

Twilight's Last Gleaming

by Val Evenstar

Genetic engineering does have some advantages. For example, all six of us can out-run and out-fight a grown-up man. Not to mention out-fly. We're also smart, good-looking, tall and thin, and even Angel would be in the running for first place in a hot-dog eating marathon. And did I mention smart? Not to boast or anything.

But just because I'm a glass-half-full kind of girl, I'm gonna have to mention that smart in our case may be defined a little differently than in yours.

And no, I'm not talking about my big mouth.

For an average non-winged, non-mutant human, the word "smart" may bring to mind the local math whiz or computer genius. Not that we're bad at math - especially ratios, which I'll talk more about later - or computers. I mean, if Nudge were a regular kid, she'd own Microsoft by now. Then again, if she were a regular kid she wouldn't have that special talent of hers either.

So yeah, we're smart-as-in-intelligent, and smart-as-in-cocky-kids-with-few-manners (NOT my fault AT ALL - the flock really needs to pay attention to my etiquette lessons and stop eating roasted miscellaneous life forms on sticks) and smart-as-in-....hmm.... I guess "street smart" would be the expression. "Sky-smart" would be a more accurate description.

The point is, we can analyze any situation like a military officer, come up with escape plans and back-up plans, decoys and bluffs and feints and outright lies to put as many miles between us and the Erasers as possible. (This is where the ratio business comes in - for example, a 3:1 Eraser-to-flock ratio is manageable, whereas a 5:1 Eraser-to-flock ratio is serious bad news).

The point of that point being that I'm starting to ramble on like Nudge here... the point of the point of that point being, we were flying a decoy route to get the Erasers off our collective tail.

It was brilliant. Fly near enough to the actual destination (Washington, DC) to fool the Erasers into overlooking it once we reached - and disappeared from - the fake destination (Boston, Mass). Throw them off our scent and keep 'em busy for a few weeks trying to find us while we continued the search for our parents.

I just wish it had been my idea.

OK, so it was sort of my idea, but since I'm naturally full of grace I'll give credit where credit is mostly due.

Fang thought of it. Which is sad, because a) it wasn't my idea and b) it shows that he's even more paranoid than I am. All we need on our hands is a paranoid Fang.

"Hey, Max, the next time we land, can we buy sunglasses?"

Nudge's voice cut into my thoughts. That amazed me because it meant that she'd actually been silent for a while.

I turned my head to look at her and immediately caught the full blast of the setting sun in my eyes. I could see her point. "Sure," I answered, holding up my hand to shield my eyes. Could looking directly into the sun really blind you? I didn't really want to find out.

"That's good, cuz the sun's in my eyes a lot when we fly, and anyway it's summer. And you know, while we were in that mall the other day, I saw this really cool pair, it had like, rhinestones on the rims? And it looked like something maybe an actress would wear. I think I'd make a good actress someday, don't you? After all, I have to do a lot of pretending nowadays. Like the other day when -"

I let her ramble on and tried to enjoy the - relative - silence of the summer evening. The sunset was gorgeous. I mean, if you want to feel like you're in heaven, just fly up to 1500 feet at sunset. Floating through sheets of golden light, surrounded by a sea of pink and purple and yellow...nothing can compare.

Bear with me here, though - I really AM capable of appreciating beauty - but it would be all too easy for a squadron of, say, fighter planes to come at us out of the sun. We were totally blind in that direction - except for Iggy, who was blind in all directions. Fortunately, planes are loud and fly a lot higher. Yeah, I have a paranoid streak too. Or maybe I'm just paranoid with a few normal streaks. Cages will do that to a girl.

"Max?" It was Angel. "After you save the world, could we get a house and decorate my room with curtains like this?" She gestured to the sheets of light streaming around us. "Like floaty pink and orange curtains around my bed, kind of like a princess'?"

My heart melted. Angel has that effect on me - and I'm positive she wasn't influencing me. I considered trying to hug her in the air, but that didn't work so I blew her a kiss. "Of course, sweetie," I said, because she totally deserved so much more than this miserable on-the-run existence.

"Hey! Max, can I get a whole bunch of monster trucks and one of those Hot Wheels tracks and a big chemistry set?" chimed in the Gasman, who was close enough to hear us.

I sighed.

That's why we play fair, Max, said my resident Zen master the Voice.

I don't need a lecture on parenting, thank you very much, I shot back. *Make yourself useful for a change and tell me how to get out of this mess.*

If silence could smirk, it did.

"Oh, and while we're at it, can I have a roomful of electronics and explosives? A job at DuPont? Three edible meals a day? And, heck, seeing again would be great," came Iggy's sarcastic voice.

Well, at least I wasn't the one raining on their parades.

"We're just asking," yelled the *Gasman*, annoyed at Iggy's pessimism. Realism.

"Yeah, well Max isn't Santa Claus," he retorted.

"Yup, cuz if I was, I'd be too heavy to fly..."

"Heads up, something's coming." Fang's calm voice instantly froze the conversation. I didn't know whether or not to be grateful.

Iggy cocked his head, listening, and I looked over my shoulder. And frowned. Hawks? Why was Fang worried about a bunch of hawks? Sometimes I even think he prefers their company to ours.

I shot him a look, and his black eyes drilled me. I looked back again, closer this time.

My heart fell into the basement. From the top of the Empire State Building.

Big, black flapping objects. Coming in fast.

Flying Erasers???

We'd wanted to draw them out with this decoy route. Lucky me, it worked. OK, so this idea sucked. Fang's fault - and my eyes told him that immediately. The corner of his mouth lifted and he shrugged ever so slightly. Not totally my idea, he was saying. I rolled my eyes.

"Angel, stay with Fang! Iggy, *Gazzy*, top and bottom. Nudge, you're with me. Fang, get rid of the dog!"

Angel went ballistic at that. I sighed - talk about lousy parenting. One moment I'd promised her the world, the next I was ordering her dog's death. But war is war.

Nudge and I disappeared into the last of the sunlight while Iggy and *Gazzy* went high. I cut around the side and met the Erasers first. Let slip the dogs of war and all that. I chuckled at the irony as I smashed a foot into a wolfy jaw. The Eraser spun and thrust out a two-footed kick. I tucked in my wings and dropped, coming up under another with a vicious snap kick.

A distant boom told me that Iggy had joined the fray with his seemingly unending arsenal. I rolled to avoid claws and grabbed Nudge away from a rear strike. We dropped together as Fang came down hard on the Eraser's wings. Ouch.

I pushed down hard with my wings and rocketed up and over the Erasers - and my wings almost skipped a beat as I looked around. We were holding our own, but reinforcements were arriving. Fast.

I made a famous snap decision. "Bonzai! Bonzai!" I yelled at the flock, grabbing Angel away from an Eraser and heading into a steep dive. The flock immediately fell into formation behind me, and we rocketed toward the ground at 180 miles per hour.

Taken by surprise, the Erasers stalled before throwing themselves down after us. It was nearly dark now,

and I wasn't about to risk a crash into the Massachusetts hills - I took a shallower angle, still carrying our speed from the dive, but covering more horizontal distance.

Then suddenly the world exploded around me, and I saw a cascade of glittering stars around my head.

I blinked rapidly, trying to recover my sight after the flash, rapidly checking to see if I was 1) airborne and 2) alive. Both checked out, but what had --

Boom!

I braked with all my might, narrowly avoiding running headfirst into a column of fire. "Iggy, look where you're throwing those things, idiot!" I yelled pointlessly, but I couldn't exactly ask him to hear where he was throwing.

I rolled up and away as something exploded and rained yellow sparks onto my feathers. Now I was MAD. I didn't mind Iggy blowing up the bad guys, but nothing is worse than going around with burnt feathers for a week. People start wondering where the smell's coming from.

I furiously searched the sky for the flock, but all there was was colored smoke and -

Another explosion, this one so close that the shock knocked me sideways and the flash blinded me. I flapped in panic, not knowing whether I was rising or falling, until I felt something - someone - tugging me upwards. I panicked, thinking Eraser and he's gonna take me back to the School, and started a hard elbow to the face.

Happy Independence day, Max, said the Voice, following its usual habit of making random comments while I'm fighting for my life.

I stopped in confusion, enough time for the Eraser to make mincemeat out of me, only -

It wasn't an Eraser. It was Fang, thank God - and thank God I hadn't hit him! If it hadn't been for that Voice's stupid comment....

Independence day?

As in, *Fourth of July*?

As in, *today*?

As in, *FIREWORKS???!!*

Ohhhhhh. Now there's an idea....

My eyes cleared, and Fang let go of me. We looked at each other and I swear I saw an evil glint in his eye. But maybe it was a reflection from the one in mine. We grinned. And flew.

And were followed by a herd of ungainly Erasers - straight through the fireworks display over the Charles River. To the theme music of "Pirates of the Caribbean".

How cool is that? We'd do so great in the movies - us weaving our way through an exploding minefield of fireworks, leaving Eraser bits in our wake.

I cackled meanly and sang the last lines of "Grand Old Flag": "Should auld acquaintance be forgot..."

The Eraser behind me suddenly felt sparks on his fur and dropped.

"Good riddance, you losers!" I yelled, even though it didn't rhyme. Boy, this was sort of fun and I wasn't even a pyro.

The last of the Erasers retreated from the barrage, and I slapped a high five with Fang. Then I blinked and realized that we were silhouetted in dazzling lights and colored smoke. I hope the crowd down there thought the special effects guys were on a field day - although Peter Pan music may have been more appropriate for that.

And, because life is not fair, even on the 4th of July, our problems continued to multiply. What is it with us and math?

Anyway, we'd lost track of Iggy, Gazzy, and Angel - never mind that I'd told Angel to stick with Fang. Big problem. We shot rantic glances at each other (except for Mr. Fang the Vulcan) as we realized they were gone, then started diving and climbing and searching and calling as loud as we dared. Need I say more?

The search was frustrating. But I'll bet I was even more frustrated when I found them - you won't believe this - sitting on the bank of the river, with front row seats and even some little flags and sparklers (Gazzy and Iggy, of course) - watching the show, clapping in time to the music.

Like normal American kids, for crying out loud! Angel was humming along to with the music while Gazzy stared raptly at the pyromania and described the explosions in an awed voice to Iggy. As if they hadn't been fighting mutant monsters five minutes ago and giving me a heart attack over their disappearance.

Gazzy even had the nerve to look up at me with his beautiful blue eyes and smile sweetly. "That was so awesome, Max! You guys rock!" he said, before returning to his firebomb-eneduced trance.

Sigh.

Kids.

Someday they'll be the death of me, I swear.

But hey, that fireworks show was pretty awesome.. and the music...

Sigh, sigh, sigh. It was Angel's fault, I promise. She says she didn't, but I guarantee you that she influenced me...

We stayed for the rest of the show.

Gazzy and Iggy were totally engrossed in the fireworks and came away with a whole stock of dangerous ideas and a few stray explosives. And cannon rounds they somehow filched from the National Guard, but that's another story.

Nudge and Angel sang their little hearts out - note to self: enroll them in a choir, they have gorgeous voices.

And when the orchestra played that dreamy waltz and the fireworks were all glittery and soft and beautiful and all the couples around us started dancing...

Ahem.

Never mind. Nothing important. Heck, I didn't even know I could waltz...

AHEM.

Bottom line - I LIKE FREEDOM. Freedom from Erasers, worries, annoying Voices, whitecoats, cages, etc. Freedom to - um, sit on the grass and watch massive government-funded light shows. Yeah.

It was my first true American holiday, and, though I hate to admit it, well worth it. Despite all the evil geneticists and secret mutant programs, the USA got a big thumbs-up from me. I even went and bought a cute little flag t-shirt from a vendor later - don't tell Angel or Nudge or they'll ask for one too.

But I can't wait to wear it. It says, "Proud to be an American". Maybe one day I'll be able to insert the word "Avian" in there, but for now...

I'll sit back and enjoy the show.

MaX2

by Val Evenstar

"So, uh, Sam," I whispered as the theatre lights finally dimmed, my ears still ringing from the violent previews they'd blasted at us. "What's the movie about?"

He leaned closer to me, and I pulled back slightly, out of instinct. "It's called X2 - it's about the X-men. You've never seen X-men?"

What the heck were X-men? "Um, no," I muttered. "Cuz, my, uh, parents are missionaries... and, uh, it had a lot of cussing and stuff," I guessed blindly. Hopefully this X-men movie wasn't a chick flick, or my cover would be blown pronto. But judging from the previews, this would be another incredibly violent movie with a lame hero and curvy damsel-in-distress.

You know, Voice, I started accusingly. You'll tell me the capital of Paraguay and anything else I need at school, but you won't even let me know what on earth my... date... is talking about.

The movie screen flashed up a picture: "Please turn off all cell phones and pagers. Thank you!"

I smiled inwardly and said, *OK, Voice, I guess you've got to shut up for the next two hours.*

That did it. Boy, if I kept this up, soon I'd be playing the Voice like a CD player.

Just because you don't want to hear me doesn't mean that you won't, it said in its confusing and grammatically questionable way.

Gimme a moment to digest that one, I thought. Some would think you'd never taken English 101.

How can a Voice inside your head give a disgusted huff? I don't know about yours, but mine managed, despite the obvious lack of oxygen in my brain.

And just in case you're scratching your head over that one, I was avoiding the word "atmosphere" which would make things both scientifically incorrect and... incorrect.

The opening credits started playing. Then someone started going on about evolution and how humans came from monkeys and how we were all going to reach a stage of global oneness through mutations and...

WAIT A SECOND.

What was this????

My Life, by Maximum Ride?

They pirated my book and made it into a movie without my permission? They didn't even pick a good title!

The girl went on to elaborate on the benefits of mutations, while I sat in stunned silence. She was starting to sound like a whitecoat, for crying out loud.

The Voice smirked. (Don't ask me how it did that.) *X-men. Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, published by Marvel Comics, first edition, 1963. In this popular series of graphic novels, the superheroes are mutants, led by telepath Charles Xavier. Supposedly, due to nuclear accidents such as Chernobyl, a generation of children adversely affected by the radiation - mutants - was born.*

No kidding, I thought, hoping the Voice would stop reading Wikipedia to me and let me watch the movie. OK, scene 1: Some random guy staring at a snowed-over wreck.

But, as they say, curiosity killed the bird girl, and I had to ask. *Uh, Voice, did any of them have, say, wings??*

One of the four original characters was a mutant by the name of Warren Worthington the Third, nicknamed 'the Angel' because of his -

I howled inwardly. That. Just. Took. The. Cake.

The Voice evidently didn't like me occupying all my brainwaves, so he cut into my rant. *However, in this movie, the character of Angel does not appear.*

I stopped my mental breakdown and smirked. *So, Voice, just how do you know that? This is a new movie. Been pirating films during coffee break?*

Silence.

I loved it.

The Voice was finally stuck between a rock and a hard place - EXACTLY what it deserved.

I, having nothing better to do than gloat, and being far too gracious to gloat - well, not for too long - got back to the movie.

OK, so there were these weird mutants with assorted superpowers. The usual super strength (check), super speed (check), telepathy (check), speedy healing (check), powers to control weather (hmmm... Flock's a little lacking in that department), shape-shifters (I won't allow that in my Flock, thank you very much), icemen (well, Fang's got a pretty icy demeanor, pardon the pun), and ... knives coming out of their hands? Talk about a bunch of freaks.

Look who's talking, the Voice immediately said.

I frowned. *Let's see. A disembodied Voice?*

Silence again.

Oh yeah! Max, 2, Voice, 0. I was starting to like this.

So, since it couldn't stand up to my stinging repartee, the Voice graced me with a science lesson.

You do know, Max, that the chances of mutations bringing about such... 'powers', for the lack of a better term, is virtually impossible.

I frowned, trying to figure out how a guy with laser eyes could see anything.

Even at the School, where mutants are created through DNA manipulation, the failure rate is alarmingly high.

Gee, I really needed to be reminded of my own mortality here. I mean, I only had Erasers growling in my face every other day.

You, the Erasers, and a handful of others were the only successful experiments.

That stung. *OK, FYI, Voice, I've got a NAME and I'm a PERSON. Please take that under consideration when you address me in the future.*

Yes, your Highness, it shot back at once.

I stewed. Finally, I thought, *OK, so what's your point? I'm already quite glad to be alive. Grateful, grateful, grateful. So there.*

The Voice sounded insulted. *The point is, Max, that you could never have evolved by chance.*

No, duh, a bunch of mad scientists CREATED me, so it's not like I'm the next EVOLUTION of humans. I paused. What had I said? I'm not the next evolution of humans...

Bingo, Maximum, said the Voice.

I closed my eyes, both to avoid a particularly disturbing kiss (blue girl and hairy man? yikes!) and to think about what I'd said.

I know, you're thinking, *it's about time.*

So, the whitecoats are trying to make this.. X-men type scenario happen? They're actively trying to evolve humans to a higher state of being? Like, return of a headache here.

Elementary, my dear Watson, purred the Voice.

I scowled. *Thanks, Sherlock. But what they're doing is not evolution. Hello, they're CREATING recombinant life-forms and calling us the next EVOLUTION of humans? Paradox warning!*

The Voice sighed. *I know, Max, it began, but I cut it off.*

And since they're using animal DNA, we're not even humans! We'd be, like, the un-evolution of humans, not the next step!

Yes, Max, the Voice snapped. I know that.

Well, sorry to insult your omniscience, I said, then got caught up wincing at a particularly bad fight scene. Some creepy Asian girl with long metal fingernails was whirling around like a dervish trying to stab wolf-boy. And no, not an Eraser. Actually, more like Eraser Fang - perish the thought! Besides Fang was a lot cuter.

The Voice chuckled, and I mentally swore at myself for even thinking that. I was on a date with Sam, after all. And he was cuter than Fang ... wasn't he?

Anyhow, what I was originally going to say was that spinning is not a good idea in a fight. No self-respecting Eraser I'd ever seen (and believe me, they all have pretty high self-esteem, hence the ego) has ever turned his back on me. Not on purpose, that is. And spinning? Well, all I can say is, picture a fully morphed Eraser with big clunky wings whirling around a stage wearing a pink tutu. See? Ridiculous doesn't begin to describe it.

I can see why the X-men were in a comic book, not, say, a novel. (Shameless advertising right here, even though it's probably not allowed on fan sites: [READ MY NOVEL](#). Then send me a review.

But anyway. I got a strange sense of *deja vu* many times during that scene - and I've got to say I wish we healed that fast, the claw marks were gone in, like, seconds. The marvels of *CG*. Hey, there's one the School hasn't tried: *CG Max*. Let her save the world - 'cuz she wouldn't even have acne.

Well, they fought and yelled and died, etc. I really think that Wolverine guy was a terrible 'hero'. You'd need to totally redefine the word to make it fit him. All I can say is that I hope X-men fans don't start reading *Maximum Ride* and then send me death threats for saying this.

But enough of cute theatrical asides. I watched the final, touching scene where Jean (the scary telepath) nobly gives her life (I bet they bring her back in the next movie) to save her friends and her lover (who, predictably, goes ballistic). And then, because leaving me alone is so anti-social, the Voice made a grand re-entrance.

Now you see how much good you mutants can do for the world, Max, it said, sounding a trifle weepy.

I mentally grabbed my throat and gagged. *Cheese! Too much cheese!* I thought.

The Voice howled.

I loved it! And then I did the single most embarrassing thing I had ever done. Ok, maybe the tenth most embarrassing thing. I burst out laughing. In the middle of the sad, death-of-a-hero scene, I laughed uncontrollably. I'd finally got a reaction from the Voice, and it was so ticked off that I couldn't stop cackling. Yeah, my dark side has very interesting ways of revealing itself. Fortunately, I had enough presence of mind not to roll into the middle of the aisle, and managed to stay in my chair and smother my giggles. I almost smothered myself, too, but hey, I'm a big girl. Oh, and FYI, don't try this at home. Smothering yourself may be hazardous to your health.

Sam made the wise decision to haul me out before they hauled me off, but I was still snickering on the way out. He very politely didn't mention my, er, outburst.

The Voice, besides being a non-mutant, was also no gentleman. *YOU IDIOT GIRL, WHY DO YOU NEVER LISTEN???* it screamed.

Look who's - I began, but wisely shut my mental mouth. (Mental, not metal. Just in case you got any ideas).

I'M TRYING TO HELP YOU SAVE THE WORLD, FOR PETE'S SAKE!!! Acting like an eight-year-old will NOT help matters AT ALL.

And the Voice-of-Yoda will?

Ouch. I really needed to learn to control my thoughts. One would think that after living with a mind-reader and Max-reader would teach me, but no, I'm just stubborn that way.

After its long, wordless scream died out, the Voice took several deep breaths. Again, don't ask me how.

Finally, the author decided that childish theatrics, though side-stitchingly hilarious, weren't doing much to move the storyline, and sobered everyone up by having Max and Sam step out into the rain. The cold water had a measurable effect on both Max and her Voice, so the rain was speedily and providentially stopped to prevent Sam from making comments about *'Singin' in the Rain'*.

Max, the reason the whitecoats made you was so you could save the world.

I refrained from echoing his final phrase with a sing-song accompaniment.

Now, in case you haven't figured it out yet, oh-retarded-one -

That hurt. But I heroically battled my inner monsters (exception of the Voice) and kept my trap shut.

- the whitecoats (you couldn't have picked a less obvious name, could you?) are not, in fact, accomplishing their goal of advancing humanity.

You're kidding, I thought without thinking. Yet again, don't ask. Shoot, a girl who wrote a best-seller is allowed some poetic license, isn't she?

They are, as you said, un-evolving humanity. That, my dear girl, is why you must save the world.

Wait a second - it was saying that I had to save the world from... *us*? The mutants? By, like, doing a 'kill the mutants' - on us?? Is fiction rated K+ allowed to blatantly endorse genocide? To say nothing of suicide! Just my luck to get a R-rated Voice.

Not so fast, kid, said the Voice, overhearing/overthinking/somehow accessing my thoughts. *I guess that came out wrong. You're supposed to stop them from making more!*

I stopped and blinked. There was silence for a long time.

You know, Voice, I finally thought. *That was very anti-climatic.*

No one's perfect, it replied. *But do you know what would be even more anti-climatic?*

Um, what?

If the story ended right here. No final heroic poses, no confessions of secret love, no sappy kisses, no mission accomplished music...

Gee, that would be a bummer...

***Total Annihilation* or How I Got Rid of the Dog**

by Val Evenstar

I could feel the wind in my feathers as I dove toward the ground. Normally, I hate diving, because I can't see if the earth is coming too close for comfort. And with the wind whistling in your ears, it's hard to hear echoes.

Fortunately - or, as it actually was, unfortunately, Max's panicked voice was guiding me downwards.

Something was wrong with Fang.

So what was new?

Well, I guess he'd never really fallen out of the sky before. And as much as I appreciated originality from Mr. Robot, I wasn't exactly fond of his latest idea.

'Flying until you drop' is an expression. But being Fang, he had to take it literally...

"Max, keep talking!" I yell when her voice stops.

"Over here!" she shouts back instantly. "Go to your left, get over his wing!"

I slide to the left. There's a disturbance in the air below me, the slightest sound of fluttering feathers...

I pour on the speed and feel something brush me to the right, and I turn and grab for it, knowing that it's Fang. The instant I touch him, I know he's hurt, and hurt bad. I feel his body twist as I snatch his arm, then steady as Max grabs him from the other side.

"I'm going to get his shoulder," I yell. "He won't be able to breathe if we keep holding him like this!"

She said nothing, but I could feel the tension my words caused. I slid my arm up Fang's, pushing his wing out of the way.

I growled as I came across his backpack straps, and quickly pulled out my knife and cut them away so I could grab his shoulder without the bulky sack between us.

"How close are we to the ground?" I asked Max, since I, being blind, naturally couldn't tell.

"Just a few hundred feet now," she called. "I'll guide us in..."

We landed awkwardly on the beach and I helped Max haul Fang up to the smoother sand at the top of the waterline.

"This feels really bad," I said as I ran my hands over Fang's torso.

Nudge and Angel came running up.

"Is Fang okay?" Nudge asked, breathless.

"Max, his backpack is gone!" Angel yelled.

"Fang's bled a gallon already and you're worried about his backpack?" I snapped, annoyed and worried.

"Iggy," Angel said angrily, " *Total* was in his backpack."

My heart stopped.

"Iggy, it's okay," Max said.

I shrugged her hand off my shoulder.

"Liar."

Max sounded hurt. "None of this is your fault!"

I snorted. "Tell me about it! If I could see, I could've told you that Fang was in trouble - I *know* him, I could've seen that he was injured..." I shook my head bitterly.

"And if these stupid eyes worked, I could've seen that Total was in his backpack! I should've heard him bark, at least.... or felt his fur... and now Angel will never forgive me..."

"It was just a dog, Iggy," Max said.

"Just a dog?" I turned my sightless eyes on her. "How do we know that? Not every dog can talk! What if it had human DNA in it?"

I could imagine her eyes widening at my words, but I had no way of telling if they actually did.

"It's not your fault," she said again. "It's theirs. They made him that way... made *us* that way. They should be the ones who pay, not you."

The words rang hollow and false. So what if the whitecoats made the dog? Did that make *me* any less responsible for what I'd done?

I turned away from Max and walked past her through the trees, just praying that somehow Angel could find it in herself to forgive me.