

PROLOGUE

In the year 2009, at least 12 kids escape from an ultra-secret government/military project called Manticore. The purpose of Manticore was to create a genetic “soup” in which to inject into “pre-test tube babies” which were then implanted into volunteer host birth-mothers. Over time, the children were trained to become genetic super-soldiers. Colonel Donald Lydecker, Manticore's project head, had been ordered to find the transgenics and bring them back. Unfortunately for Lydecker but fortunate for the children, the United States is transformed from world superpower to third-world country after “The Pulse” hits - an electromagnetic shockwave unleashed by nuclear terrorists. Almost all computer data is lost and the kids disappear without a trace.

In 2019, ten years later, Max Guevara is a 19-year-old girl who happens to be one of the 12 transgenics who escaped from Project Manticore. Now she wants to find her Manticore brothers and sisters, while keeping out of the searching eyes of Manticore.

On the run from her creators and constantly in search of her past, Max joins forces with Logan Cale, AKA Eyes Only; the idealistic cyber-journalist who hacks into the television signals and reports wrongdoings going on in the city.

She finds some of her brothers and sisters and makes a few friends in Post-Pulse Seattle. In the meantime, she also falls in love with Logan and he with her; but their individual priorities seem doomed to interfere with a potential relationship. Eventually, another lead from the government is assigned to head Manticore, and the new lead orders Lydecker to be terminated. He joins the transgenics and they strike an attack against Manticore. Unfortunately, Max was captured by Manticore forces under the new command of a woman named Renfro. Max however was believed to be dead by Logan and her friends.

While at Manticore, she befriended a transgenic from an earlier series of transgenics. His name is Joshua and is half man and half canine. With his help and the help of another X5 named Alec, she escaped. Soon however, she discovers she's been infected with a targeted retrovirus. Unfortunately, it's targeted to Logan (in an attempt to take out 'Eyes-Only') and if they touch, it will kill him. She returned to Manticore and destroyed the project, freeing the rest of the transgenics.

An NSA agent, Ames White, is ordered to hunt down and destroy all Manticore evidence, including the transgenics. Max wasn't about to let that happen, so she went to stop him. She's captured by White temporarily, and learns what White has discovered from Renfro's files; Max is an anomaly... she doesn't have any junk DNA.

Over time, she discovered that White isn't all he seems to be... he's also part of an ancient cult that over the past five thousand years have initiated through selective breeding a kind of super-human that rivals the durability, speed, intelligence and strength of the transgenics. White is of the latest breed of these super-humans. They seem to have some kind plan to take over the world, and potentially destroy humanity. White's father, Sandeman, had left the Conclave cult long ago and joined Manticore. Lydecker discovered the same thing, and White has his thugs run Lydecker's truck off into the Puget Sound. No body was ever found.

During all this, Max met up with a Manticore duplicate of herself, named Sam. She discovered White had brought Sam from hiding in California, threatened to kill Sam's new family if she didn't find and deliver Max and Eyes-Only. Eventually, however, Sam decided that her 'sister' Max wasn't as bad as she'd been told, and Sam went back into hiding.

Ultimately, a situation rises and Max's friends are taken hostage at the place she works, Jam Pony. She helps her friends but is discovered for what she really is, a transgenic. The transgenics retreat back to an area in Seattle that is contaminated by a toxic waste spill that occurred 10 years prior, but the transgenics are immune to. Wanting just to either be left alone or treated like everyone else, the transgenics bide their time in the 'Freak Nation' they've built in the tiny section of Post-Pulse Seattle.

Some people aren't willing to bide their time so quietly...

*She was designed to be the perfect soldier,
but never dreamed it was for the ultimate battle...*

DARK ANGEL **REVELATIONS**

'Get transgenic.'

DARK ANGEL : REVELATIONS

Storyline by Michael "Scanner" Haynes

MAIN CAST



MAX (X5-452)
and **SAM (X5-453)**

LOGAN CALE

AMES WHITE

JOSHUA



LYDECKER

ALEC

ORIGINAL CINDY



And introducing Anthony Hopkins as 'Legion'

PART ONE : " Dybbuk "

~ Seattle, AD 2022 (A little over a year after "Freak Nation") ~

The new moon left the night darker than usual, as Ames White waited below in the basement floor of Seattle's Pike Place Market. The creaking of the old boards above didn't bother him, but the other agents delay was annoying. Waiting for others was the job of lesser men. *That's all right*, he thought to himself, stifling his irritation. *Their time will come.*

"Sooner than you think," a voice called from behind him. In an instant the newcomer found himself staring at the cocked pistol in White's hand.

"Put that away," he drawled, unconcerned. "You have better things to do than shoot at shadows."

Keeping his hand at the ready, Ames holstered his gun and took a step back. The man wasn't easy to see in the tricky light, even with his enhanced eyesight.

"Let's cut to the chase," White said shortly. "The Conclave asked me to meet you here with no prior briefing. I don't like that. Why don't you begin by telling me who you are and what you want."

The stranger was beginning to make Ames uneasy, a feeling he neither liked nor was accustomed to. Usually he was the one taking pleasure in his ability to make others feel unsure. It kept them on their toes. He drilled his trainees in it constantly. *Being alert is essential to not being dead.*

The man in the shadows wasn't to be intimidated. "The time is drawing near; the dawning of the Conclave," he said in a soft but commanding voice. "But as you have discovered, your father and Manticore may have spawned a minor but real threat to this new era; a transgenic who's genetic structure is not only immune to the change but apparently encoded with unlimited resources."

White scowled. "452 is a problem, but given time I'm still convinced we can eliminate her. She's been extremely lucky so far, but luck only lasts so long before it runs out. She's weak and she's vulnerable. Nearly a year ago she holed herself up with most of those Manticore rejects, and from reports I've gotten she leaves the territory they call 'Terminal City' for supplies. I've been working on a plan that will bring her to us, eliminating the threat for good this time. Unfortunately our original strategy backfired due to outside interference, forced them to come together as a group. The Conclave ordered a retreat from the situation for the time being in spite of my insistence that 452 was a threat to everything."

"She is vulnerable, this is true; but she is not weak. Her strength is much like yours, from within. If you shatter her from within, you accomplish much, much more than attacking her physically."

White interrupted, "What do you want? I'm not here to discuss tactics. I'm here because of my orders."

The man smiled. "You're here because I wished it. Nothing more, nothing less. As I said, the time of dominance is nearly upon us. Millennia of planning, centuries of guiding, decades of fine-tuning, all leading to this generation. The greatest hour of the Conclave is about to come into being." He stepped from the shadows, and for the first time in his life White felt something completely alien to his soul: fear. Inexplicable, irrational fear. The man before him was tall, medium build, dark haired, perhaps in his early 40s. Nothing about him seemed to explain the sudden rush of near panic that spawned to the surface of Whites' emotions. He fought to control himself, his stony, chiseled face maintaining its usual cynicism and annoyed superiority.

"I don't expect you to understand." the man said as he walked around White, appearing to be perusing him for flaws. "After all, you have enormous prejudices against the transgenics. And your father. You feel that he betrayed the Conclave and of course, in this, you are correct." He stopped in front of White, close enough for him to feel the man's breath. Even in the coldness of the air, it occurred to White that he couldn't really see the man's breath.

"In the final, ultimate battle of good and evil, neither truly exists. There is the superior and the inferior. Morals have no bearing on the survival of the fittest." He looked into White's eyes, and Ames began to see where his subconscious manifestation of fear came from. The man's eyes were nothing but pure dominance and power.

He refused to be intimidated by either his fear or this man. "What is it you want?" he spat, allowing himself to focus the emotion into anger. The man smiled quietly and leaned close enough to whisper into Ames ear. "Your soul."

The last thing White heard before blacking out completely was a loud, bellowing laughter. It was coming from his own throat.

PART TWO : " Intrinsicity "

"It's been a long road. Who would have thought that our escape from Manticore a decade ago would eventually result not only in its destruction, but the uniting of transgenics from around the world? We weren't the only project location, though that's what we were led to believe at the time. Once news of what happened in Seattle hit the papers, we started receiving word from others like us. Like us... Two years ago I would have given anything to be normal. Now it's been over a year since we united, hoping to force our government to accept responsibility for us. The government seems to have lightened up a bit about capturing or restraining us. Not sure what's going on with that but I'm not complaining too much if it means we don't have to lose anyone over it. The locals still don't like seeing some of the more aesthetically exotic transgenics like Mole or Joshua, but usually nobody makes a scene. Still, it's fresh in our minds so we stay low as a matter of common sense."

"Logan and I are back on track with the help of a couple of those newcomers from outside Seattle. Someone at Manticore had the brilliant idea of taking a couple of the best and brightest from an earlier series of transgenics and assigned them to R&D of Manticore's gene stock. Those R&D kids discovered that some of my DNA is programmable, and after they figured out how to tell the little guys to take on the virus it was adios muchachos for the damn things; so long and don't come back now y'hear? Also, Logan is walking for good. Turns out Joshua has some kinda hybrid canine chromosome that rebuilt Logan's damaged neural pathways for good when he gave Logan that transfusion a year ago. We spent a few weeks not really knowing what to do; here we'd been at arm length for so long it was a built-in reaction to keep our distance. Talk about messed up... but we worked it out ok. Found out something else too; we're great in bed together."

Max stopped typing and looked over at Logan, busy helping Joshua dig through one of the storage bins to find a particular paint color for his latest masterpiece. After allowing herself a brief feeling of warmth for the two of them, she turned back to the terminal.

"Joshua's been in a strange mood lately, his pictures are weirder than normal. He won't talk about them much, just says he dreams them. Pretty whacked dreams if you ask me and he's not the only one; I've been hearing from a lot of our Terminal City locals about dreams lately."

"This diary is going ok. Logan talked me into writing in it every day or so. Haven't had time to write much of anything except nonsense until today, which is why I'm backtracking and starting from the Jam Pony escapade. Keepin' it all in order. Gotta admit, it's a stress breaker. At first I thought it wasn't one of his brighter ideas but ya have to hand it to Logan, he knows his stuff. Writing about things seems to get them off my mind and I don't have to tell anyone about it. Good thing it's got a security code though or I'd never use it."

"Alec is seeing one of the R&D transgenics, named Beck. Kind of a cute couple, really. Odd though, I'd never have thought he'd go for the brainy type. She's the one who found a way to develop an anti-toxin so Logan and Asha and a few other outside friends can stay in Terminal City. They just take a pill every couple of days and no worries. Lately..."

A strange but familiar sensation distracted Max mid-sentence. Ever since the runes on her skin appeared a year ago and then disappeared a couple of months later, she had these incidents. They weren't quite premonitions, more like... being conscious of certain related events.

Sometimes what she sensed did happen and sometimes it didn't. The first time she felt it was at Jam Pony when she 'sensed' the intruders entering the building and that turned out to be true. This time she could feel that it was someone she knew; but that was all. "Tam..." she called out. "We've got a visitor or visitors at the main gate." Tamara, an X6, sounded off and ran to tell the gate patrol to expect arrivals.

She caught Logan and Joshua looking at her. Logan stopped rummaging through the storage boxes and sauntered over. She saved her diary file and wiped it from her screen. "You ok?" he asked, in that way that always melted her. "You look kind of spooked."

Max started to give him her 'nothing I can't handle' line, but he always seemed to see right through her tough-chick exterior. "I don't know. Someone I know is coming."

Logan leaned back against the chair beside the desk Max was using. "Is that a bad thing?"

She smiled at him. "Not lately, but we've had it pretty easy for a while. Never pays to let your guard down too much when things get mild. Not for us, anyway."

He looked at her guardedly. "Us? Meaning?"

"Meaning Terminal City. You and me, all the transgenics, all the outsiders who live here now; Asha, Bling, OC and the rest." Max eyed him carefully. Sometimes he tended to be a little sensitive when someone referred to the difference between transgenics and 'Ordinaries', the common catchall phrase for normal people. She understood; it was only because he never really thought of her or them as better or worse, just different. She couldn't judge him badly for that since she had been the same way before she found her 'family' again. If she wasn't careful, he'd go into 'Eyes Only lecture mode'. Even now she didn't really think of ordinaries as, well... ordinary. She'd seen too many times how resourceful even untrained non-transgenics could be. And since she happened to be in love with one of them...

Logan nodded and gave her an apologetic grin. He knew that he wore his feelings on his sleeve sometimes. A commotion in the outer room startled them; he and Max got up to see what the noise was about. She could see Mole and Tam carrying a woman in and felt herself shocked into action as she recognized the woman as Hannah Sukova, the tech who'd picked her up after the escape from Manticore back in '09. Hannah was in bad condition; it seemed like there wasn't a spot on her that wasn't bruised or bloody.

Medics had been alerted, but it was soon apparent that they didn't expect to get anywhere with her injuries. Hannah stirred and opened her eyes. Her eyesight cleared and she saw Max standing close. "Hey."

Max knelt beside her and took her hand. "I'm here. Who did this to you?"

Hannah coughed and speckles of blood appeared on her chin. "Listen... I found her, but you're in danger. We all are." She coughed again. The medics backed away, and motioned to Max that there wasn't anything they could do.

"Max, I found your mother..."

Max almost jerked her hand away. But she controlled herself, moving closer, eager to hear but dreading what Hannah was about to say. "She lives in Maltby, up by Snohomish. Works in

Bellevue in one of the medical labs..." Hannah started coughing again, but managed to control it through sheer will. She tried again. "Go to Sci-Tech Industries at the old Dec-West building. She-aaaaaahhh!" Her strained speech turned into a grimace of pain for several seconds, then her body relaxed. Max had seen the hand of death many times. She didn't even bother to ask the medics to help.

They moved in to take care of the body. "Severe beating. Internal injuries and broken bones," one of them said. "Nothing we could do except make her comfortable. Tam gave her a pain killer as soon as she was in the gate. She asked for you by name."

Max felt a little 'beaten' herself. She had thought Hannah was safe when they last parted. She stood, and looked over at Logan. He knew what she wanted, and two years of getting to know what made this woman tick kept him from arguing. "I'll hack into SCI-Labs and get an employee roster. Shouldn't be too many people who work there and live in Maltby, that'll narrow the list a bit. If I ask you to be careful, that all this seems sudden and contrived, would you listen at least a little bit?" He tried to make it sound tongue-in-cheek.

For once she didn't argue. "I'll try. I know it's far fetched but I want to hope; even if just a little. O.K.?"

He smiled. He was always telling her to have hope. He couldn't deny her that now. And he knew how important this must be to her. "I'll call you on the cell when I get the info."

She smiled her thanks, but the happiness left her expression as she gave Hannah one more look and walked out.

Logan watched her leave, and as Joshua stepped up beside him he glanced over at the medics. "See if she has anything on her; bugs, ID, whatever. Then take her to the morgue and put her on ice. We'll hold the funeral when Max gets back."

Joshua looked solemn. "Max knew her from Manticore. I remember her. How did she know Max was here?"

"I don't know, Joshua. That's why I hope Max thinks twice about this. Whoever killed Hannah wanted to keep what she knew a secret."

They both watched in silence as the medics took Hannah's body away.

PART THREE : " *Quiescence* "

Shuffling debris echoed as Ames White walked through the devastation of Washington State's branch of the Project Manticore complex. Parts of the massive complex still stood, but most was just so much rubble. Dark thoughts ran through the mind of the entity now controlling Ames, the essence that existed of White himself remaining buried. He was aware of the thing controlling his body, had known it immediately. He didn't think of It as the "Shadow Man" any more, sensing that It wasn't a man at all but a force of sheer malevolence. Ames now had an idea of what the entity had planned. While some of it coincided with his own imperatives, and those of the Conclave, the rest most definitely did not. The entity had lied when It implied that It was on the side of the Conclave; It had It's own agenda.

The entity seemed to work independently of his own consciousness. Occasionally he could feel It access his own memories, but not his conscious thought. He didn't know if It was capable of doing so. Yet. But still, better to pay attention and plan later when the opportunity arose. For now he would try to learn more about It when It let pieces of information slip.

Striding through one of the wrecked buildings, he could feel It searching for one specific office. Lydecker's office. Finding it, he walked through the crumpled doorway and began a meticulous search. Ames could tell It was looking for a safe, something to do with 452. Suddenly it became clear: It believed that Lydecker kept samples of various genetic materials as a backup in case of a disaster in the genetics lab. Ames didn't believe It would find anything though. His own men had scoured every complex, every office, every square foot on the property, searching for anything useful, and had found very little left functioning or valuable to the cause. *Good thing 452 did such a number on this place*, Ames thought to himself in the echoes of his awareness.

Though Lydecker had been absent from Manticore for a time before its destruction, Renfro kept his office just as he left it, constantly looking for clues and information. It noticed a broken coffee mug on the floor under some office ceiling rubble. Picking it up by the handle, Ames could feel, through It, emanations of Lydecker's thoughts. No, he corrected himself, echoes of Lydecker's thoughts at the time.

Although Ames could only sense wisps of impressions via the entity's help, apparently It could grasp more information. Tossing the cup back to the floor, It walked directly into the office lavatory. This too had been searched, but It held his hand up against the unbroken mirror. With an audible click, the sink cupboard swung backwards to reveal stairs leading downward. Ames had to momentarily admire the craftsmanship required; the floor and wall area were seamless and the movement of the sink cabinet was nearly silent. Lydecker must have had it constructed long before Renfro arrived at the complex, long enough to have the blueprints altered so that neither interior or exterior examination would have shown a discrepancy from the diagram prints of the building. Ames sensed from It that there was a proximity chip identifier inside the mirror, much like Manticore's keycard, that must allow entrance. It was probably self-sufficiently powered, with a computer system separate from the now-destroyed Manticore mainframe. Somehow It had been able to emulate the proper identification. This caught the seldom-surprised Ames off guard. He hadn't thought of Lydecker as anything more than just another military issued commandant running Project Manticore. It was apparent that there was a level of imagination and brilliance feeding Lydecker's legendary obsession.

This line of thinking ceased as he headed down the stairs. They quickly leveled off into a small,

oddly shaped room that lit up as soon as he, correction, 'they,' stepped onto the floor. Sensor pads. *Pretty high tech for such a small room, he thought.* As the entity looked around Ames saw a number of small, suitcase-sized cold-storage safes, a small network mainframe, and a refrigerator. Finding the refrigerator empty and untouched, the entity concentrated on the computer. When he touched it, the screen lit up and displayed the Manticore emblem. A series of codes and passwords seemed to enter themselves, and a main index screen came up. If what Ames was seeing was accurate, most of the pertinent information from Manticore was copied here, for Lydecker's perusal. *Chalk up another one for the Colonel.* Obviously the man really had been more resourceful than White had believed. Ames reminded himself once more about the hazards of underestimating his opponents.

The information was being brought up faster than Ames could comprehend it. The entity must have manipulated it to display faster than normal. Something about alternate dimensions or existence, references to heaven and hell, gods and devils. Ames didn't really believe in the physical manifestation of good or evil, taught by the Conclave at an early age that ideology was a weakness, that goals and actions were the important guidelines.

Ames noticed the information had frozen on one page. 452's file was displayed, including the information from Renfro's notebook computer. That implied that either Lydecker had this information before Manticore was destroyed, or someone had been here since his team ended the search assignment. Ames stored this realization away for safe keeping. It also included a tag reference number, corresponding to the small cold-storage safes. Using Whites safe-cracking skills, the entity opened the appropriate chamber in no time. The first thing he noticed was that each vial inside was marked with the barcode number of a transgenic. The second was that two of the vials were missing; 452's and 453's.

The thing that controlled him was suddenly infuriated. White sensed a horrendous anger that seemed to threaten to consume them both. Finally, when It gained control, It began sorting through White's memories to see what might have happened. White knew immediately that Lydecker must have taken the vials before his people ran his vehicle into the Puget Sound. White couldn't stop the minion from pouring through his thoughts as he noted mentally that the vials had not been found in the truck. Nor had Lydecker's body.

They left the hidden room and pulled out Ames cell phone, dialing several digits.

In response to the answering "Yes?", White reported "The materials were taken previously."

"He won't be pleased. Proceed with your alternative."

White disconnected the call and dialed a number that he knew explicitly; that of his direct subordinates. He heard his own voice state "This is White. Meet me at the southwest corner of the Space Needle complex in two hours. Bring surveillance equipment."

The agent on the other end of the cell phone paused, then replied; "Yes, sir. Two hours."

Hanging up, Ames found himself fading out once again. When he regained consciousness, he found himself sitting in Lydecker's chair. He felt groggy but stood instantly as he spotted the man he had met at the Pike Place Market sitting in a chair across the room from him.

"What the hell did you do to me?" Ames demanded, standing up.

The man looked at White, amused. "I'll answer that, if only for my own entertainment. I

controlled you. I didn't know what traps Mr. Lydecker might have left before his encounter with your agents. Unfortunately, I didn't foresee that he might have taken the relevant materials before his exile from Manticore."

Ames narrowed his eyes. "I asked you once, now you need to answer me. Who or what are you?" The man leaned back, his laughter reverberating against the walls. "I have been known by many names, my dear boy. You, however, can call me Legion."

PART FOUR : " *Vicissitude* "

Max pulled into the Sci-Tech Labs parking lot and found into a space near the building. She'd long since jerry-rigged the Ninja to start through a hidden switch known only to herself, Logan and Alec. Having scoped the layout of the building and surrounding area in advance, she had a pretty good idea of vantage points and had worked up a few escape routes. As she swung off the bike, her cell phone beeped. The caller ID read "Elias Olson", Logan's codename for Eyes Only. That meant the call was scrambled and virtually untraceable. Well, as untraceable as one can get; it had only been a year or so ago that his untraceable network was breached by White and his goons.

"What's up?" she asked.

"They don't have any records of anyone living in Maltby that works there, but get this; there's an employee named Rebecca Lydecker who lives in Woodinville, which is just a couple miles from Maltby."

Rage bubbled at the name, but Max forced herself to remember that if Lydecker were alive, chances are he'd be on their side now. "What do you make of it?" she prompted.

"I know you don't want to hear it," he commented, "But if it's not a coincidence, then I suppose it's possible your mother could be related to Lydecker. It might explain why he was so obsessed with finding you."

She shuddered involuntarily. "I hope not. I'd resequence my own DNA rather than have that relation" Logan's chuckle filtered through the phone.

"Why didn't your previous searches on Lydecker turn up this gal at Sci-Tech?" The chuckle died as Logan decided how to answer the question.

"I wondered about that as well; she could have recently moved to the area. That's a question you would have to ask her. Incidentally, I got word from the medics, Hannah didn't just die of the beating she took," he told her "She was dying of cancer."

Before she could say anything, he continued; "A man-made cancer. Looks like Manticore did a number on her too, somehow. Or maybe White's boys; you said that when White held you captive that he was babbling about the Conclave taking over and a terrible fate for mankind. This could be a clue as to what they have planned, and the medics are still looking into it. All the more reason to play this one safe, Max. This may have turned into more than just a search for your mother. Regardless of how important that is to both of us. Be careful."

Max forced herself not to feel furious at Manticore for now, there'd be time for that later. She knew she'd have to take this one step at a time, and getting herself pissed off could be dangerous. "I'll try. Love ya." As close as their relationship had gotten in the last several months, she still couldn't help feeling a twinge of panic in opening herself up like that.

Looking the building up and down, she decided to ignore his sound advice, as usual. "Screw it, life's a risk." she said aloud to no one in particular as she walked through the front doors. She looked around and found a main desk not too far from the entrance. Sauntering up, she smiled

at the woman behind the counter. "Where can I find your Employee Resources department?"

The woman looked her over, much the same as she would some exotic species of bug. "They're not hiring." Max leaned over, still smiling. "Unless you're in charge of hiring, why don't you let them decide that. Now, Employee Resources?" The woman glared at Max. "Find it yourself."

Max shrugged and started walking down the hall. "Hey!" the woman called. Max turned and looked at her. The woman pointed down an adjoining hallway. "Try that way..." she said sarcastically, the mumbled under her breath "...bitch."

"Thanks," Max said over her shoulder, "but that's Miss Bitch to you."

Turning a corner, she found a large open room with a counter labeled SCI-TECH SECURITY. One of two security guards looked over at Max appreciatively as the other watched a monitor. Max decided that the receptionist was going to become *pate* after all. She conjured her 'redhead with blonde roots' voice and cooed at the guard, "I was wondering if you're hiring for Security. I always thought the idea of a uniform was pretty sexy."

The other guard looked over at Max, and the first officer grinned. "I think we have an application around here somewhere, if not" Before he could finish, Max jumped up and slid across the counter into him, knocking him off his stool and over the desk behind him. She landed on her feet and turned to the second guard, who only had time to begin to turn his head to follow her blinding-fast movement as he became the receiving end of a left-hand roundhouse kick.

"That's gotta hurt," she said to the unconscious form. Moving both of the guards into a closet, she took their access cards and snapped off the door handle. Bringing up the overlay of the building on the security console, she noted that the cubicles were listed with the names of the occupants. *All too easy.* she thought as she found Lydecker's name.

She memorized the internal layout on the screen and headed back down the hall. Careful to avoid the receptionist, she used the access card to gain entrance to the elevator. Noticing another card panel, she began to feel exasperated and a little on edge as she ran the card through it and pressed the appropriate floor button. The elevator stopped on a floor before reaching her destination and a snappy but casually dressed man walked in and slid his card through the access slot. He glanced at Max approvingly but curiously. "I don't think we've met you in Sales?"

She gave him her most dazzling smile. "I'm new."

He nodded; "There seems to be a lot of that going on lately. Maybe we'll cross paths." He smiled and when the elevator door opened he departed. When the door closed she let out a relieved breath. She hadn't realized just how nervous she was, hadn't let herself be distracted by the thought that she was a step closer now to finding her mother. Because of Hannah again she snapped that thought shut. She would mourn later.

Reaching her floor, she stepped out and perused the area. She could feel the tension in her neck, and took a couple of deep breaths. "This isn't my mother.", she mumbled to herself.

After taking a couple of steps forward, she stopped, suddenly aware that something was wrong. Back at Jam Pony, when she delivered anything to an office facility, she could always hear the background noises, people talking on phones, keyboards tapping, a dozen other sounds. Here,

the only person she could see wasn't even in any of the hundreds of cubicles, but at a coffee station. The woman, who appeared to be in her early 40's with thick, shoulder-length blonde hair, glanced over at her and nodded cordially. "Want some?" she offered, pointing at the coffee pot.

It smelled wonderful and although Max knew she should refuse, she accepted the styrofoam cup. This was starting to feel surreal. "Let me guess, you're Rebecca Lydecker."

The woman smiled and picked up a pastry. "Yes, I am. Come and sit down, we have a few things to talk about."

She walked over to a window and sat in a plush chair. Max walked behind a chair opposite Rebecca and leaned against its back. Rebecca took another sip from her cup and put it down, then clasped her hands on her lap and looked at Max. "The last thing I want to do right now is startle or frighten you into leaving right now. But there are certain truths that need to be said."

Max was starting to feel as if all this was a dream. She hadn't touched her coffee, but now she took a sip to clear her head.

Max didn't take her eyes off this woman. "How about starting with your name. Do you know a Donald Lydecker?"

Rebecca nodded. "He's my brother. And before you ask, yes I know who you are. I know about Manticore and what's happened to you since you destroyed the training facility. In fact, there's quite a bit I know, but you'll need time to assimilate what you need to hear"

Max interrupted her. "Not to put too fine a point on this but I'm not here to talk about Manticore other than to locate my mother, who used to be a genetic host back around 2000. Do you know where she is?"

Rebecca looked at her appraisingly, and nodded again. "Yes, but you're going to have to be patient about that. She's in danger, mostly because of her having hosted you. As I said, there's a lot going on that you don't know."

Max looked straight at her. "I've been told I don't have a lot of patience sometimes. I don't want to be rude, but either you can help me or I'm outta here."

"I will help you, Max. But you need to listen first."

Max hadn't introduced herself. Yet, the woman did say she knew her. Max decided to listen to what the woman had to say.

Rebecca continued. "If you can listen with a clear head and open mind and not walk out when you hear what I have to say at first, then when I'm finished I'll tell you where you can find your mother. But you need to hear me out first. Deal?"

Max looked at her, unconvinced. "If you know so much, tell me something only Lydecker and myself would know."

Rebecca paused and looked thoughtful. "Deck asked a favor of Doctor Sandeman when he was beginning your embryonic stages. He asked if Sandeman would induce a duplication of certain physical attributes of Donald's wife in your gene development. Sandeman refused at first, not

because of concepts of impurity but because of personal feelings; in the end Sandeman couldn't help but comply. You see, Deck's murdered wife was Sandeman's only daughter."

Max's face betrayed her surprise. Just one more link in the chain... "I guess the more Sandeman thought about it, the more he changed his mind. I suppose he felt it wouldn't be disrespecting the dead as much as having a part of a lost one living on."

Max came around the chair and sat down. "All right, you've got my attention. But if I start getting bored, the deal's off."

Rebecca nodded and leaned back in the chair. "First, regardless of what I tell you, there will be no attempt to hold you here. I just want to assure you of that." Max sat up, becoming aware that her nerves were practically jumping on their own. "Second, the reason I hope to convince you of that, is that I don't want you to make a rash decision or action when I tell you know that this establishment is the Intelligence and Tactical Applications Center for Project Manticore."

PART FIVE : " Tribulation "

Ames White checked his watch. It had been 3am when he met the man who called himself 'Legion' at the Pike Place Market, and just after 4pm when he had emerged from the Manticore rubble. Legion had spent an hour explaining what the two calls were about. Ames didn't know where the man got his information, but so far he had demonstrated more than sufficient ability for Ames to believe him. Legion had commented that he would be in touch soon, and had simply walked out as quietly as he had arrived at the Pike Basement. Driving back to Seattle, Ames allowed himself to consciously consider the man, something he hadn't dared do in his presence.

He had picked up many things during those hours. Despite his earlier suspicions, the man was not a mental transgenic from Manticore PsiOps. White had caught a PsiOps transgenic named Mia once some time ago at the Seattle Airport. He'd lost 5 agents bringing the girl and her idiot human boyfriend in.

He'd also learned that while Legion seemed calm and collected on the outside, inside he detested humanity with a passion. White felt nothing but contempt for the inferior species but this man brought a new meaning to the word 'hate'. Legion wanted mankind to suffer, painfully and continuously. That was not the goal. Complete domination and control was the mission of the Conclave, but as they had learned thousands of years ago; torture and misery of the mass populous only bred revolution.

However, it was worth considering that if the man brought about the first stage of his plan, the inferiors might revolt against him, giving the Conclave the perfect opportunity to step in and seize control. Ames smiled; the Conclave could even conceivably spur the revolt. He'd have to brief his superiors and gain their perspective.

Pulling into Seattle, he headed towards the Space Needle. Ames normally didn't give the construct much thought. A year and a half ago he'd had a couple of agents check it out along with several other abandoned buildings. It seemed that although the 60-year-old monstrosity had two fairly spacious floors, there was no evidence that anyone had taken residence there in years. But he had given orders for the building to be checked every three months for transients.

Obviously he had been on the right track, because Legion indicated that 452 occasionally climbed the monolith to the top for some 'time-out' away from the rest of her test-tube buddies. He drove up to the outer gate and turned off the car. The area was rife with transients and low-end gangs, but they usually knew not to screw with officials. It was the weak that they preyed upon.

Ames entered Seattle Center, and as he walked towards the Needle he noticed his men waiting at the base of the building. Surveying the area for police or transients, he approached them. "I want the Needle wired. Get me vid transmitters and infrared motion sensors on both floors and the upper outer slope."

He pointed to a nearby building. "Get a constant network recorder-cam hooked up and running from there. 452 has been here, and there is no telling when she'll come back. Don't install any ground cameras, they'll just be taken by the local residents."

Looking up at the saucer, he added; "Make sure the sensors won't be seen either day or night."

"Yes, sir. We'll get on it immediately." Two of the five men pulled on a couple of backpacks and began climbing the structure, while two more left to work on the other security equipment.

Otto turned to Ames, looking interested. "You've found something, sir?"

Ames turned, glancing at him. "Just some information that turned up unexpectedly. Take charge of this operation, then clear out. Let me know when the network feeds are online."

Otto watched the two men climb. "Immediately on completion, Agent White."

Ames walked away towards the car and pulled out his cell phone. Dialing, he brought it up to his ear as he opened the door.

"White. Fe'nos tol. I have some information for you regarding the agent you sent me to meet yesterday," Ames briefed the Conclave priestess on the phone.

"We are aware of his agenda," she replied. "Even as we have our own. Continue to cooperate with him if he needs you."

His frown deepened. "Our goal is to become the dominating force planet-wide and filter the human race," he stated. "I believe this person means to commit complete genocide."

A brief pause, then the priestess answered patiently, "You have informed us that the transgenic could single-handedly destroy all that the Conclave has strived to accomplish for more than five millennium. Ultimately, that may change how we must view the potential of mankind. There are sufficient numbers in our private society to continue as a race at this time should the inferiors become eradicated. There are even those in our numbers who may lose focus on our cause due to corruption from the outside."

He unconsciously absorbed this with the high level of acceptance that had been imbedded in him since childhood. However, he also had always been highly independent, a rogue conceptionalist. He idolized the Conclave, but did not always agree with its methods. He seldom failed in expressing his opinion, but had never truly disobeyed the Conclave. In fact, there was really only one thing in his life that meant as much to him...

Suddenly he felt a chill. "What do you mean by corruption?"

He could almost hear the disapproval in her voice as she answered, "It's not like you to question the orders of the Conclave to this degree. There are a small number of 'Those Who Belong' who have been corrupted by the ideals of the inferiors, there are also a limited few of 'Those In Training' who have been diseased with doubt at so early an age that they will never shake it loose."

Ames didn't say anything for a few seconds. "I understand. I'll wait for his contact. Fe'nos tol." He pressed the disconnect button, and had to fight to resist the urge to shatter the phone into the Seattle Center gate wall. He knew she was referring to Ray, his son, who had been taken by 452 and had planted the seed of doubt about the group that his father, and now he, belonged to.

He sat in the car in silence for several minutes before driving off. He knew that they were testing

him, seeing if he was still strong. But this was his son they were playing with. He had always thought that he would give up anything in his life for the Conclave, and in fact had risked his son's life as his had been risked when he was a child. This was different; they were talking about the eventual slaughtering of his son, not as a test of his strength but because they didn't trust him. And if that wasn't enough, he suspected that her comment about Those Who Belong also referred to himself. His instincts were fine-tuned enough to know an implied threat when he heard it. The message was clear: you're with us or you're with them. For the first time since his own childhood, he felt doubt. Though a weakness, he knew he had to come to terms with it one way or another. They were right about one thing. He was either with the Conclave or he was not.

He shook his head to clear it; this was definitely not like him. Must be from that freak's contact in his mind, still must be traces messing with his clarity. Enough, he had work to do.

The phone chirped. "We followed 452 as ordered. She's in Bellevue at a business called SciTech. They make pacemakers, pagers, electronic gizmos. Also, Agent Stewart reports that the Sukova woman has still not left Terminal City."

Ames briefly replayed recent events in his mind. He had located Hannah Sukova and discovered that she had cancer, but also that she had been searching for 452's host mother. He had propositioned Hannah's doctor to administer a formula constructed by the Conclave, which in fact prolonged her life so she could continue the search. Ames had decided that her search could only help them in the long run. She'd surprised him when his contacts reported that she was entering Seattle and seemed to be on her way to Terminal City. He'd had no choice but to order his agents to intercept. Irritatingly, the woman had managed to disable the agent and escape before his backup arrived. He'd been furious to find that the agent had also injured the woman severely in the attempted interception. The entire maneuver was a disaster as well as amateurish, and White had reprimanded the agent for acting before his partner showed up. He suspected the freaks were giving her medical attention in the small enclosed area they now called home.

"Keep me posted. If she leaves, I want to know where she goes. Don't be noticed."

Ames hung up and pondered her choice of destinations. SciTech was a fairly common local brand name in post-Pulse Puget Sound. He made another call and requested an inquiry file be opened and the data forwarded. No sense leaving anything to chance.

White's thoughts turned back to his son. He knew what he had to do. It was possibly going to be the hardest thing he had ever done, but Ames had never shirked from hard decisions before. This would indeed be his ultimate test.

PART SIX : " *Recondite* "

Max was so startled by Rebecca's unexpected declaration that it took her a few seconds before her body caught up to her brain sufficiently to react. In one smooth movement she flipped herself back behind the chair and quickly reassessed her surroundings, as well as the layout that she had memorized from the security computer. Nothing seemed amiss, but it wouldn't surprise her if they had armed guards or more X-series soldiers waiting outside the elevators and entrances by now. She felt foolish and stupid for letting herself be fooled this way, yet she needed to find out what was happening here. "If you plan to try to capture me, we already did that number before. Renfro and your brother are dead and I'm not going back to whatever program you whack-jobs have cooked up this time."

Rebecca, who wisely hadn't moved an inch since revealing to Max that SciTech was in fact another branch of Manticore, now stood slowly. "I promise that we won't keep you here against your will." she repeated. "The situation has changed a bit in the last two years. So has Project Manticore." She reached behind her and pulled out a pistol.

Max nearly dove into overdrive before realizing that it was facing her butt first, the woman was handing it over. "If you want, take my gun and search me for weapons before I "show and tell" you the facility and bring you up to date on what's going on."

Max looked at it and her without touching the weapon. "I don't do guns." Rebecca nodded and was about to put it back in the belt holster behind her when Max stopped her; "Put it on the table."

She paused, then placed it on the table the same way, butt towards Max. "In all honesty, I already knew that about you. But I'm being up front and want you to know it."

Max glanced out the window, but didn't see any signs of activity. Looking at Rebecca, she growled "Show me what you want but if I see anything that tells me I'm being set up, you'll be able to use your own head as a bowling ball before you can say 'Spare'. Got it?"

Rebecca nodded. "Can't blame you for not trusting me. Follow me if you want, or leave if you want."

She headed back towards the elevator, after pausing to refill her coffee cup, and Max walked after her.

Turning her cell phone in her pocket off, in case someone called during this little tour, Max kept an eye on this woman. The only, single thing that kept her here was that she wanted to know where her mother was. If she could get that from letting this woman take her on a tour of whatever this place was, she'd go along. And if this "Lydecker" tried pulling her chain, she'd have her for breakfast.

They stepped into the elevator, and when the door closed the elevator launched into movement, and Max felt it descend through the elevator shaft. "Let me guess, you have a secret underground lair. Don't you people know what the word 'cliché' means?"

Rebecca laughed and replied "How else would you host a top secret project on the side of hill-front property? Actually, the entire area is monitored, as well as all area's of the building. We

knew you were here before you even pulled into the parking lot. Don't get me wrong though, I'm glad you're here. You're more important than you know."

Max looked at her; "Important enough to kill Hannah Sukova?" Rebecca's smile vanished. "I'm very sorry about that. We didn't kill her though, that was White's men."

Max nearly spat; "White? We haven't crossed paths for some time... why now? And why did he have to kill her?"

The elevator came to a stop. "Actually, we think he was using her to get to you." The doors opened, and what they stepped out into surprised Max. She had unconsciously expected some huge open expanse with some kind of huge wall monitor such as in Logan's old spy movies. What she saw turned out to be much the same as a normal office, with hundreds of cubicles.

Rebecca escorted her down one hallway past several cubicles, she only noticed a person in each with a typical computer setup. Some seemed to be monitoring satellite images of various countries at various ranges, some seemed to be perusing various forms of data.

Rebecca noticed her gazes and commented; "One of our duties is to monitor world events and activity. We get feeds off Norad, NASA and every militia ran by the United States... and a few the USA doesn't employ."

"Why should this interest me?" Max commented, though somewhat curious in spite of her caution.

"It will. Let's go into my office and I'll explain." She led Max into a large managerial office and closed the door.

Rebecca motioned to a seat as she took a chair behind a large desk.

"Max," she answered; "what I need to tell you relates to those inscriptions that appeared on you a year or so ago. You already know something about them, they were Sandeman's way of passing a message to you about your mission."

Max glared at her, and she corrected herself. "Sorry, your... goal. What you were designed to do, to put it bluntly. What you were meant to be."

Max rolled her eyes. "Please. I got enough of that from Logan when he deciphered what he could of it."

Rebecca looked at her, "No joke. It couldn't be more serious. But I'll leave that for now. You're up to date, for the most part, about the Conclave. You know they have been involved in a selective breeding program for literally thousands of years. The result is what you've encountered; a breed of man that is stronger, faster, smarter than your typical Joe. What you don't know are two things. One is how many there are., and two; who they are ran by. First news flash; there are tens of thousands. We don't have an exact number because they are as secretive as we are. Maybe more so. Enough to take over the planet if they worked as a group, and they DO work as a group. I believe White commented on this when he captured you, before the hostage situation at Jam Pony." Max hesitated, then nodded. "The Conclave intends to control every major form of government in the world. This is a fact. Now for the second and unbelievable part. The Conclave is ran by people of apparent biblical influence."

Max looked at her blankly. "Meaning what? They know the Pope?"

The woman sighed and shook her head. "This is where we stand. There is an essence of good that lives in our world, and an essence of evil. From time to time either or both manifests itself in one form or another. The Flood. The Inquisition. Christ. The Black Plague. Both forms appear in some way every so often throughout history, physically or by manipulation. One of those manifestations is where the origins of Christianity developed, and other forms of moralistic religions. The Conclave is also such a manifestation, beginning roughly seven thousand years ago. But as all things in the universe, for every action there is an equal but opposite reaction."

Max scowled, "You're talking about Manticore."

She nodded. "Except originally it wasn't called Manticore; that was a name devised for the secret project that has ran for the last 25 years. What I am referring to is bigger than that. Manticore was only a facet of a larger equally secret organization that has been keeping the Conclave at bay for thousands of years, almost since the beginning of the Conclave."

Max absorbed this information, albeit with some difficulty. It was one thing for Logan to rattle off information like this, but another for a total stranger to do so.

"Most of the Conclave believe that they are destined at the superior race of homo-sapiens because of the abilities their selective breeding has caused. What they don't seem to realize is that the religion they subscribe to is window dressing; they are actually soldiers, like you."

Max couldn't help but take the bait, "Who's in command of their little snake worshiping group, then?"

Rebecca looked at her. "The same force that caused the terrorist attack of 2001. The Vietnam War. The Third Reich." She continued naming events of atrocities; "...the world-wide corruption before the great flood. The infidelity at the Tree Of Knowledge. Whether you want to call them God and Satan, good and evil, right and wrong; there are two forces that have been in conflict as far back as intellectual recordings of time have existed. It doesn't take religious insight or practical genius to see what has been going on through history, it just means opening your eyes. It sounds cliché, but that's what our organization has been fighting throughout time. The Conclave isn't the first, and if we defeat them this time they won't be the last; but that's the nature of the Beast."

Max was looking at her cynically. "You're telling me the Devil made them do it?" she said sarcastically.

Rebecca shrugged. "Or whatever force governs the acts that we moralistically define as 'evil'."

Max stood. "OK, I've listened to your story, and I'll be sure to pass it on to any kids I want to keep up at night. Where can I find my mother?"

Rebecca looked at Max for several long seconds, then scribbled on a Post-It note and handed it to Max. "You'll find her at this location." She picked up the phone and pressed one of the many buttons. "Miss Guevara will need an escort to the first floor."

She put down the phone and her gaze fell on Max again. "I hope you reconsider. Sandeman didn't just put you together for military tactics; you were meant for great things. Maybe to eliminate the Conclave. Things have changed since you destroyed Project Manticore's Genetic Development and Training Center. We need you, and are willing to deal on your terms. Who do you think influenced the government to drop it's crusade against you, in spite of the Conclave spies in the ranks of Washington DC?"

Max looked surprised.

"That's right," Rebecca stated. "It's a whole new game."

Max's eyes took in Rebecca's expression and decided that even if she was a nutcase, she seemed at least to be a sincere loony. On the other hand, this was the sort of thing Logan and she debated, regarding the Sandeman mystery.

"Max..." Rebecca called. Max waited for her to finish. "Elizabeth Renfro and my brother died trying to protect you. Even if you didn't like them, you should think about why they would do that. You decided that the safety and rights of the transgenics was more important than yourself. This is something like that too."

Max turned and walked past the guard, who escorted her out of the building. On the way out, she geared herself in case the guard attacked her or tried anything funny. She was almost surprised when he left her at the main exit door, and he went back in without a word.

Just when my life was beginning to get comfortable... she thought to herself as she walked towards her motorcycle.

PART SEVEN : " Latency "

In the parking lot of SciTech, unknown to Max or the agents watching her, was a common mid-sized dark brown Ford Fairmont. The car was chosen explicitly due to the fact it was unremarkable in color and design to hold anyone's attention for longer than a brief glance. The man inside the car was in the shade of trees also sufficient to make him unidentifiable even in the uncommon sunshine of the Puget Sound weather.

He noticed Max come out of the building and get on her motorcycle. He also watched as the men wait until she rounded the corner before starting their engine. Probably not amateurs, but time would tell. He waited until they also rounded the corner before following at a discrete distance.

* * * * *

As he drove, White felt the conflict within himself. He felt near absolute loyalty to the Conclave, yet now that loyalty didn't seem as complete as it used to. He did not doubt in the slightest that they were planning to discharge or eliminate the unfaithful of their own, those who weren't completely loyal; including his son. Again he thought to himself, if it was for the good of the Conclave, but truthfully Ames was kidding himself. He couldn't see any benefit to this. Even if it weren't his own son, he felt instinctively that their orders were sloppy on this issue. It didn't make sense to him.

His cell beeped, and he drew himself from his internal perusal. Glancing at the caller-ID, he answered; "White here."

His subordinate reported; "Agent White, she has left SciTech and is currently passing Totem Lake; heading North on 405."

White considered the update. "I'm on my way, keep tailing her and let me know if she pulls off the highway." White hung up and put the cell back in his coat pocket. He pulled onto Interstate 5 and headed towards the 520 interchange. *It's time to settle this matter once and for all.*

"I couldn't agree more." The voice from behind him announced. Slamming on the brakes, Legion once again found himself with White's gun barrel aiming his direction. The car slid to a halt in the middle of the highway, but there wasn't enough traffic to make a difference anymore. Not nearly as many people owned vehicles in this part of the country, and even those that did couldn't often afford gas to use the automobile consistently.

Ames didn't bother to ask how the man had managed to hide in the back seat without his knowing. "Stop doing that, or next time I pull the trigger just because it annoys me." Ames waited a couple seconds, then holstered his weapon.

The man called Legion laughed "You've got spunk, kid." he drawled. "But I know what else you're thinking too." He smiled, amused by White; "You're thinking about betraying the Conclave. Betraying them to save your son."

White considered momentarily of drawing his weapon again and eliminating this threat, but he decided to hear the man out. "You're out of your mind."

Legion raised his eyebrows; "Am I? I don't think so. In fact, you're much closer than I; so tightly wound and with personal issues that remain oh so unresolved... but let's get to the heart of the matter, shall we? Your anger at your father isn't even his betrayal of the Conclave, is it?"

He leaned closer to Ames; "In fact, that's why you despise Transgenic X5-452 so; he dwelt on her... devoted his time to the project that created her; at the expense of your mother, your brother's sanity... and your childhood. But then the deep down 'bottom of the barrel truth' is that you felt he betrayed you personally. Leading you to believe in the Conclave so completely then abandoning it and you for alternative ideals. Ring a bell, Mr. White?"

Ames White pulled off to the side of the road, turned and looked at Legion with a dark hatred that burned bright in his eyes. "This discussion has ended. Get out."

The man in Ames back seat chuckled, and said "No, Mr. White. I have something further to impart. Regardless of whatever you decide to do in the Conclave, you will either terminate 452, or bring her to me. I do so find it degrading to actually have to threaten you but make no mistake; if you don't accomplish this, your son will be dealt with harshly and permanently and you will sadly discover that you have absolutely no capability at all of stopping this from happening. Either kill her, or bring her to me."

The command echoed in the car with an eerie, uncommon reverberation.

In one swift movement Ames gun left it's holster and he fired it twice into the man's forehead. The back of the window shattered as the bullets blew through it, but the man in his back seat remained sitting and unmarked. As the man reached forward, Ames fired twice more. Again, there was no indication that the man had been shot. He took the gun easily from Ames hand, and laid it on the seat next to him, away from Ames.

"Stop that. You're going to hurt someone." Legion reprimanded, as one might a small child.

"What the hell are you?" Ames demanded. It suddenly occurred to him that he might be wrong about this man not being a transgenic. He had heard that a few of them had developed some kind of aging syndrome, but this man didn't seem diseased.

"Call me a manifestation of will. Or perhaps a presence, if you prefer." He got out of the car and stood by Ames' window for a moment. "Perhaps I'm a vampire..." the man chuckled. The chuckle died as he continued; "Did you know that you had a sister? In fact, your father's first born daughter was married to Donald Lydecker. She was killed by the Conclave in 1995 as a warning to your father. But he did not take heed, though he pretended to for some time after. Make no mistake, Mr. White. Your failure will be your son's sentence. Try not to allow that to happen. Eh?" He tipped his hat and began walking back along the highway.

Ames drove off, furious at the man, at the Conclave and most of all at X5-452. Today seemed to be filled with revelations. He hadn't known about a sister; Sandeman had never mentioned her. But somehow he believed the man, just as he believed the man's threat. If it weren't for his son, Ray... but he had to be careful for now.

He peeled off onto Highway 520 from I-5. He didn't know how the man had pulled off that little trick in the back seat, but he had to reorganize his priorities temporarily. Legion had put him behind schedule and he needed to make up for lost time.

His cell rang, and he pressed the connect button venomously. "White." he snapped.

"She's stopped at a house in a small wooded community called Kenmore." the agent informed White, reporting the address.

"Observe but don't interact. And get me the name of the owner." White ordered, then hung up.

With a little luck, he'd catch up to her before she escaped again. On the other hand, Ames White didn't believe in luck. Only results.

PART EIGHT : " Consanguinity "

The man from the parking lot discreetly followed the motorcycle and the agents following her. Past Totem Lake, through Bothell and into a small town called Kenmore. Not a town really anymore, sort of a semi-populated backroad truck stop, though to be truthful it was never really more than that anyway.

She turned onto a dirt road, and he'd been forced to continue down the road, passing the agents car which had pulled off on the side. He'd find another way to follow; the map he kept checking showed this was the only road in or out of the property it led to.

* * * * *

Max had almost shot past the turn-off onto the property. The address wasn't indicated and there was no sign on the side of the road with a street name, but she figured from the box numbers she passed prior that this road had to be the address. Wouldn't hurt to check it out, anyway.

Driving up the road, which was little more than a dirt pathway just wide enough for one car going one way, she reveled at the number of trees that guided the path. Very secluded, but it occurred to her that it would be too easy to block it off if someone wanted to; either to keep someone out or to keep someone in. She'd have to keep an eye out for traps or tricks.

A mile and a half up the small, winding path she came across a wide clearing with a house, garage and a barn. When she pulled up to the house and turned off the bike, she could hear the birds and the rustling of the forest. She knocked on the door and waited. She didn't hear anything inside the house nor any activity going on in the garage or the barn.

Trying the door, she was surprised to find it unlocked. Nobody in Seattle left their door unlocked if they wanted to keep their belongings. She knew however that in some communities it was a little more relaxed in some ways; like the small town of Haven where everyone knew everyone. That was when she noticed the tell-tale sign of scraping along the wood near the lock on the door and the inside bolt. Someone had broken in, but not busted in. Whomever it was hadn't wanted anyone inside to know they were here. She didn't think they were pro's... a professional would have picked the lock and not left evidence.

She considered calling into the house, but if the intruder was still here that would be careless. *What the heck, if it's a trap then they'll expect me to walk in anyway.* she thought. Entering the front hallway, she was struck by how cozy it felt, or would have felt if she wasn't so busy being cautious.

First she scoped the house out, checked each room silently to see if any intruders were afoot. The markings could have been from the owners having locked themselves out of the house, but the marks had looked fresh by at least a couple hours. Though there didn't seem to be anyone here and there weren't any signs of a mess, she got the impression from long experience that whomever had broken in had been here and left.

Walking back downstairs into the living room; she found a fireplace, a television set and pictures of what she assumed to be the residents of the home. One picture had a man about 30ish, a

couple of woman about the same age as the man with his arm around one of the women, a little boy and an infant. Obviously pre-pulse, it was taken at a carnival of some kind. She also found a couple of photo albums in a buffet drawer, containing various pictures.

The latest photos showed the woman who had the man's arm around her in the early photo to be in her late thirties or early forties and two young teens. It seemed odd to her that there seemed to be no recent pictures of the man, until she came across a newspaper article that announced an automobile accident involving the death of the driver about thirteen years ago, a Mr. Mark Bradford; who's photo in the clipping matched the man in the pictures.

She noted from the names under the pictures that the woman's name was Sharon and the kids were David and Heather. Max was so engrossed in the pictures that she didn't even notice the shadow crossing the door-frame.

"What are you doing in our house?" the boy at the door demanded. Max was so startled that she almost dropped the photo albums on the floor.

"I didn't know anyone was home." Max answered, after putting the pictures back in the drawer. "Is your mother here? I need to ask her some questions."

The boy looked at her, unconvinced. "She's in the woods, she'll be here shortly. You just stay right where you are. What were you doing with our pictures?"

Max looked at him, head tilted slightly. "You must be David. I'm sorry we got off on a bad foot, I shouldn't have come in without asking but no one was here, and I was waiting for you guys to come back. My name's Max."

David frowned; "What kind of name is Max for a girl?" She shrugged, "Beats the one I was born with. Did you know someone was messing with your lock?" He didn't even look at the door. "Yeah, we were checking the grounds to see if anything had been disturbed and I heard you coming up the path with your motorbike."

He grunted, "You didn't answer my question, how come you had our pictures out?" She pointed to the pictures on the fireplace mantel. "I saw those and I was curious. But you're right, I shouldn't have touched your stuff without you being here."

"Shouldn't have touched what?" an adult female voice inquired. Both Max and David turned to see a brunette woman about 2 inches taller than Max walk through the door. Her tone wasn't angry, but cautious.

Max stood. "I'm sorry, my name's Max. I saw marks on your door and thought there might be a thief here. I came into the house to make sure everyone was safe; you can check to make sure I didn't steal anything if you want. I checked to make sure there wasn't anyone robbing you and when I didn't find anyone I sat down and started looking at your pictures to pass the time while I waited. Are you Sharon?" *God, I'm so nervous I'm rambling...* she thought to herself.

The woman nodded. "I'm going to presume you aren't part of the group or persons who broke in. I'm a fair judge of character, although I don't care for people rummaging through my house under any circumstances. David, go upstairs and check the rooms again to make sure whomever jimmed the door isn't still here, take the shotgun. So, what do you want here, Max?"

Max decided not to mention that she had already checked the house, they'd feel better if they checked it personally anyway. She was quiet for a bit. She wasn't exactly sure how to ask this woman something that she had wondered her entire life.

Looking at Sharon, she decided not to waste anyone's time. "I don't suppose you were part of a government medical project around the turn of the century?"

The woman's expression didn't change. Then a shadow crossed her face and she motioned Max over to the dining room table where they sat down. "No," she said slowly "but my sister worked for the government around that time in the medical field."

Max couldn't believe her ears. "I've been looking for her for some time, if she's the right person. Can you give me her name and how to get ahold of her?" she asked. "And maybe tell me a little about her?" she added hopefully.

Sharon looked at her curiously. "Her name was Michelle Cardova. Cardova is my maiden name. She was a nurse at some kind of government base in Wyoming from 1998 until around late August of 2000 when she had some kind of nervous breakdown."

"She was transferred to a psychiatric facility and was released two years later. Our mother and father filed a law-suit; the drugs or whatever treatment they used gave her some kind of amnesia. She lost about 3 years of memories. They settled out of court, and Michelle came to stay with us here in Washington since we have lots of room."

She looked up at Max. "Thirteen years ago my husband and Michelle left to go pick up my parents at the airport. I couldn't go because I couldn't get a replacement that day at the hospital I worked at. There was an accident, and both my husband and sister were killed. They had been taking the back roads apparently to avoid heavy traffic. I guess no one will ever know what happened."

Max felt devastated and yet somehow relieved. She felt anguish at learning that her mother was dead, but at least she knew what happened to her. She inquired; "The newspaper article only mentioned your husband. Why doesn't it mention her?"

She glanced up at Max, "Well, they never really found the bodies, just the mangled up car. I was the only one who knew Michelle was with him in the car, and as it turned out they couldn't spend a lot of time looking. You see, that was the day the Pulse hit. The first of June in '09." *Oops, Max thought. Musta missed that in the article...*

Sharon leaned back and appraised her. "Why do you want to know about Michelle?" she asked.

"Well," Max began, "I believe that your sister gave birth to me while working at the government facility. I've been looking for her for more than a decade. It seems now I may have found her, and you. If what you say is true, then it's possible that you're my aunt."

"How touching," called Ames White from the front door, with his gun aimed at Max. "I hate to break up a family reunion, but we really must be going."

PART NINE : " Pugnacity "

I didn't sense him coming! Max stood slowly as her mind instantly switched modes and raced with possible actions she could take. *There's only one road out, the trees are too dense to take the bike through them and he probably has reinforcements although he normally comes at me alone...* she zipped through a dozen tactical scenarios in less than a second.

It also occurred to her that David was wandering around the upstairs somewhere with a shotgun. He didn't stand a chance against Ames.

Keep him distracted. "If you hurt anyone you won't have anything to barter with me for." she stated. "Let's behave until we're outside. Deal?"

White appeared to consider this. "No deal." he said, and shot Sharon in the shoulder. She cried out as she fell backwards from the force of the impact, and landed on the floor painfully. "Now, if you come with me, her son should be able to call 911. But if you don't, I'll have to shoot him as well when comes downstairs. And don't try leaving the room or I'll finish the job on your dear sweet aunt."

That settled things to just one remaining course of action. *He's already cut the phone lines, he'd never risk the distraction.* Ames entered the house, gun held towards Max. "Call the kid. And don't move...." Max launched herself at him, kicking the gun from his hand with one kick, and slamming him in the chest with her other leg.

White was launched backwards through the screen door, out onto the front porch and slid up to Max's bike. After a few moments of being motionless, he shook his head and sat up, dusting himself off. "David!" she called, but he was already at his mother's side. "I heard the shot, but Mom taught us to wait and listen. I can take care of her."

Max tossed David her cell phone; "Hit 'star two' then enter and tell whoever answers what happened. And lock the door." as she went outside and closed the door after her. She turned and saw that White was no longer on the ground. In fact, she couldn't see him anywhere. She crouched and listened carefully to the surroundings, then instinctively propelled herself upwards as White tore through the air where she had just stood. White slammed into the table at the end of the porch, reducing it to kindling and splinters. When she landed, she moved out to the front yard into an open area.

White gathered himself and calmly walked into the yard. "I can't afford to take it easy on you this time, 452." He launched a blurring attack of strikes and kicks that Max blocked easily at first but then with increasing difficulty. As quickly as they began, the attacks stopped. He began slowly circling her, watching her movements as she continued her defensive stance. *I have to keep him distracted until David can get help for Sharon...*

"This time, it's more than just my duty to the Conclave. My son is at risk, and it's your FAULT!" He struck her in the sternum with a side strike. Max hadn't seen a strike as fast as that since Manticore, and she didn't react quick enough to block. The impact of the blow took her off her feet and she rolled backwards as she hit the ground, feeling the sharp pain as the air rushed out of her lungs. *Yeah, a broken sternum or a couple of broken ribs ought to do me wonders.* She flipped back onto her feet and parried off with Ames.

Another series of strikes and parries left her unable to draw breath. She spun and caught White with a spinning kick, sending him landing a couple of yards away. Max took the time this provided to gather herself and focus. Her chest hurt like hell, but it didn't feel like anything was broken. *Must have just got the wind beat out of me...* she thought.

White got to his feet slowly. *I may have to kill her outright.* It hadn't really registered with him that he might have to kill her outright, even when Legion stated it as an option. He'd always assumed that he'd be able to capture and question her, then send her to be dissected. She obviously had some innate fighting skill other than what she'd been taught by Manticore in her early years. Could even be something in that no-junk genetic soup that Sandeman threw together.

Switching tactics, he began initiating tactical, methodical strikes intended to overpower his opponent. Max was able to block most of these moves but the power of the strikes was beginning to wear her down. She knew they were designed to force her to expend energy in repelling them; soon she would tire and he would strike and there wasn't anything she could do defensively to stop it.

She switched to offensive maneuvers and begin aggressing White with her own form of attacks, but every time she would instigate an attack form on him; he'd alter his attack technique so she'd be forced to revert back to defensive moves. She just couldn't seem to get a solid fighting routine set to put him down.

Then suddenly the moment Max feared came; he practically exploded in an attack of sheer strength that she was too worn down to defend against. She was about to step out of the range of his strikes so she could reposition her placement when she became aware of a presence nearby in the forest. It only took that fraction of a second distraction when a fist strike that slammed into her shoulder caused her entire side to explode in pain and then go numb.

That was bad timing... she quipped to herself as she fought the pain. *Remind me to complain to the manager.* She tried to defend against him with one arm, but she was slowed beyond even her ability to rectify. She could feel herself begin to feel afraid of White for the first time since she'd known him.

This was worse than anything she had ever experienced, even against those implant-enhanced revved up soldiers. She was being defeated, and there didn't seem to be anything she could do. She'd told Logan once that she had been afraid of those soldiers, but this was the first time she'd began to feel panic.

Max was slammed by a kick that seemed to come from nowhere and she felt herself hit the ground. All she could see were stars, and knew she had lost. *I'm so sorry, Logan...* she incoherently reflected. *I thought I could take him.*

She could make out White walking up to her, a look of hatred on his face. He knelt down and stated "It's over. Because of your meddling they were going to kill my son, but now perhaps I can make sure he's safe." He stood, walked over to a nearby tree and with a display of strength, snapped a large, thick branch from it with little apparent effort. Walking back over to Max, he looked at her with contempt. "Nice knowing you, 452." He quipped as he raised the makeshift club over his head.

She gathered her focus and strength to kick his legs out from under him, but before she could act she watched him drop the branch behind him as he jerked twice. He turned around and she saw that he had been shot. *Good for you.* she delusionally complimented him in her mind. *Couldn't happen to a nicer guy.*

She saw him jerk twice more, and she closed her eyes in relief. She opened them abruptly however as he landed on her full force, knocking what breath she had left out of her. 'Ooooooopphh!" she said loudly, then nearly bit down on her tongue when the pain of her shoulder exploded again.

After she mentally reduced the pain down to a manageable roar, she moved White off her with her leg. She couldn't tell if he was dead or not, but there was enough blood to make her believe that he was at least out of commission for the time being. She looked around for the sniper, and was rewarded with the vision of seeing someone step out of the forest area.

She couldn't make the figure out at this distance, though normally she could identify the number and color of a playing card a good sight more distant than the fellow currently was. She was damned if she was going down easy though, if whomever it was intended to take her out along with White.

She played dead until the figure was close enough and lashed out with her legs as she had intended to do to White, but the man anticipated the move and jumped just in time to avoid it. He failed to react to the sudden reversal however, and hit the ground on his back.

She had gained enough of her breath back to ignore the rush of pain as she rolled upward in a calculated move that put her in a kneeling position with her left knee on the man's neck. She noted that the gun had been knocked a couple of yards away, then took in the pained expression of the face under her leg; the rugged and annoyed face of Donald Lydecker.

PART TEN : " Confabulation "

Max opened her eyes and immediately regretted it. She had a headache that made the Pompeii eruption seem like a firecracker, her shoulder felt three times it's normal size and hurt like the dickens. She saw Alec and Beck standing near the bed, and Beck noticed Max was awake.

"Hey hon... how're you feelin?" Beck asked as she looked into Max's eyes for dilation.

She groaned. "Like I was the receiving end of a 15 car pileup. What happened, did I crash the Ninja?" Alec and Beck glanced at each other, and the incident flooded to her consciousness. "Where's Lydecker? And where's White?"

Alec stepped to the other side of the bed. "White is in the next room in chains and an IV, Lydecker and Logan made a run to Terminal City. Mrs. Bradford was nice enough to let us use the house to stabilize the three of you before we moved you back to TC. She's already walking around even though she had a bullet yanked out of her shoulder last night."

Max absorbed this. "I've been out a day?"

Alec shook his head. "Two. She refused treatment until she knew you were ok. What's the story here Max?"

Beck pushed him out of the way as she came around to check her IV. "Out." she said.

"What for...?" Alec complained. "She's awake now."

Beck turned and looked at him in a way only she knew how that turned him around 180 degrees. "Ok, ok... you need anything Max?"

She smiled "Yeah, a steak and fries." Then she touched her jaw and grimaced, "Better just make that a milkshake."

Alec chuckled and left the room.

Beck began explaining. "We showed up as Lydecker was coming out of the house. Seems he carried you in and then dragged White in and handcuffed him, bullet holes and all. When he saw us arrive he gave us the Reader's Digest version of what happened. White apparently was about to clock you out permanently and Lydecker happened to show up in time to add a few more button-holes in his shirt."

She leaned over and checked the IV. "White really did a number on you, your clavicle is spiderwebbed. If you weren't transgenic, it would have been powder. What'd he hit you with, a sledgehammer?"

Max grimaced at the memory. "Feels like it, that's for sure. Which room is he in? I want to talk to him."

Beck glanced sharply at her. "Not a chance. It's going to be hard enough getting you to the van and back to TC for a complete set of X-rays without having you try to go 5 more rounds with Jack Dempsey there."

She looked at Beck with a questioning look, but Beck just laughed. "Never mind. And forget it. I don't want..." Her voice trailed off as she saw the look on Max's face, one which she was well familiar and from experience knew better than to bother arguing with. "Aw hell Max, I just put you back together." she complained in a genuinely annoyed tone. "If you mess yourself up again, I won't care if you give me a direct order; I'll pump you so full of drugs they'll think you've been a junkie since the early days of Manticore. Got it?"

Max looked stern for a couple of seconds, then broke out laughing. "Deal. Now help me up."

She looked at Max exasperatedly, then resignedly sighed and helped her sit up and shift her weight so she could stand without stressing her shoulder. She walked with her out of the room with the IV walker and down the hall to another room where an R&D medic named Cory was sitting in a chair on the opposite wall by a window, facing White.

Alec wasn't kidding, she thought as she saw Ames White, who was spread eagle on the bed, face up. He had an assortment of chains, handcuffs, three-ton stress-test restraining straps and clamps holding each of his 4 limbs from movement. She also noticed that Lydecker hadn't fooled around; she recognized the bed as a similar type that had been used at Manticore to restrain adult transgenics when necessary. She'd have to ask later where they obtained that piece of paraphernalia.

Cory stood when Max walked in, and she motioned him to depart. He looked questioningly at Beck, who nodded. Shrugging, he left the room without a word. Beck motioned towards White with her head, "We'll be right outside if he gets out of hand." then closed the door behind her.

Max walked over to the window and gazed out into the forest. Then she looked back at White, who was trussed up with an oxygen tank with a nasal attachment, an IV and a heart monitor. He was awake, which she supposed she should be surprised by but wasn't, and looking at her.

"That was quite a show you put on out there. I especially liked the twitching part from the bullets hitting your sorry ass." she said. "Though I was a little busy to really pay attention to what you were droning on about in regards to your son. Feel up to bringing me up to date?"

Eyes filled with hate, Ames followed her with his gaze. "The Conclave has elected to filter those who have had questionable influence. Because of you; that includes Ray."

Max observed his face while he spouted off. "What does that mean, that they've elected to filter?"

He stared at her, "What do you think it means. They'll kill him. And I've been told that he'll be killed anyway if you weren't delivered to Agent Legion."

The name didn't mean anything to her, so she stored it away for now. She walked over to the window. "So, where is Ray? I could get him out of there. If anyone knows this, you do."

He scoffed, "And so do they. Do you think they've ignored everything that I've reported about you? You must have a head as thick as steel, because nothing seems to get through."

She spun, almost pulling the IV out of her arm, and was at his bed in an instant. "Don't get all high and mighty with me you hypocrite. All I've ever done in regards to you is mind my own

business, with the possible exception of your son. You're the one who keeps interfering in my life, you self-magnanimous jerk. Now you can either keep rattling off insults until I'm mad enough to finish the job on you that Lydecker started or you can shut your trap and let me do things my way; which incidentally has gotten me farther from you than your way has gotten you closer. Now I suggest you start giving me the scoop before I turn you into about a hundred and fifty pounds of mush. Understand?" Still glaring at her, he appeared to think this over. She leaned closer, "Tell me you understand, before I start yanking wires."

Ames slowly nodded, giving in. "I understand. But you listen carefully, 452. If you try anything moronic and Ray gets hurt because of it... I'll be the one finishing this."

Max ignored the threat. "Where is Ray."

White smiled inside. "They're currently holding him in a downtown construct, the Seattle Space Needle."

PART ELEVEN : " *Adversaria* "

Logan drove the van onto the highway leading to I-5. "So what happened to you?" he asked Lydecker, who had been strangely silent since they'd gotten in the van.

In actuality, Lydecker had been anticipating the question. "Meaning when they announced my death? I was being chased, and had to go into hiding."

Logan nodded. "Makes sense. Why did they want to kill you?"

"I was checking out the company name that was in Renfro's briefcase and found an excavation site with skeletal remains and evidence that Manticore has been around a lot longer than I'd previously known. Apparently the Conclave didn't want that proof to get out. Since I went into hiding, I've found a lot more information about the origins of Manticore, the Conclave, and Sandeman. Sandeman, I believe, were working with Renfro."

Logan glanced over at him. "Max and I discovered the same thing about Manticore around the same time. Renfro worked with Sandeman how?"

Lydecker was quiet for a moment, then responded. "I think that Renfro knew about this whole Conclave/Manticore business. What her involvement in it was, I haven't been able to discover. Yet."

Logan pulled onto I-5 and headed south to Seattle. "You must have heard about the transgenics mobilizing in Terminal City. Why didn't you let us know you were alive?"

"The Conclave was still keeping a watchful eye out, even though the government eased up on you people. That, by the way, was probably Manticore's doing. I could move a little more freely if they thought I was dead."

"Max went there, you know. SciTech. Manticore. Or whatever it is. She called me while she was on her way to that house and told me about it."

"I know, I followed her to SciTech and then to the Bradford house." Lydecker looked over at Logan. "Why did she go there at all? Did you find out it was a branch of Manticore?"

"Hannah Sukova showed up, fatally beaten. Before she died from her injuries she hinted that Max would find her mother at SciTech. I located your sister there and that gave Max a contact."

Lydecker brought his gun out and checked it. "That would be Rebecca. She was in the CIA a few years ago, then dropped off the contact lists. We never shared information about what we were doing in-government, and my branch of Manticore was fairly self-contained. I knew there was more to the project, but for me; my kids **were** the project."

"Why didn't you try to hook back up with another branch of Manticore? Wouldn't they have kept you under wraps?"

"Renfro tried to have me killed. For all I knew, she could have had her fingers in any or all of the Manticore departments. I wasn't exactly trusting them to welcome me with open arms."

The van was stopped at the gate of Terminal City, and they were allowed entrance after Logan was visually identified. They pulled into the lower parking area and Logan escorted Lydecker into the main building.

Stare after stare came from the transgenics as Logan and Lydecker passed. Most of them hadn't seen Lydecker since before Renfro had taken over Manticore. They knew, through Max, what had happened with Lydecker. Most of them, like Max, had thought he was dead.

"Logan!" Joshua called out. He hurried over to Logan but slowed when he saw Lydecker. Warily, he approached. "Heard Max was hurt. She ok?" Motioning to Lydecker, he added, "What's he doing here?"

Logan looked at Lydecker and back at Joshua. "He's here to help me bring back some medical supplies. Max was attacked by White."

Joshua growled, causing Lydecker to take an unconscious step back. Only Logan's earlier briefing kept him from drawing his weapon.

"Should have killed White when had a chance."

"No, you did the right thing. Max was right; they would have hunted you down as human-killers. Nothing would have stopped them," Logan assured him. "You want to help us load the supplies?"

The man-beast snuck another glance at Lydecker and nodded at Logan. "Yes. And Joshua will go with."

Logan smiled at him as he started walking to the elevator. "Good. We could use your help over there."

Lydecker looked at Joshua tactically. "You're one of the original transgenics. I remember reading some of Sandeman's early notes. Canine DNA mix."

Joshua corrected him. "Not one of the originals, Joshua was first transgenic."

"Amazing. And you never had any psychological trauma or physical problems?"

"Joshua the first. Only problem was Manticore after Father left, they tortured Isaac. Made him mean."

Lydecker looked thoughtful. "I'm sorry to hear that. Did you suffer any tremors, amino acid deficiencies?"

Joshua cocked his head and looked at the man blankly, and Lydecker shook his head. "Never mind, I'll find out later."

They began loading the van with supplies that Beck had requested.

Logan, deep in thought, asked, "What have you found out so far about the Conclave and Manticore? We discovered that there is evidence showing Manticore, under various names, has

essentially existed for thousands of years."

"Once I discovered the excavation site and disappeared," Lydecker answered, "I did some research of my own, without drawing attention. More than five thousand years ago a small European cult developed and in practically no time at all took over what at that time was considered a large area of land. But because of the cult's harsh and violent behavior, a rebellion rose just as quickly and put an end to the cult's brief existence."

Logan pondered this. "You'd have thought that a violent upheaval like that would have been noted in the history books."

"History is normally written by winners and conquerors." Lydecker replied. "But I'd say probably for whatever reason the rebellion decided not to brag about the conquest. Usually the reason for not celebrating that kind of victory is fear. Whatever the reason, that rebellion seems to be the birth of what eventually became Manticore. "

Logan nodded. "So for some reason though they beat the cult, they were still afraid of them and didn't advertise it's defeat. It's a pretty good bet that either they thought the cult was still around and hiding, or there was something else going on around that time that made larger headlines." He looked thoughtful. "I wonder what it was."

Joshua brought the last of the boxes to the ramp leading to the truck and loaded them. "Evil." he said simply.

Both Lydecker and Logan looked at Joshua, who had been silent during the conversation. Logan inquired; "What do you mean?"

Joshua shrugged. "Father talked about it once. He said the place he once belonged to was run by evil and begun by evil."

The two men looked at each other. Feeling like an idiot for not having asked Joshua before, Logan smiled and clapped Joshua on the shoulder. "What else did he tell you about them?"

A tall male walked up to the truck. "Logan, Beck is on the phone. She says Max is gone. So is White."

A few mild expletives escaped Logan's mouth. Lydecker slid the ramp into the truck closed the roller-door while Logan took the cordless phone.

"This is Logan. Do you know where she went?"

"She demanded to talk to White, and was with him for probably 15 minutes before we heard her motorcycle rev up. They were spinning gravel before we knew what was going on. Alec grabbed Whites car and took off after them."

Logan looked incredulous. "Why did you let her talk to White? Neither of them was in the condition to move around much, she wasn't even conscious when we left."

Beck sounded exasperated over the cordless. "Did you ever try to stop a speeding rhino with a water gun?"

He knew exactly what she was talking about. Sighing, Logan relented. "Stay there and take care of Mrs. Bradford. We'll be there shortly with the supplies, and we'll see if we can find anything to tell us where they went. If Alec calls..."

She interrupted. "I'll let you know. I promise."

Hanging up, Logan quickly briefed Joshua and Lydecker as he started the truck.

To himself, he mumbled "I sure hope you know what you're doing, Max."

PART TWELVE : " *Rendezvous* "

Ames debated with himself as he rode behind Max on her Ninja. He'd fought for over a year to get rid of the Manticore creations, but that mission had brought him nothing but problems, only one of which was the threat towards his son.

He needed to decide what course of action he was going to take, if any; he was experiencing one doubt after another and THAT certainly wasn't like him. *Where there is doubt, there is failure.* The Conclave taught him that, but they also created the doubt. Did that mean the Conclave was failing him?

Max made a sharp turn onto Stewart Street, nearly spilling White off the back of the bike, and headed west. The Space Needle was well within sight now.

White grimaced as she rode up onto the sidewalk and up to the entrance where he had been parked just a couple of days before. They got off and she walked the bike into the ground floor entrance, ignoring the headache and pain in her chest.

White looked up at the building, then back at Max. "What are you waiting for?" she asked, as she chained her motorcycle to the side rail inside the enclosed area that used to be called The Pavilion.

"How do you plan on getting up?" She looked at him as if he were an idiot.

"The usual way. Take the elevator." She slid a lockpick in the elevator keyslot and after a couple of seconds the floor lights lit up and the doors slid open. White just stared at her. "I know someone who replaced the burned out generator a few years ago." *Just so happens that someone was me. She thought. Would have been a pain climbing up and down like the first year I moved here, let alone getting Logan up there.*

After White entered the elevator, she pushed the CLOSE button. The doors shut but the elevator did not move. She turned to White. "This is where I give you my 'last warning' speech. If you've set me up, have any of your goons waiting or are just generally inclined to cause me any kind of trouble right now, I'll throw you off this heap and watch you spatter on the pavement below. If you don't believe me, just think of all my transgenic friends you've murdered over the last two years. Believe me when I say that I have. You get me, asshole?"

He grunted something that sounded like some sort of confirmation. Max didn't pursue it, just pressed one of the buttons. The 60-year-old elevator system groaned into activity and began ascending to the Saucer. "Which level did you say?"

Ames looked out the elevator window. In spite of himself, he was observing the splendid view the height was affording. "The top one. Observation Deck. The lower deck used to be some kind of rotating platform restaurant. Or did your friend fix the generator for that too?"

"Don't get smart. I'm resisting the urge to make you climb the sides as it is," she shot back.

They both remained silent for the remainder of the trip. She had decided on the way over after White finished explaining his story and his encounters with Legion that if he had some kind of

mystical mental abilities, he'd probably sense them arriving anyway. She didn't like White's attitude about all this. He seemed to know more about the Needle than he should, chances were that he probably had it bugged or monitored since she went up on it last.

She stopped the elevator on the lower deck. "Stay," she said as she cautiously made her way out onto the floor. She checked all the rooms and the former kitchen area, then the stairwells. She half expected White to be gone when she got back to the elevator, but he was still there.

"Lower deck seems to be clear." she commented, giving the visible area one more look-over.

"Why do you always suspect everything I say?" he drawled, amused.

"Because everything that comes out of your mouth is a lie." She added, "Why should I believe anything you say? If you didn't have a couple of holes in your chest and a portable IV in your jacket, I'd probably have made a stop at Terminal City and let Joshua finish the job he started on you back at Jam Pony."

"Make no bones about it, White; I trust you no farther than I could comfortably throw that vehicle you were driving. But on the off chance that what you're saying about your son is true, I'm willing to test that theory. If it doesn't pan out, I'll be dropping that car of yours on your head. Literally."

White rolled his eyes, but refrained from commenting. She was helping him try to save his son, after all.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. She seldom came here in the daylight; the dusk gave enough light that the old wallpaper was visible. Bright colors designed to encourage people to pass from place to place more expediently had dulled to little more than pastels over the years.

They walked out onto the floor. In Seattle's visually rare diminishing sunset, it looked almost cheery compared to the nighttime feeling of eerie abandonment.

Once again, Max told White to stay put, and made her way around the Space Needle; checking rooms and walking the outer rim. Arriving back at the elevator, she wasn't looking happy.

"So where's this friend of yours?" she asked.

"Where would you like me to be?" a voice from behind her replied.

Quickly turning her head as she shifted to a more defensive position, Max saw a man who appeared in his late 40's, dressed in slacks and, to her slight amusement; a 1962 Worlds Fair sweatshirt. "I have so looked forward to meeting you, Miss Guevara. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm called Legion."

"Legion? You don't have a regular name?" Max asked as she casually walked a perimeter around him, out of arms reach.

"Really, I'm known by many names; but that one will suffice," the man smiled.

White's patience ended abruptly. "Where's my son?"

Legion, still observing Max, replied. "He's safe."

"You said you would release him. I want my son." he snapped.

Legion now looked in Ames direction. "Mr. White, you are beginning to try my patience. Please refrain from speaking again unless spoken to or I will be forced to remove you from the premises."

Deciding that this moment might not be the right time for confrontation, Ames let his anger simmer.

Max stopped circling the newcomer. "I have to ask the same question. Where's Ray? If you don't have him, I'm outta here."

"I don't believe that will be the case, Miss Guevara. If you don't follow my directions, Ray will die. I'm afraid great misery and death will befall your little assemblage in Terminal City as well, let alone your newfound relatives, should you fail." He smiled.

She took a threatening step towards him. "If you think you're going to get me to help you by threatening me, you are definitely taking too many prescriptions at one time."

"I think not." Legion chuckled. "For I also know who and where your mother is, and she is not dead as the dear Mrs. Bradford led you to believe."

Max stopped.

"Yes, I know you're looking for her." he continued. "And if you ever want to see her, I suggest you cooperate. It's fairly simple after all; I want you to finish the job you started. I want you to destroy Manticore."

PART THIRTEEN : " Manumission "

She looked surprised. "Destroy Manticore? That's it?"

Legion continued to look out the window. "That's it. Then Ray will be released, your friends and family will be safe, and I will be vindicated. I know you've met with Rebecca Lydecker. And her infamous brother has once again turned up..."

"What?" Ames exclaimed. "I thought you didn't know if he was around or not?"

Max realized White must not have seen Lydecker when he was being shot.

Legion ignored the interruption. "...and Manticore is too involved. They continue to stumble over their own feet but somehow still manage to cause mishap with my own personal intentions."

Max glanced at White, then back to Legion. She smiled sweetly, and commented in her honey voice; "How about this instead. You tell me where Ray really is, and I'll consider not kicking your butt all around this deck and throwing you overboard. Sound like a plan?"

He chuckled. "You might find that a bit more difficult to do than you might think. In fact, you might find it difficult to do much of anything."

Max began to take a step towards Legion, and found herself unable to do so. She stood rooted, unable to move or blink. *What the hell?*

Legion smiled again, and in her mind she heard his voice; *~Imagine witnessing the death of family, friends and loved ones, through the murderer's eyes. Your eyes. I've been around for longer than infinity, will be here after eternity has faded. You cannot defeat me, you cannot destroy me. I am Ahriman, Morning Star, Damian, Asmodeus. You're designer jeans in a tight little package but I'm the scissors that could snip you into clumps of fabric. You're not yet ready to battle me, but we may choose our battleground soon enough. ~*

She stood in place, rage building.

He cocked his head and laughed. "You're so easily perturbed. Here, do what you feel you have to do."

She suddenly found herself able to move but she restrained herself from engaging; anticipating he could do whatever it was he did again. He was right about one thing, she didn't know how to defend against that little trick.

Legion nodded. "So she has wisdom along with beauty. Sandeman did fair work on this one."

"Why can't you take them on yourself?" Max challenged. "Seems you've got skills, why involve me?"

"Wisdom but limited deductive talents. Well, I suppose nobody's perfect." he replied. "My dear transgenic; don't you think if I personally could act against Manticore that they'd be just so much rubble by now?"

Cutting this exchange off, Max turned and walked towards the elevator. "I'll let you know."

Ames turned to follow but Max put her hand out, stopping him. "Catch the next one. You and I are done."

Raising both eyebrows, he watched the elevator doors close after she entered. He turned to Legion, and his face turned angry. "We have an agreement. I brought you X5420, you need to give me my son."

Sighing tolerantly, he turned back to the window. "Your son is in the next room. You of all people should know the value of illusion. She thinks he's in danger still, so she acts. You on the other hand serve no useful purpose to me any longer. Take your son and leave. I'm rewarding you by letting he and you live. Take him and go very far away."

White instantly went to open the door that Legion initially had walked out from and saw Ray in a chair listening to music on headphones.

Ray's face lit up as Ames walked in the room, jumped from the chair and ran over. He stopped halfway however, waiting for permission. White smiled, then nodded. Ray ran up to his father and wrapped his arms around him.

White hugged him, then held him at arms length. "We're leaving now. Do you have anything here?"

Ray shook his head. "No, Mr. Legion said I wouldn't need anything. He said you would be here soon."

White took his hand and they walked out to the elevator. He saw the sun had set and noticed Legion had vanished.

As they rode the elevator down, Ames decided he wasn't going to risk his son's life again. *452 may have done me a favor after all, he realized.*

The elevator came to a halt at the bottom and Ames White stepped out into the possibility of a new future with his son.

* * * * *

Max rumbled down the street on her Ninja, slid to stop as she noticed Whites car trailing, lights flashing her. She saw Alec get out from behind the wheel and she turned around and pulled along side.

"You followed me?" she spat in an annoyed voice.

Alec took a step back and assessed her attitude. She could be volatile sometimes, almost unstable; and it occasionally took tactical psychology to weave through her many mood swings without causing a meltdown.

"Watchin' your back. That's what we do, remember? You did take off without notice after being unconscious for a couple of days from getting the snot beat out of you." he reminded her.

"Besides, I figured on selling White's car while I was in town to get some back-stock supplies for Terminal City while we were at it."

"Leave the car and hop on." she told him, ignoring his explanation. "We're not far from where I left him, he'll find it."

Alec looked at her dubiously. "We're giving it back? Just like that?"

"Just do it." She said curtly, revving the cycle.

Alec shook his head in resignation, closed the door and got on the motorcycle behind her.

"Where are we going, if you don't mind my asking?"

She remained silent as they took off into the dark streets of Seattle.

PART FOURTEEN : " *Encelinte* "

Ames started the car, which he'd found down the street a half block. He wasn't sure how Max had arranged that so fast, but it beat walking. He'd have to run it for bugs later. Driving off, he was through most of the checkpoints and halfway out of Seattle when he stopped the car. Looking at Ray, who was now asleep, he considered his short range plans.

He knew the security patterns of the Conclave but that didn't make them any easier to get through, in fact; he might be incapable of doing so. He ran through several scenarios before coming to the ultimate conclusion; there was only one accessible group who had successfully blocked his moves time after time; the transgenics. Hiding wouldn't buy time, the Conclave would find him. The problem would be getting the mutants to accept him; that would never happen. But for Ray's sake...

He began driving; a plan forming in his selectively bred mind.

* * * * *

Max pulled into the clearing at the Bradford place, and noticed one of the Terminal City vans parked there. She slid to a stop and Alec got off the bike.

"Ever consider a career in missile piloting?" he chastised.

Max got off the bike, slowly. "A motorcycle is meant to go fast. I could have let you walk."

Alec uncharacteristically let it slide as he observed her walk balanced but unsteadily towards the porch. He also noticed she was watching the ground instead of around her. Deciding she might need help, he started to walk towards her but stopped as he noticed that Logan had stepped out onto the porch. *Better to let him handle her.*

When she got to the porch she looked up into Logan's face, seeing his concern. "I'm ok, but a little dizzy. We need to talk."

Logan helped her inside, and upstairs where Beck was waiting. She had set up the extra equipment Logan had brought and had already determined that Sharon Bradford would be sore but should heal fine. Logan set Max down on the bed and Beck started hooking her up to "Cyclops", a portable X-ray machine they had salvaged from the R&D shop a few months back. The machine looked like a bunk bed, with a monitor that looked like a basketball-size eyeball.

She ran the scan over Max and watched the monitoring screen. Frowning, she asked; "Logan, did anyone mess with this before you brought it?"

Logan looked over at her. "No... it was right where you said it would be in the Med Lab. It's not broken, is it?"

"No." she replied. "Come look at this."

He squeezed Max's hand, and walked over to Beck at the machine's monitoring screen. She pointed to her shoulder.

"The X-rays we took before with the old unit showed spiderweb cracks throughout her clavicle. Not severe enough to cause us anything but major discomfort but still..." She looked dubiously fascinated at the screen. "This is showing the bone completely healed."

Beck pointed at the screen. "See these lines? Those are where the cracks originally were. Don't get me wrong, we were made to heal fast. But nothing I've ever seen in a transgenic has ever healed this fast, not with the type of injury that she had. Not even with her junk-proof DNA."

Max, listening to this, asked "Then I'm 'fit for duty'?"

Beck sighed. "I'd like to find out how this happened. This didn't occur when you were shot in Seattle, or back when you were 'killed' back at Manticores. You seem to be healed, but there might be alternative problems. I'd like to run a couple of tests to make sure you're going to stay that way."

Max's exasperatedly exhausted look was not lost on them. "How long will it take?"

Logan stepped in between them; he knew her long enough to recognize the end of her patience. "Max, why don't I go downstairs and make sure everyone has something to do. When she's done with you she'll send you down and you can tell me everything that happened. OK?" He and Beck shared a conspiratory look, which was not lost on Max.

She looked at Beck, who nodded. Satisfied, Max mumbled something that sounded confirming to Logan. He smiled, bent over and kissed her forehead, then walked out of the room.

He started to head downstairs, but thought better of it and walked over to Mrs. Bradford's room. Her son was leaning against the window and a girl that looked slightly younger than the boy was in a chair next to the bed talking to Sharon Bradford. He knocked on the open door, "Mrs. Bradford, how are you feeling?"

"Mr. Cale. Come in!" Sharon called out. "The doctor said I could get out of bed in a couple of days if I took it easy, but didn't say anything about not having visitors. Is Max back yet?"

"She made it back with Alex just a few minutes ago. She's being given a once over right now. Can I talk to you alone for a few?" Logan asked.

She looked at him oddly, then nodded. "Kids, why don't you check and make sure everyone has been fed. I'm sure with all these people someone must be hungry."

After slight grumbling, they agreed and left the room. "They're great kids. Full of questions and very protective of you, from what I've been told." he commented.

"They're the joy in my life. I can't even imagine my day without them." she smiled.

Logan smiled back, then became serious. "I have something to tell you. When the medic went over your blood she found some anomalies. I was with her at the time she discovered this; which is why I'm talking to you instead of her."

Sharon looked concerned. "What kind of anomalies?"

Logan walked over to the window and looked out onto the property. "Genetic anomalies." He turned around. "The kind that I've been told apparently only takes place when a woman has had a certain type of pregnancy."

She suddenly looked uneasy. "What type of pregnancy, Mr. Logan?"

He walked over to her bed. "When a typical female is a host-mother to a transgenic, Mrs. Bradford."

Visibly sweating now, she looked straight at him. "You can't bring me into this. That was two decades ago. I don't even know who the baby was."

He sighed. "We're all in this. But I believe you when you say you don't know. However, the anomalies are so differed between mothers that an identifying match is possible even years later if the child's DNA pattern is on record. We have a number of those DNA markers on record now, thanks to the large number of transgenics that have come to Terminal City."

Eye to eye, he quietly stated the fact. "You're Max's mother."

PART FIFTEEN : " *Evanescence* "

"She's my what?" Max said in an unusually quiet tone to Beck, who was now strangely silent.
"Repeat that in slow motion."

"Sharon Bradford has transgenic hemoglobin cells that she could only have obtained by hosting a transgenic during pregnancy. As it turns out, your DNA matches the genetic markers we found in her blood... Max, lay DOWN. I'm still running a microscopic scan of your shoulder and you're not making it any easier." Beck chastised. "What I just told you can wait, and this can't."

Max lay back on the bed and closed her eyes, her head spinning with the news, trying to put the pieces together that Sharon had told her before White had shown up. Beck was right, if what she was saying was true; she might just have all the time in the world now to get the answers.

Then her eyelids snapped open. Legion had implied that he knew where her mother was, and that he could hurt them. Sharon and the kids were in danger.

* * * * *

White drove up to the abandoned entrance to Terminal City, though he knew from prior experience that there were transgenics who kept an eye on everything in this toxic-residue infested area.

"Come with me." He told Ray, as he got out of the car. Walking to the gate, he heard the distinct CHA-CHINK of a shotgun as he began to enter. Stopping, he raised his arms sufficiently for them to note that he wasn't carrying a weapon, at least not in his hands.

A transgenic with a cigar in his mouth walked up to him from the side. "You're literally the last person I would have expected to see walk through my gate. Anything to say before you begin to push daisies, White? Or would you rather march your ass back to that car and go back to whatever Conclave hole you slithered out of?"

White ignored the implied threat. "I recognize you from the Jam Pony fiasco. Nice bit of work... they call you Mole. Right? I'm here to talk to whoever is in charge of your... people."

"Why would we want to hear anything you have to say, maggot?" he spat.

As much as he had tried to prepare himself on the way over to the idea of consorting at all with a transgenic, he found his patience and tolerance slipping. "Look, bone-head. If I had wanted a verbal match with a reject from a Creature From The Black Lagoon movie, I'd have stopped by months ago for some chitchat and a latte. As it is, I brought my son with me, to show that I don't plan to embark on an action that would place him in danger. Now you think you can rub a couple of brain cells together and pull up a name for me to talk to in there, or maybe you'd like to pull more of that high brow intellectual wit on me?"

Mole looked as if he was beginning to get mad enough to chew nails, then he grinned and let out a bellow of a laugh loud enough to rattle the car windows. "You know... I think I could almost begin to like you, White. If you weren't such a slime, that is. Tam... go let Cindy know she's got a Conclave punk to interrogate. Tell her its Ames White." He glanced at Ray, then locked eyes

back with White. He re-keyed the radio. "Tell her the kid is with him, and White seems to be here on his own volition."

* * * * *

Max was up and out of the bed in an instant and began to snap out instructions. "Get everything packed up and moved out. Evacuate everyone from the house and grounds, including the residents."

Beck began following the orders without question. Max's voice had nothing in it that indicated she would tolerate questions or objections. She saved the information she had obtained so far, hoping briefly that they could continue the scan later. She raised the window and yelled out to Alec, whom she saw outside. "Alec! Emergency evac, level three. People and props, residents and TG's. Max's orders. Move!"

Before meeting Beck, Alec was in the routine of questioning everything. But since then he'd begun to really forgive himself for the death of Rachel, and he tried hard to trust the decisions of others. Besides, even though he'd never admit it to anyone, the only person he truly trusted before meeting Beck was Max. So... off he went to get things rolling.

By the time Beck had turned around, Max was gone. She began breaking down the medical beds and equipment, smoothly and efficiently... but more important, quickly.

Appearing at Sharon's door as if by magic, Max snapped at Logan; "Emergency evac. We're going back to Terminal City. Get her prepped to go, I'll find the kids."

Logan opened his mouth but Max stopped him. "I'll explain later." She vanished from the door, already heading downstairs.

Logan stood and prepped the IV for moving. "Looks like something put her into battle mode." He looked at Sharon as he looked in her closet quickly for something warm enough for her. "I've seen these people when they're in their 'Manticore' mode." he shared. "But when she gets this way, it seems different." He disengaged the braking clamps on the hospital bed. "You'd be proud of her. She set her people free and made a home for them. In three years I've seen her go from introvert to leader."

"She seems like a good person inside. I'm glad she has such good friends." Sharon smiled at Logan. "I understand you two have a relationship. Anything serious?"

Logan paused a fraction of a second to consider the question. "Yeah. Definitely serious. We've both had our problems though, but in the last year we've worked on resolving them. Too many things to mention now, but we'll talk later, I promise." He pushed the bed out of the room and called a couple of transgenics to help move the bed downstairs.

After getting everything loaded in the trucks and vans, they began heading out. Max in front on the Ninja, Lydecker drove the lead vehicle, another van with Lydecker driving which held Beck with Sharon Bedford and her kids, a second truck with Joshua towards the back, and Logan holding up the rear in a third van.

Max started to feel edgy, uneasy. Looking around on the road, she called out on the radio. "Keep alert, people. Sound off..." She glanced back to see if she could see all the vehicles

behind her. The five vehicles called out in order, which eased her mind but not the feeling of dread.

On the highway they split up, taking separate exits. This was the most dangerous move, but necessary. People weren't giving them a lot of problems lately, but it never paid to be the center of attention. Bringing the vans through separate checkpoints wouldn't draw nearly as much attention as five large vehicles at once. She wasn't worried about Lydecker. *He probably has a dozen false ID's to pass to keep from being spotted*, she pondered. Logan could take care of himself, but she was concerned about Joshua. It wasn't that Max thought he was limited intellectually, but he wasn't very good at hiding his fear.

She pulled up to Terminal City first, which wasn't surprising since she had the more capable transport. One by one the vehicles rounded the corner and pulled through the gate. Except for the last van.

She motioned Mole to call on the radio. "TC Gate to Victor One, come in." The silence from the radio was louder to Max than the electric generator in the main complex. "TC Gate to Victor One, quit fooling around and answer the goddamn radio." Mole barked.

Max got back on the bike and peeled out, following the trail the van was supposed to have taken. She passed through the sector check, snuck a peek at the manifest and rode to the highway, but there was no sign the van had been this way, even though she saw it pull off the highway.

Logan had vanished.

PART SIXTEEN : " *Alkido* "

The first thing Senator James McKinley upon walking into his office was the man sitting in the chair opposite his desk.

"Welcome back, Senator," the man drawled.

The Senator smiled and closed the office door. "Mr. Legion. Fe'nos tol. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Legion stood and smiled back. "Fe'nos tol, Senator. Final preparations are taking place to have you elected into the Presidency. There are only a few technical details to work out, namely one or two individuals to eliminate and the destruction of the remaining vestiges of Manticore, then nothing will stop us."

"Excellent!" McKinley responded, taking a seat behind his desk. "My election rounds throughout the country have gone well, even though elimination of the transgenics was curtailed politically. With Manticore and the pro-transgenic seats removed, the ride should be smooth and without event."

The strange man walked over to the window and looked out at the City Of Nations. "Nothing is without a few bumps. I've made arrangements for Manticore to be destroyed, finally, but I am dubious the tool I have selected will suffice. We may have to take more stringent actions in hand."

McKinley leaned back in his chair and faced Legion. "How stringent?"

Legion turned to the Senator. "The Manticore Observatory underground inside the Sci-Tech building is impervious to a local nuclear attack from the outside, but a device taken in and activated should destroy their headquarters. The remaining operations are only subsidiaries, and the destruction of their headquarters will give us time to initiate your Presidency and begin hunting them down once and for all."

"How are we going to explain a nuclear detonation inside a building that only makes communication gizmos?" McKinley inquired.

"My friend, you're going to tell them not only the truth, but the truth embellished with enough fabrication to put Manticore, the transgenics and everything against what we have planned in the negative eye of John Q. Public again. That the same organization that made the transgenics were hiding, disguised as the company Sci-Tech and working on secret plans to start the third world war in hopes to justify the creation of the transgenics. Sadly, their own evil consumed them and an accident set off their nuclear stockpile. Unfortunate that the immediate region for several miles will be quite uninhabitable for some time, but that's the price we pay for our advances."

The Senator was quiet for a moment. "I don't like the idea of setting off nuclear weapons. That's not the way we do things. Traditionally..."

Legion interrupted him. "Different times require new traditions. The key to survival is evolution;

that's what selective genetic breeding is all about. The flip side of that is that the weak must die. As we evolve, we adapt. You must be willing to use the tools at your disposal. This also is part of adapting."

The man at the desk nodded. "Forgive me. I think sometimes my association with the rest of these people occasionally fog the vision we know so well." He straightened in the chair. "I'm glad you're here to guide me."

Legion smiled. "You'll do just fine." He said encouragingly. "Fe'nos tol." he intoned, then turned and departed the room.

* * * * *

Alec found Max in the apartment she and Logan shared, with a backpack on the couch and a few micro-arsenal items alongside. He noticed a trunk was open in the corner and a stash of explosives, knives and various components, and a couple of guns and other electronic gizmos. She hadn't touched the guns, but she was packing up some of the explosives.

"Uh... going on a little picnic, Max?" he quipped.

She remained silent as she walked around the room, ignoring him. Only when he stepped in her way did she come to a complete stop.

"Max..." he started.

She walked around him, but he took her arm with one hand. She swung her arm up and out of his grasp a fraction of a second later and glared at him. "Back off, Alec. I mean it." She went over to the couch.

He looked wary for a second, then contemplated her. He sometimes felt like he understood her, but sometimes she was a complete mystery to him, a total stranger. This wasn't one of those times however. "You can't do this one alone. Let us help. Tell me what's going on."

She looked sideways at him as she began packing the backpack. She almost blasted him with a scalding comment, but something in his face stopped her. It was such a rare thing that he almost seemed comical; he actually looked sincere. She considered; he had a tendency of being so damned annoying sometimes that she could forget he was one of her own kind. But since he happened to be one of her own kind...

She made a decision. "I think the Conclave has Logan. White put me in touch with a major whack-job named Legion. To make a long story short, Manticore isn't totally gone, but it seems to be a little different now. Seems to be geared for observation, something to do with watching the Conclave. Legion wants them destroyed, and threatened to..." she cut herself off, then continued. "I think he took Logan. Or had him taken."

Alec absorbed this information. "He wants you to take them out? Why you?"

Max confessed. "I got the impression that for some reason he wasn't able to do it himself. He looks to be in his 50's, but he's got mental skills like PsiOps. I thought about slapping him alongside his thick skull for just thinking about threatening me, and somehow he got into my

mind. Felt like every atom in my body turned to stone... I couldn't budge."

"So how do we find him?" he asked.

"Not we, me. This isn't your fight. And I don't have time to argue. He wants Manticore destroyed, fine. I'll finish the job. Then I get Logan back, and destroy them as well. Two birds for the price of one, or however that saying goes."

Alec looked at her, then came to a decision himself. He pulled up a chair. "Sit down." He ordered.

She looked at him and almost laughed in his face. "Right. I don't think so."

"Sit down before I get every on-duty X-series in here to sit you down."

Something in his voice forced her to pay attention. She wasn't worried about the X-5's, they would take her orders over Alec's. But Alec never took this tone with her, in fact the closest he'd come was almost a year and a half ago when he was having a mood regarding Rachel Berrisford; the girl who's father he was supposed to kill back when he was still in Manticore. Max had been concerned about his behavior and had asked him what was wrong. Alec had basically told Max to take a hike and not let the door hit her transgenic butt on the way out. Of all the X-5's, oddly, she felt Alec was most like her in many ways, though he'd been at Manticore all his life. The irony of the situation did not escape her, so she put the block of C4 she was carrying on the couch, and sat.

Alec sat on an empty space on the couch and took a deep breath. "Listen carefully, because you're not going to catch a re-run. You took every transgenic in here and set them free. Then you turned them into a team. In the meantime, you managed to get some of the transgenics and ordinaries working together and actually liking each other. It hasn't been all flowers and champagne, but it's almost a normal life. You think somehow everything you touch gets damaged, which is why you took for-freakin ever getting it on with Logan but you've got it wrong. Take it from someone who's been looking for gold since you released us from Manticore... you've got the Midas gift, Max. Everyone whose life you touch is better for it."

He paused to take a breath. "It doesn't have anything to do with your being transgenic, or your junk-free genetics; it's because of your heart. A lot of people out there owe you an awful lot. Now Logan needs your help. But Max, he's not just your boyfriend... he's a member of our community. You think you have a right to go after him alone, like you always do, but the truth is you don't have that right anymore. And like Lydecker used to say, there's no I in team. You may lead this community, but you're not doing this alone. And that's final."

He leaned back and for an instant she saw in him the same command presence that Zack had always emulated.

Max tried to come up with a scalding retort but found she had nothing to say. She was fairly stunned in fact; she'd never heard Alec say so much at one time and actually have it mean something sensible enough to pay attention to, let alone anything that sounded remotely heartfelt. She wasn't about to let it slide without challenging it, though.

"And if I say no?"

Alec's expression didn't change. "Then I'll make sure you don't leave Terminal City." He noticed her 'defiant' look start to appear on her face and changed tactics. "Listen to reason, Max. We can't afford to lose you, and we can't afford to lose him. If they have him, you'll have a better chance doing something about it with your people at your side. If you destroy what might be Manticore there's no guarantee they won't just kill him since they want ordinaries enslaved or dead anyway."

The silence between them was deafening. Several seconds went by, then her eyes finally softened. "Okay, I'll play it your way this time, Alec."

Then those same eyes you could swim in turned to steel. "But God help you if you're wrong."

PART SEVENTEEN : " Veridic "

With Max's concession, Alec filled her in on White's entrance. She immediately headed to the TC Detention cells, learning from the on-watch guard that Ray was being taken care of separately. She walked into the cell area and leaned against the wall, facing White, lying on the cot.

"You just don't know when to take a hint," she said. "But I must admit you look much better behind bars."

White opened his eyes and over at her. "Nice to see you too, 452. I came because I have something for you."

Max yawned. "Straight to business as always. Suits me. It means I don't have to see your face any longer than necessary. If you mean Ray, we have him already. Thanks for dropping him off, awfully sweet of you. Really. Did you and Legion have a nice chat after I left?"

White just looked at her. "Don't be idiotic." He stood slowly and walked over to the bars, feeling the damage from Lydecker's shot. "I have digital recordings of the conversation between you and Legion. He'd initially wanted them to study you, get bioelectric, genetic sensor readings and direct x-ray scans. We had the whole saucer section wired for sound and video... most sophisticated electronic audio video sensor equipment on the face of the planet. What else he wanted from it, I have no idea. He seems to change tactics from moment to moment. I can't tell if he's a tactical genius or one step short of egomaniacal shortsightedness. Regardless, as I was leaving I pulled the disks and replaced them."

"Nice. I'll give them to our Med Tech in case I get the sniffles."

White rolled his eyes. "This is like explaining algebra to a hamster. Try to listen for once instead of smarting off, 452. It recorded both yourself and Legion. Which means that I now have recorded scans of him."

Max considered this momentarily. "And you're here to make some kind of deal."

"As I already told you, they want to kill Ray. They feel you corrupted him. Mental corruption from outside sources isn't permitted. Now they'll want to kill me as well. It behooves me to go underground. You hid from Manticore for more than a decade. And you avoided the Conclave, once they started cleaning up Manticore's mess, for quite some time."

He paused. It was grating his nerves to admit these things to anyone, let alone to this woman. "Bluntly, you're fairly adept at covert operations. Better than they think you are. Better than I thought you were... so you have something I need and I have something you need. Yes, a deal sounds like an appropriate term. The safety of Ray and myself in exchange for the information."

She looked at him incredulously. "Two days ago or so you tried capping my ass, Conclave-style. Now you want to make nice like nothing happened? You're going to have to come up with something better than that. For all I know this is just another attempt to eliminate me."

"I'll tell you all I know about those markings that appeared on your skin a year or so ago. And I'll

help you take the Familiars down, help you take down the Conclave. It goes against all my training's and beliefs... but if I want my son to survive I'm going to have to make some radical choices. This is one of them."

She made a decision. "Give me the recordings. If they turn out to be what you say, I'll consider what you're saying. Consider it a show of good faith."

He'd anticipated this. "They're mixed in with Ray's music CD's. You'll find them."

She turned without another word and walked out, switching the micro-radio to two-way mode. "Did you guys catch all that?"

"We got it." Lydecker's voice filtered through the unit. "That stuff should have been checked when those two were brought in. Sloppy work, Max; you kids were taught better than that. We're looking through the kid's bag now... yeah they're here. Two high-resolution recording discs. Pricey items. You might want to think about scavenging the Needle for the equipment he left behind."

"Send Tam with a couple of X6's to retrieve it," she replied, ignoring the comment about checking the bag. He was right though; if Mole hadn't checked the bag then the gate guards were getting sloppy. She might have to run a few drills when time permitted. "In the meantime, give the recordings to Beck and see what she can pull from it. Out."

"Out." Lydecker answered.

She looked over at Alec as he walked up to her. "Alec, go to Medical and run over the data disk information with Beck. I'm putting you in charge of briefing us on what they contain."

He looked surprised, "In charge of the briefing? Why me instead of Beck? She's the medical do-all."

"Once you two review the data and determine if it's legit, she could be busy using what you two have learned to come up with a plan against this Legion guy and the Conclave. Besides, you have more active combat-engagement experience than she does. You'll be able to give us tactical information based on whatever you two have found so far while she works on the medical side."

Alec nodded. "Ok, I'll buy that."

"One more thing," she added. "If the information turns out to be authentic, I'll want White in on the briefing. He'll be joining the team."

His jaw dropped. "You're joking."

"Just do it. This may be our one chance to stop them. I'm not going to let my personal prejudices get in the way, and neither are you. That being the case, he has information he's willing to share. Such as where the Conclave Headquarters is located. Besides, he's got reasons not to double cross us, seems the Conclave wants to terminate him. So, right now if it came to a choice between the Conclave and Terminal City; we're practically his best friends."

He grimaced. "Easy for you to say, you didn't have a micro-explosive placed in your neck by the

creep. Yeah, ok... I'll make sure it's done. IF the information holds up. If not..."

"Good enough," she replied. "Let's get it done."

Alec trotted off, and she switched radio channels. "Gate Station One, come in."

"Gate Station One, that you Max?"

She recognized Mole's voice. "Call in the second shift, I want tri-guard relays on each post for now."

Mole's irritation was apparent. "I'm off in ten minutes and have a poker game in thirty. Can't this wait?"

"Nope. In a few hours, if things go right, we're going to be on alert status."

His attitude changed instantly. "Good, it's about time we got some action around here. I'll call them in."

"I'll keep you posted. Out." She clipped the mini-radio back inside her shirt pocket.

She sat down on a bench to allow herself a moment's reprieve. It occurred to her that she hadn't seen Sharon since Beck had told her the woman was her host-mother and she had evacuated the house. "*Your DNA matches the genetic markers we found in her...*," she remembered Beck saying.

She frowned, and in her mind she ran over the discussion she originally had with Sharon...

"Her name was Michelle Cardova." ... "She was a nurse at some kind of government base in Wyoming when she had some kind of nervous breakdown." ... "Thirteen years ago my husband and Michelle left to go pick up my parents at the airport." ... "There was an accident, and both my husband and sister were killed." ... "They never really found the bodies, just the mangled up car."

She stood. It was time for truth from Sharon Bradford, but first she had a duty to perform, and a personal debt to pay to an old friend.

PART EIGHTEEN : " *Rectitude* "

"The first ordinary to help us, any of us." ... "Gave her life so we could live." ... "Always remember..."

They stood in the rain, holding Hannah Sukova's funeral. Max felt the eulogy she gave was incredibly inadequate but she couldn't seem to put how she felt into words. It had been her first encounter with an ordinary that helped her, not because she was a soldier, but because she was a person. It was that action that first made her feel as if she could live amongst them instead of hiding in the woods, as she'd first intended when they had escaped. She had still moved from place to place, but because of Hannah it was among normal humans. She had given it her best shot. Somehow it never seemed enough.

She watched as the transgenics lowered the coffin into the ground at the makeshift cemetery. They had lost a couple of people since they moved into Terminal City over a year ago, but not many. So far the area they designated was sufficient. Back at Manticore they had been taught to burn the dead, never leave traces, destroy the evidence. She wasn't sure that planting them in the ground was any better or worse but it seemed to make everyone, both transgenic and ordinary, feel a little more bonded to each other.

She looked over at Sharon Bradford. Beck was by her side, having allowed this brief outside excursion. *I wonder if she's as uncomfortable as I am; I finally find out who my mother is and discover she lied to me about it.*

After the ceremony, she walked with Original Cindy for a while, not saying anything.

"I hear through the grapevine you've got something on your mind. What's the gimme?" Cindy finally asked.

She glanced at her friend. "There'll be a briefing shortly. You've probably heard, Logan's missing. I'm pretty sure the Conclave has him but White has some info I need before I can go after Logan. Since I have to wait, I want to talk with Sharon first and clear the air. I found out she was my host mother back at Manticore."

"For real? That can't be easy, but what's there to clear the air about? You got some baggage, Boo?"

"Yeah, a little. She lied about it when I first caught up to her, said it was her sister that was involved instead of her. Probably doesn't want one of us as her kid after learning what we are. And getting shot up probably didn't inspire the welcome wagon either." she said unhappily.

Cindy paused, considering her words. "You know, it may have been tight on her. You don't know why she said what she did, but you told me once that the gal we just buried said your mother fought to keep you. It's not her fault Manticore was stronger than she was. And Boo... if she didn't actually say all those other things to you about wanting you and getting shot, then you're the one not being fair."

Max looked over at the ordinary walking beside her and felt a smile play on her lips. "You're right, I'm feeling selfish and I'm not sure what else I'm feeling... I had this big scene in my mind

where I'd find my mother and she'd pull me into her arms and wave her magic-wand and I'd never have to think of Manticore or the Conclave again. Blame it on those "happily-ever-after" books of Logan's I was reading to his niece."

Cindy laughed, then turned serious. "Don't go in with expectations. Go to find the truth and if-or-when you get the lowdown from her, come to terms with it. We all make mistakes or choices we don't like. She didn't want to lose you back at Manticore and they locked her away for it. Give her a chance to be human, and give yourself a chance to be human while you're at it. Know what I mean?"

She nodded. "Yeah. But..."

Original Cindy stopped and turned to her. "No expectations. Give her the chance you would want if it were reversed. You finally found her, now give her the road to walk herself into your life. Give yourself the opportunity to figure it all out. Don't force it, just go with it. I know you, you're not happy unless you're fighting the current. Sometimes you have to just go with the flow. Original Cindy knows what she's talking about."

Max conceded. "You're right. It's not easy though... God, I hope Logan's ok. Things are bad enough without something happening to him too."

Cindy smiled at her. "He'll be fine, Boo. He's got you. You'll get him back, and he has faith in you... wherever they've got him."

* * * * *

Max knocked at Sharon's open door. Sharon looked up from the book she was reading, and her face brightened. "Come on in..."

She came in and sat down in the chair by the bed. The quiet soon grew to an uncomfortable silence.

Sharon began first. "I'm sorry I lied to you, Max. I didn't know you were the one I carried... and I was afraid for the safety of my other children. If I'd known it was you, I'd have told you immediately. You must be furious with me..."

"No." Max said quickly, then paused. "Well, I guess I was upset. I had this preconceived notion in my mind that when I finally found you that everything would fit into place, that I might have answers. But then Beck told me you gave birth to me... and I guess we didn't exactly start off on the best footing with White barging in like that. Logan tells me I have a habit of judging people based on my own expectations. And now I'm rambling..." She stopped. "Can you just tell me the truth now?"

The woman in the bed nodded somberly. "Of course I will. Are you sure you want to hear it all?"

Max hesitated, and nodded her head. "Yes. Anything you're comfortable with telling me."

She took a deep breath and began.

"For starters, my real name is Michelle. My sister's name was Sharon. I was in the medical field

and through some high-level doctors in the governmental fields, I was given an opportunity to interview at a classified medical facility. Manticore. Turns out they came across my medical records and found I was a completely viable host. They told me they wanted to enable artificial pregnancy and induce gene therapy. They never told me I wouldn't be able to keep the child once it was born. I only found out about that later when I overheard a doctor talking about the on-base genetic soldier project.

"By my third trimester, they realized I knew they were going to take the baby away from me. I'm afraid I didn't play it very smart, I was young and feisty and often acted before I thought things through. Maybe that's what tipped them off. Eventually they sedated me so I wouldn't hurt the doctors, myself or you.

"When I gave birth to you, they took me immediately to a secure facility away from Manticore. They held me there for a couple of years; I suppose I'd probably still be there if my parents hadn't made such a squawk to the government. But they had made me forget, Max. Over time I started to remember again, bits and pieces. Enough to know they were still keeping an eye on me. And enough to know they'd taken my child.

"Sharon and I moved from Wyoming to Washington State in 2005. When we moved out here she insisted we switch our first names and take different last names, in case Manticore came looking. That was easy enough because we used to do the same thing to boyfriends on the phone back when we were going school; we didn't look anything alike but we sounded identical." She chuckled quietly at the memory."

"I met Mark shortly after moving here. He was a construction contractor with a terribly childish sense of humor and a passion for baseball, science fiction, classical music and Jamocha Almond Fudge ice cream. We fell in love immediately. We got married, had two kids and were as happy as anyone could possibly be. He even built a house on the other side of the barn for my sister. He sensed a dark secret in my past but I didn't dare tell him for fear that they were still watching and listening. It was all I could do just to not think about it or let it interfere with my life. He was such a doll... he never asked about it. He only commented once that if I ever wanted to tell him, in my own time, that it was good enough for him.

She looked at Max, tears on her face. "He was a wonderful, kind man who loved his kids. I wish you could have met him."

Max handed her a towel, and drying her tears with it, she went on. "In 2009, like I told you, my parents were flying in, and she went with Mark to get them. The plane that Mom and Dad were in was in the air when the pulse hit... one of hundreds that crashed because of it. They didn't survive.

"I almost went mad when I learned of it all, first of my parents and then of Mark and Sharon. Almost everyone I cared about, gone. The only thing that kept me together was the thought of my kids. I couldn't fail them... not like I failed you."

She took Max's hand in hers. "I always felt like I should have done more, that somehow they would have given you back to me. In a way I felt by being there for my kids, I wasn't just being a good loving mother, I was making up for my losing my first born. You'll never know how bad I felt when they took you away from me. I wanted to die, which is why I guess they found it fairly easy to make me forget. For a while, anyway.

A knock on the door and they both looked up to see Alec. "Sorry, Max. Briefing in five minutes."

"Ok. Give me a minute," she answered.

Alec nodded and waited outside.

The transgenic pondered briefly what she'd just been told, then made her decision. She leaned over and hugged Sharon lightly. "As a friend of mine says, 'it's all good'... but we'll talk later. I have to be at this briefing."

Sharon waved her out. "Be careful."

Rolling her eyes, the transgenic couldn't stop herself. "God, you're starting to sound like Logan already."

"Hey, about Logan... he was supposed to stop by here?"

A worried look flickered across Max's face. "He never showed up with the rest of us. We're... looking for him."

Sharon straightened up as much as she could, and looked concerned. "Then I guess you really should be careful."

"All my life..." she said reflectively as she left to catch up with Alec.

PART NINETEEN : " Cabal "

"He isn't human..."

Alec looked around at the group at the table. Max and Lydecker at the head, Mole and White at the end, accompanied by Joshua, Cindy and Beck on the side chairs.

He continued. "He's not transgenic. Frankly, we're not sure what he is. The disc containing the sensor readings didn't show anyone there at all... not anything or anyone you'd invite out for a beer, anyway."

Mole, Joshua and Cindy chuckled. The rest waited.

"Right. OK, this Legion person comes across video as a normal guy, but the only thing along the band sensors is dead signal, except for a weird background resonance. Before you ask; it's not the sensors. They picked up Max just fine."

Lydecker motioned to the display, "Then let's see her readout, so we can tell what it's supposed to be reporting."

"All in good time, Commandant Manticore." Alec replied, without giving the man a second look.

"Alec..." Max said sharply.

Alec glanced at Max, then rolled his eyes. "All right. Hold on a sec." He punched a couple of buttons. "It's not easy operating this stuff without your boyfriend around, he put it together you know."

Joshua brought the question into the open. "Do we know where Logan is?"

Max answered. "The Conclave is holding him. Or this Legion guy is."

"How do we know that for sure?" Mole challenged.

Max fixed her gaze on him, "One of my gut feelings. The premonitional bogeyman visited again. Whatever it is, I know he or they have Logan. As usual, I'm a little foggy on the details. If I think something's not right, you'll know it."

Alec interrupted "Ok, here it is."

A frame image of Max appeared, and split-screened was information that looked to Max like genetic sequencing codes.

Donald Lydecker was already standing up, putting his glasses on. Reading the lines, he nodded. Sharply, he asked; "White, what kind of sensors are these? I've never seen detailed readouts like this, even at our prior labs, without detailed microscopic examination."

White started to stand, but a throaty growl from Joshua changed his mind. "Top of the line genetic samplers. Like I told her before, the Conclave doesn't exactly consider artificial eugenic

manipulation the acceptable norm, but they have technological advancement par none. If 452..."

A glare from Max made him pause momentarily...

"Ok, if 'Max' hadn't been extremely lucky, we'd have had her and most of the rest of her genetic buddies long ago." he continued. "If my brother hadn't interfered before the Jam Pony incident, when I had her at a holding facility; I would have had sufficient time to have similar equipment brought in."

Grudgingly, he looked at Max. "Eventually we would have caught you. But I have to admit, Manticore did a fair job for you to have evaded the Conclave as long as you did. If you don't do something about them, they WILL eventually take over. That will mean death for the transgenics and vassalage for the rest of the world."

Mole interjected, "So we don't have any readings on this so-called pal of yours on the screen. What good is it then?"

"More than you'd think." Beck answered. She nodded at Alec.

Alec brought up a couple of charts. "We ran a check on the background harmonics that came through on this guy. Something seems to be there, it's just not showing up through the sensors. Either the guy's a phantom, or he's the best natural signal jamming catalyst I've ever seen. His voice is another matter. On typical audio reception of human or transgenic, his speech sounds fairly typical." He smiled a mysterious smile at Max. "What we discovered however, was a level of sub-frequency tracks that effects neurological and subliminal impulses."

He motioned to White. "When you were interrogated, before Max returned; you said he controlled your body. Max reported that he stopped her from moving completely." He motioned to Beck.

Beck cleared her throat. "We believe that this individual has some kind of psionic abilities, but that his voice is the key. It may open the mind to suggestion or infiltration, much as a safecracker opens a combination lock. However, he's too old to be a Manticore PsiOps transgenic and I can't explain yet why he can block the sensor from reading him and not prevent it from getting readings from others at the same time."

Lydecker looked thoughtful. "Would audio inhibitors on our soldiers prevent him from enabling control over them?"

"Our PEOPLE might be able to be protected," she corrected, "Then again they might not. I'm going on theory here, based on fact. Given time I might have more information for you."

Until now, Lydecker had not directly looked at White. His line-of-sight now fell solidly on him. "Where is the Conclave located?" he ordered.

As the two men locked eyes on each other, Max felt the tension in the air rise exponentially. Though Lydecker had learned of the Conclave almost two years ago, White had known of Manticore all his life. If circumstance hadn't brought the two former enemies together in the same room for a similar purpose, it was doubtful both would have survived such a meeting.

Taking his time, White responded. "Locally, the Conclave has a gathering on the western side of

the Puget Sound, in a community called Belfair. You should know the location well, it was built just over the hill from the ruins of Manticore. And incidentally, Colonel, you would be best suited to remember that I am here in opposition to everything I believe, for the safety of my son, and as it turns out; for the safety of your transgenics as well. A more respectful tone might be in order."

Lydecker leaned over the table directly towards White. "Your organization betrays the foundation of the government and people of the United States and, incidentally, every government on the face of the planet. You're a traitor not only to your people, but also to the world and mankind. If you want respect from them," he waved his hand around the room in gesture, "...you'll have to earn it. But don't expect to see it from me, ever. And if this is a trick to lure my kids into a trap, you will definitely discover what I'm best suited for. Do I make myself clear, Mr. White?"

A grim expression wove a pattern on Whites face. "Indeed I do."

Max decided this had gone on long enough. "Once past the Seattle checkpoints, Belfair is about an hour, maybe an hour and a half drive on public roads. White, I want you to work with Lydecker and Mole on entry strategy and Conclave perimeter securities. Both of you pay attention, as this part is very important: if you and Lydecker get into it and either of you gets killed, I'll terminate the other personally. And you..." she pointed at Mole, "...will go on latrine duty for months just for letting it happen. After this is over, I don't care if you kill each other but right now you both are on probation here; do I make myself clear?" She looked back and forth between the two. Neither looked happy about it, but both nodded.

"Good. Beck; you and OC see if there's anything more you can come up with on this guy or anything we can use as a defense against what he did to me at the Needle. Alec, get an infiltration unit grouped. If details work to our advantage, we're going to form a plan and go in to get Logan. Joshua, you're with me." Joshua stood as she headed towards the conference room door.

Mole lit up a cigar. "And if details don't work to our advantage?"

Max paused at the door, "Then I go in alone."

Then she turned and walked out.

PART TWENTY : " Parley "

Logan felt consciousness return, fuzzy light slowly replacing darkness, solidifying into a room. He became aware that a man fitting Max's description of Legion stood in the corner, observing him intently.

"Mr. Cale. I'm very pleased to meet you. I do apologize for the trouble my associates have caused you. Hopefully they haven't caused you too much duress."

Logan smiled grimly, noticing that his arms and legs were strapped securely to what seemed to be a fairly sturdy chair.

"Not at all. I was just thinking the other day about getting one of these for friends and family. Think they'd appreciate the gesture?"

Legion leaned back and laughed. "Splendid! Even faced with the unknown, the imperturbable Logan Cale releases his reserve of wit and wile. Admirable." He grinned.

Nutcase. Logan's first thought permeated his brain. *Or Wack-Job, as Max would say.* But better to amuse him for now than to perturb him. "Indeed. I'll take it. Now if you'll loosen the shackles, I'll write a check for it. You do deliver, yes?"

"My apologies, I'm afraid you'll have to sample the merchandise a bit longer. Interestingly enough, the Conclave has discovered the secret behind the miraculous recovery from your original spine-damaging injury. Transfusions from at least two different transgenic sources. No surprise to me of course, there are very few and limited ways you could have reversed the effects of that particular injury. You have been a busy bee... of course they wanted to kill you outright. Pollution of the natural selection and all that. Fortunately for you, I talked them out of it."

Logan nodded. "Much obliged. But what do you want me for? It's not like I can do anything to the Conclave..."

"On the contrary. You've done a great deal of damage to the Conclave in the past, Logan. May I call you Logan? Or perhaps Eyes Only?"

Logan looked at Legion blankly, as he had practiced in depth for just such occasions. "Logan is fine. I only associate with Eyes Only."

Legion chuckled. "Oh, you're much too modest. You were running this Eyes Only scam from your apartment for some time before meeting our little transgenic, then when the Conclave finally traced your signal and destroyed your home you started again from Terminal City. Oh, don't worry, they haven't tracked you down again. Here only I know your 'secret identity.'"

He leaned over to Logan and whispered, "It'll be our little secret." He straightened back up. "Well, perhaps not just ours, Mister White suspects as well it seems. It appears he was the individual who traced your signal originally. Not too bright for such a brilliant man, running a secret identity from the same location you live in? Even if it wasn't registered in your name, one can't help but leave fingerprints and DNA traces. Well, no matter. We all have our little quirks,

eh?"

Logan looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Well if you don't want me because of Eyes Only and you're not going to let them kill me; why am I here?"

Legion smiled mysteriously. "I must admit to enjoying our little chat, but I really have a schedule to keep." He walked over to a door and opened it.

He called out "Is it Max? Am I being used as leverage so she'll get rid of the remains of Manticore?"

Legion paused and glanced back at him. "What an extraordinary fellow..." he commented to himself, closing the door behind him.

* * * * *

"Why did they have to take Logan? I mean, if they'd taken Lydecker we'd have all year to plan his rescue, if he didn't talk them to death first with his soldier spiel..."

Joshua watched Max as she paced back and forth, working herself into a dither. After leaving the conference room, they had gone to the control room and checked to see if any word on Logan had turned up. Then they'd gone to her bike and they calibrated it. Three times. Listening to her rant, he wondered if she'd start tearing things apart.

"Max..."

"Maybe I should just take out Sci Tech and be done with it. But then would I be shooting my own foot, and what if they killed him anyway?" She kicked a bottle and sent it whistling through the air and over the fence. Joshua watched as the bottle sped out of sight.

"Uh... Max..."

"Not to mention that Logan knows how to take care of himself, why the fire-truck didn't he take them out with those guns he always has hidden, god knows he's always trying to pawn them off on me... ooph..."

She walked right into Joshua.

"What? Oh... sorry big fella. What did you want to say?" Max sat down.

He sat down next to her. "You shouldn't go alone."

Max gathered herself to argue, but Joshua cut her off. "Father meant for you to lead. Not to be alone. Even dreams I have lately are Father telling me... saying you were made to make Conclave go down. But not alone. You go alone, you don't come back. Simple as that."

She didn't smile. "I'm trying to lead them, Joshua. That's what this whole year has been about."

"No. You're in charge, yes. But not leading, still hiding. Because of people. Because of Conclave. Even with troops, we send in two parts. Them and you. We can't fight like that, they need you to lead them against the Conclave."

Max looked exasperated. "We are going up against the Conclave..."

Joshua stood again. "No! For you this is about Logan. But there's more to see... the... uh..." he struggled to remember the expression.

"...the big picture?" she filled in.

Joshua looked thankful at her. "Yes! The big picture. Father was part of Conclave, but he knew it was wrong and left. He made you to come into the big picture. Conclave going down. But not because of just you. Because you're in charge. Father meant you to lead us."

He took a step back, and looked down. "Lead us into the light, Max. Don't go into it alone."

Max was starting to get a headache. Four people pouring their heart to her in one day was a bit much, even for her. But it seemed they all had a message to deliver.

She nodded and stood. "You're right. It's been about Logan, for me. Maybe I need to get my head on straight... I don't know. I'm playing this all by instinct."

Joshua shook his head. "Some instinct good. But training good too." He pointed back at the barracks. "That's all they have."

"I know." she sighed. "But sometimes..."

A voice from behind them interrupted. "...sometimes you have to stop running and do what's right."

Max's head snapped in the direction of the voice, and Joshua turned to see Sam, Max's genetic twin from California. Max and Joshua looked at each other then back at the girl before them.

An amused expression crossed Sam's face. "Don't everyone say hi at once... I hear you've got a scenario going on."

Max shrugged. "Alec is working on it. What are you doing here?"

"Long story, but we're here now. My family's settling in at the barracks. I was heading to sit in on the briefing, but heard you two bickering like hens." She chuckled.

"We were having a private conversation." Max bluntly told her. "But incidentally, that was pretty close to what I was going to say. Sometimes you do have to stop hiding and fight back. That's not hard. Doing what's right, that's sometimes harder to figure out." She sized Sam up. "Alec could probably use your help, his experience is mostly with single unit missions, not team efforts. If you're planning to stay for a while, that is."

Sam snapped to attention and saluted. "X5-453, ready for duty." Then an amused smirk crossed her face. "For now..."

Max gave her directions to where the briefing was taking place, and Sam wandered off. She looked at Joshua with a bewildered look. "She's sure changed her attitude..."

Now it was Joshua's turn to shrug. "Father used to say time changes people in one of only two ways, for the better or for the worse."

"Yeah, well, sometimes Father sounds like a stuffy SOB. Ok, big fella. Let's go lead this group into battle."

Joshua grinned at her and followed.

PART TWENTY-ONE : " *Empiricism* "

Logan woke again to Legion entering the room.

"Visiting hours open again, eh?" Logan stated, dryly.

Legion pulled a chair out of the darkness and sat in front of him. "Why not? An interesting fellow like yourself must be bored silly."

"Suits me. What do you want to talk about?"

"I'm curious as to what you might have learned about your good friend Max, and Manticore, in the time you've known her. That shouldn't reveal any secrets you might have, should it?" he smiled.

Logan shrugged. "I don't have any secrets. She was a result of a secret project that was designed to take you people out. But that's not a secret to you, is it?"

Legion laughed. "No, I'm just curious what you've learned. It really doesn't matter. Passing time, so to speak."

The man clamped to the chair nodded. "How about a sharing of info. I tell you something, and you tell me something."

"A game! Splendid!" The older man exclaimed. "By all means, but let's make some rules before we proceed. First, questions can only deal with the Conclave, Manticore, yourself or the transgenics. Second, no lying; the answer given must be truth. Third, no question can be repeated. Fourth, questions are put forth in single sentence format and each person asks one single question followed by the answer and the next person asking a question. And finally, if any of the rules are broken, the questions come to an end. Ask your question."

Logan, surprised at the openness of the man before him and the sudden rules to his spontaneous suggestion, almost drew a blank. Then the questions came to mind.

OK. I can live with that. It'll pass the time, at least.

Legion smiled. "Games are what makes the world go round..."

Logan pondered that momentarily, then jumped in. "Did you kidnap me to lure Max here?" he inquired.

"No."

Logan waited, but it didn't appear the man was going to explain further.

Legion cocked his head, then asked "What happened to the hidden genetic material at Manticore in Lydecker's secret room?"

Surprised again, this time by the complete unexpectedness of the topic change, he looked blankly at Legion for a couple of seconds before answering. "I didn't know he had a secret room, or hidden genetic material. So I'd have to answer that I don't know what happened to it. Why am I being held here against my will?"

"So you won't escape."

Logan frowned. The answer, though certainly true, wasn't exactly what he wanted to know. He would have to phrase his questions more carefully.

* * * * *

Joshua and Max made their way to where Alec was concluding the debriefing of the transgenics who were going on the mission. Alex noticed them enter and nodded to them. "That's it, boys and girls. Unless the boss-girl knows when departure time is, you'll be on standby for the next 24 hours."

Max noticed Lydecker and White on Alec's sidelines. She signaled to Lydecker with hand signals. "*We move out as soon as I check with Beck.*"

Lydecker noticed her, and signaled back. "*Wait for the final briefing.*"

Joshua heard Max grumble unintelligibly, then she signaled again. "*We'll brief on the way.*"

Lydecker frowned and signed back, "*We need to take time to go through any new information.*"

"*We're leaving in one hour. Deal with it.*" She concluded the silent conversation by turning and walking out of the room, Joshua hot on her heels. "That man is going to end up a casualty before we leave if he doesn't get with the program of who's in charge here." she said to no one in particular.

They walked to the infirmary where Cindy and Beck were discussing mental disciplines. The conversation stopped when Max walked in. Beck called her over, excitedly. "Max! Come over here... this is fascinating!"

She walked over and sat by the monitor. "What am I looking at?"

"A genetic scan composite. basically it gathers sort of a DNA x-ray and turns it into raw data. I've been running it through the medical computer hardware Logan set up for us and it's producing some phenomenal results." She explained.

"OK," Max said. "So what do we have on him?"

"Him?" Beck asked, confused.

"Legion? What do you have on him that's so exciting?"

"Oh! No, it came up with practically nothing about him except for what I told you at the briefing."

Max began to feel her stress headache get worse as she tried to work this out in her head.

"Fine, let's start again from the beginning. What am I looking at?"

"This was compiled from your scan, Max. The composite of your DNA."

Her confusion cleared immediately. "Anything I can use against him? Or them?"

Original Cindy and Beck glanced in each other's direction. After a pause, Cindy spoke. "Nothin' much that can be done soon, Boo. Beck tells me the scans show that you probably could do some kick-ass paranormal stunts, but you'd need a lot of mental training to figure out how. Months maybe, heck even years isn't unlikely. A lot of your DNA seems to be geared to your brain activity... which may have something to do with your premonitions; so chances are that you could eventually control some of it. Could be that mongrel, White, could give you some pointers since they're into that self-genetic breeding thing. They must have learned somethin', being as whacked as they are."

Max considered this. "You might have a point there. I'll pull him aside and ask him before we take off."

Beck hesitated, "So you're going to do this." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah, it has to be done. We need to make a dent in their armor and we need Logan back. I need him back." she admitted.

Original Cindy hugged her. "Then you best be careful. Don't make me come after you, Boo."

Max grinned, which felt kinda good for once. "I'll expect you."

Beck squeezed her hand. "Keep my friends safe."

She smiled. "When I can." Joshua followed her out.

She saw Lydecker, White and Alec exiting the briefing compound, and she whistled loudly. They saw her, and headed in her direction.

"Joshua, could you go to my room and grab my duffel bag? I left it on the couch. Be careful, it's got explosives in it."

He grunted and wandered off in the direction of the building her room was in.

Lydecker was the first to speak as they approached. "They're ready, but I still advise against going until we've worked out the rest of the details."

She shook her head. "We'll work them out on the way. It's a simple operation; there are only going to be two details, demolitions and retrieval. One group sets the explosives while the rest of us go in after Logan. We get him, head out, first team blows the place to keep them from following. What could be easier?"

Lydecker grimaced, "All we have is his..." he pointed at White, "...word for what passes as a layout of the place."

"It'll have to be good enough, and his breathing future rides on it being accurate so I wouldn't worry a great deal about it. I've got a few people who're gonna punch his ticket if things go

sour." She glanced at White meaningfully.

She looked at Alec. "Take Lydecker and finish loading the vehicles. I want a word with White alone."

Lydecker looked somewhat satisfied, believing Max was going to give White a personal warning, but left them with a warning glance at Ames.

White looked at her in his typical, smug way. "Yes, 452?"

Her look could have burned wood. "Stop calling me that before I change my mind and throw you back in that cell. I have a name... and you'll use it or you'll be uninvited. For good. Do you understand me?"

"The question stands." he replied, unperturbed. "What did you want?"

"What do you know about mental disciplines regarding paranormal ability? Our intern tells me my DNA seems to deal somewhat with intentional activity that's guided mentally, like psionics. How do I use that, or how can I find out?"

White briefly sized up her current attitude and decided she was serious. "You don't have much time to take this in, are you sure you want to get into this?"

"Yeah, I've got at least until the vehicles are packed up for the mission." she replied.

White began telling her what he knew regarding psionics, a subject the Conclave knew due to anomalies that would crop up from generation to generation. For some time they tried breeding to enhance those abilities, but determined after a relatively short time that whatever factors seemed to produce psychic or psionic abilities weren't determinable by their methods.

He told her that the individuals who seemed to develop those abilities relayed a common method of engaging their capabilities. "Concentrate on the essence of what you want to accomplish. See it in your mind and feel it in your soul. It seems to be as much an experience of existentialism as it is a manipulation of your environment. You've probably received flashes of insight, think of that as a sort of backfire when your motorcycle isn't tuned right... you have to focus and concentrate to do what you may be capable of. That's all I can really tell you for now."

"Abilities such as?"

"How would I know? I only had the blueprints to your genetics in my hands for a short time before Lydecker stole them originally." he answered.

She looked exasperated at him. "You must have some idea..."

"Well, without having access to the diagrams and prints in your lab, or the information Lydecker took, all I can give you is a general idea of what it could entail. You might be able to supercharge your already enhanced abilities, you might have a controllable combination of telekinesis, pyrokinesis, telepathy, premonition, precognition, locational viewing... the list goes on." White began to look as if this conversation was amusing him, much to Max's annoyance.

Ames relented. "Why don't you try something small." He took a pen from his pocket, and laid it

on a bench. "Telekinesis is not a terribly common psionistic ability, but if you have that ability it should be fairly easy to determine and use. Focus only on the pen. See it with your eyes, and feel it with your thoughts. Mentally reach out and touch it."

Max looked at the pen, saw it and focused her attention on it completely.

She could almost feel the pen in her mind, contoured and solid. She closed her eyes and almost felt as if she could touch it.

White didn't notice anything at first, but after several seconds he thought he saw the pen quiver slightly. Then without notice it took off like a rocket in his direction, causing him to dive out of the way as it imbedded in the wall of the building behind him.

"All right, I think we can classify that as a technical failure." he chastised, as he stood up and brushed himself off.

"Are you high?" she replied, astonished. "I just made the damn thing fly through the air!"

She concentrated on a small rock, which after a few seconds shot into the air diagonally and through a window. She grimaced as faces appeared in the window shortly after.

Ames took hold of the pen, which was halfway buried in the wall and yanked, unsuccessfully.

"Perhaps, but you didn't control the pen, or that rock." he said simply. He had known from the brief review of the information that had been on Renfro's briefcase that she might possess such abilities. This exercise had not surprised him in the least.

She looked at him, unable to comprehend his sarcasm in the face of this new enlightenment. "Whatever. Thanks for your help, I'll see what I can figure out on my own time."

He watched as she walked off. Amused, he switched his radio to a private channel and paged Lydecker.

"Lydecker." the voice answered.

Ames watched Max depart out of sight. "This is White. In spite of our differences, I think you should know something."

He briefed Lydecker on what had happened.

The radio was silent as the ex-Manticore leader absorbed the information.

"Thanks." He said coldly but acknowledging the effort. "Incidentally, we head out in five. Out."

White switched back to normal channels, and began walking in the direction Max had left, towards the vehicles.

Five minutes later, on the dot, they were in the TC vehicles and on their way.

PART TWENTY-TWO : " Steeplechase "

"How long do you plan to keep me against my will?" Logan inquired. The answers to his questions were starting to give him a generic idea of what was going on.

"Until Miss Guevara arrives." Legion answered. "Is Mister Lydecker in your Seattle encampment?"

"He was at one time, I don't know if he is there now or not. I thought you said your bringing me here wasn't to get Max?" Logan shifted, the chair was slightly less comfortable than it was when he first woke.

"Can you reform that as a question, Mr. Cale?"

Logan considered the wording. "If your bringing me here isn't to get Max here, why will her arrival be the catalyst of my release?"

Legion smiled, almost fatherly. "You really are starting to get good at this. I personally did not kidnap you to entice her here. The Conclave kidnapped you to insure that Miss Guevara initiated her attack on Manticore. However, I do personally suspect she will instead attempt to find you. I sense a certain lack of tolerance in her for actions against you, and so I believe she will come here to retrieve you. Do you or any of those you associate with at Terminal City know the current location of Mr. Sandeman?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but if you're right about Max you can always ask her when she shows. How long have you been part of the Conclave?"

Legion's eyebrows raised fractionally, then replied "My dear boy, I've never been part of the Conclave." He paused, then added "You could say that I offer my services of advisement to them, from time to time."

Logan was silent at this. Legion asked, "Do you love her?"

Yet again, he asked a question Logan wasn't expecting. What did he care how Logan felt? "Yes, I do. And because I do, I'd like to ask if you'd reconsider whatever you or the Conclave is planning. Please."

The man before him smiled again and looked sympathetic. "I'm afraid that whatever happens will happen, unraveling as events may. I sincerely hope that your friend survives and that you will as well. One cannot escape destiny or fate. Perhaps her destiny will be to succeed, or perchance to fail. One never really knows, even if one truly knows. I'm sure that sounds confusing. But I assure you, it's been true over the vast length of time itself."

* * * * *

White, Sam and Mole led the diversionary and cover teams; Max, Lydecker and Alec were the extraction team, lead by Max. Her team spread separately throughout the woods until they arrived at the Belfair in parameter formation to the outer walls of what appeared to be a large estate.

So far, White's description of the terrain to the transgenics on the way here seemed to be on the money.

Lydecker was signaling the teams. According to White, the Conclave didn't use any kind of parameter sensors, but relied on the honed senses of their sentinels. *Should make things fairly easy, at least going in...* she thought.

They regrouped within the woods just short of the buildings. Max signaled to Alec to come around the guards on his side.

They took out the first two guards successfully and without raising an alarm. Lydecker watched them from a slight distance. He nodded approvingly to himself; Max was highly efficient even after years of being out of Manticore and Alec was still at the top of his training.

He quietly signaled to the other teams to begin their run. In less than a minute all of the exterior guards were unconscious. On the way, Lydecker had initially ordered the guards killed, but Max had overridden him. *Let's hope they don't wake up before we leave, or this might be for nothing...*

Max and Alec jumped to the high end of the wall, and lowered a rope for Lydecker. Alec held the rope for him while Max scouted their entrance route.

As Max rounded a corner she came face to face with a Conclaver. Before he could focus on her to recognize her, she immediately reacted by slamming his face with a palm strike, then cracking his skull against the wall; sending him into an instant oblivious state. *That's what you get when you don't pay attention to the environment around you...* Quickly checking the surroundings, she went back to Alec and Lydecker and gave the "all-clear" signal.

She also had teams going into each of the other buildings on the estate in case White was wrong about Logan's location. So far she hadn't heard any gunshots or alarms, and all units were ordered to use the earpiece-mics only if necessary... so she presumed everything was going according to plan. She signaled Alec and Lydecker to follow her inside the building then split in separate directions.

As they entered the main building, she noted a large open room on the right, a hallway leading to both the left and the right, and stairs leading up. She motioned Alec to the left and Lydecker to the right, and she went straight through the large room; heading towards the stairs.

* * * * *

Legion looked distracted for a moment, then smiled at Logan. "Sorry, young man. I'm afraid I have other business to attend to. I've most enjoyed our chat."

Logan watched as Legion walked out of the room, and heard the door click. He pondered momentarily what business Legion could be referring to, then started again in trying to free his hands. All he seemed to be doing was rubbing his wrists raw on the restraints, but it was better than accepting his current situation.

* * * * *

She wasn't running into a lot of people, but White had told her the main building had little traffic.

It was usually used only for meetings, celebrations and rituals; although the latter two more often took place outside.

As she silently made her way up the stairs, she memorized the layout of the section. One never knew what complications would arise, which made knowing the layout a necessity.

* * * * *

Lydecker was step by step making his way down the hallway on the right, gun out and in alert position. Opening door by door as quietly as possible, he hadn't found anything significant so far.

The final room down the hallway was locked but he picked it with relative ease. Opening the door, he looked inside and knew immediately that their mission here had just expanded. He stepped inside to get a closer look at the computer system that, from the looks of it, was tied to several government intelligence networks. One seemed specifically targeted to Seattle, primarily Terminal City. Another seemed to monitor information regarding SciTech. Not surprising, since Manticore has apparently been dogging the Conclave for literally thousands of years.

"Hey!" a voice whispered. Alec found Lydecker's gun pointed straight at his head, although he could have blocked it with relative ease. "Not bad, old man. Still got the edge..." His eyes widened as he saw the computer equipment.

Entering, he passed Lydecker, who didn't know what annoyed him more; the fact that Alec had startled him, that he hadn't heard the transgenic behind him or that he'd almost shot one of his own. Of course, Lydecker figured Alec probably would have avoided the bullet, but that wasn't relevant.

"There wasn't anything down the other corridor, except a doorway with stairs leading down to the basement. I figured we should both check down there." he reported, looking closer at the information rolling across the screen. "Uh oh..." he grunted.

Lydecker looked at what Alec was commenting on and his face tightened. "Come on, let's go. We'll deal with it later."

They exited and closed the door, moving back the way they came to find the door to the basement.

* * * * *

Max reached the top of the stairs and started checking rooms. Not making a sound, she went from room to room, not spending more than a couple of seconds checking each.

She opened a door on the right, but the man who stood within it was so unobtrusively statuesque that she nearly closed the door again.

"Come in, my dear." Legion stated, "If you'll forgive the stereotypical response... I've been waiting for you."

"I'm here for Logan." she replied. "Nothing more. Don't get in my way."

"Come in first and close the door. I have something to talk to you about, then I'll tell you where

you can find Mr. Cale."

She considered the offer. He might call an alarm if she walked out, which wouldn't inconvenience her much but it would probably hinder her finding Logan if he was well hidden. On the flip side, he might provide some valuable information. Bad guys seem to let information slip when they felt they had the upper hand. Yet she had already gone up against him once and knew he had a potent bag of tricks... besides, the last time they'd met he threatened to exterminate her mother. She owed him something for that one...

She walked in and closed the door.

"All right, what do you want? As I'm sure you're aware, I'd like to get out of here as soon as possible." she demanded.

He smiled. "Direct as always. I like that. Very well; to the point it is. I sense you've come to a decision about the possible attack against Manticore. It also seems you've discovered who your mother really is. No matter, I really only wanted to see if you'd actually do it."

She sighed. "Bravo. Now about Logan?"

"I'd like you to work for me." he said simply.

Feeling as if her mind had suddenly slipped a track, she played it over again mentally. No, she didn't miss anything, the man simply seemed to enjoy switching the subject at hand without notice. "Thanks, but I've already got a full time job keeping the rest of the world from messing with my family."

He nodded. "Ah yes, the transgenics. What if I told you I would arrange for the pressure against you to stop completely? I might even be convinced into having the Senator arrange a petition for a Transgenic Freedom Act. In fact, I could probably be convinced into arranging much more for them."

She considered it. "What would you possibly need me for? You've got the Conclave in your hip pocket, you can control people at will, I'm just a pain in the butt transgenic that would probably just annoy you to no end. Really, you don't want me working for you. So what say you tell me where Logan is and we part company without destroying the premises, eh?"

"You have a very influential personality. People like that, and I like it."

"I see. Naaaah, I like my life the way it is, thanks." she replied. "Now. Where is Logan?"

He stood. The desk slid to one side on it's own, rather than his walking around it.

"Disappointing. I'm afraid I'm going to have to resort to one last cliché in that case... 'time to take the gloves off.'"

She bolted to the door but stopped just short of it, finding herself once again unable to move her arms or legs or her head.

She was trapped.

PART TWENTY-THREE : " *Abacadabra* "

Lydecker and Alec made their way down to the basement. It was obviously used as a housing facility for the mainframe network.

"Set a couple of charges near the power couplings, and one more on each of the units," Lydecker told Alec, who began setting up the plastique and timers.

Donald was having trouble concentrating, after reading the data on the computers upstairs. SciTech, a.k.a. Manticore, was under intense surveillance by the Conclave. They knew everything, including names of field operatives. There had to be a mole, someone his sister wasn't aware of. Of course, it was also possible she was very aware of the spy and was baiting him/her with filtered information. He'd have to contact her and find out.

Alec's voice broke his train of thought. "So what are you involved in this for, Lydecker? You're not in control of the group, you're not torturing anyone and although I bet you're a kick at parties; I'd put real money on the fact that you're not doing this for your own personal jollies. So what's the story?"

Lydecker looked at Alec disapprovingly. "You know, you've developed quite a mouth on you. You learn that from Max?"

"Must have been that rebellious teen phase when you stopped coming around, Pops. How about a straight answer instead of avoiding the question?"

Lydecker sighed and glanced at his watch. "When I learned what was really going on, my mission changed. It wasn't just training you kids for engagement against possible hostiles or a new breed of soldier for a tactical advantage; I discovered an organization that you were specifically designed to combat. I wasn't told about the Conclave when I was originally assigned to Manticore. Renfro was part of the Cabinet that created Manticore and she never let on what was at stake."

Alec finished hiding the first explosive and moved to the next. "So your participation is out of a sense of duty, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes. For me, it's all about duty. Protecting the country and government. If you don't know that already, you didn't learn as much as I thought you had at Manticore."

"You also taught us never to assume that anything was as it seemed. If you don't like what the result is now, maybe you should question your tactics instead of our behavior. OK, this one is finished. All you'll have to do is set the timer and start it; but once you do you won't be able to stop it. I've got it set so if they remove the timer or try to disable it, all you'll end up with is a premature explosion."

Lydecker nodded. "Good work. If nothing else we can take out this relay system, maybe set them back a bit. Set the timers for 15 minutes."

Alec glanced sharply at the human. "We should check with Max first."

"We shouldn't be here more than 10 minutes longer and she doesn't know about this. Set it."

He shrugged, set and engaged the timers, then nodded. They ascended the stairs and Alec slowly surveyed the hallways.

"Hallway's clear." Alec said and stepped out from the stairwell, gun in hand again.

* * * * *

Legion forced Max to turn and walk to the middle of the room, facing him. He was becoming more and more disappointed with this woman. It always seemed as if the most promising ones turned out to be the most stubborn and strong-willed. Unsuitable.

"You really are beginning to erode my patience, my dear child. First you ignore my request regarding Manticore, and now you rebel against joining me. I fear I cannot use you after all. The time may have come to eliminate you, as sad a fact as it is true. White told me that you were engineered to stop the Conclave. I had hoped that whatever abilities you were given would help instead. Unfortunately, it seems not to be."

He pulled out a .45 revolver.

Max tried to speak and discovered to her surprise that she could.

"What are you going to do with that?"

He sighed. "I'm afraid you're going to have to be terminated. A terrible loss but perhaps for the better. I'll have to decide whether I'll let Mr. Cale live or not as well, I suppose. He could also, in his own way, cause problems for the Conclave after your demise."

Trying to distract him, she thought quickly. "The last time you disabled me from moving, you said something to me in my mind about you being Asmodeus. Were you just flapping your gums, or only trying to 'boogey-man' me?"

He paused, then smiled. "Actually, I hadn't realized you heard that. Let's just say I tend to get a little full of myself when I'm intoxicated with the presence of a few special people. Though you are in fact quite special, I'm afraid that you must die now."

Max desperately fought to free herself from the unseen bonds, but as before; there didn't seem to be anything to fight against.

Legion pulled the trigger.

* * * * *

Alec and Lydecker made their way up the stairs, cautiously listening and watching to make sure they had no unexpected visitors.

Reaching the top, Lydecker motioned Alec to try the doors on this end, while he went to the end of the hallway and started from there.

Quietly making his way down the long corridor, he opened the first door and was surprised to

find himself staring at Logan bound to a chair in the middle of the room. Surveying the room and discovering nothing out of the ordinary, he pulled out a knife and cut the binding cords.

"You don't look the worse for wear..." Lydecker commented, eyeing the door. "How many have you seen?"

"Just one. Legion. The guy White brought Max to at the Space Needle." Logan finished unbinding himself and stood.

Lydecker went to the door and motioned to Alec, who promptly came to the doorway. Seeing Logan, he nodded.

"Mission successful, Herr Lydecker." he quipped. "Now let's find Max and get out of here."

"She came up the stairs first. If Logan didn't see her, then she's in one of these upstairs rooms as well."

"Then we'll check each room until we find her," Logan said without hesitation.

"That could present a problem," Lydecker stated, checking his watch. "There are high-level explosives set to go off in ten minutes..."

Logan interrupted. "What does that have to do with us?"

"...in the basement of this building. If we're going to look, we better do it quickly." Lydecker finished.

As the words registered in Logan's mind, the sound of a gunshot rang out from down the hall.

* * * * *

~ Time seemed to slow to a crawl as her mind suddenly went into overdrive. She had realized as Legion began pulling the trigger that she would have to do something or there was a real chance she would die. She didn't know yet how to deflect items tossed to her, let alone block a bullet with her mind, if that were even possible. Bearing White's instructions in mind, she focused on the bullet with every essence of her concentration. ~

As he fired the bullet, Legion both felt and saw a golden-white flash around her body.

~ She could see it in her mind, felt the chemical explosion of the compressed gas and powder that propelled the bullet along the chamber of the gun's barrel. As it left the barrel she could feel the friction in the air as the bullet pushed through it. ~

~ As the round began its path towards her, she sensed the trajectory of the bullet and where it would strike. Concentrating more deeply, she could feel the molecular existence of the path. ~

~ The bullet was now halfway to her. She could almost feel the matter and mass of the object as it almost seemed to float towards her, even though she knew it was speeding at a speed that precluded evasion. ~

~ She suddenly became aware of the part of her that was in the path of the bullet, her very genetic material, even her molecular and atomic make-up, almost sensing the quarks bouncing around within her. For the briefest moment she almost lost her concentration, thinking for a nanosecond that she must be hallucinating. However, she regained her sense of the path and found that the bullet was reaching her. ~

As he recognized the glow, it expanded suddenly and with such intensity that he could feel actual heat from it microseconds before he and the rest of the room was enveloped by the heat and light.

~ As it struck her she could see the molecules and atoms of organic and metallic materials sway and avoid each other, weaving a path around each other and yet not disturbing the rhythmic orbit that maintained stability. The complexity of the movement seemed nearly impossible; billions of separate atomic orbits, plotted in avoidance of the billions of orbits of the atoms in the bullet that were passing through the body at somewhere around a thousand feet per second. ~

He knew then that he had severely underestimated the abilities of this one. Before the heat incinerated his body, he realized that though her talents had not been tested sufficiently, she had the instincts borne of her own uniqueness. He knew that returning to this existence anytime soon would be difficult. Yet he was a legion of evil and as such, was no minor power. He pondered this as he felt his physical form begin to fail. The glow enveloped him, and as he vaporized; his crackling blackened face appeared as an expression of a fatherly smile.

~ The bullet seemingly materialized from behind her and imbedded itself in a strut in the wall. She felt the path within her quiver and calm to a normal state. ~

She found she could move again, and just as suddenly discovered she was perceiving the rest of the room in 'normal time'.

The last thing she heard before losing consciousness was Logan's voice crying out, "Oh my God!"

PART TWENTY-FOUR : " *Sequester* "

Sam finished placing charges around the third complex and was making her way around to another building when she spied Mole doing the same across the flat between buildings.

She signaled with hand signs that she was finished with her building, and was moving on to the main complex.

Mole looked at his chronometer and nodded to her, indicating that the interior group should be finishing up soon.

When the muffled shot sounded, Mole and Sam drew pistols at the same time, looking in the direction of the main complex. Easing back against the wall in the darkness, Mole waited for Max to give clearance through the micro-radios to break radio silence.

A small number of men and women, probably the only ones awake at this hour of the morning, began coming out of the various buildings and looking around for the source of the report.

The Conclave members gathered and compared observations. This pleased Mole. If they started moving towards the main building, they'd all be in one spot to start shooting at.

Sam watched this with professional interest, unaware of Mole's deliberations. She noticed they had collected between the two transgenics and the main building where Max's team was.

She had patently ignored White after discovering he had switched sides. If she hadn't seen Max talking to him back at Terminal City, she'd probably have nailed him on the spot. In her opinion the former Conclavant deserved to be killed rather than be allowed to participate in this rescue, regardless of the information he was providing.

Sam reminded herself for the umpteenth time that if it came down to it, she could always eliminate him after the mission was over. Just as well he was forced to remain with the observation team at the perimeter.

A squawk came over Sam's earpiece. "All teams alert. Single radio silence break..." She recognized Lydecker's voice. "Mission green. Flash at three in three, two, one, mark. Maintain silence."

Instantly the translation filtered through her mind. "*The mission is successful. Begin extraction procedures in three minutes. Do not respond to this, maintain radio silence...*" She assumed the injured party was Logan, since he was the one that was captured. While this was going through her mind, she set her timer for 3 minutes and on Lydecker's mark, initiated the reverse timer.

* * * * *

Alec took point; Lydecker came around him and situated himself on the left side of the doorwell. Logan, gun in position, came up beside Lydecker, then took a standard police stance in front of the door, gun pointed forward.

"Oh my god..." they heard him call out. Lowering the gun, Logan burst into the room as he saw

Max collapsed to the floor.

Lydecker swung around, gun inside the room and swerving around to find a target. The acrid smell of burned flesh hit him as a wave, almost as if the doorway was a barrier against the odor; but there was nothing in the room that indicated anything was burning.

He covered Logan while the man picked Max up after he quickly checked for injuries. "Time to go," Lydecker stated bluntly.

Alec glanced inside. "Time's running out, guys. Is she all right?"

Logan couldn't take his eyes off the young woman in his arms. "We'll find out on our way out." He began walking towards the door.

Lydecker motioned to Alec. "Single file. You, then Logan. I'll pull pick up the tail. Go."

They made their way through the hallway and down the stairs as an explosion came from outside.

* * * * *

As the three minute mark timed down to zero, mini-explosives detonated, blowing in windows, doors and destroying exterior electrical panels and phone relays on all of the buildings in the "mini-mall" community.

The group that was now searching around for the source of the gunshot began talking urgently into radios, obviously frustrated in the discovery that they no longer worked.

Sam and Mole circled around to the back of the main complex. Several other placement teams started showing up, and they hid in various spots. One of the back doors opened and Alec glanced out in both directions, then headed through the doorway, followed by Logan carrying an unconscious Max.

Lydecker followed shortly after. Alec motioned with hand signals and Mole came out of the woods.

"Run into a little trouble?" he quipped.

Alec replied, "'Run' might be a good term to use. We've got about two minutes before this building goes sky-high."

"How do we get out of here?" Logan asked.

Remembering that Logan wasn't briefed on the layout of the area, Alec motioned to Max. "Give her to me."

Logan wanted to refuse but sensibility won over pride only because her safety was at stake; Alec could carry her for a long time over the terrain without tiring. Putting her into Alec's arms, he mumbled a "take care of her" and stood back, waiting for their next move.

Lydecker made two sharp motions with both his arms, and the transgenics in hiding began

moving out deeper into the woods. Logan followed Alec, who was hard to keep up with despite his burden.

Abruptly, the expected explosion brightened the sky, sending debris everywhere. Almost as one, the transgenic teams moved into positions; beside trees, large rocks, anything that provided cover from the debris and light.

When it appeared the larger pieces were done falling, they started out again.

White and the rest of the teams soon joined them as they made their way back to the vans, some of the transgenics clapping Logan on the shoulder and quietly welcoming him back to the flock. Their smiles turned somber as they noticed the limp body Alec was carrying.

PART TWENTY-FIVE : " Conundrum "

"Complete exhaustion, dehydration, malnutrition... how the hell could she have malnutrition after only being gone a few hours? She was fine before she left, if you don't count her miraculous recovery from that boxing match she had with White..." Beck complained loudly as she adjusted the IV drip.

Logan waited patiently through her tirade. "I already told you, we have no idea what happened. It probably had something to do with Legion. Is she going to be all right?"

Beck glared at him, then sighed and glanced again at Max's blood tests. "Come back in an hour. Maybe two. She's 'power sleeping' right now... her body went through something so strenuous that ... well, it would be as if you went at a full out run for a couple of days solid without sleep. I don't think I could bring her to consciousness right now even with drugs."

She looked up from the microscope. "Whatever happened, you probably need to run the troops that went with you through debriefing..."

A voice finished the statement from the door, "After which I'll be briefing the rest of the Terminal City occupants as to the official result of the mission and our current status."

Lydecker stepped into the room and glanced at Max. "She's still out? How long do you figure she'll take to recoup?"

"I might be able to give you an estimate of that if I knew what caused this. From all indications I can find, I'd give her at least a couple hours before she starts responding, and if that happens then a day or two to recuperate. Knowing Max however, she'll probably be awake in an hour and running around trying to find more ways to get into trouble." Beck sighed with an exasperation borne of experience.

Logan stepped over to her, made sure she was looking at him and smiled at her. "You're doing a great job you know. There's no one I'd rather have looking after her."

She looked at him crossly, but couldn't resist a faint smile. "OK, out of here. Both of you. I'll call you when she wakes, otherwise go do whatever it is you have to do."

He turned to Max, sighed and touched her cheek. Then he nodded to Beck and walked out with Lydecker.

* * * * *

A little over an hour later, Joshua walked up to Logan. "Beck said you should come to the infirmary. Said she had news."

"Thanks, Joshua." He clapped the big guy on the shoulder and walked off in the direction of the medical facility.

Logan walked in and found Max sitting up in the hospital bed. She looked drained. "Hey, good lookin'," he said as he walked over to the bed and kissed her forehead.

"Hey, yourself." she shot back, weakly. "Sorry to interrupt your vacation at Hotel Conclave. We heard the food was excellent so we had to crash. You know how it goes..."

Logan smiled gently. "You didn't miss much. The 'Flan Aux Poire' was much too sweet for my taste, and the service was terrible."

Max smiled back. As always, he felt his heart lighten at the sight. He held her hand. "Max, what happened in there? Lydecker and Alec released me, we heard a shot and when we got to the room you had just passed out."

The smile vanished and her forehead bunched up in concentration. Then her eyes widened as she remembered. "He was there... Legion."

"I know, I saw him. Wait, you mean in the room you were in?" he asked.

"He wanted me to join him. When I wouldn't, he shot me." Realization of what she said hit her, and she looked down where the wound would have been. "It went right through me."

Logan followed her gaze and then looked back at her in confusion. "Could it have been a blank?"

She shook her head. "It went right through me, as if it wasn't even really there. I heard it hit the wall behind me. Logan, it was so weird! It was as if everything slowed down... I could see the bullet as it flew through the air towards me, but he had motor control of my body again and I couldn't move. Then he vanished in the bright light."

He looked at her questioningly, but didn't want to rush her.

"When he fired the gun, I knew I couldn't move out of the way, being frozen and all. Beck and Cindy and I had talked earlier about my weirder-than-normal DNA, and my discussion with White later came to my mind..." she stopped, remembering.

"Logan! I moved a pen with my mind! Almost hit the creep dead center between the eyes too." Max chuckled.

He looked amazed at her and glanced at Beck, who shrugged. "She's probably got some tricks up her mental sleeve that I couldn't even guess at, at this point."

Max nodded in excitement. "Anyway, he fired the gun and I thought about trying to deflect it but I wasn't sure I could. Maybe I did, I don't remember everything. Just that the room felt like it was starting to glow, and he vanished. I was only vaguely aware of him, but it almost seemed like he disintegrated. Then I heard your voice and everything went black."

She looked at him. "Sounds pretty whacked, huh?"

Logan looked at her for a few moments before trusting himself to reply. In fact, it did sound pretty bizarre, but in the last few years the term 'bizarre' could apply to a large number of situations they'd been in together.

Finally, his thoughts came to a conclusion. "I think you've experienced something extraordinary."

Maybe it even saved your life. We should try to figure out what happened, but what's more important is that you're all right."

Max smiled again, before taking a serious look at him. "Beck said she checked you out, that you're ok. Think you're up to some 'Eyes Only' work?"

He nodded. "I suppose so... what's up?"

"The Conclave isn't going to take what we did standing still. That means sometime in the near future we're going to have to take them head on. First, I want to find out everything we can about Legion. Some things he said to me on the Space Needle sounded very ominous, like he was some kind of demon or something; maybe something worse."

He looked somewhat dubious but nodded for her to continue.

She did. "Something happened in that room. It'd be in our best interest to find out. I don't believe in the Boogey Man, but I might make an exception in his case. We know the Conclave is going to try to destroy mankind. Something Legion said makes me think it might be some kind of political takeover that starts it, you can confirm the details with White. We have to do something about it."

Logan squeezed her hand. "OK. But for now, you rest and get better. Some day you're going to lead this nation of transgenics, friends and converts you've brought together into a final battle for the lives of humanity. But not today."

Max looked at him somberly. "No, not today. Today I thank whatever deities helped us bring you home safe."

"Brought back both of us." he corrected.

"Save me from hopeless, self-sacrificing romantics." Alec called from the doorway. Glancing at Beck, he amended, "Mine being the exception of course."

Max scowled at him and briefly looked for something to throw. "Shut up. I like my hopeless romantic..."

Beck looked up from the microscope. "I like mine too. Come here and kiss me, then go away. Max still needs to recuperate." She looked at Logan, "That means you too, Prince Charming."

Alec complied, and in parting he stopped at Max's bed. "Thought you'd want to hear... no casualties and other than finding you unconscious, no injuries."

As he started out the door, Max called out to him. "Hey..."

Alec stopped at the doorway and turned to look at her.

She suddenly looked embarrassed. "I just wanted to say thanks... for the discussion we had. You were right."

A slightly surprised expression crossed Alec's face, but it promptly vanished. He was about to reply when Beck called out. "Bye, Alec."

Alec glanced at her, then back at Max and gave her a rare, sincere smile. "Anytime."

After he left, Logan stood. "Incidentally, I think I owe you a 'thanks' as well for coming after me."

Max grinned mischievously, "You can thank me when I get released from the warden over there."

He grinned back at her, gave a mock salute to Beck, and left the room.

Max turned on her side, content for the moment, and fell asleep.

EPILOGUE

In her office at Sci-Tech, Rebecca Lydecker watched the taped recording of the attack on the Conclave. As it finished, she picked up the phone and dialed a long distance number.

It rang twice, and a man's voice answered. "Yes?"

"The main Puget Sound Conclave section has been inconvenienced, courtesy of the transgenics. It appears that White has been excommunicated into joining 452's commune. Details are sketchy, but intelligence implies that Legion has been dealt with." she reported.

"Very good," the voice commended. "Monitor the situation, as always. If they intend to further engage with the Conclave, you may want to... coordinate efforts. But be sure to let me know."

"I will, Senator." she assured. "Fe'nos tol."

"Fe'nos tol." Senator McKinley replied, and hung up the phone.