Virus: Insanity

~1~

Stephen sat in his hiding place, lying in wait for his quarry to arrive. He was told it might take a while for it to get there, but this was getting ridiculous. It had been an hour. No respectable person would be this late for a meeting with a possible employer. He snickered quietly to himself. This person was *far* from respectable. Even still, his muscles were starting to cramp up, hindering his movement. His hands and feet were numb and heavy, his arms and legs tingling. He had been trained to ignore the pain in his back, neck and knees, but there was no stopping the inevitable tingling. He made up his mind: another half hour and he was going back. He couldn’t stand it anymore. The suspense was quite literally torturing him. He shifted as much as he could in the tight confines of the vent, wincing as his half-numb shoulder struck the ceiling. The violent tingling lasted for a few agonizing seconds before returning to normal, which wasn’t much better. He self-consciously looked behind him, but the vent was empty. Of course it was. There was nothing else here.

         The door opened, making Stephen snap to attention, sleep sliding off his mind like water. He was here. The man was tall and muscular, visible even underneath his thick, powdered winter clothing. The specks of snow on his black trench coat melted quickly, the ones on his hat pooling in the gutter between the bowl and lip, some dripping out the back. His knuckles stuck out in the fabric of his left pocket. He was gripping something hard. A gun? A club? A Taser? His sharp blue eyes stared straight ahead, his cleanly shaven rugged face set in a scowl. Stephen didn’t want to meet with that creep, but he had no choice. He carefully rotated his legs so that they were in front of him, then kicked out the vent cover with both feet. The man didn’t flinch as the cover crashed and clattered on the floor. Stephen jumped out, his feet and legs protesting when he landed. He ignored them.

         “Who are *you*?” the man asked with obvious disdain.

         “I’m the messenger,” Stephen replied. The man sniffed.

         “I was expecting someone more…” he started.

         “Aged? Experienced?” Stephen smiled. “Just because I’m not old enough to drive doesn’t give me any less credibility.”

         “Hmph,” the man said. “If you’re so smart, then what are the addresses of the three Survivors?” Stephen began to panic, but quickly pulled most of himself together.

         “They all live together,” he said, voice as still as a lake. “At 2782 Anderson Street.” The man smiled without opening his mouth. He nodded and turned to face away from him, absentmindedly walking away.

         “You have been trained well,” he said. Stephen relaxed slightly. He was winning. All of a sudden, a whirl of black erupted into a bright flash, followed by blinding pain. Stephen keeled over, clutching his bleeding stomach. He staggered onto his knees, eyes wide and mouth gaping. The man lowered his gun, sticking it back it in his pocket. He knelt beside Stephen, gripping his jaw and holding his head up. “But not by the Survivors.” He grabbed Stephen’s arm and hauled him to his feet. “Where’s the real contact?”

         “Burning,” Stephen said hoarsely, pausing for a second to take in a ragged breath. “Burning in he-“ The man backhanded him across the face before he could finish, splitting his lip. Stephen sagged, his vision sparking.

         “Pureblood scum,” the man spat. He then dragged Stephen to the door, throwing it open and releasing a pent-up gust of frigid wind. Stephen could barely find the will to flinch. The man gave him another final glare, ignoring the pitiful expression on his face. Then he threw Stephen out into the snow, ignoring his pained whimpers of despair. He slammed the door shut.

         Stephen was glad that he had long hair and that he dressed for the weather. At least his death freeze would take longer. He forced himself back to sit on his heels, ignoring his stomach pain. He gripped his midsection with one arm while he fumbled for his phone. His numb fingers sloppily opened the fingerprint scan and got him in, barely hitting the speed dial button for “Home”. He shivered madly as he sat knee-deep in the snow, turning on speaker-phone. As the phone rang, he pulled the bullet out of himself, gasping as blood squirted into the snow. After what seemed an eternity, someone picked up.

         “Did it work?” a girl asked.

         “No,” Stephen replied. “He ended up almost assassinating me instead.”

         “Gotcha. Where are you?”

         “Right outside the previous location.”

         “Got it. I’ll be right over.”

         “T-thanks…Luna?” There was a pause.

         “Steve?”

         “…H-hurry.”

         “You know I will.” Stephen smiled for a half second, holding the phone tightly until his numb fingers dropped it into the snow. Every second seemed like an eternity. After a million eternities, he heard the constant *thop* of a helicopter. He opened his frozen eyes that he hadn’t realized were closed to see the blinding beam of a searchlight. He let out a ragged, smoky breath, blankly watching as medics gently hauled him onto a stretcher. The last thing he saw before he passed out was the snow swirling around the masked faces of the first responders.

         The man pulled out his cellphone the minute he shut the door. He held the screen up to his ear, waiting for someone to pick up. When someone finally did, he waited for a few seconds before talking.

         “Yeah,” he said. “He was a Pureblood.” The man smiled. “He won’t be a bother again.” The man’s face fell. “I shot him and threw him out in the snow.” He held the phone away from his ear, the word *idiot* blasting out of it. He put the phone back up to his ear after turning down the volume. “No Pureblood could do anything to save itself.” He paused, listening to the mini-monologue he always got when he failed. “Yes, I know.” He paused again. “He said he was under 16.” Another pause. “I understand. I won’t fail you again.” He hung up, sticking his phone in his pocket and zipping the pocket shut. He took off his trench coat, revealing snow-white wings and no undershirt. He spread them out, revealing their span of about 8 feet. He tied the coat around his waist, taking his hat off and gripped his hat in his hand, walking to the door and opening it. The cold wind that came when he opened it blew his golden hair back out of his face, catching on his wings and telling him to fly. Fly he did, beating his mighty wings and taking to the sky to disappear in the cold flurry.

~2~

         The bullet wound was taking a long time to heal, like all wounds did with humans. Stephen was bedridden for days, waiting for his stomach to close up. All the while, he was thinking about the man whom he had met. He hadn’t seemed like a mutant at first, but his eyes gave him away. The eyes of all mutants were piercing, as if they could see into your soul. An effect of the virus, no doubt, the virus that everyone had, but many could avoid. The one that turned you into something less than human. Through many years of science, breeding and failure, the disease in nearly everyone stayed static. But, there were some people who didn’t go in every month for their free vaccinations. The inhumans who accepted their other, infected side as who they were. *The idiots,* Stephen thought. These were the people who would destroy the world. The mutation virus made you crazy, erratic. It destroyed your mind, one piece at a time. He’d seen it with his own eyes in the containment cells. Being mutant was not a good thing. That’s why he joined the Purebloods, a force for eradicating mutant-kind and restoring humanity to its original glory. And now that the mutants were armed with more than teeth and claws, the Purebloods would have to up the ante. Stephen smiled. He couldn’t wait to get back in the field and test out some of the new gadgets he’d get. Someone knocked on the door, and he looked over at it. He had a good idea of who it was, and he was excited to see her.

 “Come on in,” he said. Luna opened the door and smiled sweetly at him. He found her beautiful, with her sparkling purple eyes and beautiful flaxen hair. She always had an air of knowledge about her. She emanated smart, and Stephen adored her for it.
 “Hey,” he said, smiling back. She walked in and held out a plate of mac-n-cheese with bacon on the top to him.
 “I brought you your favorite,” she said, “to help you heal.”

 “Thanks,” Stephen replied, taking the food and starting to eat large bites. He was hungry, and he needed the energy.
 “I’m sorry things didn’t work,” Luna said, sitting down next to him. “We’ll try and be more prepared next time.”
 “It wasn’t your fault,” he said, taking a bite and finishing it. “No one’s been able to figure out the location of the Survivors, and you’d have no idea that they’d ask that.”
 “Well, I still feel bad,” she said, leaning forwards on the bed and letting her hair fall around her face, tucking some of it behind her ear. “I should’ve at least sent you with backup, or had you linked into a comn with me or someone with more information, or just planned better.”

 “Look, Luna,” Stephen said. “It’s fine, I promise. I chose to do that mission, anyways. Everything turned out okay, and we’re gonna get ‘em back before you know it.” He smiled and gave her a gentle nudge with his elbow as he took another bite. “You’re good.” Luna smiled a little.
 “Thanks, Stephen,” she said.
 “Sure thing,” he said, nodding at her. “Y’know, you don’t need to worry so much about me. I can hold my own.”
 “I found you crying in a trash can,” Luna chuckled.
 “I was eight!” Stephen protested, slamming his fork down. “I was freaking out, and the trash can was contained and nice and dark and it made me calmer!”
 “You’re so weird,” Luna laughed, shaking her head. “But seriously, you’d probably be dead if it wasn’t for me.”
 “Yeah, probably,” Stephen admitted, nodding. “You’d probably be alone if it wasn’t for me, though.” Luna nodded, condescending.
 “Yep,” she said. “That day was really rough for both of us. It changed our lives forever. ”

“But, just like then, as long as we stick together, we’ll end up better than ever,” Stephen replied, wrapping an arm around Luna’s shoulders and giving her a squeeze. Luna hummed happily and leaned into the hug. She enjoyed his touch as much as he enjoyed hers.
 “Sounds good to me,” she said, wrapping an arm back around him. “I’m still gonna protect you for as long as I can, though, you silly.” Stephen smiled to himself, nestling his head in the curve between her shoulder and neck.
 “I won’t argue with that.”

~3~

        The mutant base was extremely hard to storm. Since it was crawling with mutants, it was heavily fortified. Danger was imminent and plentiful, and there was always a high chance of death. It was Stephen and Luna’s favorite thing to do. Both of their families had been destroyed by the mutation virus before there had been a resistor. They had both pledged their life to Pureblood, the mutant fighters after that day. Stephen’s dad was killed by one of the highly trained mutants that were assassins to the Purebloods, and Luna’s mom died from cancer. They were both eight then. It had almost been seven years since, and their hatred for the virus and their passion to eradicate it hadn’t dimmed since. They wore twin gauntlets, a watch like thing with triggers that fit in between their middle three fingers, the thick band holding a small yet powerful battery. The band itself was a navy blue, and everything else was a glassy silver. Luna had the left-handed one, Stephen had the right. On their respectively opposite wrists, they had another watch-like thing, only this watch had a dial on it and its core glowed blue. These were their new weapons they had to use against the mutants, along with their skill and intelligence. Overall, going up against such simple-minded creatures who probably didn’t know how to use the weapons they had, it was a pretty fair fight.

        Getting into the base was the easiest part. The mutants lived in an old government base. The security was top-notch and almost impossible to break into with a computer. Stephen and Luna walked up to the control panel, looking it over. They looked at each other and nodded. Then Luna pointed her left hand at the box, clenching her hand into a fist. Two barbed wires flew out, imbedding themselves in the panel. Electricity rocketed down them, scrambling the panel. Electricity rocketed down them, scrambling the panel. She released the triggers, the wires ripping themselves out and retracting into the gauntlet. The door automatically opened, giving them an easy way in. They turned the dials on their watches one click, making a shimmering blue blade appear from their first thumb joint to their elbow. They held their blades diagonally across their chests as they went in, moving slowly and precisely. Every sound triggered a response, from the creaking of the building to the scuttling that seemed to come from everywhere. No mutants yet, but that didn’t mean anything. They were bound to strike soon.
 “What was that?” Luna whispered anxiously when something scuttled on the floor nearby, holding her taser near the direction of the sound.

 “It was probably just a rat, Luna,” Stephen whispered back.
 “But what if it wasn’t?” Luna replied, looking over at him.
 “That’s why we have Tron blades and tasers,” Stephen replied, giving her a comforting smile back. She sighed, wishing Stephen would take this more seriously but not saying so out loud.
 “Just stay focused,” she hissed. “We don’t want you injured again, or killed this time.”

 “What are the chances that’ll happen two missions in a row?” he replied. “Come on, Luna.”
 “Shut up and be careful!” Luna whispered angrily, giving him a gentle kick.
 “Okay, okay,” Stephen mumbled, going back to looking around in silence with her.

          The deeper they went into the labyrinth-like base, the darker it got, and the soft blue glow pulsing from their blades more welcome. They stuck close together, ready to back each other up if need be. A sudden gust of wind almost knocked Luna over, startling her. She searched for Stephen’s presence afterwards, nervousness creeping up her heart like vines. Upon finding he was gone, she whispered his name. It echoed creepily and had no other response, scaring her more. She hunched her shoulders and bent over slightly, making herself a smaller target for…something. She kept on, turning as she walked to reduce the chance of surprise. Her heart pounded in her chest and anxiety filled her head as she wondered more and more what happened to Stephen, and if it would happen to her or not. As she was walking backwards, she bumped into something. The something grabbed her arms and wrestled them behind her back, crushing the Taser and glow-blade. She shrieked, trying to pull herself free.

           “Let me GO!” she yelled. She kicked back into where she thought his groin was, making a pretty solid hit. Her attacker grunted in pain, and she kicked again. “STOP IT!” The brutish thing didn’t respond, simply holding her farther away from him so she couldn’t reach him and walking her in a circle to face a different direction. The lights slammed on, blinding her for a couple seconds. When the spots disappeared from her eyes, she saw the mess of mutants facing her with one standing in the middle on a wide metal cylinder. It was a young girl with long blond hair, a short, willowy stature, and sparkling purple eyes. Luna gasped. It was like she was looking in a mirror. She watched in awe as the girl was surrounded by billowing purple smoke, flying down to right in front of her in the smoke. As the smoke faded, the form of the girl appeared again. She was smirking, her eyes shining like violet pearls. They stared into each other’s eyes for a few moments. Then the girl spoke. Even her voice sounded like Luna’s, albeit more sinister.

          “Hello, sister.”

~4~

*Luna woke up to the voice of her twin and the feeling of movement. She opened her eyes, revealing the face of her sister. She sat up, looking into her twin’s sad eyes.*

       *“What’s wrong, Sola?” she asked.*

 *“I’m leaving,” her sister replied. “I can’t stay.”*

 *“Why?” Luna asked. When she didn’t get an answer, anger began to boil inside of her. “Sola, why?”*

 *“I’ve got the mutant virus,” she said. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to worry, but the vaccinations that come in the mail just aren’t helping anymore.”*

 *“But you can’t leave!” Luna snapped. “Where will you go?”*

 *“With the other mutants. Look, Luna.” She grabbed her sister’s shoulders. “Don’t stop the meds. I tried it as a game, but this virus is anything but.” Luna nodded, tears flowing down her cheeks. Sola gave her a quick hug before standing up, grabbing a duffel bag and walking out. Luna curled up, sobbing into her knees.*

Luna had thought she would never see her sister again, but here she was. Her brain refused to wrap around the fact that her sister was a mutant, and she was standing right there.  It was another mutant, a shapeshifter, it had to be.

          “No,” she said. “No. You’re not my sister.”

          “What are you talking about?” she said. “Of course I am. I came here when we were seven.”

          “My sister,” Luna said, voice quavering slightly. “My sister is dead. She died when she became a mutant.” Sola’s eyes darkened.
 “Then my sister died when she became a Pureblood,” she snapped, turning around and smoking back up to her perch. Luna felt a slight pang in her heart, but shoved it downwards. Sola looked down across the span of mutants and her sister with obvious authority. “Say hello to my sister,” she said, gesturing to Luna, “the Pureblood.” The mutants booed and yelled at her. One spit acid at her, making a shallow hole in front of her. She backed into her captor, then got a good look at him. He had maroon skin with reptilian eyes, fangs, and arms with painful-looking spines on them. She gulped and took a step forward. “She and all of you will watch as we test our new virus on her partner!” Sola gestured to a glass cylinder with Stephen chained to the sides inside of it. Luna gasped. *Not another one,* she thought. “This virus isn’t like the ones we were infected with,” Sola continued. “This virus is controlled. By adding a little bit of the vaccination into the virus, the effects stop after the mutation. Sadly, the mutation is permanent.”

 Stephen woke to the sound of shallow, quick breathing and pain in his wrists and ankles. Upon opening his eyes, he discovered that the breathing was his own. He tried to move, making the pain shoot up his arms and legs. He groaned and shook his head, trying to pull himself together. Looking outward, he saw millions of mutants cheering and his partner watching in fear. He smiled encouragingly. She didn’t smile back. He couldn’t hear exactly what the woman speaking in the center was saying, or what she looked like, but one word resonated through his brain: *Survivors.* Whenever it faded from his mind, she said it again and it bounced through his mind like a ball would in a box. *Survivors.*

 “No!” he heard Luna scream, snapping him out of his reverie. Chaos was erupting below, all the mutants flooding towards his partner. The mess was too much for his brain, so he closed his eyes, shutting all of it out. He waited for his mind to settle in so he could focus on his options. *Okay. You’re in a glass cylinder. You’re chained to a mglass cylinder. Glass is a break-* His concentration was shattered as the glass around him was, making him fall to the ground. The air was thick and smoky and wherever he moved there was glass under his hands, knees, and feet. Bewildered, he kept his eyes closed and just focused on breathing. *Just breathe. Just breathe. Just-* He choked. He inhaled, but he couldn’t exhale. He inhaled madly, trying to get a breath. He stopped breathing entirely, groaning as excruciating pain screamed in his left leg. He fell onto his right side, grabbing his pained leg. He opened his eyes to look at it, scared into keeping them open. His leg was bending backwards and inwards, crushing his knee bone. He pulled his pant leg up and nearly puked. It was turning green, shifting his bones and muscles so his leg was like that of a grasshopper’s. His feet were changing too; he ripped off his shoe and sock off to see that three of his five toes were gone and his remaining ones and his heel were lengthening and becoming slightly pointed. He could barely hear the cheering of the mutants over his own pained cries. His respective arm began to change within milliseconds after his leg was done, going through the same process. It was becoming green and hard-shelled, and two of his fingers were shrinking, his thumb rotating back in his hand so it was right in the middle of the bottom of his wrist, elongating and warping like the other two. The next thing to change was the left half of his face. It changed into the hard, green shell that the rest of that half of his body was covered in, his mouth becoming bigger and lined with jagged teeth, his eye splitting in two and the two new ones becoming a glossy yellow, like droplets of paint. The final part of the transformation was the wings. They ripped out of the back of his shirt, two on either half. Then the transformation stopped. Stephen exhaled, breathing fast and heavily. His wings slowly lowered themselves onto his back, crossing each other near the ends and twitching. The room was silent except for his labored breathing. The world was tinted yellow and looked like he was in a bubble. Then the world toppled and faded to black.

The last fifteen seconds were the scariest of Luna’s life. She had heard that the mutation process was unnerving, but she had never… The screams of her partner still echoed in her ears as questions ricocheted through her head. *Why did the mutation stop halfway through? Will he still go insane?... What’ll happen to us?* She had tried to stop it, to spare Stephen with a rock, but she was too late. She couldn’t stop the destruction of Stephen’s life. He was tough, though. He could deal with being a...a half-mutant, right? Her stomach lurched when she glanced back up at her partner, his misshapen left side disgusting her. She looked away, unable to look upon her partner in his current state.  Maybe he wouldn’t be the only one having a hard time coping. The mutants around her were silent, except for a few scattered whispers. Eventually a mutant with a deep, doglike voice asked the question everyone was thinking: “Is he dead?” Sola smoke-flew over to Stephen, smoothly kneeling beside him. Luna tensed as her sister reached out to touch him, her heart fluttering. But with what? Nervousness? Hatred? Love? She shoved the last thought out of her mind, not wanting to be bothered by a stupid crush. *Besides,* she thought, *If i were to date a guy, I don’t want him to be any amount mutant.* Sola gently set her fingers on the soft spot barely accessible between Stephen’s plating, and the fingers on her other hand on the artery in the human part of his neck, feeling his pulse, or, pulses. After a few tense seconds, Sola stood.

“He is alive,” she said. “And the virus has stopped spreading.” Murmurs rippled through the crowd, quickly silenced by Sola. “I know that the virus wasn’t a complete success, but it’s another step towards our goal.” *What goal?* Luna thought. *World domination?*

“Sola,” the creature holding Luna boomed. “What do we do with them?” Sola thought for a second.

“Knock them out,” she replied. “And have Gabe fly them home.” Luna looked up, not having time to shriek before a fist slammed down on her head.

~5~

 Stephen awoke feeling unnatural and heavy, the world tinted a sickly yellow. It looked bloated and rounded, as if he were looking through a bubble. He sat up, looking around. His eyes landed on a window, seeing a boy sitting on a bed, half of his body deformed so that it looked like a grasshopper. He glared at it and it glared back. He hissed at the thing and it hissed in response. He recoiled, the boy copying his movements. Frustrated, Stephen grabbed the water glass on his side table, yelling as he threw it at the window. The glass shattered, revealing a black backing. Stephen gasped. It wasn’t a window. It was a mirror. He panted, gripping his bed. *Oh my god,* he thought. *I’m a mutant. I’m already going insane. Ohmygodohmygodohmy-*

 “Stephen?” Luna’s soft, concerned voice cut through his dazed reverie, making him snap his head over. She stood in the doorway, her purple eyes worried and gentle. Stephen relaxed slightly, still panting.

 “What happened to me?” he asked, the words foreign and sharp in his mouth. Luna walked over and sat on the edge of his bed, seeming a bit hesitant. An undiscovered rage welled up in him; he grabbed her shoulders and glared at her. *She won’t tell me unless I make her.* “What happened!?” he yelled, shaking her slightly. Her shocked expression brought him back, making him realize what he was doing. He released her, slowly setting his hands on the bed. She recovered quickly, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“The mutants experimented on you,” she started slowly. Once she realized that he had his wits mostly about him, she relayed the information as she normally would. “They had developed a new virus, one that could supposedly give someone the full extent of mutant powers while keeping their sanity.”
 “Then why am I breaking down?” he asked, gripping the bed. “Why am I a...a freak?”

“The virus wasn’t entirely perfected,” Luna replied. “It stopped functioning before it was finished.”
 “So I’m a half-mutant?” Stephen asked.

“Yes,” Luna replied. “But it shouldn’t restrict you from normal life.” Stephen swore under his breath. Then an inhuman voice spoke to him, crept inside his brain. He’d heard it before, just not as prominently. *Kill ker.* He gasped. He had to kill Luna. She was the one keeping him from fulfilling his destiny. The future flashed before his eyes: Mutants writhing in pain as they were cured, millions of them, while Luna held him back. *Kill, kill, kill. Use your power. Mutantkind will live on.* The screams of Luna fueled him as his sharp fingers dug into her soft flesh, her warm, thick, *creamy* blood running down his arm and dripping onto the floor. She screamed for help, screamed and screamed and screamed. The noise of crackling electricity snapped him out of his insane attack. His arm tingled as if he had struck it against a wall after it had fallen asleep. His mind flashed back to the mission in the Arctic where he had nearly gotten assassinated, his chest stinging where the scar was. He stepped backwards, his fingers sliding out of Luna’s… *Is that her arm or her chest?* It was her arm; the bones he felt were vertical. His shelled fingers tingled as he pulled them out of her squishy flesh, his shoulder still stinging. He looked to his left, seeing four men standing almost perfectly still, electricity creeping up the wires coming from their wrists. Time seemed to be slowed down, the pulses of electrons taking whole seconds to reach him. He casually pulled the barbs out of the plate on his shoulder, dropping them. It took ten seconds for the men standing nearby to open their eyes wider and then clench them up again, recovering from the shock of their target ignoring their tasers. Stephen asked as realization dawned on him. Time didn’t *seem* to slow down. It *had* slowed down. He laughed, not one of joy or excitement, but of annoyance.

“I’ll be damned,” he said, setting his hands on his hips. “Hell, I’m ALREADY damned. Might as well give them one more reason to hate me. Now I’ve got some sort of time warping power." All of a sudden, something in his brain snapped. The world went back to normal speed and he slowed down with it. The next thing he knew, he was being chloroformed and the world faded to black.

~6~

 When Stephen woke up, he knew he was himself. No murderous thoughts, no insane foresights, no uncontrollable rage. *What happened back there?* He tried to move, but his arms and legs were weighed down by clanking chains. He sighed. They didn’t trust him. He didn’t trust himself either. A door clicked open nearby and he looked over at it. In walked Naia, the girl who was in charge of all the captive mutants. She was a pretty girl, her thick black hair flowing down to her mid-back, her ebony eyes laughing. Sadly, she wasn’t actually laughing. She disconnected him from the table he was chained to, hauling him to his feet.

“C’mon,” she said. “I gotta show you to your new home.”
 “I didn’t mean to,” he said, the chains binding his wrists and feet rattling.
 “I know.” Stephen didn’t want to say more. Naia’s voice revealed her hatred for the duty she was performing. She led him into the prison hall, looking around at them. She stopped at one cell, where a teenage boy with messy brown hair, broken glasses, and an arm made of fruitcake sat in an electric chair.

“I won’t!” the boy yelled, giggling crazily. “I’ll never tell!”

“Then it’s fruitcake weather,” Naia snapped, pressing a button. The boy laughed maniacally as the electricity flew through him, turning his body into fruitcake. Stephen watched in horror as his head became consumed, his wild eyes the last thing to go. Then he exploded, splattering fruitcake all over the glass. Naia took her hand off the button, pulling Stephen away from the carnage and into the long hall of titanium-reinforced glass boxes. The only light came from inside the cells, the glow taking a break every time they passed a set. The walls only went three cells high, but the cells were each about as big as a classroom. All sorts of mutants were stored here. There was the fruitcake kid (Stephen saw that his cell tag said his name was Jeremy), a kid who looked about ten with giant crab claws instead of arms and hands, a woman with blue hair, a dorsal fin, a fish tail and gills in what looked like an oversized fish tank, a young adult curled up asleep in a corner, tiger tail swishing and striped ears twitching, sharp claws striking fear into Stephen’s heart. To his relief, Naia kept walking, but she didn’t walk far. She pulled him onto a platform and pressed a button with an up arrow on it, making the platform rise up off the ground and get chain-lifted up to the second level balcony. She pulled him across a walkway to a few cells over, to the nearest empty one. She opened a door on the side and shoved him in, seeming a bit regretful.

“I don't think that you should be blamed for this,” she said, looking away. Her hair fell over her face. “I'm sorry.” She didn't look back at him again, closing the door behind him. The shackles fell off of him and another door opened. He walked through, entering his cell. It was bland, with white walls and an enclosed bathroom in the corner and a bed. His eyes rested on the mirror--not the window--on the wall. He truly saw himself for what he was: a freak. The whole left side of his body was covered in grass-green shell-like plating, the plate on his shoulder with two burn marks on it from the tasers. His left leg was bent inwards, giving him a lopsided look. He now realized that he had a subconscious limp, for his left leg was slightly shorter than his right. His mouth was deformed on the left as well, slightly larger and with different, now jagged, teeth arrangement. His eyes on the left were yellow paint droplets, shiny and rounded. His right eye was normal, skewing his vision. The only thing that affected both sides of his body were his wings. They were a set, two on each side of his body. They were beautiful, like woven lace, yet as strong as an airplane’s wing. His first thought was that they would be a good asset, then he went back on it. What would they be a good asset for, now that he had no affiliation? *For yourself,* his conscience said. He refused to listen. This was the same voice that had made him go insane. *Why do you ignore me?* it said in the hissing voice that had tortured him previously. *I just want to help.*

“NO!” he screamed. He gripped his head, trying to recover. *Look in the mirror. Look and see yourself.* He froze. He released his head and looked at the mirror, the pull of curiosity dragging him over. He saw himself as a whole human, the way he was before. He had perfectly straight chocolate hair, styled so the front stopped at his chin while the rest went down to his shoulders, his sharp green eyes almost as piercing as a mutant’s, accenting his slightly olivine skin. His slender yet muscular form was clothed in an old Imagine Dragons t-shirt and jeans, his feet donned with black Nike shoes with red accents. He stared at himself for a long time, tears streaming down his face. He reached out and touched the mirror with his human hand, his smiling past self touching it as well. *I am not you,* the voice said. *You are you.*

“Then...who are you?” Stephen asked. *I am your other half,* the voice said, the image in the mirror changing. It now showed a mutant, his left half mirrored in his right. He gasped, backing up. *This is me.*

“What are you?” Stephen asked. “Who are you?” *I am the mutant. My name is Insanity.*

*“*Are...are you the virus?” *What do you mean?*

“Are you the one who’s inside everyone? The mutant virus? The one that can't be entirely cured but left untreated turns you into a monster and makes you insane?” *...Yes.*

~7~

Luna sat on her bed, watching an old YouTube video on her phone. Two of her favorite vloggers were playing Sims 4, a game created before the virus spread. They couldn't stop laughing, making a roof like a skate ramp. Luna couldn't help but smile. They were hilarious. They and people like them were her link to the past and her therapy, distracting her from the throb in her heavily bandaged arm. Stephen kept slipping into her mind, though. He was something that laughter couldn't solve, whatever he was now. She hit replay when the video ended, wanting more release. When none came, she pressed the lock button on the side of her phone and dropped it, falling back onto her pillow. She missed Stephen, as much pain he had caused her. She missed the old Stephen, not the berserk, violent one.She missed the boy she found cowering in a trash can, teary-eyed and dirty, like a stray puppy she took in and loved back to health. He had become her closest friend, and now all of that was gone, destroyed. She had no one anymore. She closed her eyes, squeezing out tears. She wanted her partner back.

Stephen sat with his back to the wall, staring into the mirror. He was the bridge. The path. The way out. He was a half-mutant; half of his body that of a normal human being’s and the other of that of a grasshopper. He was the perfect blend of mutant and human. Yet, they seemed to have forgotten the human side was still there. He pulled out his phone, unlocking it and opening up his notes. He opened the file titled “Insanity” and scrolled for a good two minutes to get to to the bottom. He typed in the date and hit the enter button, beginning to type. He poured himself out into the note, easily typing an essay-length entry. This note acted as his journal and his outlet, letting him be himself. He thought of it as talking to Luna through text, even though she’d probably never read it. When he had nothing more to say, he opened up a different app, a video streaming one, and started playing the next episode of his favorite TV show, Arrow.

“Stephen Insanity,” he mumbled to himself, “you have failed this city.” The whir of an arrow on the screen surprised him and made him flinch. Why couldn't he be like a superhero, leading a double life? He already had a split personality, and the skill set to make a name for himself in the world without it being in the obituaries. Hell, maybe he could cure the virus once and for all. If only he could get out of this death trap. Naia walked up to the door, sliding a plate full of mac and cheese topped with bacon through the opening in the bottom of the door. He smiled at her and she gave him a quick smile back before walking off. He absentmindedly ate his lunch as he watched Arrow, as content as he could be locked in a glorified jail cell alone. Well, he wasn't really alone. He had all of the characters from the TV shows he watched to sympathize with. Sometimes Naia would come in and talk, but she rarely ever did anymore. There had been breakouts recently, and everyone had been working double-time to find the four girls that had escaped. He had looked them up in the database, and he understood why. The first girl, the leader of the operation, was named Tori. She had poofy black hair, dark skin and shimmering green eyes. Her power was that she could draw certain designs and shapes in the air and create real things from the drawings. The second girl was Ellie. She had thick brown hair cut to her chin with long bangs that covered half of her face, her brown eyes like a chocolate bar. Her power was that she couldn't die, turn into a zombie at will, and infect people and make them her slaves. The third was Vera. She had a powerful singing voice that could control people, make them fall asleep, or perform a range of  attacks. She had curly brown hair that was pulled back in a tight in a tight bun and bright green eyes. The last girl was Madison. She had chin-length blonde hair with side bangs and icy blue eyes. She could turn any part of her body to solid ice and back again, as well as shoot ice blades and blow cold air onto anything to freeze it. These girls were dangerous. All of a sudden, the roof above him shattered, falling all around him. He jumped up and flew back, wings instantly reacting. A zombie girl fell through the roof, her right arm falling off. She got up and put her arm back into place before looking Stephen dead in the eyes.

“Come with me,” she groaned, “if you don't want to end up like me.”

~8~

Luna ran into the detention block, gun held in front of her. Stephen’s cell was empty except for large glaciers. She and a squadron of guards stood there with their guns raised.

“Put the half-mutant back!” Luna yelled. In response, the ice exploded. Everyone ducked, only two people getting impaled. Everyone alive jumped up and shot at the hole made by the girls, trying to hit something. Luna cursed and threw her gun to the ground, frustrated.

“Why did they get away?!” she screamed. The guards shrugged, unsure how else to respond. Matthew, the chief of the guard, walked over and set a hand on her shoulder.

“I know you miss Stephen,” he said. “But you have to focus.”

“Even though he is a murderous ba-” a newer cadet named Connor started before getting slapped in the face by Matthew. Luna sighed.

“He’s not wrong.”

“No,” Matthew said firmly. “We’ll get Stephen back.” Luna smiled up at him. Matthew had lost his partner a while ago, a man named Beck. They were the strongest fighting force in all the Purebloods, the ones that everyone looked up to. Then Beck went. He was killed by the mutant named Gabe in the heat of battle. Matthew was heartbroken. There had been rumors that they were together, but now their relationship was lost to time.

“Thanks,” Luna said, slightly humbled. Matthew nodded and sent one more glare Connor’s way before leading the guards out. Luna stayed, lingering by the cell. Then she noticed something on the floor. She walked over and picked up a phone with a spiderwebbed screen. Stephen’s phone. She unlocked it and glanced through it. She skimmed through his notes, picking out key words. She stuck it in her pocket for further investigation. She glanced up at the hole one more time before walking out, her fear and remorse suddenly gone.

~9~

Stephen awoke with an abnormal feeling of calm in him, like he was alone and free. He tried to sit up, but the left side of him didn’t move. It felt like he had half a dead person attached to him. He forced himself up, looking around with his one open eye. He was in what looked like an old school gym, at the top of the bleachers. Broken, rusty basketball hoops dangled from the ceiling, the left hand scoreboard ripped in half and sparking madly. The right one seemed entirely dead until it made a loud beeping noise and lit up for a split second. Stephen started with surprise and almost fell off of the row he had been laid down on, which was cracked and dirty. The others below him weren’t much better; some had caved in and others had disappeared. Some parts had been stripped entirely and just faded into a black hole. He got up, the wood under his feet creaking precariously, and slowly half-walked, half-dragged himself over to the railing, gripping it with all the might his human hand had. The dark balcony behind him kept making ominous creaking noises. The room was not well lit, the only light coming naturally through the doors and windows and off the sparking scoreboard.

“What a wimp,” a girl’s voice said.

“Come down from there!” a different one yelled.

“No!” Stephen yelled. “It’ll break!”

“We climb it every day,” the first voice replied. “So get yourself together and move your ass!” The others joined in trying to get him down, leaving Stephen questioning his instinct. His wings had a random spasm, fluttering and slamming themselves into the railing. His other side-Insanity-snapped awake, instantly standing him up and opening his eyes. *Where are we?*

“You coming?” the second voice asked.

“Yeah,” Stephen yelled down, filled with reckless courage. He jumped off the edge, wings automatically spasming--er, flapping--and flying him towards the ground. He landed lightly, his wings calming down. *You're welcome.*

“See?” the first voice said. “You did it.” The four girls who kidnapped him approached him, Vera and Madison smiling, Ellie confused and no longer a zombie, and Tori stone-faced.

“Why didn't you fly down earlier?” Ellie asked, arms crossed.

“Um…” *I told you to.* “The virus, it..told me to.”

“Huh,” Vera said, walking over to him and looking him in the eyes. “It talks to you?”

“Y-yeah,” Stephen replied, a little worried. Vera nodded and backed away, relieving his stress a little.

“You probably want to know why we took you,” Tori said, stepping forwards. *Yes, we do.*

“Yeah, sort of. I was trying to watch Arrow.”

“Good for you. Well, we took you because we know you can prove that mutants aren't bloodthirsty genetic retards.” *Well, that was a very accurate description.*

“But I thought the virus destroyed your mind.”

“No. the ones you say had been tortured for information, dissected piece by piece, Pureblood.” Stephen flinched at the word, ashamed that he had ever been one of them.

“The past is past,” Vera said. “It doesn't matter now that we have him.”

“We can stop them from killing any more of us,” Ellie said. “Save the race.” Stephen wasn't sure about these girls. They seemed nice and all, but he didn't want to face his friends. *YESYESYES HELP THEM!*

“I'll do it,” he found himself saying, despite the war raging within his brain. “Wait! No, I...grrr!” He grabbed his head, fighting to gain control over his brain. The other girls exchanged looks, seeming a bit confused. *You blind fool! Can't you see that we can live together if you do this?! But not in the same warped body, no, in SEPARATE ones.*

“You okay?” Ellie asked, skeptical of his sanity.

“Yeah,” Stephen said, relaxing and setting his hands at his sides. “I'll help you.”

~10~

Sola smoked into the office of the Pureblood leader, her eyes practically glowing in the near-darkness. She walked over to the desk, inserting a flash drive into the computer and downloading it to the desktop. She opened up a file titled “Finished Mutagen” and left it up. Then she opened a file named “Awakening,” leaving it open over the one prior. Then she smoked out as the door opened and a tall, strapping young man with slicked-back black hair and amber eyes dressed in a suit, red tie, nice pants and dress shoes. He sat down at his computer, looking at the file. He read it through, then opened the other document. He smirked, printing it out. He got up and grabbed the printout, then walked down the hallway lined with fluorescent lights with his document to the chemistry lab, opening the door and walking in, gathering all the necessary equipment and materials. He inserted the cells shown on the paper into the seemingly endless stretches of genetic code, watching as the virus took over the rest of the cells. He smiled and hit enter on the computer in the room, initiating the creation of a test virus. It ended up in liquid form in a small beaker, swirling and bubbling. He picked it up and looked it over, debating whether to drink it or not. Then he held the glass up and smiled.

“To whatever god put that bloody virus on this earth,” he said in a smooth, authoritative voice. Then, he drank.

The change came about instantly. It wasn't visible,  but he could feel it. Every muscle, every bone, every tendon in his body tightened, sharp bursts of pain erupting in waves along his body as his nerves cried out. It all stopped suddenly, as if his change had been turned off. He smiled, looking himself over, but his face quickly fell. He hadn't changed. Then excruciating pain rocketed through his body, mainly his chest and face. He screamed and ripped his tie off, unbuttoning his suit and ripping open his shirt as his body changed and warped into something more than human. He fell on his hands and knees as he mutated, digging his fingers into the tile floor and cracking it. The pain lasted forever, or what seemed like it.  Then, as suddenly as it came, it stopped. He slowly opened his eyes, which he hadn't realized were scrunched closed, the world tinted amber. Little bits of code flashed in his peripheral vision, somewhat distracting but also informative, since he could now read them. He felt no pain, no emotion, no nothing. He stood, listening to himself move. He was exhaling and inhaling like he always had, but he couldn't feel the rush of air flying down his throat and into his chest, nor did he have to swallow. When he breathed, he could feel his chest shifting but in a different way, as if his heart and lungs were moving with his skin and ribcage. He closed his eyes and searched deep within himself, trying to determine what had happened. Suddenly he gasped, his eyes snapping open. He was a robot.

•••

Sola picked us her ringing phone, hitting the answer button and holding it up to her ear.

“Did it work?” she asked. The response she got made her smile. “Jace, that's awesome! Okay, okay, come over RIGHT now. I have to see what you look like.” She paused. “Love you too.” She hung up and stuck her phone in her pocket, looking out across her army. “It worked!” she yelled, getting cheers from the mutants below. “Now we can put our master plan into action: infecting the world!” Jace walked into the back of the room, smiling at Sola. Love and affection towards her were the only things he still felt, and he was glad to have retained those emotions. She smoked down in front of him, purple eyes sparkling.

“You haven't changed,” she said, wrapping her arms around his midsection and leaning her head onto his chest.

“Yes I have,” Jace said, setting one hand in the curve of her back and the other between her shoulder blades, holding her close. “Just not towards you.”

“Hmm,” she murmured, smiling. “Then to me you haven't changed at all.” They stood there for a few seconds in swirling silence, simply enjoying each other. Then Jace spoke:

“I'm no longer human.”

“Of course not,” Sola replied, looking him in the eyes. “You're a mutant now.”

“You aren't processing correctly. All of the things that made me human disappeared when I mutated.”

“Well...you still love me, don't you?”

“Of course.”

“Well, love is a very human emotion.”

“It was the one shard of my human personality that was transferred over. It is the only part I wished to retain.”

“You chose perfectly.” They released each other, Sola pecking him on the cheek before smoking away to go relay instructions. Jace stood as still as a statue, watching her through his amber-tinted eyes. She was just as beautiful as he remembered, even though she did look slightly orange. His brain switched over to another topic. He was leader of the Purebloods. How could he deal with this? The thought of all the pressure and the emotional expression made his non-heart speed up. There was only one way out of this. He walked outside and climbed into his hovercar, starting the engine and driving across the barren wasteland that had once been just outside of Chicago, Illinois towards the Pureblood base that had once been called the Sears Tower. The ground-zero-like city that used to trouble him evoked nothing within his heatedly existent soil as he drove, the dilapidated skyscrapers and signs and streets just simply there. When he got to the tower, he walked right into the weapons room and grabbed a small pistol, cocking it and setting it to his chest. He closed his eyes, feeling nothing, as what seemed to become the norm. Then the pulled the trigger.

He bled. His veins still functioned even though he was a robot. He lay himself down on the floor, splaying himself out as if he had been killed on impact. Then he put himself into shutdown, closing his eyes. Things would work out once he woke up.

~11~

Luna’s life was falling apart. First Stephen becomes a mutant. Then he gets jailed for attempted murder. Then he gets kidnapped. And now Jace was dead. He had shot himself late at night in the weapons room. Matthew had replaced him, and Connor put in charge of the guard. The Pureblood cause was falling apart at the seams and would soon begin to unravel entirely. They seemed to be held together by a thread with Matthew holding onto it. His next move determined the fate of the Purebloods. Luna only hoped he chose the right move. She fingered Stephen’s phone, wondering whether or not she should give it to Matthew or unravel its secrets herself. She slipped it into her pocket, walking towards Matthew’s office. She stopped right outside the door, still undecided. She thought back to her childhood days when she actually went to church. *If there really is a God*, she thought, *then I wish he would send me a sign on what I should do.* Right as she had finished thinking, Matthew’s full, commanding voice resonated through the cracks in the old door.

“We can't storm the mutant base without knowing what goes on in their minds!” Luna took it as a sign, opening the door and walking in. The arguing men silenced and looked at her, relaxing slightly.

“I have Stephen’s phone,” she said, pulling it out of her pocket. “If it helps any.”

•••

Stephen collapsed on his bed, exhausted. He had stayed up all night three times in a row, training hard and pushing himself to his absolute physical limit. He would have a day of rest tomorrow before going back at it. As he closed his eyes, the days’ events replayed in his subconscious.

He had woken up early the first morning, going from his sleeping spot in what used to be a boy’s locker room to the gym down the hall, the fading posters adding an eerie feel to the old building. The gym, lit slightly better in the daytime, was still creepy and obviously dangerous. The girls were already there. They told him today was flying day, and that his whole back would hurt when they were done. They had him fly up to the top of the gym with his hands and feet tied, then told him to stay aloft as long as he could without touching the net strung between the two basketball hoops on either side. He tried it all day, with the only breaks being for a quick snack or meal. His record time was a few seconds shy of half an hour.

The next day was weapons and defense. He got to test out different types of weapons in an obstacle course, seeing which one fit him best. The first one he tried, the machine gun, was hard for him to carry and fire. The second one, a hammer, was even worse. The third weapon, a broadsword, worked pretty well for him but was hard to store because of his wings. The fourth weapon he tried, a crossbow, worked perfectly in time with him and fit between his wings. He trained with it against each girl, targeting his different abilities. Tori drew up targets rapidly, testing his reflexes. He hit about six of the eighteen targets. Vera worked with him on hand-to-hand combat, beating him almost senseless while barely getting any bruises herself. Madison worked with Stephen on dodging and quick striking, which was basically just paintball. She won by a lot, but both walked away with welts. Ellie worked on Stephen’s mindset and nerves, making him shoot her in her zombie form until he could do it with little to no hesitation.

The next day was the day where they told him about their location and the hiding spot they went to if it was compromised. Then they put him through a false interrogation to see how long he would last. Being a former Pureblood, he had already been trained in this, so he passed with flying colors. They also used a lie detector, which he got through as well. Then they left him there for the rest of the day to see if he’d crack. He didn't.

The last day was the day where they worked on crafting all the supplies they'd need for their next Pureblood raid, such as flash bombs, wood sharpened into spikes, and thin wood armor to prevent getting tasered or tranquilizer. They spent all day working on their objects of protection or destruction, playing old music on the computer in the room and chatting. Everyone went to bed early that night, the girls sleeping in the locker room next to him. His training session was complete.

~12~

Jace crawled out of the cremation chamber, shirt burnt off and pants almost there. He looked over at the control panel, smiling when he saw Sola. She walked over and they embraced, Sola smoking them both away. They arrived back at the mutant base, where a huge nozzle was being created in the middle.

“Your funeral was beautiful,” Sola said, walking towards the nozzle.

“That's good,” he replied, following her.

“Did it hurt, shooting yourself?” she asked.

“No,” Jace replied. “It felt quite odd, though.”

“Hm.” She stopped, looking up at the nozzle. Jace followed her gaze. “This,” she said, “is how we're going to rule the world.”

“I know,” Jace replied. “You've told me.”

“We’ll be ready by next month,” Sola said, leaning into him. “And then we can finally be accepted again.” Jace nodded.

“And we can be together.”

“Without hiding. We can have a proper wedding and live in the most normal area we can find and have kids…”

“If this works.”

“It will,” Sola replied firmly, looking up at him. “I know it will. It has to.”

“Life never goes as planned, Sola. Everyone who caught the virus found that out.” They stood in silence for a couple of moments, contemplating life. Then the roof exploded.

•••

Stephen, Tori, Ellie, Vera and Madison were the Rebels. They adopted their symbol from an old dynasty of movies, TV shows and comic books: a flying bird with wings making almost the full outline of a circle, its neck and head in the middle. The symbol had been wood-burned above their hearts in the wood armor and on the flash bombs, showing their pride. And when they blew out the roof, the hole was in the shape of it. Tori went first, drawing up a cloud and using it to fly in, her pair of guns firing at anyone who dared shoot. Next went Madison, making a tube of ice all the way to the bottom before pulling out her ice-bladed metal swords. Ellie went next, sliding down the ice slide and destroying it as she went. Wielding a shotgun, she took out most everyone who came at her. Stephen flew down, sniping people with his crossbow, reloading and firing in perfect sync. When he hit the floor, he only fired when he had to. The rest of the mutants he beat up, Insanity calling out moves in his head. *Left hook, right jab, flip, dodge, BAM!* He slammed the hilt of his crossbow into the head of the bird-like mutant he was dueling, knocking her out. The Rebels worked their way towards Jace and Sola. Tori got there first, holding a gun to each of their heads, Madison and Ellie close behind. Stephen flew into the sky, sniping anyone who tried to get close. He couldn't really see what was going on, but he could definitely hear the dialogue.

“If you turn to that machine, so help me I will blow your brains out the back of your heads,” Tori growled.

“Good thing I don't have brains,” Jace- *Wait, Jace?! What is he doing here?*-said. A gunshot rang out, followed by a grunt and another shot. Stephen chances a quick look back. Jace was holding Tori in a choke-hold, Ellie firing shots into Jace’s chest and head angrily, Madison standing guard over a frozen Sola.

“Let her GO!” Ellie commanded. Jace dropped Tori, who, despite just being choked, angrily shot off a few rounds. Jace was visibly bleeding, but his eyes were still somehow not clouded. He wasn’t dying.

“I, like you, Walker,” Jace said, his voice sounding robotic, “cannot die.” Ellie lowered her gun, stunned by her nickname. “For I am not made of organs and muscles like you. I am made of t-technology.” Slowly, his wounds closed, the bullets spreading across his metal inner frame and fixing it right before the skin closed. He straightened and smirked, looking directly at Tori. “The Scribbler,” he said. “It’s only natural for you to be a leader.” He turned to Madison, looking her over. “As cold as ever, Frostbite,” he said. She sniffed angrily at him, glaring. He ignored her, looking up at Stephen. “You, my friend,” he said, “are unique. The perfect mix of man and mutant.” Stephen landed, his awkward limp making him stagger slightly. Jace continued: “You would’ve been Kickback if you had fully mutated, but obviously you didn’t. So what at are you, then?” He circled Stephen, looking him over. “The virus speaks to you, so that would make you…” *You and I both know what we are.* “We’re Stephen Insanity,” he said.
 “Hmph. If you say so.” Vera, who had been hiding nearby, jumped out in front of Jace, singing a series of notes that should put him to sleep. His eyes slowly closed as she sang. She smiled as she stopped, thinking she had caught him by surprise. Then Jace opened his eyes, smirking.
 “Such a beautiful voice,” he said. “A pity it had to be wasted, Mockingjay.” Vera backed up slightly, taken aback by her failure. Jace looked around at the small team. “The Rebels,” he said, no positive emotion in his voice. “Such an honorable name for such a ragtag group. You may be talented, but you’re no match for us.”

“It doesn’t matter. We are closer and more organized than you could ever be,” Tori replied, standing tall.
 “The rebels of the past fought against a tyrannical empire. Which side is yours?”
 “Both sides are the empires, which we seek to make peace between. We can live together as one people.”
 “That cannot happen. The Purebloods will always judge us.”
 “Then join us and change their minds.” Tori held out her hand to Jace. Jace stared at it for a few seconds, thinking about what to do. Then he slowly extended his hand out to her, taking hers and shaking it.
 “I’ll help out, but I’ll do it in secret,” he said. “I will provide you intel on the mutant plans through email.” Tori nodded, writing her email in the air and shrinking it down to a slip of paper, handing it to him.
 “Thank you,” she said, turning and walking towards the door. The others fell into step behind her, Stephen and Ellie storing their weapons on their backs, Madison storing hers in a sheath tied to her belt, and Tori putting her guns into holsters before opening the door. Jace spoke right as she was about to leave.
 “The nozzle activates in a month.” Tori paused, then walked out, the others following her. Jace looked over at the still-frozen Sola, brain working quickly. She was going to be mad if she found out. If. He smirked. He didn’t have to tell her, did he? No. She wouldn’t find out until it was too late.

~13~

Luna wasn’t sure if there was really a God of any kind. If there was, then why did it send the virus, or let something give them the virus? No, there probably wasn’t. No good god would let this happen, let a war rage across their land, let Jace die...take her partner away. No almighty power would let that happen. She rolled over in her bed, her thoughts keeping her awake. She ended up looking out the window at the dark skyline, only a few lights left shining, people who were still up like her. The rest of the city was sleeping, and rightfully so. It was long past when the sun went down. Luna stared out across the city, trying to remember when it was in its heyday. She couldn’t. The virus had shown up when she was little. Back then, everyone took what they had for granted. Cell service, a general unit of time, games and toys, working amusement parks, a steady flow of electricity in more than one place. Many of these things had been eliminated by the first strains of virus-infected people, leaving the world scrambling for a safe haven. Not long after, the original Purebloods discovered an almost-antidote. It fended off the lasting effects of the virus, and it was free. The Purebloods still supply humanity with their almost-antidote today, trying to keep our species alive. They’ve done a pretty good job about it, but the mutant population was still growing despite their efforts. The virus was beginning to learn how to avoid the pseudo-antidote, which was really, REALLY bad. Humanity was slowly disappearing off the face of the earth. Each new mutant was a fallen carrier pigeon, shot down by an unavoidable bullet. Soon they would become extinct. They would join the endless species of animals they have destroyed, now kindred spirits in oblivion. Luna sighed. Humanity was screwed. *If there is a God,* she thought, *why isn’t he helping us?*

Stephen looked up from his laptop when someone pounded on the door. He was in the office, the pounder was in the gym. The sound echoed throughout the whole lower level, alerting everyone. Stephen got to the door first, and his face instantly broke out into a smile.
 “Naia!” he said excitedly, opening the door for her. “What are you doing here?”
 “Jace told me about you Rebels,” she said, giving him a smile back before she stepped to the side. “So i brought recruits.” Outside was a miniature army of mutants and people, all from the prison. The girls ran up behind Stephen, mouths agape. Stephen laughed and shook his head, throwing his hands into the air in excitement. They weren’t screwed! *Yay! Now we’ve got a chance!* Before he even knew what he was doing, his arms were around Naia’s neck. The world froze. Then Naia shoved him backwards, red and angry.
 “What are you doing?!” she snapped.
 “I, um, uh,” he stammered, blushing and bewildered.
 “Just don’t do it again,” Naia said, sending him one last glare before shoving her way past him to talk to the girls. All of the mutants stared at him, as if they wanted him to do something.
 “Um…” he said, wings fluttering nervously, “Uh, come inside and, uh, have a seat where you can, I guess.” He hovered above the crowd as they filed in, the girls stepping to the side as well. The people sat on the bleachers, the hoops, the crash net, and the littler ones ran around on the floor. Stephen flew in and shut the door behind him, landing on the floor. Then Naia began to bark out commands.
 “Hey! We’re gonna get organized now!” The girls made a horizontal line, Stephen hobbling into step beside them. Naia continued. “We’re gonna sort you guys by type,” she said, standing beside Stephen and turning him to face the mutants with the girls. “Humans first. Stand in a line behind me.” All of the humans did as she said, which was only a couple dozen people. “Creatures behind Stephen.” About half of the remaining people walked, galloped, or hopped behind him in a line. “Shapeshifters behind Ellie.” Somewhere between ten and twenty people went behind her. “Spell-casters behind Tori.” About ⅔ of the remainder walked over. “Elementals behind Madison.” Half of the remainder got up and walked over. “Anyone else behind Vera.” The rest obeyed. “Great. Now we’re going to split off to go train. C’mon.” Naia walked outside, leading her team to what was a field, once upon a time.
 “You stay here,” Ellie said, waiting for the other groups to leave.
 “What am I supposed to do?” he asked as she started to leave.
 “Just do what we did for you,” she called. “Or think of something yourself.” Stephen sighed, exasperated. He turned to the group of creature-like people standing in an uneven line behind him. Then he had an idea.
 “Line up in front of the bleachers,” he yelled, crossing his arms.”It’s time for a skill test.”

~14~

*I am dying. Slowly, painfully. I was meant to. The ones who created me also made me two siblings. I will die so the next one can live. She will spread throughout the world and shut it down. I cannot let Stephen know. I can’t. My siblings and I are connected to him, what the humans call a* bond. *I can’t hurt him. I will shield my pain and fatigue from him for as long as possible, but, eventually, he must know. But he will forget when my sister comes. He will keep his personality and senses of nobility and leadership, but he will not remember the world he once lived in. Everything that happened to him will be simply an illusion. Then my brother will come and right everything through Stephen, erase the effects of my sister and I. Stephen is the Host. But he won’t know until the last moments of my existence. I just hope my sister will be swift in her coming and make Stephen blind to our pain. Our last moments of* **us…** *will be pain and death. If i could spare him, I would. But only the ones who made me could take our pain away. And they don’t live on this earth.*

Luna’s world was gone. Everyone she knew and trusted? Gone. Everyone except Matthew and Connor. They were there. Distant, but there. She and Connor became partners, friends. They began to refill all of the cells emptied by the traitor, Naia. More and more mutants. But...something was wrong. The mutants were de-mutating. The mutants they caught were slowly, seemingly painfully, devolving. Becoming human again. But why? Luna studied the captive mutants, trying to figure out what was happening. Then she noticed it. The virus was dying. Everywhere. It would be gone within a few weeks, and everyone would be human again. She told literally everyone she could, ecstatic. Of course, no one believed her. They thought that after all this time the virus just couldn’t simply die. But then she showed them the captive mutants and the data she had collected. What a party there was. Luna lay in her bed, smiling at the window. After all this suffering and pain and loss...everything was finally starting to go correctly. She pulled the covers up to her chin and curled up into a ball, closing her eyes and falling asleep.

~15~

Stephen knew something was wrong. All of the kids under ten had suddenly lost their mutant side overnight. Since they were young and not fully developed, their devolution happened fast. Now the older kids were getting sick, their mutations fading away. The home-ec room was now a hospital wing, everyone trying to make the teens as comfortable as possible since they couldn’t stop it. Stephen watched as the young men and women he and the Rebels had helped train and formed bonds with writhe in pain and scream as who they were disappeared. The adults were showing signs of sickness now too. What was happening?
 “We need to figure out what this is,” Ellie said, “and fast.”
 “It’s taking everyone out,” Vera added. “The adults should be affected by next week.”
 “The virus is dying,” Tori said, making everyone fall silent. “It’s just...going away.”
 “So...we won’t be mutants anymore?” Madison asked quietly. Tori shook her head sadly.
 “As much as we respect the wishes of the humans to stay human,” she said, we shouldn’t go back to being them.” All of a sudden, the teenagers stopped thrashing and screaming. The Rebels looked over at them sadly. They were humans. They began to wake up, slowly, one by one. A few broke down in tears when they found out, most just sat there in shock. The kids who had already devolved watched from the doorway, looking sad and angry. What was happening? Why was the virus dying? Why was Insanity dying? The Rebels moved the teens to the gym with the kids, moving the adults into the home-ec room. Time for another week of torture.

*The pain is worsening. I am being destroyed, one mutant at a time. My everything hurts. I won’t be able to keep it from Stephen for long. It hurts. It hurts so much. I almost want it to stop. Almost. The only thing keeping me going is my sister’s coming. And Stephen. Stephen...he will forget me when my sister comes. I’ll be dead, just a foolish dream. I’ll never be able to watch him grow up with me, never let him know how important he is to me, how much I’ll miss him when I’m gone. We are more than partners, more than friends. He won’t remember...Every second, every minute, more pain. More and more and more and more… The pain makes me tired. I’ve been tired, but it’s getting more tiring, being tired. So tired...NO! Stay awake… Must protect Stephen. Stay awake. Stay awake. Blind Stephen to my pain. Keep him safe. Keep...him...ohhhhh… I.... Stephen… I’m so...so...so sorry…*

Stephen was trying to fall asleep when it started. His eyes were flickering closed when his whole body suddenly became sore. He sat up, the sheet that covered him falling off his bare chest. He sat cross-legged on the floor, debating whether or not to deal with the minor pain or go next door and bug Tori about a numbing spell. Then the pain worsened. It felt like a bunch of little kids were punching him on every inch of his body. He grimaced and forced himself to his feet, staggering towards the door. The pain suddenly flared up and worsened, making him fall onto a wall with a grunt of pain. He was sure he woke up at least Maddie. She was a really light sleeper. He forced himself up and kept going even though he felt like every inch of him as being pulled outward. Then the pain flared again and his whole body was on fire. He fell onto the floor with a cry of pain, unable to stand any longer. The world was tinted red, not its normal yellow. Breathing, moving, simply being was painful. The pain flared, making him yell in agony. He was in a volcano, his skin and muscles melting off his bones. Hot tears flowed down his cheeks, his muscles unable to move or react for fear of more pain. He could feel himself hit the floor when the door opened, making him scream. The red world began to blacken. The last thing he heard was *Stephen...I’m so...so...so sorry…*

~16~

Jace and Sola watched as their empire fell, mutants falling everywhere in sight. They were in a separate room from their fallen brethren, safe. Jace turned and walked to the back of the room, which used to be a control center. Sola and a young boy stood nearby, holding hands. The boy had hair that looked like someone had dumped paint on it, and his eyes were a sharp gray. He wore a paint-splattered t-shirt way too big for him, also paint-splattered jeans, and once-white shoes. Jace took out three spill-proof reusable water bottles from a nearby case and handed two of them to his companions, keeping one for himself.
 “One small mouthful of this will keep us immune to the sibling viruses for a week,” he said, pacing slightly. “Every week, we will alternate taking a drink. Two of us will succumb to Illusion while one of us will be here, waiting a week to pull out the next person before they themselves go into Illusion.” The other two nodded.
 “I’ll go with Smock first,” Sola said, glancing at the boy. Jace nodded.
 “But not now. We have to wait until the siblings exchange their reign.”
 “Of course. Insanity must die out first to make room for his sister.” Jace nodded.
 “We don’t know when the virus will come, but when she does, we will be ready.” He held up his bottle out in front of him with a smile. “To mutantkind!”
 “To mutantkind!” the other two chorused, doing the same.
 “The Survivors chose us to be the last of the mutants,” Jace said, putting his bottle back in the case. The other two did as well, Sola closing the case once all were in. “So we must respect their wishes.”

Stephen woke up feeling sore and tired. He was scared, confused, and panicky.
 “No,” he gasped. “No, no, no, it’ll come back…”
 “No it won’t,” Vera said, running her fingers through his hair tenderly. “It’s okay.” The gentle, soothing motion combined with Vera’s relaxing voice calmed Stephen’s panic, but didn’t freeze it entirely. He closed his eyes, breathing hard and long, the lingering soreness bringing back memories of pain.
 “Is he awake?” Ellie’s voice said from nearby.
 “Yes,” Vera said. “Now shoo.” The sound of pounding footsteps resounded, getting quieter and quieter until they were gone.
 “What happened?” Stephen asked, not daring to move any more.
 “No one knows,” Vera replied. “Stephen, stop being a chicken and open your eyes. Nothing’ll happen except you understanding more.” Stephen slowly opened his eyes, taking in his surroundings. He was in his room, sunlight filtering its way through the badly boarded holes in the wall and piled rubble. He was tied to a table, his wings and feet separately bound. He worked on untying himself, working the knots until he was free. Then he sat up. Vera was talking really slowly. ‘Whoops,’ he thought. ‘Speed overload.’ He slowed down, and Vera talked at normal speed.
 “-Stop moving so fast!”
 “I did,” Stephen responded with a smile. Vera rolled her eyes and cracked a smile back.
 “Gee, thanks.” She scooted back slightly, giving Stephen more room to move. “Do you think it has anything to do with the mutants becoming human again?”
 “Dunno,” Stephen replied with a shrug. “I do know that was the first time Insanity’s spoken in a while. He said he was sorry.”
 “Hmm,” Vera said, absentmindedly twisting a lock of her curly hair. “That means he probably knows what’s going on.” The last statement made Stephen have a moment of sudden realization.
 “Of course he knows,” he said, staring down at the edge of the table. “Every person he’s mutated is an extension of himself. If the virus is dying, that means…” He stopped. He couldn’t continue. His other half was literally dying. And if that side died out...what would happen to the other side? He swallowed heavily, suddenly sick to his stomach.
 “Stephen?” Vera asked. “Are you okay?”
 “Yeah,” he replied breathlessly. “Just need some air.” He got up and staggered outside, falling to his knees on the cracked and overgrown pavement, chest heaving. *Stephen.* Insanity was back. His exhausted-sounding voice ricocheted through Stephen’s head.
 “What?” he yelled hoarsely. “What torture are you going to put me through now?” *None. I just wanted to tell you something.* “...What?” *You are the Host. The one the Survivors chose to guard the viruses.* “Wait, there’s more viruses?” *Yes. My sister and brother. The only reason you’ve been through all of this pain is because I--we--know you can. That’s why we chose you. I’m dying off, as you know, but you will not. You’re much too valuable. I know it’s a lot to take in, Stephen, but I know you can do this. You were chosen.* “Why are you telling me this?” *Because you need to know. You need to know this before I die. Now you must go to Chicago so you can greet my sister.* “What about the Rebels?” *They will come when they need to. Now go! There is little sand in the top of the hourglass.* Stephen stood and buzzed his wings, taking off and flying towards the city. He had a bad feeling about this, but Insanity hadn’t been wrong yet. He pushed himself to supersonic speed, trying to get to the city as fast as he could. He was sure there was an apocalypse waiting to happen, but he didn’t care. His other half was dying. He had nothing to lose.

~17~

Luna watched. She watched as every mutant and human in the remaining world gathered here. In Chicago. In the streets, the buildings, everywhere. She didn’t know why or even how. She just knew they were there. Stephen had arrived earlier. He was holding onto the spire at the top of the building, watching. She hadn’t tried to talk to him. She didn’t want to. She didn’t care anymore. He was a mutant. He took away her sister and her parents. Besides, she had a new partner in justice.
 “Hey, babe,” Connor said, walking up behind her and setting his hands on her sides, kissing her on the cheek. Luna smiled, looking up through his sandy hair to his deep blue eyes.
 “Hey,” she replied, kissing him on the nose. He smiled down at her, then looked out at Chicago, setting his chin in her thick blond hair.
 “What’re they all doing?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her chest.
 “Waiting,” she replied, setting her arms on top of his. “I don’t know what for.”
 “Hmm. Maybe for the half-breed on the roof.”
 “Maybe.” The door opened and the two separated turning to face whoever it was. It was Matthew.
 “Matt-er-sir!” Connor stammered, snapping to attention. “What are you doing here?”
 “At ease, Connor,” Matthew said, walking over and setting a hand on his shoulder for a second. “Just came to watch.” Connor relaxed and stepped next to Luna, who slipped her hand in his. Matthew stepped to the wide, slightly cracked windows, looking out across the city. The other two looked with him, absorbing the fear and anxiety radiating off of him like silent sound. The only noise for the next few minutes was the clamoring of the people below and the steady stream of thought running through their heads. The one to break the silence was Connor.
 “Do you know what they’re waiting for, Matt?” he asked, looking over at his stern commander.
 “Yes,” Matthew replied quietly. “I do.”
 “Well,” Connor replied, “what?” Matthew looked over at him, as stoic and sad as a ghost.
 “The next virus,” he said. “They call her Illusion.”

Stephen stood on the roof of the old Willis Tower, waiting. Insanity had told him that his sister, Illusion, would come soon. He could feel himself changing back, his leg bending forwards and his shell-like exterior becoming softer and more flesh-like. His eyes were merging back into one and becoming normal. His wings were disintegrating into flakes. The transformation made the left side of his body even more off balance. He had to grip the spire with his right arm and leg just to stay upright. He could feel that the time for it all to happen was close. He was sick and tired and just felt horrible. All of a sudden, the spire exploded. Stephen was launched off of it, his left side filled with excruciating pain as Insanity died. Pink mist flew out from the previous location of the spire, spreading like pollen across Chicago. He could hear thumps below as people passed out, followed by screams of bystanders that were abruptly cut off when they too fell unconscious. Time seemed to go in slow motion as Stephen fell. People in buildings collapsed, unable to escape the new virus. The whole world would soon be affected, and no one could stop it. It was time. He closed his eyes, accepting the virus, when he suddenly and painfully stopped. He yelped in pain and looked back at his captor: Luna.
 “Let me go,” he gasped, exhaustion restricting his rebellion.

“No,” she said, pulling him into the room she was in, both falling onto the floor. Stephen dragged himself towards the edge, but Luna grabbed his shoulders and held him back. He looked out across the city, mind flashing back to when Insanity had told him to kill Luna. The mutants in the vision weren’t being cured. They were being infected. Even in unconsciousness, Illusion worked in their bodies, destroying her elder brother once and for all so that she could live. Stephen gasped for air, the pain in his left side becoming unbearable. *Stephen…* Insanity whispered. *Goodbye.* The change was complete. He was human again. He screamed once more with agony and loss and threw himself free of Luna’s grasp, ignoring her scream. He could feel himself slipping away, closing his eyes as the darkness of unconsciousness surrounded him. The last sound he heard before he went completely under was the sharp crack of his back against the pavement.

~Epilogue~

Two men and a woman sat in front of a set of computer screens, not unlike the ones in a security room. It was a 3x3, with nine screens overall. They looked at the far left column of screens, each one tinted yellow. The screen in the middle showed a slowing green heartbeat, the other two darkening. Behind them was a table with three buttons on it, two already pressed down. The first one was green, the second was pink, the third was blue. The second column of screens, tinted pink, were all static. The third column was black. On a separate table to the right of the people was a cellphone. They were surrounded by windows, each giving way to endless stretches of stars. Light came from a ring of swirling golden substance held above them by a metal trough, the light shining into the top of the white domed roof and onto the scene below. The woman was tall and willowy, with thick brown hair pulled back into a ponytail that reached her shoulders. She wore a collared, button-down green shirt with cuffs above her elbows, as well as tan cargo pants and brown leather mid-thigh boots. She wore black rectangular glasses over her amber eyes. The man on her right had wild blond hair that stuck out at the ends and blue eyes, as well as an old Beatles t-shirt and blue jeans. He wore black and white sneakers on his feet, laces untied. The man on her left had slicked-back red hair and emerald eyes, a bit of stubble on his lower jaw. He wore a brown long-sleeve shirt and jeans, as well as red sneakers on his feet. Together the threesome watched the middle screen in the far left column. Slowly the heartbeat ground to a stop, the pink tinted screens springing to life instantly as the green ones went dark. The pink ones had the same display as the green, two cameras on top and bottom of a steady heartbeat. The three sighed and stirred to life as if broken from a trance.
 “Well,” the red-haired man said, Irish roots clipping his words. “It’s done.”
 “We made it through Phase One,” the woman said, brushing the little hairs tickling her forehead back. “And Phase Two is in action.”
 “She hasn’t started the illusion yet,” the blond man said. “She’s still killing off her brother.”
 “Aye,” the redhead said. “Your viruses are working, Richard.”
 “Yes,” Richard replied, “but they never would’ve worked without your expert placement, Stark.”
 “Bull,” Stark said, slapping the air. “It was all Wayne’s idea.”
 “Oh…” the woman said shyly. “Stop. You guys did all the science.”
 “But you gave them names,” Richard said, getting off of his metal stool and wandering backwards. “And their personalities, genders, and their effects. You thought up each detail that we made a reality.”
 “A pity Banner isn’t here to see it,” Stark said somewhat sadly. Wayne nodded, looking away.
 “He knew what he had to do,” she said. “He had to prepare Stephen for the things to come.”
 “A pity he had to do it with his life,” Richard said sadly.
 “I know that this must hurt you more than anyone,” Stark said to Wayne, setting a hand on her shoulder.
 “He knew what the price was,” she said. “It’s just that...I had always wanted to see our son reform the world together.”
 “Yes,” Richard agreed. “It is a shame. But we all have children down there.”
 “I found it cute that my Connor and your Luna fell in love,” Stark laughed. “Maybe we can go to their wedding with a little help from Illusion.”
 “Let’s not do that,” Wayne said, shaking her head. “But I can’t wait to see who Stephen ultimately falls in love with. He’s got an eye for both Naia and Vera.”
 “I say Naia,” Richard said. “She’s just his type.”
 “Aye,” Stark said. “I agree.”
 “What about Jace, Sola and Smock?” Wayne asked. “Think they’ll be able to do it?”
 “For ten years?” Stark laughed. “No! They’ll run out of  everything beforehand anyways.”
 “Yeah,” Richard said with a shrug. “I wouldn’t bet on it.”
 “Your daughter’s a tough one, though,” Stark replied, nudging him. “She might make it a year or so with Jace there.” An alarm went off, turning everyone’s attention to the monitors. The heart rate on the middle screen had evened out at 95 beats per minute, and the screens above and below began to flicker to life.
 “She’s waking up,” Stark said, sitting down.
 “And so it begins,” Richard said, standing behind him.
 “Ten years,” Wayne said, shaking her head. “Ten years before Infinity is released. Ten years before we can see our families and planet again.”
 “Well, eleven, technically,” Richard said. “Infinity takes a years to work.”
 “Whatever,” Stark said, leaning back. “I’ll just be glad to be breathing non-recycled air and seeing things OTHER than space.”
 “It’s going to be a long eleven years,” Wayne replied, watching the screens as they turned on. “Might as well get used to it.”