out and huddled in a corner of the alley, but you didn't." He grins. "You whipped its ass with a *garbage lid*."

"Max saved us," Ben says.

"She did," Alec agrees, nodding. "But you saved *me*." The words hang between them for a moment. Then Alec stands up. "I'm hungry. Want some dinner?"

Ben already starts protesting, "You don't need to—"

"Don't get excited; it's microwavable." Alec opens his freezer and takes out two frozen pasta dishes. "Don't expect Cale-grade cuisine over here."

He's not looking, but he can feel a smile in Ben's voice when he replies, "Dinner sounds great."

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Alec's microwave is a dumpster reject that is probably frying his brain cells as he speaks. It also takes three times as long to warm anything up. But Alec figures that's part of its charm. When the food's ready, he grabs two stained forks from the drawer and plops back down on the couch, handing one meal to Ben.

"Thanks."

Alec waves the thanks away. They eat in silence; fettucini alfredo and Santiago de Cuba went surprisingly well together. Or maybe it's just because it's one in the morning and they spent their evening wrestling monsters. When they're finished eating, they set their empty cardboard boxes aside. Without an excuse not to talk, the quietness is suddenly deafening.

After a while, Alec breaks the silence. "You seem ... better," he finishes lamely, because he doesn't know how he's supposed to say it.

Ben gets him, though, and shakes his head. "I don't feel better."

"You sound better," Alec assures him. "You don't cower as much."

"As much," Ben echoes with a faint laugh. "Maybe. I don't know. I was at Manticore for so long, I don't know how ... Alec," he says suddenly, "will I ever really get better?"

Alec makes a show of studying his hands folded in his lap. What a loaded question. He thinks of PsyOps, the training regimen, of Rachel. Life has a penchant for kicking transgenics in the ass. But then he remembers Max and Joshua and realizes that transgenics gave as much as they got. He lifts his head, meeting Ben's gaze and holding it. "We're always all right," he tells his twin. "We'll always get better."

Ben nods, his gaze never wavering from Alec's. It changes, though — Alec watches it transform. He sees trust and uncertainty become relief and affection and — and he knows *that* look. Ben's green eyes are dark with it, with fear and longing and wanting to be able to....

We're living on borrowed time. And if you don't put your heart out there on the line, you're never really living at all."

Alec's already sliding across the couch. Ben watches him the whole time, but doesn't say a word or move a muscle. There are a million reasons not to do

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it — not the least of which is Max — but Alec remembers what it was like to be out and free and able to make his own decisions. So he leans over and brushes his lips against Ben's. They're soft and wet from either Santiago or Ben's tongue. Alec's own lips tingle from the contact, so he does it again. Ben stiffens, fingers tightening on the arm of the sofa.

Alec backs off. "Was I wrong?" he murmurs. "Is this no good?"

Ben looks nervous, averting his gaze to stare at at the far wall. "It's not — I just." He takes a deep breath.

"Hey," Alec says gently. "We don't have to do anything." When Ben glances at him quickly, Alec amends, "Or we could do something, if you want. You're in charge here, Ben."

Ben looks at him again, blinking. "I'm ... in charge."

"Yep." Alec spreads his hands in surrender. "We'll do whatever you want."

It's like Alec found and flipped the magic switch. Ben surges forward, surprisingly gentle as he molds himself to Alec, pushing him into the sofa's back and climbing into his lap. "I want to kiss you," he says before he does just that, sealing his mouth over Alec's.

"Yeah," Alec breathes around Ben biting at his bottom lip. "Yeah, okay." He can get behind that.

The kisses are swift and desperate at first, Ben taking what he can while he can. Alec lets him, kissing back when he can manage and resting his hands on Ben's hips. Soon Ben slows down, realizing Alec isn't going anywhere. He readjusts himself, straddling Alec's waist more comfortably, hands cupping his cheeks so Ben can lick into his mouth. His twin whimpers, which Alec belatedly realizes is an answer to his own moan. Ben tastes like rum. Alec tilts his head, deepening the kiss, grabbing fistfuls of Ben's t-shirt. Ben grinds down, rubbing their denim clad erections together. The friction is electric and makes both of them curse. Alec catches Ben's tongue with his teeth and sucks it into his mouth, keeping it there for as long as he dares. Ben breaks away with a growl. Alec's afraid he's done something wrong until Ben only moves him onto his back.

The cushions are warm beneath him; Ben is even hotter, moving over him and seeking out his lips. Alec lets Ben take the lead again, lets Ben pull him under, long and deep and oh so good. His lungs are burning but he can't

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make himself pull away. Ben's holding himself up with one arm braced awkwardly between the cushions and Alec's head. His other hand is at Alec's side, twisted into his shirt. Alec throws his outside leg around Ben's hips and rocks upward, hungry for the friction again. Ben chokes out a sob; Alec swallows it.

Eventually, Alec cranes his neck for fresh air. "Damn," he gasps, letting his foot slide back to the floor.

Ben pushes himself up, panting. The action results in pushing his hips further into Alec's. He groans low in his throat, peering down at Alec through heavy-lidded eyes. It takes everything Alec has not to pull his twin back down and roll them onto the floor. He succeeds only because the desire to give Ben a safe place is only *slightly* stronger than the desire to fuck him. Thankfully, Ben doesn't test him for long. His twin sits back on his knees and then his hands worm under Alec's shirt, hot against his stomach.

"Ben," Alec rasps, arching into the touch.

Ben hesitates, rubbing slow circles into Alec's skin. "Can I—?"

"Yes," Alec hisses, wiggling to help Ben remove his shirt. Ben pulls his own top over his head next, looking sexy and sculpted and the lamplight touches his skin *just so*. Alec sits up, wrapping his arms around Ben's back to yank him back down. Ben follows, unresisting, and Alec shimmies downward to latch onto one perfect pink nipple. He licks it until it pebbles up under his tongue, sucks it while Ben makes tight frustrated noises.

He releases the nipple with a wet pop, intending to go for the other one. Ben has other plans, rolling them off the couch onto the floor. Alec finds himself on top and doesn't skip a beat, tonguing the whorls of Ben's ear as his twin's short nails rake lines of fire down his back. He half-expects Ben to stop at the waist of his jeans, but he doesn't. Ben's hands cup Alec's ass and squeeze, pulling them further into each other. Alec abandons all patience, sitting back atop Ben's thighs and going for the button on his pants.

"Tell me if you want to stop," he says, and the lowering zipper sounds much louder than it is.

In response, Ben lifts his hips. Alec gets their pants and underwear off so fast he's sure he's set a record. Free of denim and cotton, Alec sees Ben's cock for the second time and it's surreal. They look the same, even erect. He wraps his fingers around the soft weight of it, thumbs the head; they feel

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the same, too. Ben twitches in Alec's palm, hardening further. Alec licks his bottom lip. Will they taste the same? They probably taste the same.

"Don't stop," Ben pleads, and Alec would give him anything.

There's precome leaking under the pad of his thumb. Alec swirls it around the head before sucking the tip into his mouth. Ben whines — a helpless sound. How long has it been for him? Alec takes pity and swallows him whole, holding Ben's hips to the floor. Ben smells like cheap soap, heat, and sex. Alec drinks it deep, moaning around Ben's cock. He pulls off only long enough to suck on two of his own fingers, watching Ben watch him. Then he goes back, taking Ben deep down his throat and working himself open.

Ben knows what's coming. He cards his fingers through Alec's hair, breath coming in shallow pants. He pulls at Alec's ears, but Alec doesn't rush. Only when Ben is pulled taut and humming does Alec pull his lips off, precome a little bitter on his tongue. Ben's cock glistens in the low light and his twin is already taking charge again, sitting up against the couch and pulling Alec into his lap. Alec sinks himself onto Ben, chin dropping to his chest even as Ben throws his head back with a hiss. Ben's cock splits him open bit by bit; by the time he's seated, he isn't sure where he stops and Ben begins.

His twin reminds him, thrusting his hips up, fucking himself further in. Alec groans, struggling to find leverage. Once he's balanced, he lifts up and lets himself fall again. Ben slides in and out of him and it's burning hot — searing — but so *good* So *full*. Alec starts moving faster, riding Ben with wanton abandon, each thrust tingling from his cock to every nerve ending and back again.

Ben's pawing at him, stroking his skin. Pulls him in for a kiss once, but it's almost too much and they break apart. When Alec numbs with ecstasy and drops his head onto Ben's shoulder, his twin takes over, seizing Alec's hips and pulling him down, down — going deeper, deeper — and then it's *not enough*.

Ben doesn't ask. He practically shoves Alec off his cock and turns him around and Alec is *glad* he didn't ask because *yes*. He falls to his hands and knees and tries not to scream when Ben pushes into him again. This angle is better, as Ben proves by really giving it to him. Alec scratches the floorboards, bites his lips when Ben reaches around to jack him. It's like it's his own hand, except it isn't. It *isn't*. *Oh, fuck...!*

He comes with a shout, spilling over Ben's hand and nearly falling on his

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face. Ben lets go of his limp cock and then the warm-wet hand is on his hip again. Ben cries out, fucking in and in and *in*, coming deep inside him.

Ben pulls out and rolls onto his back. Alec finally lets himself collapse onto his stomach. Neither of them move for a few minutes. When they do, it's only for Ben to stumble to the bathroom to get a damp washcloth and find their boxers because seriously, the one who gets fucked shouldn't have to move so soon. After they're clean and marginally decent, Alec wonders if maybe it was a mistake. He doesn't regret anything tonight, least of all the amazing sex, but sex always seems like a great idea at *first*.

Maybe Ben is regretting it. Alec stares at his lap. Maybe Ben moved too quickly into something he wasn't ready for and now they are going to be weird around each other forever. Maybe hooking up with your clone is too weird even for Manticore.

Ben clears his throat. Alec looks at him, finds him soft and vulnerable and not at all the man who just fucked Alec into the floorboards. Alec offers his hand. To his relief, Ben takes it.

"Do we have to talk about this right away?" his twin asks. He looks a little apprehensive, but his fingers are entwined with Alec's and their grip is firm.

Alec smiles at him. "Gossamers first," he says, and knows they'll be just fine.



Even though his day is going to be filled with Gossamer-hunting and other assorted headaches, Alec finds himself looking forward to brunch at Logan

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Cale's. The man may be an pedantic pain in the ass sometimes, but he sure knows how to cook. Alec and Ben take the scenic route, circling the city the long way around and backtracking twice before actually heading to Logan's building. Alec weaves his Duke through Seattle's congestion. Ben's arms are a comfortable weight around his waist, and he smells like Alec's soap.

Max is already sitting at the table when they arrive, which Alec figured would be the case. However, he wasn't expecting Joshua to be here, too, poking at his scrambled eggs with a fork that looks too small in his large hands.

"Hey, big fella," Alec greets him with a grin.

"Hey, medium fella," Joshua replies, pleased. He blinks, looking genuinely surprised when he sees Ben, and sniffs the air. He blinks again, then lifts his nose skyward and takes another whiff. "You smell the same," he accuses, as though Alec is deliberately tricking him.

"Don't worry," Alec soothes, raising his hands placatingly. "He's one of us — a transgenic. This is..." he trails off when he glances back at Ben.

His twin has gone white, slack-jawed and unblinking, staring at Joshua as though he were a demon. But petrified though he seems, Alec can tell that every muscle in Ben's body is ready for a fight — and so can Max. She pushes away from the table, standing up and reaching for Ben even though she's across the room.

"It's okay," she reassures him. "Ben, it's okay. This is Joshua. He's our friend."

"He's a Nomlie," Ben says.

"He's a *friend*," Alec insists, catching Ben's gaze with his own. Ben keeps one eye on Alec and the other on Joshua, but soon realizes that if Alec and Max say that Joshua is a friend, he must be a friend. He visibly relaxes, and Alec releases a breath he didn't know he was holding.

"I know," Joshua says. Wisely, he's remained seated and thus doesn't appear threatening. "Joshua knows Ben is Max's brother. Max told me. Max told me ... that Ben is like Alec. Same cocktail?" He sniffs the air again. "You smell the same. Almost the same." He sniffs again, leaning forward over his plate to do so. Max smiles indulgently.

"Sorry." Alec squirms beneath the scrutiny. They showered; there's no way

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Joshua can smell that they had sex, right? "It must be confusing for you."

Joshua squints at them, cocking his head. "Ben is ... all right?"

Alec looks over at him. His twin still looks a little freaked out, but his voice is steady when he replies, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

Logan picks that moment to walk in with a plate of bacon. "Problem?" he muses, eyeing everyone's serious expressions.

"Not anymore," Alec says, breaking the any lingering tension. "You brought bacon."

Later, everyone is crowded in Logan's living room, all full bellies and ready for Gossamer-hunting action. Logan refused to tell them what he found out until after brunch. It's hard for Alec to tell if he was being annoying or just genuinely didn't want to bring work into a perfectly good meal.

"Give us the good news, Logan," Max says, smiling. Alec finds the corner of his mouth tugging up into a smile, too. Of course Max's hacker boyfriend would need less than two days to find out what to do.

Logan touches the rim of his glasses and fiddles with some papers. "Eyes Only did some digging around for me, and one of his contacts struck gold." He finds the sheet he was looking for, holding it up in triumph. "Even though the Manticore facility was compromised and burned—"

"Not sorry," Max quips automatically, but then looks immediately guilty.

"—Some records managed to slip through the cracks. Maybe they were in the process of being sent when the fire started, so it was too late to recall the message. Regardless, this is a list of the Gossamers that were prepped and almost ready for training. They are the only Gossamers that were outside of their pens the night Max brought the Seattle Facility down."

Alec glances at Ben, checking in. Ben gives him a reassuring nod. "So you know how many we're looking at?" Max asks.

Logan smiles at her. "Disregarding the ones you guys already took out, looks like there are two Retrievers and one Eliminator left on the loose." The smile wanes when he turns to Ben. "Since those three did follow Ben all the way

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here and didn't take long to find him, it's safe to assume they are prowling Seattle."

"We can't keep showering six times a day," Alec points out. "Or taking a hundred different routes home all the time."

"No," Logan agrees. "So I'm thinking of laying a trap for them — let the hunters become the hunted, so to speak." He hands another piece of paper to Max. "Eyes Only's contact also supplied information on the tranquilizer used on the Gossamers while they were at Manticore. They still make it, and I've made arrangements for a pick-up this afternoon — for both the darts and the guns. Max, if you'd be so kind."

"Well, I'll be damned," she says, folding the paper and stuffing it in her jacket.

"Seriously damned," Alec adds, impressed. "Gossamer hides are a bitch to pierce."

"We are going to hunt Gossamers?" Joshua wonders.

"That's right, buddy," Alec replies. "They've been making life for me and Ben here very inconvenient."

Joshua's nostrils flare. "Gossamers are hunting Alec?"

"Fraid so."

"Not good." Joshua shakes his head. "Not good, not good. Is this why Logan called Joshua?"

Logan nods. "I was hoping you'd be willing to help us out. Once we have the tranq, we'll be ready to lure the Gossamers into a fight on our own terms, more or less."

Max looks over at him. "What do you mean, more or less?"

He has the grace to look sheepish, at least. "Well, this batch of Gossamers — all they know is Ben's scent. They grew up trained to fetch Ben."

"You want Ben to be bait again," Max says flatly, just as Alec finds himself giving a curt, "No." Everyone's looking at him now, so he goes on, "You can't ask him to do something like that again, are you crazy? You saw what they

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did to him."

"Alec," Ben starts.

"No," he repeats. "I'll be the bait. We have practically the same scent. It came after me last time, remember?"

"Of course," Max says, "but—"

"No," this time from Ben, "no, I'm going to do it." His knuckles are white from where he's gripping the edge of the sofa. "I didn't think ... no, I'll be the bait."

"Ben," Max ventures.

He rides over her. "It's me they're after, so let's give them what they want. But if I'm going to be hunted, it's going to be on my own terms."

Max is about to protest. Alec doesn't blame her; he is, too. But one look at the determined glint in Ben's eyes makes both of them clam up. Two days in Seattle, and already he is far and away from the quivering mess he was when they found him hiding in the Needle. Whatever compelled him to return to this city, being here — being with them — was helping.

"Okay," Max acquiesces. "Okay, deal. But I have an even better plan." She quirks a grin at Alec. "Divide and conquer."

And damn, when she smiles like that, it always means work for Alec — but hell if he doesn't love it. "I'm listening."



Logan's contact is true to his word: Max heads out to make the exchange and calls ahead to let them know everything is in order. Logan prints them a schematic map of the sewage system they'll be using. The rest of the day is basically a really long waiting game. When Max returns, she and Logan go to run some errands, relegating Alec, Ben, and Joshua to the apartment and promising to return with dinner. Alec lets them go without so much as a smart-assed remark, because stealing moments like this to go *grocery shopping* give Max and Logan a glimpse at a normal relationship, and he isn't going to take that away from her.

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It doesn't take long for boredom to set in. Joshua eventually retreats to the guest bedroom for a nap. Alec and Ben pretend to watch television for a little while, but eventually they abandon the pretense and Alec lets Ben fuck him on Logan's floor. Being virtually silent nearly kills them. Then they commandeer the shower, lest all of their efforts be for nothing.



Alec hates a lot of things, but there are three particular things he hates a *lot*: Gossamers, sewers, and being followed. Unfortunately, he is in the middle of all three. He hefts his tranq gun and rotates his shoulders, trying to remain calm when all he wants is to turn around and scream at the Gossamer to come and get him. He knows it's out there somewhere — he can hear whispers in the dank air, amidst the drips and creaks of the sewage system.

"I hated this the last time I did it," he says offhandedly to Joshua.

His canine companion cocks his head, listening but concentrating on cataloging all the smells. No mean feat, considering. "Gossamer smells different. Different from last time."

"I think it was from a different facility altogether," Alec replies. "Wait until you see these ones: they're bigger, uglier, and I'm guessing aren't distracted by shiny objects." Joshua looks at him for a few seconds. Alec's mouth works. "Something on my face?" he asks.

The big man shakes his head. "No, there is nothing on Alec's face." He faces forward again, but still steals glances. "Joshua heard you."

"Heard me retching?" Alec deflects. "Sorry, big buy. Can't take the stench down here sometimes."

"No," Joshua says again. "Heard you getting busy," he whispers shyly.

Alec closes his eyes briefly. "Oh. Sorry, did it upset you?"

Joshua shakes his head again. "Max's brother," he points out.

"I know." Alec shoulders his gun, reaching out to touch Joshua's arm. "Look,

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you can't tell her, okay? We're not — I mean, we just wanted..." he gives up with a shrug. "He isn't ready for that kind of thing. Me neither, really. We were only..." he trails off with a sigh. "It's complicated."

Joshua doesn't say anything for a few seconds. Alec rubs the back of his head, feeling awkward. Finally, his large friend decides, "Ben could be family."

Alec finds himself grinning. "Yeah, I suppose he could be."

The brightness of that moment does nothing to illuminate the dingy sewers, though. They continue hiking through the muck, at a much slower pace than usual, purposefully parading around Alec's enticing scent. It's getting ridiculous, though. He wishes the Gossamer would just take a shot at him already. They've been at this for hours and have nothing to show for it but filth to wash out of their clothes. Alec checks his watch. "Ugh, the sun will be up in a couple hours already. This sucks." Of course, the one time he wants the damned thing to find him is the one time the Gossamer decides to play it safe. "Stupid mother found me fast enough last time," he grumbles, rounding a corner.

And has time to wish he'd been careful what he asked for.

The Gossamer leaps. Alec shouts, falling backward but not fast enough. The creature is on him. Alec braces the gun under its neck, using it to keep its jaw at bay. The claws are another story. Thankfully, Joshua is in that book.

The Gossamer may be new and improved, but at six-foot-six, Joshua is a force to be reckoned with. He grabs the Retriever, pulling him clean off Alec with a roar. When Alec clambers to his feet, Joshua is squeezing the life out of it.

"Hold it steady," he says, taking aim. The tranquilizer has to be measured precisely, so as not to damage or kill the Gossamer. They'd thrown caution to the wind and pumped so much of the mix into the darts, there should be no coming back. Alec pumps two deep into the Retriever's gut, and it goes limp in seconds.

Joshua drops it; it hits the ground with a heavy thud. Alec notes the ribbons of blood trickling down Joshua's forearms.

"Thanks, bro," he says, patting Joshua on the shoulder. "You saved my ass."

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"Alec would save Joshua's ass," his friend says simply.

"I would," Alec agrees. "Again and again." He whips out his phone to touch base with Logan. "Let's hit the rendezvous point."



The night so far has consisted of a lot of marching, and a lot of conspicuous silence. Max and Ben duck under the umpteenth low-hanging pipe of the night. She manages to misstep while dodging a head wound, makes a face when her foot sinks into something murky and squishy and she *doesn't want to know*. "This sucks," she declares, trying to wipe her boot on the ground.

When she looks up, Ben is staring at her. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this," he says simply.

It flusters her badly; she can only respond with a flat, "What." She blinks, tranq gun dangling in loose fingers. "Hours of awkward silence, and this is the first thing you say to me?"

He averts his eyes, and she feels sort of like a dick. "I'm s—" she glares at him, and he switches directions, "I caused you so much trouble the last time I was in Seattle." He takes a deep breath. "Part of me was hoping you'd finish what you'd started. Not started," he corrects himself. "You did me a favor: you killed me so I wouldn't have to go back there. It's not your fault they can sew just about anything back together — if not always correctly." Absently, he touches his temple.

"Ben," Max says, very seriously, "there is nothing wrong with you."

"But there is," he insists. "There was. I was psychotic, Maxie — I know it now. I never could handle the outside. Even when I was back at Manticore, after they — after. I was still clinging to the Lady."

"Of course you were," Max reasons. "It was one of the only things that used to make sense to you! Ben, you," she hesitates, heart breaking, "you were *tortured*. That's what it was: weeks of endless physical and psychological torture. Trying to hang on to your old reality was how you protected yourself."

"Was it?" He sounds genuinely curious. He looks at his feet. "My reality was

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such a fucking mess that my only comfort was the ghost of an alternate reality I'd made up as a child. A disturbingly accurate alternate reality," he adds bitterly. "The Lady didn't love me, didn't save me in my imagination any more than She had when I thought she was real."

She takes a step toward him. "Ben—"

"And then, somehow, I make it back here. Back to you." He rubs his arm. "How could I even face you? After all the grief I caused, I couldn't expect you to help me. But you did. You took me in and wanted to help me, when all I'd done was nearly blow your cover and murder innocent people."

Max tries again. "Ben, you were sick. You were ... things are different now. You're different now."

"Different," Ben manages a humorless laugh. "Docile. Not a soldier."

"Not a soldier," Max agrees, and he looks up in mild surprise. "But still a fighter. Like me. Like Alec and Joshua."

Ben shakes his head. "I'm not like you or Alec."

"You're fighting. You've been fighting for months. You fought yesterday — you're fighting *now*."

"Out of *desperation*, Max!" he yells at her. He swallows. "Because I have to. Because if they catch me, it's going to be even worse than the hunt."

Max lets the words hang between them for a minute. Then she only says, "Yeah. Us, too."

He glances her way, green eyes sparkling with just a glimmer of hope. "I thought you hated me for what I'd done. I didn't want to be more of a burden on you than I had been already."

She finds herself shaking her head. She blinks away tears. "No, Ben, no. I ... it was my fault the Gossamers did this to you. I set them free. You were at Manticore and I didn't save you. I—"

Ben's wrapped around her a second later, and they're hugging like they haven't seen each other in years. In a way, they haven't. "Max," he whispers, like a litany. "Max, Max, Maxie ... you helped me hang on to myself." He squeezes her tighter.

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Max sniffles into Ben's shoulder, and squeezes back.



Alec makes a show of checking his watch. "Okay, seriously. We have been camping at this point for an hour. I don't think the Eliminator is coming."

"Strange," Ben muses, looking left and right down each hallway. "We've been combing the sewers for hours, you'd think it would have been hunting us by now."

Max is still carefully picking Gossamer goo out of her hair. "This shit is worse than gum. Sure you guys don't see anything skulking in the dark?"

Of course he is. Alec bites back a retort. There wasn't anything there an hour ago, when they arrived at this underground crossroads of tunnels, and there definitely isn't anything now. Ben and Alec's scents should have been nice, ripe, and wafting down the corridors, bringing the last remaining Gossamer running. "Yes, we're sure. Maybe his Retriever buddies screeched a warning, or something?"

"Ours didn't," Max says, pulling elastic gummy webbing from her scalp. "It didn't have time. I shot it in the face for ruining our Kodak moment."

"Not before it shot you in the face," Alec points out.

"Shut up. It just grazed me."

Joshua is sniffing around each doorway. He's been doing that every few minutes; Alec figures he's just as bored as the rest of them. But then Joshua inhales deeply, and turns to them. "Gossamer is this way!" he announced triumphantly, pointing excitedly down the corridor.

Alec is dumbstruck for a moment. He's not the only one; Max gets her bearings first. "Wait, you can sniff them out?"

"Smell is different," their canine companion acknowledges. "But now Joshua knows it."

Alec looks at Ben. Ben looks at Max. Max looks at Alec and says, "Let's go

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hunting."



Joshua leads them through winding tunnels, around crisscrossing pipes, and along enclosed walls that were nearly claustrophobic. Eventually, Alec realizes that they have somehow moved away from the sewage system and into an abandoned subway tunnel. It's like stumbling upon an evil overlord's lair: the mouth of the old cave open deep, and the empty, damp cavern stretches out before them like a hidden valley.

Max fusses with the paper Logan gave her. "Huh. Apparently there were plans to expand on a subway system around this part of town, but after the Pulse the project was understandably scrapped."

"And it's hiding here?" Ben wonders, remaining behind Alec. He does sound even better, as though a huge weight has been lifted off of him. Alec thinks being friends with Max automatically gives some people extra kick-ass potential.

"It's almost like a scrapyard," Alec figures.

Joshua sniffs the air again, but makes a face. "Gossamer scent is heavy here. Very heavy. Eliminator is here." He looks frustrated. "So much of its scent, can't pin it down."

"Fan out," Max orders quietly.

As one, they venture further into the abandoned tunnel. It's like spelunking a supercave. Ben sticks close to Alec, but he isn't joined at his hip. Alec is inordinately proud of him; no matter how he doubts himself, his days in Seattle with the rest of them are definitely healing him. Slowly but surely. As he inches along, Alec finds himself thinking they'll have to hit Crash again to celebrate. Or maybe he and Ben could go out for a real dinner, like Max and Logan sometimes do. *Whoa*. The thought makes him pause. He doesn't have time to dwell on it.

Far to his left, Max screams. Alec hefts his tranq gun and starts running for her. "Max!" he shouts. She doesn't answer. "MAX!"

It happens so fast, Alec thinks Logan was wrong about the Gossamer count.

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Something slams into his right arm, taking him down. He loses his gun, barely registers it skittering away from him. The Eliminator goes for his face. Alec right-hooks it as hard as he can and rolls away. It stumbles, clearly pissed. Alec scrambles away on all-fours, tries to get up. Something hits his back, knocking him onto his stomach with a grunt. He can't move.

"Ben!" he shouts. "Joshua!" He tries lifting himself out of the goo. It's no good.

The Gossamer clammers right by him. Alec knows the only reason it didn't eat him is because as far as it's concerned, the moving meal is more important. It moves like lightning. It moves like it was designed to hunt X5s. Alec struggles some more. No good. "The gun!" he yells to whoever can hear him. "Get the gun!"

Ben's a blur moving across the cave, giving the Gossamer a run for its money like he's been doing for months. He zigzags, trying to out-maneuver the Eliminator. He pauses only for a second near Alec, to grab the fallen gun. Then he's off again. Alec thinks the plan is to see which of them tires first, slips up first. Then he sees Joshua skulking along the walls, and he gets it.

Ben and Joshua time it perfectly. His twin blurs by Joshua and the big guy goes for it, tackling it with his monstrous size. They roll across the ground with hisses and growls. Joshua gets the creature pinned and roars right in its face, intimidating it. Then he's gone, getting clear of the shot.

The Gossamer is on its feet in an instant. Ben is ready for it, taking aim and firing three quick shots. Each dart strikes true; the Eliminator drops as easily as the Retrievers did.

And just like that, it's over.

Ben goes limp, sinking to the ground and dropping the gun. He doesn't move after that. Alec renews his struggle and calls for Max. Joshua takes a cautionary sniff in Ben's direction, then wanders to Alec. The Gossamer goo is no match for the canine transgenic's massive strength. As soon as Alec's free, he goes to see if Max is all right. They find her further in the darkness behind a mound of dirt, wrapped up like a present. There's Gossamer goo serving as a makeshift gag, too. Alec winces in sympathy.

"Get her free, big fella?" Alec asks, catching her eye. She nods as best she can.

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Alec leaves Joshua to untangle Max and goes to Ben. His twin is still sitting in the dirt, staring at nothing. "Ben?" he ventures.

At first, Alec doesn't think Ben heard him. But then his clone looks up at him. "It's over?" he whispers.

"Yeah," Alec breathes a sigh of relief. "Yeah, it's over." He offers Ben his hand and pulls him to his feet. Ben half-falls into his arms, and Alec has to hold him up. "It's okay," he finds himself assuring. "Everyone's okay."

Ben doesn't answer him. He lifts his head from Alec's shoulder and kisses him once on the lips. That says more than enough.

They pull apart when they hear Max and Joshua shuffling closer. Max quirks an eyebrow at them, but doesn't comment beyond, "Let's get the hell out of here, huh?"

No one argues.

When they crawl out of Seattle's seedy underground, the dawn is breaking and the birds are singing. They find their bikes, Joshua pulls his helmet on, and then the four of them head back to Logan's.



Alec's starting to lose track of how many times he's eaten at Logan's these days, but he isn't complaining. The man knows how to scramble an egg. They debrief over eggs, sausage, bacon, toast and coffee. Alec stuffs his mouth with syrupy bacon and lets Joshua tell their part of the story. Beside him, Ben tries not to chuckle. He tosses his own bacon on Alec's plate.

"Are any of you finally going to pitch in with the dishes?" Logan asks after, amused. "I've been cooking for this crowd for days now."

"You like it," Max teases him around a mouthful.

Logan smiles at her. "Now that all the Gossamers are gone, what are you going to do?" he asks Ben.

Ben freezes with a forkful of egg halfway to his lips. "Um."

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"He could stay with me," Alec says into his mug, avoiding everyone's eyes. "I have space," he adds, like it's no big deal. Under the table, he moves his left leg until it's pressed against Ben's right.

"I'd like that," Ben says, sipping his own coffee. He gives Alec an answering push.

Joshua is stirring some honey into his milk. His head is ducked but Alec can tell he's smiling. Logan only nods, as though he expected as much, and exchanges a look with Max. "So what's next?"

Max is smiling at both of them from across the table. Alec knows that smile; she's okay with it. She looks back at Logan and says, "Who knows what else escaped from Manticore? And there's still White to deal with." She taps a finger against her cup. "I'm sure something will be along to make us miserable soon enough." She smiles again, at all of them. "But I'm sure we can handle it."

Logan smiles back at her — a special one just for her. "I'm sure we can."


There's a comforting line of warmth where Alec and Ben's legs are still pressed together.

~end






Author's Notes

... SO THAT HAPPENED.

Special thanks and mad, mad, *massively mad* props to  [dollarformyname](#). Not only is she the source of this incredible art, but she served as sounding board, grief counselor, and stepped up to take on beta-reader duties when unforeseen circumstances called my original beta away.

She's also my sponsor in the Em Dash Addiction program.

Thanks to  [measuringlife](#) for being awesome, and to  [denyce](#) and  [brihana25](#) for running the DAbb. I have such affection for old, small

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fandoms and it's nice to see efforts to keep one active. ♥

Also, props to my husband/friends/family for not flipping tables when I begged off outings with the excuse: "I have to write this thing."

Thanks for reading! And if you made it this far, I suppose I should apologize for not even making a single passing reference to the whole SEX WITH YOUR CLONE = MASTURBATION Y/N? thing. Forgive me; I have shamed us both.

Be sure to nab the [soundtrack!](#)